

## ***Behold the Man***

Lilly Wei

Pelagia Kyriazi, a Greek-born, New York-based artist is primarily a painter who also works with manipulated digital photography. In this series of new work, called 'Walking Awakening', an ongoing project which has been the major focus of her energies for the past several years – which she characterizes as a metaphor for movement, where even its form is in movement – she explores her relationship to her Hellenic heritage from the perspective of New York, where she has lived since 1992.

Like many émigrés, distance has helped here see her relationship to her own tradition more clearly. Kyriazi's 'Walking Awake' features a constant visual image, a charcoal and gouache drawing she has made of a naked, slightly over life-sized man.

Kyriazi's anxious, solitary figure, stripped bare, a "figure without references", is positioned a little to the left of center and is a full-length figure except for the loss of one foot, which is cut off by the edge of the paper, as if emphasizing the entrance into a fictive, 2-dimensional realm, leaving a trace behind in the real world. One leg is raised at an awkward angle as if about to climb the stairs in front of him, his exposed and vulnerable body pressed close to it.

There is nothing in front of him except the tiers of gloomy steps, band after rising endless band, inspired in part by the grand staircase of the Great Pergamum Altar, flanked by straining, twisting heroic gods and giants in battle with each other, the action breaking the plane, spilling out onto the staircase. Kyriazi first saw it several years ago when she was in Berlin and was profoundly affected by it as well as by the Hellenistic sites in Asia Minor, many of which were dedicated to ancient local deities, to the worship of chthonic goddesses mingled with rapturous Dionysian cults. Her man ignores us, his back turned to the viewer so we cannot see his face, concentrating on the Sisyphean task before him, as he begins his ascent, struggling to overcome gravity. He is clumsily outlined in black, his body both flat and modeled, the left side less hatched, scored, shaded and scabbled than the right, an image of desire, hope and futility. The body and the stairs are streaked here and there with highlights of gold and silver gouache, a scattering of light to illuminate and break up the heavy, burdened grays, the chiaroscuro that Kyriazi considers to be more analytic, more abstract and also more dramatic.

From this one image on a 9'X5' sheet of paper, originally joined to a slightly smaller drawing of stairs that could also be a horizontally banded abstract work, Kyriazi has generated her present exhibition. Using it as the basic visual unit, she is investigating in how many ways she can interpolate her proto-Prometheus, her heroic anti-hero, a creature of blind instinct and stubborn feeling whose movements are incipient, onerous, weighted down by counter forces.

She has photographed him from different angles using all kinds of different lighting and different light sources that are diffused, raking or direct, the actual light interacting or overriding the depicted light. Taking hundreds of photos of the image she has created and making a sequence out of selected images of this one pose, she destabilizes the singularity of the posture as she sets her figure in motion in a kind of animation, breathing life into him through repetition, an unfolding in time and space. The digital video she has made from these photographs, a compilation of changing states and racing thoughts, is spliced together with images of train tracks, windows and corners of rooms. She associates the video with a poem, "Windows" by Constantine Cavafy, the celebrated Alexandrian poet of Greek descent. It describes the closeness, darkness and despair of rooms without windows where light is refused entrance and being is held in existential abeyance, the narrator preferring the constrictions of the known to the uncertainty of the unknown. In a group of stills, she has also photographed herself dancing in front of her naked man in numerous choreographed poses, arms extended, head back.

Juxtaposing her image with that of her creation, she comments on the age-old relationship between creator and the created, one which encompasses both self and other in a conflicted dynamic relationship of resistance and capitulation. She says that although her figure is male, it demonstrates female traits in its behavior and could be interpreted as a self-portrait.

But the self-portrait is mediated and complicated and necessarily duplicitous, composed of layers of reality. She also plans to make a montage out of the digital prints, turning them into a monotype, since as a painter she prefers to make unique objects. With the drawing of the stairs, Kyriazi wants to construct a more abstract installation. Using digital photography again, she can rotate and obscure the image in a number of ways so that the stairs are altered, almost crazed, buried beneath as in an archeological site. She is also planning to make a frieze of the stills from the video, a kind of deconstruction of

the video or an extension of it so that the image is recontextualized once again in a continuous loop.

The frieze, in some sense, would articulate time, where each second, as a frame, is held and made visible. (George Duhamel, a French writer in the early days of cinema, said that what he disliked about film was that the images never stayed still.) Kyriazi's strategy is expansive and metamorphic so that the work is always proliferating, spinning out, extending itself yet also returning to its source. In keeping with this variation on an image and a theme, she also plans to project her digital images over different kinds and textures of surfaces, not just plain walls, in order to explore as many formats as possible.

Again, she wants the details to become obscured, enigmatic, to put into question what it is that we really see and how contingent seeing is. It is contemporary theatre, a synthesis of new technology and old media, of the provisionality of the temporal and what might underlie it, updating the poetics of nostalgia. Kyriazi said a few years ago that in "America I felt for the first time that tradition is not impeded by the contemporary and that the most recent technological means could metamorphose the artist's visual experience". For her, this constituted a new beginning and ultimate freedom.

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*Lilly Wei*

*Art critic and curator*

*Essay on the drawing 'Walking Awakening' and the relevant project 'Tyranny of Light'*

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