

# MINUS SPACE

## **Cristos Gianakos: Sculpture + Drawings**

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Cris Gianakos' sculpture recalls for me Wallace Stevens' poem, "Anecdote of the Jar." The poem tells of the odd act of placing a plain and simple jar on a Tennessee hill. Stevens observes that the jar "held dominion everywhere," and that it "did not give of bird or bush like nothing else in Tennessee."

The sculptures that Gianakos has created for the Nassau County Museum have a like effect on the landscape. The forms do not overpower the natural terrain; they are clearly foils to it, are boldly but serenely alien to it. Their otherness is intrinsic. The sculptures are ideated geometry, mental constructs made palpable, based on universal prototypes. Gianakos achieves a sensitive harmony with nature, while still being aware that man cannot vie with nature in matters of aesthetics.

The pure forms that Gianakos has appropriated for his constant subject matter are referred to by the utilitarian term 'ramps.' Staying with abstraction for the moment, their main feature is a diagonal. Diagonals surely occupy a position at the fore of the collective unconscious. For everybody, they signify passage upward, attainment. And they are decisive; one is reminded by them of the Euclidian catchword: the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Gianakos' ramps literally aim at the heights, and in doing so raise our sights.

So far I have sketched a pretty sublime foundation for the artist. It came as a surprise to me that the present formidable work has an important prototype in a lowly, portable wooden object that Gianakos found fifteen years ago on the streets of what is now SoHo. This object resembles a miniature stairwell with slats along its diagonal. It's a found object, of course, and it came as a revelation that an artist trafficking solely in universal forms should be an ardent admirer of Duchamp. That the pure, poised and classical work is descended from street objects checks a natural desire to talk inflatedly about it. Its ancestry helps keep it humble, part of our earthbound reality.

Early in his career Gianakos staged some participation pieces. At a SoHo intersection, he shaped bags full of white flour into a diagonal that was scattered by cars. He made a flour X in Central Park, at the exact geographical center of Manhattan that was reshaped by bicycles. Stable pieces in the form of hard-edge, semi-transparent resin objects aspiring to verticality came shortly after that. Then there were long, low-slung forms. Full of cracks, these seemed to swell out of the rough wood floors on which they were placed.

In 1977 two major pieces were exhibited: the room-filling Highbridge at 55 Mercer Street, and a twenty-four foot ramp (compared with the 120-foot piece in this exhibition) in Keene, New York. These seem like giant steps from the modest-sized, more organic or temporary work, but the evolution makes sense, if romantic sense, when other factors contributing to Gianakos' art are known.

Gianakos grew up in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, but in his childhood his family spent extended periods of time in Greece. The village in which he resided on these visits was primitive. It was small with neat white houses. The furnishings were spare but there was always an elaborate icon illuminated by an oil lamp that was always lit.

In 1971 Gianakos produced a book of photographs of the pit of white casein at Mykonos. The pit seems to be a touchstone for him. In a near-Proustian way it summons up his childhood, and it provides a standard for the clean simplicity that characterizes his work. Here there is a major divergence from Duchamp. The historical resonance and reverence-inspiring quality of Gianakos' found objects bear scant resemblance to Duchamp's provocative Dada jokes.

I am fortunate to have listened to Gianakos talk about his childhood. In response to a question about the universal apprehensibility of his work, he said, "Man is always climbing on all levels. The play street in my New York neighborhood was a hill. They made it so hard for us. In team sports one side always had the advantage; it was never fair. In winter we used to play in a drained swimming pool and run up and down the ramp that made the deep end."

This recollection led to remembering another instance that shows how the untutored mind apprehends ramps. Gianakos constructed a small slender ramp on Ward's Island, a psychiatric hospital complex, the grounds of which have been turned into a sculpture garden. Some of the residents there took Gianakos' ramp to be a rocket launcher and awaited the lift-off. Gianakos savors the Jules Verne 'dreamer' quality of this response.

The unsophisticated and primal may be a basic component of Gianakos' art, but of course the real father of art is

other art. Andre Malraux has alerted us to the fact that we now live in a "Museum without Walls." This is thanks to mechanical reproduction that allows for the wide dissemination of images.

A critic's concerns naturally run to the historical sources of the work under consideration; an intuitive artist's don't. Yet it must have been fun for Gianakos to go into an art postcard store and cull for me cards bearing pictures of the world's art with which he feels kinship. Not surprisingly, his affinities run the gamut. There is the jaunty geometry of Malevich and Mondrian, Franz Kline's paintings, with their strong black lines that seem to be the outlines of structures, are there. There are 19th century photographs of the pyramids and the sphinx. Gianakos also likes the "anonymous quality" of De Chirico. Since the debt to Duchamp has been demonstrated, it is apropos that Duchamp's forebear, Leonardo, should rank high in Gianakos' museum.

