

Katy Stephanidou (1925-2012)¹

Katy Stephanidou is an exceptional case in Cypriot art. Along with Eleni Chariklidou, she is one of the first important female artists of the island, after the forerunner Loukia Nikolaidou.² The work of Stephanidou, furthermore, is not only as important to that of the other artists of her generation and of the next one, but it moreover escapes both the qualitative fluctuations, as well as the repetitive mannerisms of the late production in the oeuvre of many of them. On the contrary, she has systematically produced high-calibre work, which exhibits constant renewal.

Stephanidou, née Phasouliotou, was born in Limassol in 1925. Between 1948 and 1955, she studied at the School of Fine Arts in Athens, where she was taught by the painters Umbertos Argyros and Yannis Moralis, and by art historian Pantelis Prevelakis. According to Stephanidou, Argyros was not in contact with the international art scene; her first encounter with it, as well as her essential art training, realised through Moralis, who had just returned to Greece from Paris.³

Some of her pictures from this period, mostly portraits, manifest solid technical training, along with a successful effort to render the psychological and emotional character of the persons portrayed [figs. 1, 2, 3]. Formalistically, these works are academically oriented, with a tendency for simplification and generalisation – elements also encountered in the early painting of Moralis himself.

Stephanidou's direct acquaintance with the international art currents, took place during her stay in London, between 1956 and 1960. Although she attended classes at St. Martin's School of Art for a year (1956-57), her real "education" comprises, on one hand, in her interaction with other artists of various nationalities, and on the other, through her constant visits to galleries and museums, in both London and Paris. "During these years, I saw more than I painted", says Stephanidou.⁴

In the 1950s, Paris was replaced by New York as the international "capital" of the avant-garde; meanwhile, London had been a rather conservative art centre in the course of modern art ever since the late 19th century. It was perhaps inevitable then, that

¹ Many thanks to Katy Stephanidou, for an excellent collaboration, for putting at my disposal all available material, and for her wonderful hospitality (along with her son, Panos Stephanides) at the village of Pera Orinis. All translations from Greek are mine.

[Note, 2012:] Katy Stephanidou died on March 26, 2012. This text is dedicated to her memory.

² The work of Moscow-born (in 1893) Olga Raouf, who lived in Cyprus for 62 years – from 1925 until her death in 1987 – is largely unknown.

³ Personal conversation with K. Stephanidou, Pera Orinis, 13/12/03.

⁴ Personal conversation with K. Stephanidou, Pera Orinis, 13/10/07.

it was early 20th-century European modernism that exercised the strongest influence on Stephanidou at the time, rather than the latest developments in international art. Some of her paintings, which were produced immediately after her return to Cyprus in 1960 [figs. 4, 5], allude to Paul Cézanne and to late Cubist idioms, such as Orphism, combined with a strong representational character that also brings them close to Russian “Cubo-Futurism” – such as works by Kasimir Malevich from the 1910s. Stephanidou herself mentions André Lhote, as another, direct influence on these works.⁵

As soon as she returned to Cyprus, Stephanidou started working as a teacher of art in public schools, and continued to do so for the next twenty five years. At the same time, she kept on painting. In 1961 she participated in the group show “Cypriot Artists” (organised by the journal *Kypriaka Chronika*), at the Marios Vayanos Gallery in Athens.⁶ Since then, she has taken part in group exhibitions of Cypriot art, both locally and abroad, as well as in international shows. The latter include among others, participations at the Alexandria Biennial in 1963, the “Contemporary Cypriot Art” exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute (in London and Edinburgh) in 1970, and the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1971. This is the time (1960s and early 1970s) during which contemporary Cypriot art (especially by artists of the second generation – born in the interwar period – and by some younger ones) is presented in international events, on the encouragement and the promotion of Greek art critic and curator Tonis Spiteris, who had been appointed advisor on art to the Cypriot government. Spiteris channelled contemporary Cypriot art, often aggressively, in the direction of current trends, such as Minimalism, geometric abstraction and Op Art.

