

Dimitris Constantinou (1924-2010)¹

Dimitris Constantinou belongs in the generation of Cypriot artists born in the inter-war period, a group of whom strove, from the late '50s to the early '70s, to “synchronise” Cypriot art with international developments. This course was drastically interrupted by the political and military events of 1974. When Cypriot art returned to a state of “normalcy” around 1980, most of these artists produced work that not only did not strive to follow the latest artistic expressions any more, but also was a “conservative” regression, in relation even to their own work from the decade before 1974. Constantinou is among the few exceptions: his work in the post-1974 era, although it has not been in step with contemporary trends, it constitutes both a smooth progression from his 1960s production, as well as a very interesting case of modernist sculpture, which successfully claims a place in the contemporary era.

He was born in 1924, in Alexandria, Egypt, by Greek Cypriot parents. After completing his general education, he attended the Italian Don Bosco Technical School, in his hometown. He specialised in “arte in ferro battuto” – the art of *fer forgé* (wrought iron) – which constitutes his sole art studies, and which has largely determined his course as a sculptor. During WWII, he was enlisted in the British forces, where he worked as a welder for the allied fleet. After the war, he established his own *fer forgé* workshop.

He continued with this occupation in Cyprus, after his settling down on the island in 1950 (see *Console*, 1951-52 [fig. 1]). At the same time, he designed and manufactured wooden furniture in which, elements from the Cypriot folk tradition are rendered with a tendency for geometric stylisation and abstraction; he also created light apparatuses, as well as jewellery. Additionally, he undertook interior design and decoration projects, for hotels and restaurants (see **Interior views of “Cosmopolitan” Restaurant**, c. 1970 [fig. 2]).

The above activities were taking place in parallel to more purely artistic preoccupations: he began making sculptural works, such as *Bird*, 1959 [fig. 3]. Such early sculptures are, of course, of limited importance within his overall oeuvre. They nevertheless carry, albeit vaguely, references to expressions from early European

¹ My thanks to Dimitris Constantinou for his co-operation, for making available to me all archival and art material in his possession, and for our conversations on art. I also thank him and Mrs Maria Constantinou, for their genial hospitality.

[Note, 2012:] Dimitris Constantinou died in August 2010, at the age of eighty six. This text is dedicated to his memory.

modernism – such as, to the work of Alberto Giacometti (1901-66), as well as to those by Julio Gonzalez (1876-1942), who is another case of a “self-taught” artist, well versed in the process of oxyacetylene welding.

The first, however, true encounter of Constantinou with international modernist art took place via the group of “articulated” or “mobile” sculptures, from the 1960s onwards. Art historian Chrysanthos Christou refers, inevitably, to Alexander Calder (1898-1976), when he talks of Constantinou’s “mobiles”, but only to admit, however, that no direct influence was exercised by the former artist on the latter.² Calder’s “mobiles”, originally created in the 1930s, largely constitute three-dimensional transportations of the “biomorphic” paintings by Surrealist painter Joan Miró (1893-1983). They can be described as fragile, sculptural exercises in balance, characterised by lack of solidity and volume, while their ability for motion depends mostly on natural factors, such as, air.

Constantinou’s “mobiles”, on the contrary, are genuine products of the 1960s, with simultaneous connections to both “mobile sculpture” of this decade and, mainly, with the Minimalist art of the same period. These later mobile works, by both European and (Northern and Southern) American artists, primarily depended, for the element of motion, either on visual illusion, or on integrated mechanical and electrical devices, which produced autonomous movement. The quality of “movement” as optical illusion exists in some of Constantinou’s works, such as *Stele [Column]*, 1965 [fig. 4], and *Growth*, 1965 [fig. 5]. As art critic Tonis Spiteris has pointed out, “their interrupted and repetitive elements indicate a constant movement through time [...]”.³ The escalating development-interchange of cavities and projections along the trunk of *Stele*, c. 1965 [fig. 6], constitutes another, masterful negotiation of the sense of motion as optical illusion. In another group of works, all named *Course (epiticha [wall-hanging]*, 1970 [fig. 7] – the earliest example is from 1967), this sense of motion is the result of a rhythmic or “wavy” treatment of the material. An additional, interesting element here is the rendition of the sculptural composition as high relief growing out of a painting (wood panel).

