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Reflections on the “end” of painting, prompted by the work of Leon Michail

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It has been maintained that when someone takes up painting, they are faced with an additional challenge. Beyond and apart from meeting certain standard technical requirements, they must constantly reflect on the logic, nature, and function of representations and, at the same time, familiarize themselves with what has been stated on the subject. It is a given that their noteworthy—if not the most significant—theories drew upon examples from the long history of painting, across all periods and diverse geographical regions. They must, therefore, engage with the medium's great tradition, situating their images within one of the lineages that tradition has created over the centuries. Or, at the very least, take them into serious consideration.

It is also said that art as a whole, and even more so painting, is approaching—or, more precisely, has already reached—some sort of “**end**”; that whatever comes to be added belongs to a realm beyond. Consequently, since it is not possible for new, subsequent forms to emerge which would be capable of approaching a certain “truth” better, for example, than philosophical thought, then today's works of art belong to its “**metahistory.**”

What would such a conclusion actually signify though? **Could it be that what is presented today in art spaces is the result of an endless recycling of visual proposals or responses to artistic problems that were raised and addressed in the past—a reformulation or, at the very least, a modernization of them?** If we answer this question in the affirmative, then we would also be confirming the statements in the first paragraph of this text. That is, that all that remains for us is the subordination of every work to some preexisting genealogy, whose origins lie somewhere before the “end” of art. After all, according to this line of reasoning, no such new lineage can emerge after that, since the sources of art's renewal have definitively dried up. **A retrospective look, of course, at the art and painting of the 20th century would hardly corroborate this entire line of reasoning.**

Let us, however, attempt to test the above thoughts—admittedly formulated in a rather superficial manner and bordering on naive generalization—using **the example of Leon**

Michail's art, since that was the catalytic agent which allowed the formulation of said thoughts. Indeed, at first glance, we would not face much difficulty in identifying certain points that lead to some of his art's origins, whether or not those are capable of forming a possible genealogy of it. It may be found, perhaps, in the settings of the protagonists' actions in specific works by **Goya**, which, painted with a roughness unprecedented for the time, seem to detach themselves from the events of the main narrative. Why not also in those landscapes by **Friedrich**, such as, let's say, *The Monk by the Sea*, where the dark, horizontal water formations compete with the nervous vertical brushstrokes of the approaching storm on the horizon, with the aim of conveying the insurmountability of nature and the sublime. By isolating areas and focusing on these points, one would indeed encounter something of the rhythm of Michail's works.

He would, nevertheless, find more prominent and elective affinities with the mature paintings of **Turner**, who was almost the same age as Friedrich; at the period of his further departure from his earlier idealistic scenography and anthropomorphism, which, according to many, paved the way for certain versions of expressionist or abstract painting and their intersections. It is certain that Michail's art shares a similar mood, though certainly to a much greater degree.

It seems somewhat uncertain whether Michail himself would accept such origins for his work—in this case, the genealogy we are constructing for it. I honestly do not know. How, indeed, would it be possible to go so far back and so far away, two hundred years ago, to the early 19th century, to trace it? **The developments in art that followed were, as is well known, more than rapid; they were radical.** There is no need here for even a brief outline to describe their momentum. Does Michail stubbornly reject them or willfully ignore them, content with his ceaseless personal research, isolated in a studio hermetically sealed off from diverse influences? Obviously, neither is the case. Quite the opposite in fact.

Just as arbitrarily, we could even add various examples from the 20th century to supplement and extend the line that leads us to Michail's paintings. We could invoke **Mark Rothko**, perhaps overlooking his own intentions, or even more contemporary cases such as Sean Scully's less geometric moments. **We could also recall here a vast number of artists who would likely be counted among Michail's even more privileged interlocutors. But what places all these illustrious names in a single "line"?** We might quickly say that they constitute significant stops and milestones—certainly among many others—in the journey of a transition in the practice and thought of art. More specifically, they bear the **hallmarks of a gradual detachment**—a process spanning several centuries and involving multiple episodes—from idealism, historicity, mythology, and religion.

We are not implying here merely an indifference toward all manner of subject matter, a complete acceptance of the formless or the abstract. After all, a certain landscape

is discernible in Michail's works, even if we understand that this is merely a pretext. But a "pretext" for what? **We encounter an artist who lives and works in the center of Athens, in Greece, a country where the landscape has been the focus of interest for so many of the most renowned painters as well as a multitude of writers.** The manner of its depiction or even its description took on broader dimensions, reaching the context of an older geoclimatic patriotism—if not chauvinism—to validate a sense of place or the very nationality of those who attempted to render it through painting, literature, poetry, film, photography, or any other medium.

Michail may be completely indifferent to the relevant tensions in modern Greek art. Or perhaps not. What matters is that **the landscape we see in his works is imaginary**, unreal, mentally constructed within the confines of his studio, betraying a disposition not only of self-determination in the face of so many local ideologies but also of detachment from the very act of observation, the very act that has decisively guided the majority of painters throughout history. If he seeks anything, it is that which is inherent to and belongs exclusively to his medium, painting as such—which is autonomous from any, seemingly superfluous, heteroreference. **He focuses on composition, shifts in emphasis, rhythms, gradations, and the materiality of color—all the elements that constitute the core of the act of painting.** Michail seeks to develop its inherent characteristics and strengths, knowing that now, following the evolution of photography, cinema, and, even more so, digital technologies, painting can break free from the demands and dictates of previous eras.

The landscape, then, serves as a "**pretext**" in his work for us to examine those qualities and anxieties that painting is uniquely capable of bringing to light—most certainly better than other artistic media. Its evaluation must take place on these terms, its own terms, not on the basis of some "content" or "narrative." **Are we, then, faced with yet another version of "art for art's sake," sufficiently "autonomous" as to care not for the political, social, or whatever else surrounds it and, at times, defines it, but only for itself?** This is not the time to justify whether or not we adopt such a proposition. Let us simply note that **the creation of many such "autonomous" spheres had something to contribute to the social and political discourse.** The reason? Because the focus and steadfast commitment to a painting practice free from heterodeterminations activates a new form of knowledge for both the creator and the viewer.

We are thus referring to a broader process. Michail is the heir and continuator of a long journey toward the **autonomy of painting** from a certain "truth"—likely of religious or philosophical origin—a "truth" that does not concern painting, one that still bears the marks of a self-awareness that it is not the most suitable medium to express and convey it. **A consciousness that haunts almost all of contemporary painting.** The discussion of its "end" marks the beginning of its liberation from old unresolved issues. It served as an opportunity to unburden and distance itself from everything that is not its primary

subject. Something that Michail certainly knows very well. As a contemporary painter, he is fully aware of what technical mastery means, of the historicity of his medium, of the many traditions and lineages that flood his past. **And above all, he challenges the notion of some past or impending “end” to it.**

The gallery will be closed for the Easter holidays from Thursday, 9 April, through Tuesday, 14 April.

Opening hours: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday 14:00-20:00 & Saturday 12:00-16:00
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