

# DENYS ZACHAROPOULOS

## EYES WIDE OPEN, INQUIRING GAZE

I have been deeply amazed by **Christina Calbari**'s work ever since I first saw it. It is the manner she approaches her themes rather than the themes themselves that impresses me. Her themes - which she specified as a reference to child abuse - constitute a substantial problematique of our times. Yet, if her works were confined to her themes and were rationally structured through information, analyses and theses, the sense of iconography would be so profound it would presumably create a sense of alienation from any form of truth. I'm still confident that the iconographic dimension of painting is the weakest aspect of expression and the most alienated approach to the essence of art. However, none of these applies to Calbari's work. For some years now, she keeps revolving around the same issues and meditations. She systematically generates the same kind of sensibility and agonizing intensity by presenting us with something that may be a child or a woman, obviously a human being. Yet, above everything else, this "something" is also the resonance of a deep expression of pain and fear that penetrates time and space, similar to a shudder or shakeup. What agitates the spectator is mostly the lack of any iconography in a world where violence, fear, enforcement on fellow humans, arbitrariness and intimidation, maintain a sequence of active overtones of fantasy where death and the transgression of power falter. Her work reveals a world that assumes thousands of forms; a world that awakens all kinds of memories from elements that the artist or spectator has incorporated as images rather than as personal experiences. Her drawings - her visual work in general - allow us to enter an unforeseen territory. It is from this territory that intimidation seemingly surges out towards the astonished viewer, akin to a modern Pandora's Box. Nevertheless, there is a sense of nostalgia that often dominates Calbari's style, as if this Pandora's Box hails from a familiar past each of us possesses.

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Thus, this nostalgia intensifies a complex where the familiar and the unfamiliar come out as interchangeable entities through the spectators' own memories and experiences. It is in this manner that her work emphasizes the timelessness of intimidation and veneer of tenderness through which violence and imposition abuse the childish existence; preserve the fear and sense of guilt; extort and rape the wide open eyes that are too surprised to comprehend the situation. They may not comprehend it, but they certainly appear to fully experience what is happening to them, unable to realize the extent at which they are sneered and deceived. The conspicuous enforcement of lie awakens the sense of truth. Bold and shocking as this truth may be, it is retained as a dangling, unsettled expression of a helpless gaze. It is an expression of the wide open, distant eyes that stare at as if taking us hostages, with the hope we will break through the grip of apathy and stop being passive associates of violence. They challenge us to recount that particular gaze as if it once belonged to each one of us, similar to a fragmented experience, an alienated memory. It is precisely at this point Calbari's work - beyond any direct reference to a psychological condition, an instant of our self - is consummated as a work of art, a visual work, a work of painting (be it a sketch, a picture, a mural, a photograph, a video). This consummation follows from the fact Calbari's work isn't concerned with direct narration. It is concerned with indirect memory, whose reconstruction is both what we call "image" and what no image can re-enact as a whole and can only re-enact as part of a wider process of triviality and awe; description and enigma; analogous and inconceivable; stratagem and vociferation; illusion and truth. It is at this point that her work is proven to be modern, due to the fact neither the religious icon nor advertising campaign, neither the illustration of children's books nor the phantasmagoria of cinema are able to reach the manifoldness and complexity that pushes zero and infinity beyond the boundary that demarcates theory from action, glamour from usage, aura from guidance.

It is at this point that Calbari's work rises as a pure expression of painting, constructs itself as a query and a suspicion of an episode and places itself outside the process of iconography. This is because her work is neither a moral nor a ploy; hypocrisy or annotation; signifier or incident, all of them so easily placed within a code of iconography or a continuation of its power. It is at this point that this very young woman brings forth issues such as the violation of the world's image, the exposure of the other side of the coin and the demolition of any kind of glamour. She re-introduces the relationship between the self and the other, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the truth and the lie, the production and the comprehension. On the pretence of naïveté, Calbari poses the question of "disenchantment within culture", adopting a method of excavating the history of image. It is a method that falters between the history of art and the trivialization of re-enactment, as experienced by us all since childhood, through the social environment and the consumption of fantasies that maintain it: TV and window; museums and books; blackboards and mirrors; fables and songs. I do not want to praise a young artist more than it is proper, considering she has many years ahead of her to measure the depth and extensiveness of her restlessness which she already imparts to us with the intensity of her concepts and the strength of her style. I simply wish to thank her, because - with modesty and determination - she renews the challenges posed by Melanie Klein, Virginia Woolf, Marisa Mertz and Louise Bourgeois, by standing up amidst the misery and horror, generously radiating a sense of hope and intuition that shakes the viewer with its boldness of self-analysis. A self-analysis that prevents any outside enforcement of the other because it exposes the other within us.

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