

MINUS SPACE

Order and Mastery: Recent Work by Cristos Gianakos

By Steven Henry Madoff
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To go down into the earth, to see the darkness of granite...The granite sits deep in the earth; a magnum formed through centuries at temperatures attaining 1200 degrees centigrade, at pressures 12,000 times greater than the atmosphere at sea level.

To extract the rock that dwells in the earth is to take part in the dwelling. Cristos Gianakos's sculpture borrows this sense of dwelling. His granite, taken at the quarry in Broby, Sweden, cuts a form in the world. It is taken out of the earth and is cut into, cut away at its sides in order to make a form in space that is reasoned. He takes this heavy matter that represents the dwelling of the earth and shapes it, arguing that reason is what humanity brings to this dwelling: Reason is how men dwell on the earth.

This belief, seen in the geometric and restricted angles of Gianakos's stone sculpture, is utopian. Its heritage is vague and ancient: Finally, all the arguments of men against chaos seek solace in order, in regularity, in the recognizability of phenomena. My presumption here, of course, is that the world is not in fact stable at all. I am now speaking of the social world. Whatever mechanistic principles may exist of an ordered physical world, our social world is filled with an intensity of fragmentary events. And herein lies what may seem a profoundly conservative interpretation of art. For I would like to propose that the exercise of the mimetic faculty (to create imitations in the world that establish a comprehensible order of things) attempts a stability that is utopian. But as utopia means in its original Greek no place, all art lives in the site of paradox: Art holds the site of reason in the sight of the unreasoned world.

Even the art of our century's seemingly antagonistic avant-garde yearned for order. Its experiments grew from the realization of the lack of order that filled the world. The avant-garde sought to confront, fragmented civilization with a mirror of an apparently unreasonable, fragmented art. For it thought that by imitating disorder, it would do many things at once- represent the world with greater similitude (no matter how peculiar it might seem), bring society into recognition of its state and remove avant-garde art from the stance of all earlier mimesis that upheld the moralized image of a now impossibly stable world. And yet by including itself in the aesthetic arena, in the utopian space of mimesis, this momentarily shocking art was absorbed into aesthetics with its idealized code, its ethical order.

The minimalist aesthetic of Gianakos's stone sculpture dwells no less in this paradoxical no place that is both idealized and physically in the world. The reduction of minimalism is no less hortatory in its nostalgia for order than the earlier avant-garde. The need for order is cut into the stone. It stamps the stone with the proscriptions of geometry, as we see in the granite piece, Voyager.

Voyager's upright hypotenuse and stepped inner side are cut at 45 and 90 degree angles. They are blatant inscriptions of reasonable perception. Their dwelling in the rock is a reformation. The weight of the stone and its light-absorbent black surface give the work its "gravity", its rooted appearance, its emphatic need to locate, to be in the world. The enigma of Voyager, and of all such minimalist work, is how very mute, how essentially physical it appears, while its intellectual gambit attempts a base simplicity of absolute and static order that drives the physical matter toward the weightlessness of pure idea.

This stasis can be read as the ambition to establish something eternal, as all longing for geometry is a desire to repeat fixed measures that collaborate in space. The stone's detail is the bare sculpting of an angle that is precisely half of a right angle, as we see again in Oceania. The granite marker is the volatile mass stabilized, cut so that it is no more than a container for this single incision, 45 degrees into the rock. There is a violence here, a willfulness to impose order. Now order dwells.

The stone is a house of order, a throne in which reason sits. In Gianakos's paintings done in acrylic on mylar, the idea of order is given a visual transparency, a look of transience. The forms are painted and then partially dissolved, wiped away. The drawing, as we see in this image from the Delta series (page 13), resembles post and lintel architecture or a geometric seat in which the triangle is placed. The very graphic nature of the dark and light image, approaching starkly elegant design, wants to achieve the physical definition of the stone, while its actively marked surface begins to erode the eternal condition of geometry.

Indeed, these paintings have their own enigma. Their spatial character is ambiguous. The forms can be read as flatly frontal or as a threshold through which a recession in space is seen. The image is betwixt and between, stable and moving, shallow and deep, announcing the eternal forms of geometry and their erosion into unordered space.

And yet this erosion is bracketed. It is seen behind the frame of the post and lintel, just as the stone is struck by the stonecutter and cut with the blade until it assumes the appearance of order. Any implication of erosion means movement and change. But change, though it may harbor instability, may also mean the creation of energy, energy that can be mastered and driven.

In the ambitious monumental sculpture, Gemini, to be built in painted steel. 9'6 by 14' by 21 ', Gianakos adopts the constructivist creed that argues for man's control and production of the forces around him. Here the planes shoot out at varying angles like wings and ramps, combining in a massive trajectory of energy that focuses on the ascension of Gemini's fin. This channeling of power, which is as political as it is aesthetic in origin, seeks to bring utopian values into the social sphere of life. It is an order mastering change. And perhaps it is more ambitious for its allowance of movement that the purposeful stasis of Gianakos's granite sculptures does not admit.

Nonetheless, the entire body of this work calls and calls again for a purity of forms, for a regulation of chaos, for an imposition of the pristine idea of another dwelling on earth that differs from the grotesque model of our history. Witness this utopian art that advertises the paradox of its pleasure, both idea and physical presence, made more darkly enigmatic for its power, its will to mastery.