² Chrysanthos Christou, *A Concise History of Modern and Contemporary Cypriot Art* [in Greek] (Nicosia: Ministry of Education, 1983), p. 119. Nevertheless, he allows (wrongly, I believe) for the possibility of some connection between Constantinou’s explorations and the works by Calder.

³ From the text for Constantinou’s exhibition at the Cyprus Hilton Galley, Nicosia, 15/02-2/03/71. Reproduced in *Dimitris Constantinou–Sculpture* (Nicosia: En Tipis, 2003), p. 56 (English translation, p. 57; here, my translation).

In Constantinou's actual "mobiles", however, the dialogue between movement, form and space is a more complex affair. Works like *Articulation of Space*, 1964 [fig. 8], *Expanding Cubes*, 1965 [fig. 9], and the various "mobiles" in iron, from 1970, constitute such compositions of repeated geometric shapes and volumes, and of their relationship to the surrounding space, that can be placed next to the Minimalist creations in the United States in the 1960s.

At the time, Minimalist artists, reacting against concepts of individual gesture and personal expression of the "solitary genius" (that were at the core of 1950s US-led "high modernist" discourse), produced works in which the role or "presence" of the artist was drastically reduced or camouflaged. The black canvases by Frank Stella (b. 1936), first exhibited in 1960, as well as other of his paintings that followed, consist of uniform, parallel lines or stripes that "mechanically" reproduce the frame, the shape or the wooden support of the canvas. The repeated bands (of the cube's edges) in *Articulation of Space*, or the increasing, concentric squares in *Expanding Cubes*, by Constantinou, constitute a parallel expression in sculpture, of the mechanically reproduced geometric shape and, more generally, of the negotiation of the artwork as independent, non-representational and self-referring object.

Constantinou arrives at such expressions not via conscious, ideological stance, but through personal interaction with the material, and as a result of his "need" – in the above works – to deconstruct the compact shape and form of the rhombus or the square. This does not subtract from the strength or "value" of his works; on the contrary, his sculptures acquire a special interest, in that they seem to carry simultaneously, on one hand, modernism's emphasis on the exploration of material and on form; and, on the other, the reaction against such focus, as expressed at the beginnings of post-modernism, with the emphasis on the repetition of the motif, and on the mechanically-uniformly (re)produced work of art.

Creations such as the above-mentioned *Expanding Cubes*, meet Minimalism on an additional level: one of Minimalist sculpture's basic tenets is that the work or art reaches its true completion (exists fully) only in the mind of the spectator; the artist merely offers an "excerpt" or "snapshot" of a pattern of ordering or of an arrangement in space, which can (conceptually) expand in infinity.⁴ Various cubes by Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), made up by multiple, intercepting grids, are examples of works imbued

⁴ See, for instance, Edward Lucie-Smith, *Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century* (London: Laurence King, 1996), p. 276.

with such notions. The expanding and transforming cubes by Constantinou instigate in the viewer similar tendencies of conceptual development-extension of the artwork. Moreover, as with the rest of his “mobiles”, these cubes invite (and challenge) the viewer to interact with them, and to “complete” them, in more tangible ways as well, thus to create variations of the form and the volume (see *Mobile*, 1972 [fig. 10] and *Multi-dimensional*, 1973 [fig. 11]).

The allowance for the viewer’s “intervention” on, or interaction with, the work (another important post-modernist concept), has been strongly emphasised by various commentators of Constantinou’s work.⁵ The time frame of these texts – early 1970s – perhaps justifies the great emphasis placed on such “empowerment” of the viewer: “[...] the new form seems an entirely different work.”⁶ Actually, any variations of shape, volume and form the viewer may impose on the artwork are not only temporary and reversible, but moreover, the sculpture remains always the same, since such “interventions” are neither endless, nor unforeseen: they arise strictly within the specific parameters set in advance by the artist himself.