These tendencies are well apparent in the works which Stephanidou showed at her first solo exhibition, in 1972 (Acropolis Gallery, Nicosia). Some of the paintings

⁵ Stephanidou relates that her “acquaintance” with Lhote took place via two of his books (one on the figure and, especially, one on landscape), given to her by a Polish friend in France. (Personal conversation with K. Stephanidou, Pera Orinis, 13/10/07). André Lhote (1885-1965) was more influential as a writer and critic on art, as well as a teacher (at his own art school, the Académie Montparnasse, established in 1922, attended by both French and foreign students), rather than as a practising artist. The leading Cypriot modernist artist Christoforos Savva was among Lhote’s students in the late 1950s. At the time, Lhote was teaching (both at his school, as well as through his books) a late Cubist idiom, of a rather academic and conservative character, which is also apparent in Savva’s painting (despite the fact that it was a novelty for Cypriot art) at the time.

⁶ The comments by Takis Frangoudes (Cypriot artist and occasional art critic, living in Athens) on a painting by Stephanidou at the exhibition, indicate the co-existence at this time, of various, often conflicting elements in her work: “*Still Life with Mandolin* by Katy Phasoulidou, manifests a basic antinomy: the entire piece is Cubist, apart from the mandolin that is realistic (‘photographic’). She has to decide which tendency she prefers; they cannot co-exist on the same picture”. Takis Frangoudes, “The Exhibition by Cypriot Artists in Athens: some thoughts and judgements” [in Greek], in the journal *Pnevmatiki Kypros*, no. 17 (February 1962), p. 240.

[figs. 6, 7] allude to the early geometric abstraction of artists such as Piet Mondrian, Naum Gabo and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, from the 1920s though the 1940s. Some of the other works [figs. 8, 9] are close to the later current of optical illusion (Op Art), which developed out of geometric abstraction and Minimalism in the 1960s. These trends in painting, after going through a process of completely shedding any recognisable, “representational” elements, and of doing away with differentiations among “grounds” (foreground, background, etc.) and between centre and edge, proceeded in negotiating the painterly surface as a field of formal composition and of organisation of shapes and colours. Moreover, the artwork itself was treated as a self-referring, autonomous object, free from any allusions to, or dependencies on, the (outside) world.⁷ “My painting is optical, and it is free of emotionalism. Having broken free of the traditional way of rendering nature and objects, my attention has focused on their ideal form. Form, the balancing of shapes, colour, rhythm and motion are what is important to me. [...] In today’s reality, man directs his gaze inwards rather than outwards: into himself and into the objects. He is not concern with their appearance but with their essence. This is why I believe the message of my work to be one coming out of the depths, out of the geometry and the colour scale of painting. [...] My intention is to transmit something spiritual, and structurally sound”.⁸ Stephanidou commented thus in 1972, while in 1980, looking back to the above paintings, she said: “Around 1972, I began to occupy myself with ‘geometric abstracts’, after I had gone through an initial, cubist phase. The later work was completely abstract, though my subject matter alluded to urban blocks of flats, to big buildings, and to the contrast between light and shade. That was when movement and rhythm entered by work [...]”.⁹

Stephanidou’s painting continued developing within geometric abstraction, until the political and military events of the summer of 1974. This milestone in modern Cypriot history is also, more particularly, a turning point in the course of modern Cypriot art. The movement toward its synchronisation with international developments

⁷ Theodotos Kanthos, in his speech at the opening of Stephanidou’s exhibition in 1972, comments: “The works by K. Stephanidou consistently follow aesthetic laws and principles, presenting themselves as possessing a universal autonomy. [...] They exhibit a total functionality in space, in terms of form, colour and texture, which via attraction and repulsion creates both motion and stability, within a structural and architectonically balanced whole [...]”. (Reprinted [in Greek] in the brochure of Stephanidou’s second solo exhibition in 1978, at the Zygos 2 Gallery, Nicosia; in the archive of Katy Stephanidou).

