



NIKOS KATRIS

An island between day and dream - that is how Santorini was called by a German poet. Santorini is one of the most unusual, extraordinary places on our planet, the attraction of the landscape, is similar with the Gulf of Naples, the Bay of Rio de Janeiro or the Caribbean.

Here, legend has its position. The history of Greeks and the Mediterranean starts from here, the place where the father of the gods Zeus separates during the heroic decisive battle against the Titans, the rocks from the sea and he buries his opponents in Sicily, where they now lie trapped beneath the islands Stromboli and Vulcano, and sometimes we experience the awful burden of their ascent in the form of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

After the Cycladic prehistoric people, the Pelasgians "the Greeks before the Greeks", the Cretan Minoans had here their main base outside of Crete, at the still anonymous at these times port, that is close to the current Akrotiri.

The great archaeologist Marinates, the Greek Arthur Evans and memorable benefactor of Santorini, discovered this city, the Cycladic Pompeii, buried under many meters of volcanic ashes, one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century.

At the moment, we are on the floor of this historic square, where only a small part thereof has been excavated until now and certainly in the future will offer us many thrills. Our host today, Nick Katris, has placed on the walls of his tavern, some replicas / reproductions of the paintings of the old Cape - as an invocation of this magical ancient city.

The great eruption of the volcano, which took place before 3 A thousand years in Akrotiri, resulted in the burial and the destruction of the Minoan civilization in Crete and it was the most destructive volcanic activity that had ever occurred in the history of mankind, even more terrible than the eruption of Vesuvius, in 79 BC, which destroyed the Gulf of Naples, and worse than the eruption of Krakatau that took place in modern times, in 1883.

It is also very likely that the myth narrated by Plato's Atlantis was born here. And then?

When Santorini had recovered after centuries and offered a fascinating view of volcanic ruins covered by seawater in the Caldera which was formed, the man put there his foot and with it the history of Greece on the island and ever since Santorini is the central point of population movements and political conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. Just like the waves, everybody went on the island and indelibly left their mark: since the early Doric period, and then the Romans, the Byzantines, the Franks, the Turks, the Venetians, and even the pirates and sea gypsies.

Therefore it is not surprising that this unusual place attracts not only the elite of the international archeology, researchers of Atlantis, volcanologists, geologists, naturalists, but also even today and every day as a «hot spot» of world tourism that attracts international travelers, who come with the floating hotels, white like snow, anchored in the blue ink caldera, and that for a long time it has a force of attraction on artists from Greece, the rest of Europe and the overseas countries.

Santorini is the central point for creative people from around the world, and the image of the island includes studios and artistic workshops, academies, music schools, as well as old windmills, wineries or tomato plants of an earlier financial cycle. The greatest part thereof gives Santorini the impulses that came from abroad.

An artistic boost that derives from the island itself and by a real native, is the occasion of this inauguration (opening). I have the honor and pleasure to present to you tonight Nick Katris as a sculptor. It is not just the premiere of a debutant in the scene of art, but above all a preeminence for Santorini, as a native and independent art center. Nick Katris is an islander and he has it inside. He has chosen the island as “his” island. He just not live on the island, he lives by it and for it.

At first, Nick's love-story with Santorini was a conscious decision, the decision for Santorini. For he's repatriated, which of course is obvious for the Greek islanders. After his childhood, his education and military service in Piraeus and in the mainland, he returned to the island, to his family home.

And not only that. The island has become the island of his fortune, he has made it its own, he has been literally incorporated - on various ways. This is a journey of discovery, a real journey, a mission outwards and inwards, in the spiritual sense. During his youth he was once a fisherman and diver, and as apnea diver he has researched the Caldera and the fishing grounds of the Gulf of Akrotiri, in a depth of 30-40 meters. It was then that he experienced the worst tragedy of his youth, the death of his best friend and colleague in diving, who did not return from a dive.

As a boat master, he explored the waters of Santorini and the neighboring islands, he learned the currents and the wind course which had long before determined the fate of Odysseus. As a fisherman, he came to an aesthetic contact with the marine life, he became aware of the caste of the large and predatory fish. As a climber who is not afraid of heights, he explored all the corners of the local mountain of Akrotiri Bay. As an observer of the island winds, of the weather, of the tides and the currents, he became a meteorologist of Santorini. As a petrographer and an amateur geologist, he became familiar with the stones of Santorini., the rocks, the sediments by eruptions - their stratigraphy, their volcanic origin. He has developed his own smart theories about the formation and shape of the Caldera, which he has seriously discussed on an equal footing with foreign experts.