Along with indicating the special place that Constantinou’s creations occupy in the history of modern sculpture (specifically with regard to the 1960s and early ’70s), various commentators have stressed the element of “Greekness” in his oeuvre. Eleni Vakalo has emphasised the relation of Constantinou’s sculpture to folk or popular art (something also indicated earlier, in relation with his design of furniture). She specifically points to the repetitive use – “increasing or subdividing”⁷ – of geometric shapes. The artist, himself, refers to this parallel-to-folk-art integration and exploration of geometric motifs (such as, the shape and volume of the rhombus), as the most immediate manifestation of the element of “Greekness” in his work. He particularly emphasises the “Doric quality” of such elements.⁸

Another “presence” in his work, which may be related to “Greek tradition”, in general, regards the human figure. The anthropocentrism of Greek art through the centuries (Helladic, archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, and later) is a common historiographical topos. The human form is an important component in Constantinou’s

⁵ See Christou, op. cit., pp. 119-20; Spiteris in *Constantinou–Sculpture*, op. cit., Efi Ferentinou, ibid., p. 75, and Eleni Vakalo, ibid., p. 95; and the text by Alexandros Xydis (1972), reprinted in the brochure of Constantinou’s exhibition in Argo Gallery, Nicosia, 1973. (The last three texts were written on the occasion of his exhibition at Desmos Gallery, Athens, 1972).

⁶ Ferentinou, op. cit.

⁷ Vakalo, op. cit., my translation.

⁸ Personal conversation with the artist, Nicosia, 6/04/04.

work, not only in the naturalistically-inclined (despite some tendency at stylisation and distortion) figures from the early 1960s, but also, and especially, in his geometrically abstract works from the same decade and onwards.

His most immediately anthropocentric sculptures are the “*Korai*” (“Maidens” – an apparent reference to the so-named archaic Greek statues), which he has been producing since the mid 1960s. In the more frequent (and, formalistically, most interesting) version, the “*Korai*” stand as schematic, geometrically-stylised variations of an upright flute (specifically, the traditional *floghera*). The most important example is *Kore*, 1965 [fig. 12] – a work that won Constantinou the 2nd sculpture prize, at the 8th Alexandria Biennial in 1970. Austere line and stylisation, and repetition of geometric motifs characterise this piece of sculpture. In a much later variant – *Kore*, 1991 [fig. 13] – the fluidity in the rendering of the surface, and the dense, vertical stripes exude a certain lyricism, and produce an impression of over-decorativeness. In both (as well as in other) works, Constantinou exploits most creatively the advantage which sculpture (vis-à-vis painting, for instance) possesses, namely, the actual presence of form, volume and material in real space. Thus, he creates forms that, though abstract, “stand”, literally and metaphorically, as human (or anthropomorphic) figures.

The “*Korai*” are not the only abstractly anthropomorphic works by Constantinou. Among others, *Figure*, from 1962 [fig. 14],⁹ is constructed as an encounter of straight and curve lines, and of rectangular and curvilinear volumes. It is thus characterised by a quality of hardness, which renders it as the masculine version of the more feminine “*Kore*”.¹⁰ In a different variation, the same theme has been explored in some of his “articulated-mobile” sculptures, such as *Mobile (Korai)*, 1970 [fig. 15]. Such works consist of three vertical poles, the length of which carries articulated, curvilinear pieces of metal that can produce a series of combinations, some of which integrate the three parts into a unified whole.

Constantinou first went to Greece in 1970, on the occasion of the “14 Cypriot Artists” exhibition, in Athens; there, he also had his first (Greek) solo show in 1972, at the Desmos Gallery, during which he attracted the attention of important art critics. Since then, he has been exhibiting in Athens, where he moved permanently in 1974, after the tragic political and military events in Cyprus.

⁹ It was also exhibited at the 1970 Alexandria Biennial, along with *Kore* [fig. 12] and *Stele* [fig. 6].

¹⁰ Constantinou has referred to the work as the “crusader” (personal conversation with the artist, Limassol, 15/04/04).

