



Neither Visible nor Invisible

I first met Michalis Karaiskos at the house-studio he shares with his partner, Irene; a serene place in an unexpected countryside setting near Athens. It was there that we first discussed the prospect of my writing a text for his first solo exhibition.

My first reaction was to get to see the evolution of his painting over time, which I consider necessary in order to understand the current works before me.

This initial approach demonstrated the three stylistic and thematic directions the artist has followed over the years: naturalistic landscapes, religious icons and, more recently, a form of geometric abstraction.

So my primary concern was to trace the relation among those three directions, which I reckoned intuitively to be an underlying affinity despite the obvious morphological differences. Yet I still had the more difficult task of defining the content of this peculiar and unclear relationship. I had before me three different styles: naturalism, a (Byzantine) abstractness and a contemporary abstraction. At that point, Michalis's invitation automatically became a challenge and thus an eagerness to delve into his work. I focused on his latest works, which would feature in his first solo exhibition, which are formally divided into two major sections: coloured and monochrome. A second wave or flash of intuition (feel free to choose the word) was that I was standing before an attempt at conveying a non-conventional space and time.

Starting with what I see as the most decisive work in terms of both form and content, "Night Flower" (*fig. 1*), it is structured as follows: what at first looks like a large blue square that takes up the entire canvas becomes brighter towards the centre and ends up as a highly luminous azure inside a central square. There follows a second square made of successive chromatic zones suggestive of 'square' variations of sunlight inscribed within the original blue square. At the exact centre of all this squared structure there is a mysterious, dense light/colour whose milky and chromatically unclear texture points more to an amorphous fluidity which cancels out the 'square mood' of the composition.

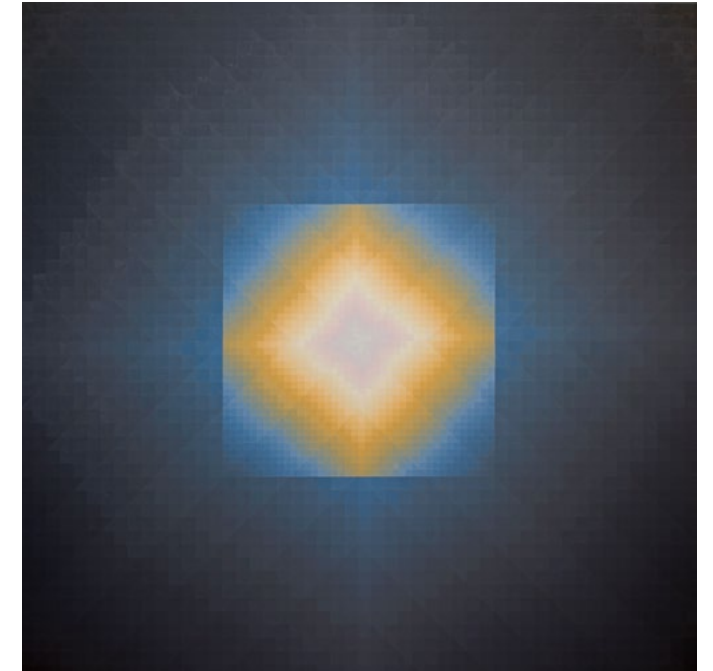


fig. 1

Fleur de Nuit
oil paint on linen, 200 X 200 cm



εικ.2

Indian Mandala

I had the strong feeling of standing before a Christian version of the Indian mandala — the famous symbols of the cosmos, morphologically based on the square and the circle (fig. 2).

Yet in this specific work by Michalis the dominant element is the square, as an age-old symbol of fullness and the created world.