In the end he is the architect Nick Katris, who made with his bare hands, without a construction plan, with no machinery and only with a hoe and a shovel, he made the cave house in the volcanic land of Thera in a traditional-style, his tavern and finally in winter his gallery by digging the soft volcanic material, if so, a a big sized sculpture. Not to mention his skills as an inspired chef and a good host, who welcomes people from .all around the world as well as his friends from the island to his famous tavern, which ensures him only as a secondary, his material existence and that is prima facie a meeting place of generous hospitality, where the owner is a wonderful entertainer and friend.

Furthermore, we should not forget the pop-philosopher of real Greek tradition, who makes thoughts about God and the world and shares them with, his friends, not being afraid of any possible Socratic debates. For what reason do I explain all this? Well, all these complex knowledge, skills, hobbies, have eventually led to the targeted and inevitable existence of Nick Katris as an artist, as a sculptor who has ultimately made his Santorini a creative process.

After the preparatory work on the stone material, which he got from the sea, the beach and from the volcanic slopes of the island or from the ancient masonry, ie small heads of Demons, which he called «Diavolo» and they are objects of folk art, which he donated and they are an architectural "Hymn to Ancient Greece" consisting of stair sets, ruins of a temple and a steep rocky structure, there has been created the first monumental work of Nick Katris, the symbolic «Lady of the Lighthouse»

With this project, which was already artistically perfect, Nick appeared as a serious sculptor in the art scene. Embodied on Nick's beloved rocks in the bay of Akrotiri and the lighthouse thereof, the female figure is the protector of the island, the sailors and the fishermen residents of it. As the bow of a ship, which is stuck on the island rock, the personification of the ship on the volcanic stone with the name "Santorini". However, at the top, the Lighthouse appears as a sign of spiritual "enlightenment".

The columnist from Santorini named Dimitris Prassos discovered the work of the unknown Nick Katris and he published it to the public through a newspaper article. During our chat, Prassos highlights to me the particularity of this sculpture as "an unusual combination of archaic Cycladic Art, i.e. the person with genuine folk art, i.e. carved figureheads (Galionsfiguren) of old wooden boats"

Other works were created very quickly from the skillful hands of Nick. They include issues from his social and natural environment, portraits as symbols of the "New" and the "Old", an "Hymn to Life" and creative productivity, and more particularly he captures with his hands, looking back in the past, the prayer of the phallus, a n allegory of "Spring" with the flora and the fauna of the island as a project assignment, that is the symbol of an ancient Italian city in the form of a city gate and a struggling elephant, symbols of the deep friendly relationship of Nikos with Conte Francesco Leopardi, and that from time to time he traverses Santorini with his vessel, and finally the double group of stone books, an open and a closed one, such as the "books of life ", as metaphors of human destiny as well as of the personal, not always without conflicts, biography of the artist.

Katris always succeed the anecdote, narrative personal promotion from the particular to the general, the archetype, the metaphysical.

As if all this is just a prelude, from the hands of Nick, his latest work “Eva the First” was developed during last winter.

And through this work he managed to be permanently present in the scene of sculpture. The "Eve" marked another level in sculpture, in the conquest of a fragile material, the "king- material" of marble, and in the spiritual deepening to this topic. This is the path of the most decorative approach: the «Hellas - Hymnus» which was created 14 years ago regarding the "narrative» Akrotiri-Lady of the autonomous sculpture. Thus, Nick Katris proves to be the non-naive artist. Because naive art knows no development, no progress.

Since his last and most important work needed a decent room, during last winter, Nick as a creative "worm" dug further the body of the island. The result was a cave that evolves as a maze, a real Cretan Minoan building, a sacred cave of archaic power and mythical presence, a "strong" place with its own atmosphere and intense transmission. The gallery itself is a real "big sculpture" - and it is also the mountainous, priestly building for his most important work, the "Eve", with which he is pushed forward in the arena of severe sculpture and is an unusual successful visual form that is not formulated thoroughly so far, through the initial intellectual thinking.