These events became the cause for a completely different group of works: created between 1974 and 1978, these sculptures are predominantly made of copper (the age-old Cypriot product), and they grow out of a flat, wall-hanging base, either as high reliefs or as three-dimensional additions onto the main, two-dimensional part of the work (see, *Vision*, 1977 [fig. 16]). The symbolisms are immediately apparent, while, formalistically speaking these works do not constitute an important stage in Constantinou's oeuvre. They form, nevertheless, a direct, emotionally and psychologically genuine reaction of the artist, in the face of the tragedy that unfolded in his homeland.

The agony and the suffering of our country have shocked me. To the pain and cries of my people, I add my own accusation [... which] has been expressed in [works made with] a technique I have used in the past. The works I am exhibiting now, inspired by the suffering of my people, constitute a parenthesis in my work. The naturalistic elements that I have translated into copper, a metal extracted from the depths of this land, intend to enable ordinary people to understand my work. My aim is to communicate with everyone.¹¹

Moreover, at least two of the "Cyprus works",¹² which do not bear formalistic affinities to the rest, exhibit, additionally, an aesthetic interest. In *Armouring*, 1977 [fig. 17], the earlier "*Korai*" have been transformed into a group of four upright, slim warrior figures (alluding, also, to the earlier *Figure*), which carry spears that rise upwards, and wide, cone-shaped shields. The clarity and austerity of line, and the use of very few geometric shapes and volumes, uniformly repeated in the group's structure, place this piece within the wider development of Constantinou's "anthropomorphic" creations.

A corresponding place within his general oeuvre – here, with regard to his more abstract creations – may be occupied by the *Enclosure*, 1977 [fig. 18]. Among the parallel, horizontal, interrupted stripes (that are confined by two flat, vertical pillars) a metallic, spherical tangle is suspended – symbolising the complexity, confusion and tragedy that have gone into the making of the "Cyprus Problem". The metallic, spherical cluster (laden with various symbolisms) appears in later works of Constantinou as well, but the chapter of his oeuvre bearing direct references to the 1974 events in Cyprus, was permanently closed in 1978.

The subsequent course of Constantinou's art continues the pursuits and expressions of the pre-1974 work, advancing, at the same time, toward new ones. From the late 1970s and, especially, from the 1980s onwards, his sculpture acquires a novel

¹¹ Extract from Constantinou's text, in the brochure of his exhibition, "Cyprus '74", Municipal Theatre, Nicosia, 7-20/12/76 (my editing of, and changes in, the English translation provided).

¹² Created after the 1976 show (see above). A second (Cypriot) exhibition of the "Cyprus works" ("74 – 78") took place in the Municipal Theatre, Nicosia, 12-23/04/78.

monumentality, expressed in works dominated by geometric volumes. His earlier preoccupation with geometric shapes and volumes concerned mostly his “mobiles”, in which, the deconstruction of form and volume was followed by reconstruction in new, variable formations, consisting of the basic components of the deconstructed form. These successive, as much parallel, processes resulted in pieces where the presence of the material coexists equivalently with its absence in the intermediate openings and empty spaces, which utilise the immediate environment as part of the composition, integrated into the work’s form.

In his later geometric creations, solidity takes centre stage, and any previous “lightness” is replaced by the robustness and the “heaviness” of the material itself. In works such as, *Geometric Fission*, 1978 [fig. 19], *Cube Expansion*, 1982 [fig. 20] and *Multi-faceted*, 1999 [fig. 21], the material’s presence is strongly emphasised, whether with regard to the work’s compact form, or to its “occupation” of space. This last element seems to constitute the sculptor’s dominant exploration, since the volumes of his sculptures either break up or expand into space. The works, therefore, present themselves as snapshots (time stands still for a moment) in a process of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of (geometrically defined) matter in the void. At the same time, matter and form seem to have been imbued with internal force and energy, which cause the breakage of the compact object and its expansion into space. This process forces us to reconsider views about, and ways of perceiving, the object’s form and volume, and the surrounding space, as well as of their interaction.