My response to a picture of Brancusi's Endless Column was a gleeful "of course." This sculpture soars skyward from its base in a small town in Rumania and might be said to pierce the sky. This work pertains to Gianakos' slender 120 that could be continuing on forever as it disappears into the trees.

Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument for the Third International" is a rich and eccentric ancestor. It is a tortuous spiral ramp reminding one of the roller coaster at Coney Island (also a favorite of Gianakos). It is all trestle-work, adding emphasis to the realization that the underpinnings of Gianakos' sculptures are not mere means to an end-the support of the ramp beds-but are major components of the artist's aesthetic. They possess wonderful incremental rhythm and there is little resistance now when Duchamp is again invoked -for his Nude Descending the Staircase with its lively rhythm.

In the mix of art cards are several picture postcards of sites in mainland Greece, Crete and Egypt that feature rugged architecture and rough means of ascent and descent. One is immediately aware of Greek architecture translated into Gianakos' sculpture. He is remarkably at ease talking about art and the past made present -about the collective unconscious. He has said, "When I traveled in different parts of the world I felt very comfortable with the things that were very old. In Crete at the Minoan ruins I had the sense of having lived a number of lives. It wasn't like being the reincarnation of a particular person, but the sense that the process goes on. I know that I was around the pyramids when they were being built."

When asked why, for all his affinity with old things, his works are so pristine, Gianakos responded that when the pyramids were new they had a smooth stone facing. "My work is precise, but it will get old, too. There is "something naturally beautiful about the slow process of aging."

At this writing, Rex needs its plywood facing, 120 is getting taller as it stretches out, Mars is roped out on its site, all that Leda needs is her steel plates, and Little Rex is still a gleam, plus drawings, in his father's eye.

Yet one already has a sense of the immense variety Gianakos has achieved working with his deliberately restricted vocabulary of forms. The works share materials, steel and wood and the diagonal, yet will afford forcefully different sensations. The pinetum that houses Rex is a nest-womblike, moist and erotic. Gianakos compares this grove to the atmosphere of a sanctuary at Delphi.

From the shelter of Rex and its environs one can espy 120 in the open field. Watching the trestles being fixed in place, I had the sensation of watching sheer arduous labor, such as the laying out of railroad track. There was little that was artful about it. There must be a period when 'art' is suspended in order not to be distracted from the business of construction. Gianakos reports that this drudgery experience ends abruptly and that transcendent sensations suddenly overtake him. Already one anticipates drinking in the marvel of a thin eighteen-inch wide line dominating a whole field.

The aggressive Mars is near a formal garden. This is daringly like a bull near a china shop, and its elements recapitulate the cutting-through quality of the garden path. Gianakos avoids mimicking the symmetry of the garden by choosing an askew placement. "I have always liked corners. I know there are corners in nature." The most prosaic analogy for Leda is a narrow table. But the ramp bed is inviting. One can imagine it as a bed holding the woman, Leda, who was seduced by Zeus in the guise of a swan. Humorously Gianakos also sees the swan residing in the piece. "It looks like a fat goose." Unmistakably, but chillingly, it recalls the table on which Frankenstein was assembled.

Little Rex will hunker on the lawn near the mansion, behind the box hedges. The connotation of Rex as a dog's name as well as being Latin for "king" amuses Gianakos. Ail of his titles are quick and telegraphic, signaling scale and mood but resisting the literary.

The gallery exhibition offers three maquettes of Mars, Leda, and Rex. The many drawings that are on exhibit are both concepts and working drawings. They include technical studies, photographic explorations of the sites, and expressive images of the works themselves. The viewer will pick up on the emotional quality evident in the mania for, and an obsession with, ramps which the wildly varying drawings reveal.

Cris Gianakos has reduced forms to what he calls the least common denominator, without frills and veneer. This

makes his work immediately apprehensible. But apprehending it is not the end. The diagonal works do trigger a restless feeling in us. The stable pieces, attractive and sensual, don't hold us, but send us off on flights of the imagination. When we re-align on the pieces we appreciate the craftsmanship, but are quick to be sent off again. So many worlds are conjured up by the work, how can we be cool aesthetes around it?

The dominance of minimalism in the art world over the past twenty years has let us appreciate the spare and unadorned as art. Minimalism is one avenue to these pieces, but with Gianakos one bypasses terminology very fast. For these angular pieces, like Stevens' round jar, "hold dominion everywhere"-not only over the vast and varied acreage of the Nassau County Museum, but also over some not-often-visited chambers of our sensibility.