Moreover, the square has a direct affinity with the cross, which appears to some extent to be inscribed in the larger, original square in the manner of an internal 'scaffold' for the entire work. The overall chromatic makeup of the compositions seems to rely, generally speaking, on tones of blue and yellow-orange-gold. Underlying these hues is the Christian symbolism of the difference between the visible (blue) sky and the invisible one (yellowish-gold) which is equated with the famous Seventh Heaven, the realm of divine presence. And in some mysterious, unconscious way derived from a Jungian psychoanalytical approach, the chromatic zones in the work of Michalis are seven.

Much the same is true of the second, similar but much smaller work which has more earthy hues (fig. 3). Here the central square looks more like a star with a radiating centre — an element we find in four more of the artist's monochrome works.

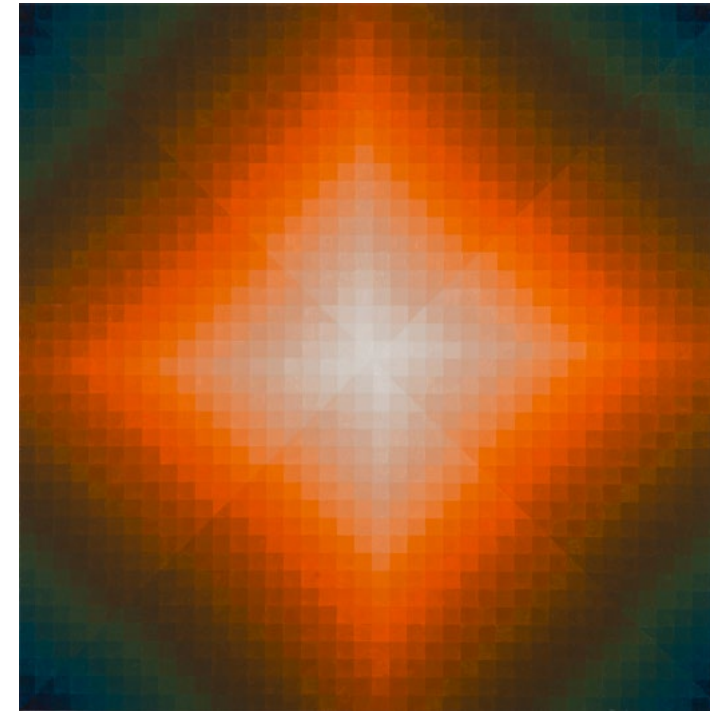


fig.3

Asteroid Transition
oil paint on canvas, 60X60 cm

four

microcosm, which is essentially a projection of the macrocosm.

If I were to give a collective title to these works, coloured or black-and-white, it would be: "The Eye of the World" [the all-seeing eye of justice]", which is something we often find in today's Orthodox churches in the form of an eye above the sanctuary's holy doors — but with a crucial difference: in the two coloured works Michalis examines the macrocosm and in the monochrome works the

This is also borne out by the architectural quality of the monochrome compositions, which reference the microcosm of the church and convey the feeling of rays of light/vision emanating from the dome; indeed, the dome in an Orthodox church invariably depicts Jesus the Pantocrator surveying or ruling over the world (*fig. 4*).