⁸ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview [in Greek] to Theoklis Kouyialis, in *Kypros* newspaper, November 1972. Photocopy in the archive of Katy Stephanidou.

⁹ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Maria Themistokleous (“Katy Stephanidou – a journey of search” [in Greek]), *Aghon* newspaper, 13/11/88, p. 24. In the archive of Katy Stephanidou.

was cut short violently. It took many years before such a “requirement” was put forward again, and even then it was negotiated mostly by individual explorations, rather than in the shape of a collective effort. It is difficult to speak of common characteristics of groups or “generations” of Cypriot art, in the post 1974 era. In the years up to the 1990s, in particular, Cypriot artists went on “lonely” journeys, without the direct contact and interaction, or the public discussions, which were common in the local scene between the late 1950s and early 1970s.

After 1974, many of the artists, who in the 1960s had fully adopted non-representational currents, turned (or returned) to representational, mostly figurative, painting. This turn, as an overall trend, was not in contrast with international developments, since representational art has made a comeback, albeit in new guises. The difference with trends in Cyprus at the time, is that some of the local artists (including some of the important ones) (re)turned to older, conservative manifestations. This goes a long way in proving that the earlier adoption of more “progressive” trends had been, at least as far as these artists are concerned, a rather superficial exploration, largely imposed from without.

Stephanidou’s painting also changed toward figurative, mostly anthropocentric depiction, but without the qualitative drop or the backward turn manifested in the work of some fellow artists. The first complete presentation of the new developments in her art took place in her second solo exhibition, in 1978 (Zygos 2 Gallery, Nicosia), where next to some older works, she showed new pictures, under the overall title *The Depths of the World*. Looking at the earlier paintings (all from 1974), we are able to observe yet another stage in Stephanidou’s negotiation of geometric abstraction [figs. 10, 11, 12].¹⁰ Then, we witness the exciting transformation of this abstraction in the pictures from *The Depths of the World* which, although representational, contain the formal characteristics of the earlier work: the former, rectilinear colour surfaces have been, at places, transformed into curvilinear, appearing as schematic, female figures [figs. 13, 14]; while elsewhere, they have turned into frames that contain (or windows that look out to) “stills” from the natural or the built environment [fig. 15]. Even in those works that

¹⁰ In talking about the making of several of these works, Stephanidou mentions that she would begin by drawing geometric shapes on polyester and paper (coloured by her). She would then proceed with the creation of collages, by putting together (often by nailing) cut pieces of the above – “a game with shapes, textures, etc.”. Finally, these compositions would be transferred into painting on canvas. (Personal conversation with K. Stephanidou, Pera Orinis, 13/12/03).

contain more organic forms, the painting still presents itself as an arrangement of shapes and colours [figs. 16, 17].

Both formally and subject-wise, these later works constitute a response to the events of 1974, as well as to the rapid changes that followed those events, in the Cypriot socio-geographic environment. A female form dominates, which formalistically alludes to the Hellenistic statue of Aphrodite from Soloi, now in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia. Via its simple stylisation and repeated depiction on the canvas, it appears as a symbol and as an embodiment of local socio-political references, as well as of ecumenical, existential anxieties. “Around 1978, I moved toward an integration of the representational and the abstract. I added more colour and I engaged in the depiction of unidentified female figures. They are simply the women that suffered and mourned during the war. Woman is always the witness of [such] events”.¹¹ At the same time, the rectilinearly framed “stills” exude a sense of limited (often claustrophobic) environment-world. Recent, local historical events are once again “visualised” (“I was generally preoccupied with the gathered crowds and their sheltering in schools and halls, during the war”¹²), as well as catholic, human agonies.