In some works, such as *Predevelopment*, 1980 [private collection, Limassol], and *Cube*, 1984 [fig. 22], the “internal energy” produces variations on the cube’s surface, but without causing any break-up or dramatic expansion into space. These variations, by trapping and reflecting light in different directions (an element that is reinforced by the different rendering of each side’s surface – some smooth, others rough – as in *Cube*, 1985 [collection of Dimitris Constantinou]), create an illusionary sense of motion. They may therefore be seen, additionally, as developing and transforming the element of optical illusion based on the repetition of geometric elements, encountered in some of Constantinou’s earlier sculptures. Correspondingly, the above-mentioned, deconstructing-and-reconstructing geometric pieces may be seen as a development from, and transformation of, his older “mobiles”.

The exploration of the sculptural piece’s “presence” in, and the “occupation” of, space, may be summarised in the artist’s own words: “my sculpture is spatial sculpture”;

and he continues by stressing the relationship of his work with architecture: “[By the above] I mean that it is the jewel of a beautiful edifice; the conjunction between architecture and sculpture”.¹³ Examples of this relationship are, among others, the two sculptures that were placed in the outdoor spaces of private residences in Oklahoma and Colorado [figs. 23, 24]. They were created in the autumn of 1981, when Constantinou went to the USA, after an invitation by the Armenian-descent, American architect Varouj Hairabedian.

The piece in Colorado constitutes an early example of the increasing presence of the sphere, which from the 1980s onwards takes a permanent place in the sculptor’s work. It appears along the rectangular volumes, and it is subjected to similar processes of breakage and development into space, such as in *Sphere-Fission I*, 1987 [collection of Dimitris Constantinou] and *Sphere-Fission II*, 1990 [fig. 25]. Moreover, the possibility of alluding to the form of the egg-ovule imbues some of the works with lyrical (at times, quasi-literary) connotations – as well as with formalist negotiations – expressed via symbolisms of (re)production and perpetuation: for example, *Womb*, 1984 [fig. 26] and *Perpetuation*, 1988 [private collection, Athens].

Womb may be placed, additionally, within a separate group of works, which (in contrast to the post-1980, compact-form creations, commented upon earlier) are constructed more as sculptural groups, rather than as single, autonomous forms. They are rendered as assemblages made of separate and often conflicting forms, which, however, surpass – both formalistically and conceptually – the sum of their parts. An early case of such work – impressive in its uniqueness for that period – is *Nucleus*, 1965 [fig. 27]. A similar expression is encountered fifteen years later, in *Dialogue*, 1980 [fig. 28].

In later examples, the contradicting character of the forms of the component parts becomes more evident: in *Sperm*, 1988 [fig. 29], long, thin, straight rods leap upwards, developing out of the split sphere-base, while a smaller, compact sphere is suspended among them. In *Fission-Genesis I*, 1995 [private collection, Athens], bronze, curvy rods emerge out of the separate halves of the sphere-womb, while a smaller one is held among them. One of the “womb’s” halves floats in air without apparent support, offering, once again, a sense of time having momentarily frozen in space, and of turning us into witnesses to some cosmogonical process.

¹³ From an interview of Constantinou, in *Phileleftheros* newspaper, 13/04/93. Photocopy no. 46, Dimitris Constantinou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia. My translation. On 19/06/04, the Cyprus Architectural Association honoured Constantinou for his “contribution to architecture” (from the award’s wording).

The symbolisms in the works above, have been imbued with elements of sexuality and eroticism that become, additionally, formalist components in a series of sculptures where the robust presence of matter is manifested as imminently sensual, due to the dominance of curvilinear shapes and volumes. In *Embrace*, 1990 [collection of Dimitris Constantinou], a curvilinear shape emerges out of a sphere, engulfs the surrounding space, and returns to the central volume, which it holds in an erotic embrace; this is consummated in the tight clasp of the two components in *Completion*, 1980 [fig. 30]. The compositionally and formalistically harmonious union of the two constituent parts, aimed at in *Conjunction*, 1985 [fig. 31], has been completed, resulting in the creation of a new unit-third element in *Genesis*, 1983 [fig. 32]. In these cases, we have an exploration of the development of geometric volume in space, parallel to the earlier-analysed, more compact works – cubes, triangles, etc. – replacing, however, rectilinear austerity and severity with curvilinear sensuality and erotic connotations.