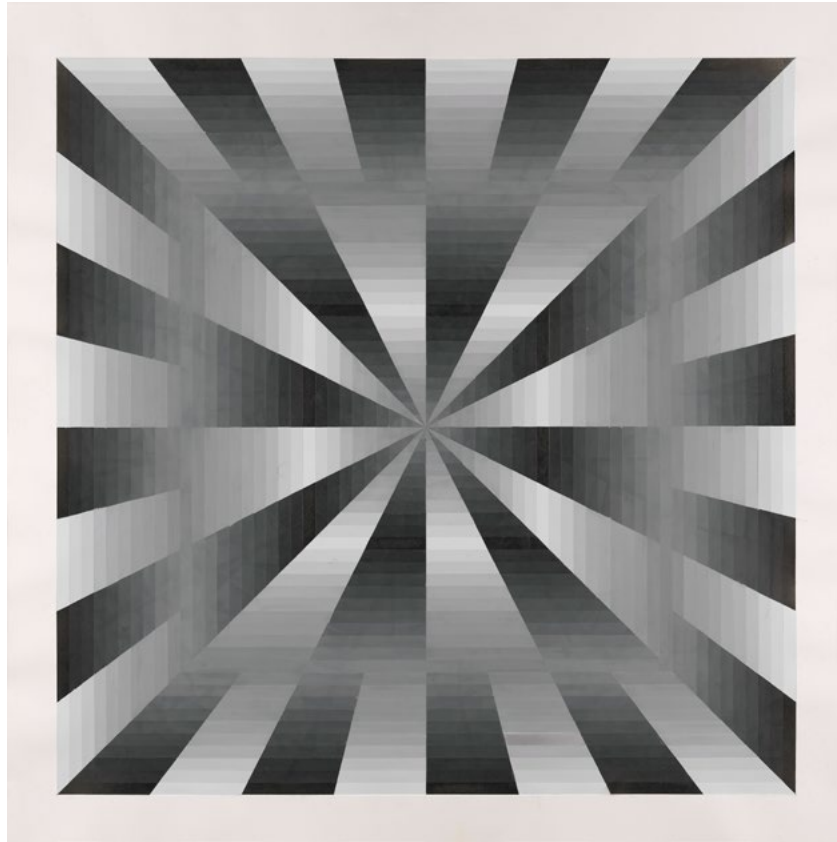


fig.4

Radiant (III),
Ink on paper, 68 X 68 cm

Finally, also present in the exhibition besides these four works is a series of monochrome compositions with combinations of curvilinear and rectangular shapes (*fig. 5*).

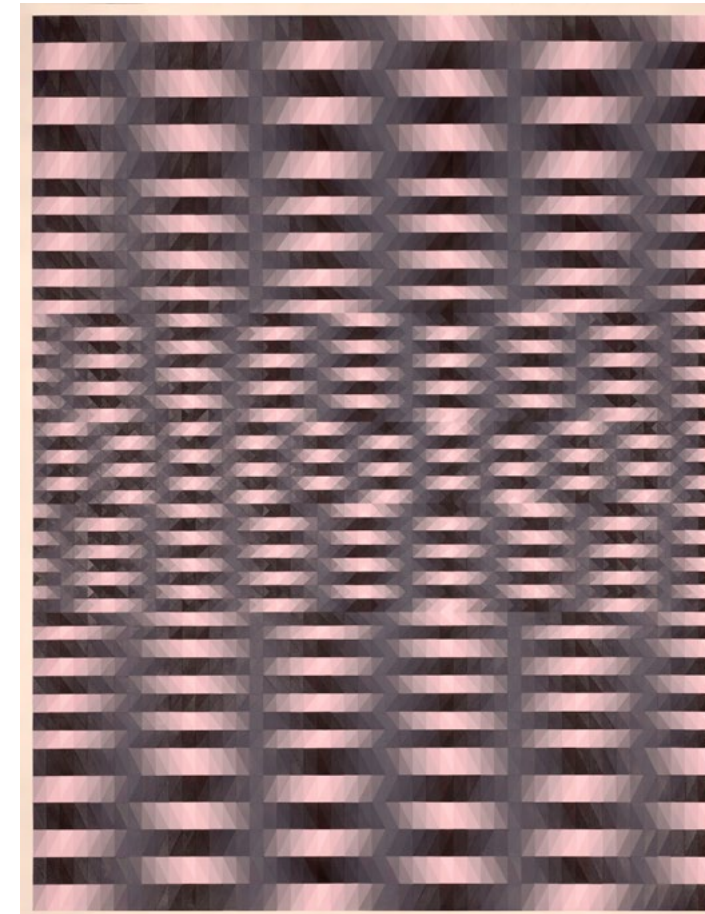


fig.5

Integration
acrylic inks on paper, 98,5 X 75 cm

These works led me to associations and concepts that came spontaneously to my mind in relation to time, albeit the conventional, linear time which we believe to be experiencing exclusively. These are concepts I have come across on occasion with reference to time, such as space-time, time dilation and contraction or time as a function of speed, gravity, and so on. I saw all these references projected onto these works, suggesting not just time but Time with a set of properties, actual or imagined.