By the time of Stephanidou’s third solo exhibition in 1982, as well as during most of the 1980s, her work developed once again. In parallel to the changes of the previous decade, her new paintings once again carry elements from what went on before, but moving into new directions. Her pictures from this period (1980-86), can be divided into two groups, which present both similarities and differences. An initial, important, common characteristic concerns a further movement toward representational art: all previous leanings to abstraction are now completely absent, just as equally absent is the earlier emphasis on the arrangement of the picture plane as a composition of shapes and colours. The second common aspect of the two groups concerns, in terms of both subject matter and technique, the shift toward Surrealism: recognisable and familiar forms and objects co-exist in unexpected or “unorthodox” ways or environments, thus creating the sense of the unfamiliar and of the dream-like [figs. 18, 19, 20, 21]. In terms of technique, these paintings adopt an academically oriented realism – characteristic of both the early work of Giorgio de Chirico (particularly, from his *Pittura Metafisica* period), as well as the later, surrealist creations of René Magritte and Salvador Dalí.

¹¹ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Maria Themistokleous, op. cit.

¹² Ibid.

With regard to the two groups' differences, in the works of the first (mostly, "still lifes"), for the only time in her entire oeuvre, Stephanidou employs extensive shading, and she places emphasis on the exploration of the objects' textures [figs. 18, 19]. These pictures, which in terms of technique allude also to older periods of the European painting tradition, could be seen as an isolated episode in the artist's oeuvre, perhaps a result of her desire constantly to explore the figure, the form, the material and the composition. But at the same time, these images are imbued with a strong sense of spirituality amidst a "metaphysical" atmosphere, thus focusing on the spiritual dimension of the whole world – including the objects – that surrounds us. "After 'abstract geometry', I moved to 'still life', always preserving continuity with my earlier work. I painted not so much geometry now, as much as pure compositions. I enjoy dealing with the structure of a work, but I was then influenced by metaphysical elements, thus rendering the true essence of an object".¹³ "It was a period of my metaphysical concerns. I saw symbols in nature. I portrayed pieces of cloth, imbued with the stillness of rock, next to minute objects. The proximity of these objects imbued the [depicted] cloth with a different texture, with a distinctive quality of self existence. The painted cloth acquired its autonomy".¹⁴

The other group of works, straddles both Surrealism and Pop Art: bright, clear, flat colours, repetition of the same figure, and integration of symbols and semiotic codes, like the (broken) head of the statue of the Greek goddess of Health (*Hygeia*)¹⁵ and traffic signs [figs. 20, 21]. Concepts and symbolisms, such as fragmentation, prohibition, the lack of, as much as the need for, communication, are all contained in the above paintings, as well as in others, made around the mid-eighties. Especially in the later works, the aesthetics of Pop Art are even more pronounced, just as pronounced is the adoption of additional semiotic elements (numbers, signs, telephone appliances, etc.) [figs. 22, 23, 24]. "I am affected by the state of things, the sad recent events in our country, especially, by the place of women. I want to allude to the perseverance of woman in the face of the conditions in which she finds herself trapped, which is why I

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Doros Christis [in Greek], *Alithia* newspaper, 14/11/78, p. 4. In the archive of Katy Stephanidou.

¹⁵ In some of these paintings, Stephanidou depicts (broken) the head of the statue of the goddess of Health (*Hygeia*) daughter of Asclepius. One such sculpture, from the sanctuary of the temple of goddess Athena "Aleas" (c. 340 BC) in Peloponnesus, is now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Another one, either of *Hygeia* or of Aphrodite (early 4th c. BC), was found in the ancient Gymnasium in Salamina – now in the Cyprus [Archaeological] Museum, in Nicosia.

place women in squares [boxes]. [...] Later on, in some pictures I include the telephone appliance, as a communication symbol. I wanted to break the boundaries of woman's entrapment, by placing next to her an object of daily communication. Women pursue communication. The telephone appliance becomes the symbol of the desire for breaking out of the enforced restriction".¹⁶

Some of the above paintings were exhibited under the overall title *Compositions*, in her next, fourth exhibition, in 1988 (Apocalypse Gallery, Nicosia). However, the main part of this show was the group of works under the title *Demonstrations*. These pictures stand opposite the earlier ones: from the metaphysical, surrealist stillness, and from the stylisation and semiotics of Pop Art, Stephanidou moves into the freedom of expressionistic compositions, to the rendering of motion and energy, to the fluidity of form, and to the exploration of colour [figs. 25, 26].

