

## Constant Reorientation: The Works of Melina Nicolaides

By: *Kadir Artur*



**From the Project: Trambala Courtesy of the Artist & Darb 1718**

A child of at least three continents, the painting practice of Melina Nicolaides is driven by the intimacies of a personal history of living in Asia, Europe and the United States, assimilating as she grew the cultural diversity and unique specificities of each space she lived in. In her constant reorientation and adaptation to a new place, she had developed a mobile studio, as well as the reflexes of a chronically mobile artist, much reminiscent of what the impressionists did over a century ago. Her studies too, reflected that background and her chronic interests - a B.A. in History from Princeton University, presenting a thesis on a study of the problem of authenticity and representation of the Orient through Verdi's opera 'Aida'; and an M.F.A. (received with the Graduate Painting Award), from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Certainly, due to the flux of art residencies and international grants

available, many artists today develop the reflexes of working in different locations, but seldom do painters adapt to changing spaces and homes frequently. For Nicolaides it was not shorts at residencies that took her away from establishing her steady space; it was a voluntary decision to migrate for development and growth. There was always this new reality of repeated relocation, with its subsequent radical change of languages and landscapes. In her painting, as well as in her installation and video work, Nicolaides ruminates over those intimate dreams that accompanied her throughout a life of shifting landscapes, and questions unanswered, not for the lack of answers, but for the speed by which this flux of sensory information flow, a flux that comes during states of rapid change and in between a space and another.



**Gallery view**

In one painting project, Nicolaides fuses fragments of recognizable visual elements on a series of large-scale canvases: colour, texture, line and form, in a weave that formulates carefully constructed surfaces that are almost abstract, and yet almost figurative. There is this state of visual in-between-ness. The explosive red looks abstract, but it cannot NOT be also seen and fully recognized as a sea, a complete deep waterscape with kinetic movements of waves and ripples. The viewer is confronted by a surface that conveys imagery capable of evoking a state of *deja vu*, seldom encountered with abstract works of art. Nicolaides' video and sound installation project are approached in the same esoteric rumination over the passage of time and the stages that the artist herself had to live, her rites of passage to maturity, in life as in practice. The two components of the project - sound and video - are based abstractly on the universal concept of the real physical transformation, from birth till death, and the flowing of time. The underwater footage shows a forcibly slower movement than on regular ground. The slower movement is perhaps an attempt to slow and stop time, and perhaps space too, which

is physical impossibility, yet Nicolaides still attempts, in a quest of, perhaps, going backwards to childhood to those intimate memories of odors and colors of India, of a consumption-oriented West, or to her island, Cyprus, where identity, and everything, starts and ends. The unanswerable questions to her remain the same: can we go backwards in time ten years? Twenty? Thirty? And what is the role of visual and emotional 'memory' in the passage of time, in all of this lengthy and full story?

But is the role of the artist to provide answers? Perhaps not, but Melina Nicolaides through her interdisciplinary practice succeeds in posing several critical questions.

### **Nicolaides' Cyprus: The Works**

Over the years, the multifaceted nature of Melina's painting process was also influenced by her identity as an artist from Cyprus, this small island whose history was created by its unique location at a juncture between East and West, a place of origin saturated by elements that reflect these contradictory influences. Although recently part of the European

Union, deep complexities endure, created by factors which have affected every aspect of life, prior to and after independence in 1960 - the persistent effects of imperialism, colonialism, military occupation, and the 'green line' that has since 1974 partitioned the island into two halves, the occupied North and the free areas of the South. Within the realities of this charged political history and their relation to questions of individual, social and cultural identity, evident imbalances have emerged - disequilibrium, disharmony and an inequality of energies and forces.

Having recently taken residence in her home country for the first time, Melina's most recent installation work addresses the divided status of the island, and the instabilities that have arisen in social and cultural dimensions. This series of work explores the theme of 'imbalance', drawing principally upon the symbolism of the "Balance" - this traditional symbol of equality and justice from which derives the notion of 'matters held in balance', which has its origins in ancient Egypt, and implying equilibrium, harmony and equal energies. Through a repeated use of the visual element of the stripe or line within the works, signifying a line of division, the artist aims to emphasize the notion of the two sides of an uneven and unstable balance.

In 'Two Halves Split', a 2009 installation created out of Cyprus sea stones, plexiglass, mixed media and oil, the artist collected stones from the waters of the Mediterranean were dissected in half, like the two sides of the island; the painted broken stripes within the 'hearts' of the stones represent the countless complexities politically and socially, which touch every aspect of Cypriot life. The installation with glass, mirror and water reveal a reflection of the work through the distortion of water, representing the degree of difficulty presented in completely comprehending the intricacies of this culture that has handled unique circumstances of external domination throughout its history.

In her 2010 work 'Which Way is Up?' that was created out of marine plywood, fiberglass, mixed media and oil, a wall installation of repetitive rectangular shapes

with intricate horizontal and vertical lines, like a chessboard, represent the interminable possibilities of the outcome of peace negotiations between the occupied North, and the South, and the imbalance of a game played through negotiation, in which foreign powers dictate the moves towards the outcome.

Nicolaides' work 'The Negotiating Table', a work-in-progress, deals specifically with the idea of a table with separately moving planks of wood, each representative of all 7 of the negotiating participants on the Cyprus Issue (Cyprus, Turkey, Britain, USA, Greece, the EU and UN). Each piece of this table seesaws up and down independently, and the table remains always out of balance, reminiscent of Cyprus' 50 years of independence that remains fragile and unstable, and of negotiations that go on and on. The table fluctuates and is never allowed to be still, like a country that is never allowed to find its own balance, the timing never right, whilst the bigger players move the playing field to suit their own interests - touching on a theme that is comparable to many other nations, especially those that fought for their independence after years of colonization.