I don't know how convincing I can be with all this but, after all, there is no smoke without fire.

Summing up, as I contemplate the three stylistic directions of Michalis Karaiskos (who continues to practise naturalism and abstraction in parallel) I would say that the artist keeps moving back and forth between the two; between nature and metaphysics. The link between them is the abstractness of religious painting—and this brings us back to our original tripartite division into naturalism, abstractness, abstraction. (fig. 6a, 6b; fig. 3).



fig.6a

Afternoon in the Mist-over land
oil paint on canvas, 60X84 cm

In all his works he manages to convey a sense of void, but as a presence rather than an absence.



fig.6b

Aghia Ioulitta and Aghios Kirykos
eggtempera on wood, 82 X 45 cm

From the naturalism of the first section (fig. 6a), i.e. from the readily visible, he goes to the abstractness of Byzantine art where the invisible (God, golden backdrop) becomes visible. Thus the second section combines the visible and the invisible, the physical and the spiritual (fig. 6b). Finally, in the third section the 'abstract' shapes lead us to a complete geometric abstraction with no references to the visible world, as the colours basically convey abstract notions of metaphysical spirituality: the square as creation of the world and completeness, and the colour as light.

In this last section Michalis turns the chromatic physicality into luminous energy and appears to be influenced by the Byzantine tradition, which uses colour as light (*fig. 3*) which conveys the spirituality of the schematically depicted figures in Byzantine icon painting. Plotinus, the neo-Platonic philosopher of the 3rd c. AD who had a great influence on Byzantine aesthetics, points out that colours are lights. In other words, he accepts at once the artistic material's physical (colour) and spiritual (light) qualities (*fig. 7a, 7b*). We observe this association in the works of Michalis if we compare the two paintings "Twilight" and "Inferno".

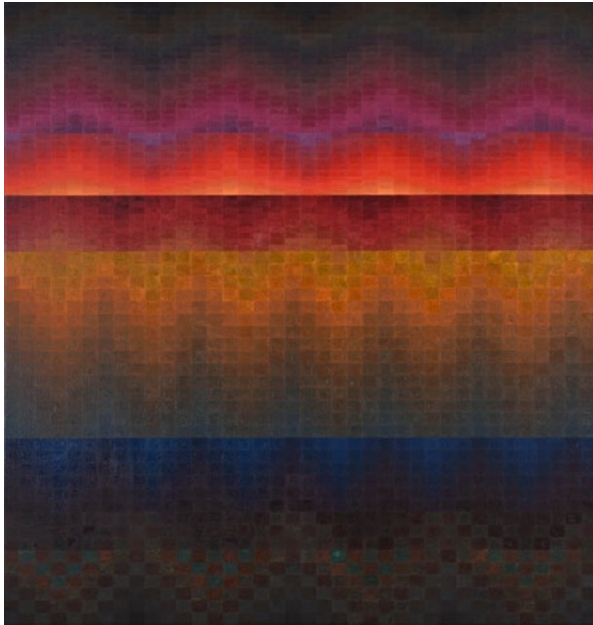


fig. 7a

Twilight
oil paint on jute, 100 X 95 cm



εικ. 7β

Inferno
oil paint on linen, 180 X 128cm

In the former the colour is closer to a physical status in the form of waves (*fig. 7a*); in the latter it approaches the intangible, the "uncreated" light (*fig. 7b*).

In this way our artist manages to oscillate between the two worlds, between the visible/tangible and the invisible/intangible, and thus goes from naturalism to abstraction via religious painting.

A very interesting feat, indeed!

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