In terms of subject matter, the initial interest of the artist concerned the depiction of the human figure in a crowd, in motion; "Demonstrations", as a title and concept, came along the way.¹⁷ "I felt the need to break out of this restriction [to which women are subjected], and I began having an interest in demonstrations [...]. After the stillness of enforced entrapment, I was interested in the gesture of emancipation within a state of freedom, in protest, in movement".¹⁸ Formally, Stephanidou approaches the canvas as an arena of action for the brush and the paint. Beyond any recognisable shapes, the present compositions are made up of small, colour areas, much like thick brushstrokes placed next to each other. They bring to mind the most "abstract" moments of Claude Monet, but also the works by Nicolas de Staël (from the mid-20th century), which are on the border line between depiction and abstraction.

It is on this border that many of the *Demonstrations* (both from the 1988 exhibition and from the next year) may be placed. The subject retreats even further in the face of increased exploration of colour, especially, as an element of composition [figs. 27, 28]. "In these paintings, I probably placed more emphasis on colour rather than on form. I reached a point where I paint in the manner of abstraction. I noticed that this period in my work seemed like an extension of my old, geometrically abstract, painting".¹⁹ "The subject of 'demonstrations' offered itself for [the depiction of] motion

¹⁶ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Doros Christis, op. cit., pp. 4, 6.

¹⁷ Personal conversation with K. Stephanidou, Pera Orinis, 13/12/03.

¹⁸ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Doros Christis, op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and resistance within the painterly space”.²⁰ “I started [in these works] by painting with colour tonalities, and gradually I engaged in a major exploration of colour, whereby the subject matter was no longer that important, though it is still discernible”.²¹

The shift toward non-representational painting is also manifest in the works that were shown at her fifth solo show (Morfi Gallery, Limassol) in 1989, under the overall title *Transition* [fig. 29]. Beyond any philosophical-conceptual connotations with which Stephanidou possibly imbued the term, it also signified the formalist transition of her work (once again) to purely non-representational art.

This development was made fully apparent in her sixth exhibition (Apocalypse Gallery) in 1990, under the title *Expressions*. With this body of work, Stephanidou (re)turned to abstraction, but not the cerebral, minimalist geometry of her painting from the 1960s and early 1970s. The forms here are organic, and the sensuality of colour that first appeared in the *Demonstrations*, is reinforced due to the absence of subject matter [figs. 30, 31]. Also absent, is the gestural, emphatic placing (in terms of the volume) of the paint on the canvas – trademarks of expressionistic painting. On the contrary, all “expression” is embodied in the combination of shapes and of (smooth, flat) colour surfaces.²² “My latest work is fully abstract, and this is what I am after. It is characterised by flatness, a trademark of modern art, where there is no perspective, depth or volume, but only a flat surface. In abstract painting there is no subject matter, but the ‘subject’ spreads all over the picture”.²³

Stephanidou’s turn toward abstraction was not permanent, however. The alternation between representation and abstraction that had taken place in her work before, has continued into the 1990s and down to today. Out of the compositions of shapes and colour in paintings that immediately followed the 1990 exhibition, arise recognisable motifs, at first as mere allusions [figs. 32, 33]. Tiny, schematically rendered, human figures appear, deriving in part from the *Demonstrations*, but more emphatically referring to archaic art, as well as to children’s paintings. In parallel to

²⁰ Comments by Stephanidou, in the article, “Katy Phasouliotou-Stephanidou exhibits in ‘Apocalypse’” [in Greek], *Simerini* newspaper, 17/11/88. Photocopy no. 22, Katy Stephanidou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia.

²¹ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Maria Themistokleous, op. cit.

²² “I remember seeing Katy’s abstracts well over a quarter of a century ago. Who since Christoforos Savva can use colour so well? Who can understand spatial values so well? And she can use all these abilities to express mature feelings which are also alert and fresh”. Glyn Hughes, “Katy at the height of her powers”, *The Cyprus Weekly*, November 23-29, 1990. Photocopy in the archive of Katy Stephanidou.