### **Trambala: The Project**

*You push me from above, you lead me astray  
Rock me back and forth, until I am dazed  
So for a moment, i can not see the absence of my antiquity  
Faded is the colour that bestowed on me  
The goddess of my true identity  
M. Nicolaides*

Conceived especially for Darb 1718, in the year that marked the 50-year anniversary of the independence of Cyprus, is the installation Trambala. Its subject, like earlier works on Cyprus by the artist, recalls the theme of 'imbalance', which is at the heart of the island's strange, unstable peace, and its fragile independence. "Trambala", the Cypriot word for a children's rocking toy, illustrates this state of disequilibrium, and alludes as well to a universal issue: the erosion of a nation and of a culture's identity through persistent conditions of instability produced by the weight of the pressure of the more

powerful - by those who wish to maintain their dominance at the expense of others.

Here, the trambala is a pre-made children's seesaw, where each piece, alike in form, echoes the shape of the island. A distinction between the top and bottom parts, held tightly together with metal screws, subtly alludes to the image of the island split into half. Seven pieces, colored with lustrous industrial paint, recall the artist's previous references to the 7 main "players" in the Cyprus issue, whose influence has spanned the island's recent history. Each trambala interprets the reality of the island's constant rocking back and forth, and the tension of the risk of falling out of balance - a subtle metaphor for the precariousness and the uncertainty of a people never allowed to be still because of the fear of an outside force that is always there to unsettle, to perturb, to unbalance.

Through a repetition of shape and color, Trambala coheres into a linear message that can be unraveled by an explanation of the discrete variations in colouring, beginning with the predominant color, copper - the identity of Cyprus. Copper, the oldest metal in use and one of the 7 metals known in antiquity, was given its name by the island, and is that with which Cyprus, and her goddess Aphrodite, has been associated since ancient times. The copper pieces signify an island that despite past adversity and instability has maintained its harmony, wholeness and identity, through this grounding element.

The circular flow and visual balance of these pieces, however, is broken by the appearance of the vivid black, the weight of a heavy darkness from above. This visually imposing strain on the Trambala alludes to the imposition and interference by destabilizing forces, and is a symbol of the constancy of pressure from Others, the burden of occupation, and the fear of the military presence from above.

In the center piece, the metal has faded and lost its copper hue, subtly communicating the warning message - that moment in which the color of a rich cultural heritage and identity is absent- revealing that the greatest danger of a loss of authenticity is in that imperceptible moment in which a misleading rocking movement has lulled a people into not noticing the lost wholeness, that the heart has faded.

The image of the fading copper reminds us of a past which roots the people of Cyprus to the island and their sense of belonging - and the dangers of how exterior pressure from others can deplete a culture from the inside. Moreover, it conveys human life as a trambala, the uncertainty with which many peoples live, within their struggle to maintain true ethnic and cultural identity. Ultimately, Trambala illustrates the injustice of the global practice of appropriation or erasure of national, cultural, and personal identities by those who wish, through deception and pressure, to prolong long-term political interests, to ensure dominance over a territory, and to divide peoples.

### **On Trambala** **Michalis Pieris**

Cyprus; The eastern outpost of Europe and the Mediterranean. "A rock in the sea", as its most prominent medieval writer, Leontios Machairas, put it. A land forever destined to exist at the crossroads of civilizations, trade routes, strategic interests, and geopolitical pursuits, a land doomed to experience over its millennial history a long succession of invaders, conquerors, soldiers, travelers, traders, and settlers, and yet blessed to draw on the traditions of many cultures - Ancient Greek, Egyptian, Phoenician, Assyrian, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Frankish, Catalan, Venetian, Genoese, Ottoman, British.

This duality of curse and blessing has marked the entire history of Cyprus, in which ups and downs have been alternating ever since copper - Aphrodite's metal that changed the course of humanity - was discovered on the island. Bound by fate to this hectic seesaw ride, the people of Cyprus developed a peculiar stubbornness; a remarkable resistance that helped them survive the trials and turmoil of their history, striving - like nature does - towards stability and security. They learned the vernacular of those who came to settle on the island (as many as twelve languages were spoken in Medieval Cyprus), they got to know the religions of their conquerors, they adopted some of the customs that newcomers brought with them, but they never abandoned the fundamental features of their original culture. They

traded their assets wisely, gaining wealth, power and importance, and they managed to persist in the most crowded of crossroads, finding the right balance between East and West, North and South. For centuries on end, the people of Cyprus have proved able to keep their millennial culture unadulterated, preserve the language of their Ancient Greek ancestors, and remain committed to their Orthodox faith, while being tolerant and respectful towards the many minorities with which they lived in peace.

In modern times, when pirate raids and crusader attacks are replaced by subtle and clandestine political dealings - with far more devastating consequences and far-reaching implications. Dealings that brought instability to the very core of what Cyprus is, to the most stable and resilient element on this island, to its people. Dealings that instilled fear, hatred, division, intolerance, and a sense of constant threat, which undermined the foundations of a nation that wants nothing else than to be left in peace. Now. Before it loses its amazing ability to find its own balance,

which had saved it so many times in its long history. All this is Cyprus. An island once surrounded by the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. An island washed by the combined waters of what medieval scholars termed the Seven Seas, or “the beloved waters of Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt”, as the Alexandrian poet C. P. Cavafy called them. An island now waged in a seven-player chess game, which can be won only if the strategy of each player is the best solution for him and for everybody else involved, i.e. when the game reaches the point of equilibrium, as Nobel Prize winner John Nash defined it.

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**Gallery view**