The first woman of humanity, at the same time the original mother, the first woman of Adam and the creature of God's creation, is not made according to his image (provided that God according to the Bible and the other "biblical religions" appears as a Father, as a Man, as a patriarch and as an Anti-image of Adam), and Nick has found his sanctuary in the gallery of the cave, a condition with mythical significance in depth and complex testimony - ambiguous and complex. Aptly can someone read this as a three-dimensional "Mona Lisa" of Santorini.

How come? A headless Mona Lisa without a mouth, without a smile? Well, Nick's Eve smiles perfectly. She smiles with her entire body, just like Rainer Maria Rilke explains in one of his most beautiful poems for the headless torso, an archaic figure of Apollo: "In any other case, the breast would not be able to amaze, and at the quiet turning point / the loins could not lead to a smile / to the center, that bears the Nativity.

Eve closes the cycle of the «Lady of the Lighthouse». Now, the island has discovered from the inspired hands of Nick, two mighty protectors: these of the wind, the water, the ships and the tidal connected with the Lady of Light, who sprang from the castle of the earth, in marble as an enchanted first woman who is the archetype of the mother of mankind, the first lover, a wife and a mother, an archetype, an exemplar, Genetrix.

Eva and the emblematic figure of Akrotiri that reminds of the four elements of the first Greek Philosophy: Fire, Earth, Water and Air.

"Eva" does not ask questions, and there are final answers -apart from the unfortunate and absurd contest between the religious zealots of the world. To the extend that it consists a basic philosophical sense - typical for a Greek thinker. Back to the roots!

Nick's "Eve" immobilizes the difference between the priests, the popes, the imams, the pastors, the rabbis, the gurus! Nick's "Eve" lacks the original sin, she is blameless and innocent, she is not relieved, she cannot justify. She exists without apology.

This is why Nick selected for the archetype of Eve the basic sculpture of Torsos. His Eva has no face, she is not something modern and she has no limbs. She comes from the distant past, from the beginning of time, and she indicates a distant future, the end of time.

As a figure she would be something that does not fit, she would be an equally humorous story as a fig leaf. Initially Nick's "Eve" had such a fig leaf. Recently it was carved away from there. When during a night phone-call in Germany he informed me respectively, we were shocked at the beginning and we thought: "For God's sake, now your Eva, has no nose, she is no longer a recognizable Eve!" Meanwhile, Nick has convinced us. If she is innocent and timeless, standing outside and above the original sin then she no longer needs a fig leaf. Because now she's shameless.

To this corresponds that «Eva the First» besides the genders, is amongst you! She is not just a woman nor just a man. She is both a man and a woman, as the original Platonic man at the beginning of human history, one of the most memorable images of Greek philosophy. This explains why «Eva the First» offers two fundamentally different views. On the front she is a sensual seductive woman with feminine characteristics. From the front side she looks like a beautiful Venus. However, the back side is this of an archaic kouros. As convincingly ambiguous, Nick's Eva is an androgyn. It becomes the transfer of perpetual metamorphosis of man and woman, the main problem of Eros.

We are at the end of our course through Nick Katris' work. How was the beginning?

Santorini - the island between day and dream - breezy, flooded with light. Nick, the islander, bears both of them inside, both the dream and the day. He is a day-dreamer, who faces the day, the brightness, the dazzling light of the Aegean, the purity and crystal structure of his birth island. He is the man who makes his artistic dream come true. Like all artists, he is a dreamer. An artist, who is not utopian, who is not realistic. Art - the largest utopia. The dreamers - artists of the Absolute.

Finally, how should we classify Nick Katris? The criticism of art needs such classification systems in order to operate. Is this naive art? Almost none. Whoever creates forms such as "The Lady of the Akrotiri Cape" or has discovered «Eva the first», is anything but "naiv". Is folk art "folklore"? I see no donkeys, dolphins, starfish or windmills, in Nick's work as they are commonly found in many galleries of Santorini!

Is amateur art the sculpture of a gifted amateur? The observation of "Eve" proves the opposite. It's hand perfectly. It is a «Wurf», as we say in German. Such a sculpture does not succeed as a secondary product in a hobby workshop.

Nick Katris is completely original, and at the same time he is nonacademic refreshing, he is a really authentic talent! He is autochthonous and autonomous.

Now we must hope that this winter he will be hard working and will create the opposite of "Eve". Perhaps «Adam the Last», or the central idea of the "Shepherd»? For this purpose, the marble will come from Paros and at the top Nick will have a monumental at least natural-sized figure.

Dr. Rainer Bentmann

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