²³ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Evi Katsounotou (“The painter who expresses herself in colour” [in Greek]), *Eleftherotypia* newspaper, 18/11/90. Photocopy no. 39, K. Stephanidou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

reminding constantly of the flatness of the picture's surface (the absence of depth being a consistent element), Stephanidou creates compositions where, against brightly-coloured grounds (red, green-blue, etc.), figures, designs, symbols and decorative motifs develop upwards.

These paintings were presented in 1998, in her seventh exhibition (Apocalypse Gallery). Apart from all the above-mentioned characteristics, which connect this work with her hitherto production, the latest compositions constitute an additional, important development in her oeuvre. For the first time, Stephanidou includes an aspect that is outside the course of European (or generally, Western) modernism. Traditional weaving, tapestry making, and the decorative motifs of both folk embroidery and of "primitive art", all constitute influences that have been creatively assimilated into her work.

These traditions have also been the source for part of Western, post-modern art, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. Women artists, in particular, have derived material that allowed them to produce works that brought to the foreground areas from the history of human creation, which had not been included into the West's "canon" of ("high") art in the post-Renaissance era. Feminist artists sought to foreground more "feminine" production and, generally, types of creation that do away with distinctions between "high" and "low" art, and between art and craft. Embroidery and other forms of (mostly women's) handicrafts, as well as the rest of popular art forms, have been among the main references of such aspects of post-modern art.²⁴

Stephanidou remains, however, a modernist painter; canvas and acrylics continue to be her main media. The material she drew from the above traditions, therefore, could not but be assimilated in a manner that is substantially consistent with her hitherto oeuvre. This process continues to this day; recent examples were shown in her eighth exhibition (Argo Gallery, Nicosia) in 2003, under the title *Metamorphoses* [figs. 34, 35]. Here, the minute figures seen in the previous group of pictures have been "metamorphosed" into angels and butterflies, that either create dream-like and fairy-tale worlds, or imbue the images with spirituality, even religiosity (the "halos", for instance, function both as compositional elements and as metaphysical or sacred symbols). The vertical, upward development, first seen in paintings in the previous show, is

²⁴ Here, it is important to point out Christoforos Savva's pioneering work of his "*yfasmatografies*" (appliqués – "cloth compositions"), which incorporated crafts such as patchwork and weaving, as early as the beginning of the 1960s!

encountered here as well, having now gone further in the meticulously balanced arrangement of the picture surface. This “austerity” is, however, greatly checked by the organic character of many of the figures-motifs (flying creatures, animals, plants, etc.), and by the softening of the colour palette. The decorative tendency, which here is more emphatic and it is further accentuated by the strict balance of the depictions in some of the pictures, once again draws from popular tradition.

Additionally, for the first time, the painterly space breaks out of the rectilinear frame, resulting in the “unorthodox” shape of some of the paintings [fig. 35]. “I felt the need to break out of the frame, and if I have enough years ahead, I would like fully to break out of the frame. In some works, I use extra pieces of wood in order to [achieve this]. But I do it with caution, because I have to be fully satisfied by the result. The painting process is a trial”.²⁵

Once again, Stephanidou appears renewed in her continuous, decades-long exploration of subject, form, colour and materials. Moreover, her painting from the last fifteen or so years has been her most uniquely personal yet. Now in her eighties, she is as flourishing as she has ever been, and her work continues to evolve [fig. 36]. She seems to have reached full maturity in a truly personal style, which constitutes the apex of a career that has been a continuous, substantial and restless exploration of the potential and the expressive range of art.

“What is painting, anyway? It is a problem to which you must find a solution, not just by following the easy tract, but the difficult one [as well]”.²⁶

²⁵ Comments by Stephanidou, from an interview to Marina Schiza (“On the hard road of painting” [in Greek]), *Phileleftheros* newspaper, 13/11/03. Photocopy in the archive of Katy Stephanidou.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.