A special mention must be made to a smaller group of works, which, in spite of the erotic-literary connotations contained in their names, derive their strength exclusively from the severity of their rectilinear, vertically-developed form (the artist, himself, classifies them within the larger group of the “Columns”). Examples of these are, *Seven-pillar*, 1983 [fig. 33], *Completion*, 1987 [collection of Dimitris Constantinou] and *Genesis*, 1988 [fig. 34]. They combine the sturdiness of the bulkier, minimalist, compact works, with the exploration of fission in the form and the volume, manifested in pieces examined earlier. They develop vertically, splitting into geometrically-defined branches, as if born from a common base-root of a living organism.

Perhaps the most intriguing works, among Constantinou’s entire geometric output, are the ones that combine formalist severity with the sensuality of the irregular, curvilinear negotiation of shape and volume, devoid, however, of immediate symbolisms. Examples are, *Geometric*, 1978 [fig. 35], *Completion*, 1980 [private collection], and *Crater*, 1993 [fig. 36].

All of this production, from the late 1970s onwards, constitutes a most important contribution to the development of modern sculpture. In the post-modern era, sculpture (after brief, temporary stops in Land or Earth art, and in Performance or Body art, coming close to its self-annihilation) moved in two directions: Hyperrealist (or Photo) art, and (the dominant, today, tendency of) installations. Constantinou, on the contrary, has kept modernist sculpture alive, not as an imitation of the past, but via new explorations of, and expressions in, the possibilities of the material, the strength of form,

and the presence and development of volume in space. His “refusal” to adopt post-modern tendencies is due, in part, to his constant interest in working with materials – mostly metal – that imbue the artwork with *continuity*: “I don’t want wax melting in the sun, or diapers eaten away by moth. [...] I want my works to have PERMANENCE.”¹⁴

These “obsessions” of his have not kept him, however, from experimenting with new materials and forms.¹⁵ *Clasp*, 1995 [fig. 37], is but one example, from the 1990s onwards, where Pentelic marble is used in the shape and volume of an egg – symbol of fertility and reproduction. This new material-element, along with Plexiglas (also used for the first time in the same period), in the form of a “drop”, have been used in works that have moved on from the sculptural group arrangement, toward interior installations, as in *Divine Fertilisation*, 1992 (in which, coal is also used for the first time) [fig. 38].

Another aspect of Constantinou’s production, one that has developed (between 1994-2002) in parallel to his more substantial work, is constituted by his “belle époque” works: naturalistic renderings in metal, of hats, clothes, jewellery and other objects (see, *Chair and underwear*, 1994-2002 [fig. 39]). This production is mostly due to exigencies of livelihood, and cannot be seen as important in the development of his work.¹⁶ Their technical mastery, however, which manifests the artist’s dexterity in the handling of metal, refers us back to the beginning of this fascinating journey: the adolescent student of *fer forgé*, having as his stepping stone the solid ability of handling the material, and being free from any narrow and restricting framework of an art school, matured and went on to produce an important oeuvre: a production that, though created in the “periphery” of the Western art scene, met, at some point, on a level with international avant-garde, and it has continued to constitute an important development of modernist sculpture, even if the latter has ceased to exist in the “centres” of contemporary art.

¹⁴ From an interview of Constantinou in *Simerini* newspaper, 16/03/84. Photocopy no. 28, D. Constantinou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery. My translation (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵ It is a telling fact that Constantinou, like a Renaissance artist, draws, plans and analyses his works (on paper as much as theoretically), dealing with them as if they are almost architectural problems. When their “solution” is reached, the execution is all that remains: “When I draw something, then I analyse how this piece can be carried out, construction-wide. When I solve this problem, then it is easy to carry it out. The process of conception, planning and analysing is really the difficult part. *Phileleftheros*, op. cit., my translation.

¹⁶ The artist himself considers such a production to be, additionally, a periodical, “pleasant break” from the more substantial creations in his work (personal conversation with the artist, Nicosia, 12/10/04).