

ULRICH LOOCK

Self-Portrait of the Other

“The work is beyond individual painting matter.”¹ A warning. Work is exhibited here that goes beyond. Work that defies the possible and well-established function of painting to express and confirm, if not to substantiate, the painter's individuality. First of all, what is exhibited as constituting one single work made from multiple parts includes, apart from paintings in different sizes and following different aesthetic orientations, drawings done with pencil, charcoal, ink, etc., black and white photographs, a video film and a large scale architectural model – items of imagery relating to each other to form the work while displacing the means of representation. This multiplicity is framed by the premise that another artist's work is at stake. The statement presented as an introduction to the exhibition reveals his biography in the briefest form – name, date of birth and death, last address, an irrevocable decision for self-imposed confinement in his house determining the second major period of his life and work. The note claims that the visitor of *The painter A.K.* is confronted with that person's work of a lifetime. It suggests that the painting (and additional work) of George Hadjimichalis exceeds an oeuvre's individual approach by rendering the work of another painter, A.K., an invented figure, while there is no reason to doubt at any point that it is Hadjimichalis who produced that work. The installation subtitled *A Novel* is not a fiction. No effort is made to suspend disbelief. There is no intention to lead anyone to assume that it was someone other than Hadjimichalis who painted these paintings, who took these photographs, who filmed this video. Work, obviously made by George Hadjimichalis, introduced as A.K.'s lifework.

There is little about the manner of painting, about the approach to subject matter, about the mood reigning over the different works that would indicate the sense of distance if not irony to be expected when a simulacrum is involved. In some paintings the brushwork is quietly agitated, in a rather crudely expressionist or a more sensuous impressionist manner. In other pieces the layer of paint is condensed to create a mysterious atmosphere suggestive of secrets and hidden feelings, projections and denials, or painterly gesture is subdued to foster detailed depiction. A number of different ways of painting are adopted and can be traced to various historical models even if only in an allusive manner. It wouldn't be adequate to consider these painterly approximations a consequence of purposefully re-working the heritage of painting – be it in the sense of critical development or progress, or be it in the sense of melancholic or hysterical re-enactment. Rather, every single one of these works is imbued with a subcutaneous sense of hesitation, an attitude of uncertainty and searching, sombreness and mourning. The conceptual proposition of the work of someone else, A.K., having been created by the artist who is known by his full name, George Hadjimichalis, is softly but efficiently subverted by a painterly notion that can be called, without much reservation, a personal style – a style that is rather innate in a biological sense than resulting from a focused effort. The painting to be seen – as much as it may be lacking indicators of a concentrated painterly quest – reveals traces of a distinctive personality that are difficult to reconcile with the task of generating *n'importe quoi*, uninvolved stand-ins for the work of someone else. But still the warning is in effect – “beyond individual painting matter.”

The very first painting of the total of 265 pieces (not counting photographs, the video and the model), distributed and organized in different sets relating to particular walls of the exhibition space, depicts a young man, his face very bright, very white, emerging from dark and barely differentiated surroundings, making an appearance in a zone resembling the depth of a stage, the head inclined at an angle of undecidedness and receptivity. Who could paint someone else gazing in such a non-defensive way, the face quietly open without the slightest resistance? Who could be painted under such a shameless gaze while unaccounted time is passing, unaware of any urgency except the concern for himself? There is no other way than considering this painting a self-portrait. A self-portrait which by its nature is the portrait of the one who painted it. It is possible to feign a self-portrait, but the work Hadjimichalis called *The painter A.K.* is not a fiction. Hadjimichalis painted that specific painting of the other that can only be painted by the

¹ George Hadjimichalis in an email to author, 5 May, 2011.

respective painter himself. He painted a self-portrait of the other. He painted a self-portrait through the painting of the other who is the self, thereby introducing a split between the self and the other inside one and the same person, replacing the concept of individuality by a notion of dividuality. This is the key to the work and an answer to the question how the painting can be informed by a personal style and at the same time exceed the individuality of the painterly undertaking – the personal style is not one and the self is multiplied through sharing it with the other.

In relation to his earlier project, *Synaxis Maroneias* (1989-91), a work involving references to the excavation of an early Christian basilica in Thrace and inserted in the well-preserved and renovated architecture of a villa that was constructed in 1879 for a tobacco merchant in Kavala, Hadjimichalis has stated, "... I wanted to use painting to examine the human activities of those who had lived and built there [in Synaxis, in the 6th century]; in other words, to penetrate as far as I could into the manner in which the things I could see in front of me had been constructed."¹ In a similar way he could have stated in relation to *The painter A.K.* that he wanted to use painting to examine the life of an artist identified by those two letters. This time however – and this accords an exceptional position to the work in question within the oeuvre of Hadjimichalis – he does not only use painting to reveal past life, A.K.'s biography as it is, but also and possibly more importantly, to examine the medium of examination itself, painting. Making painting and related works to create the work of the other is Hadjimichalis' way to return to his own painting and explore it as if it hadn't been his. Creating the other's he makes his own work into another's to taste the pleasures of narcissistic reflection while at the same time avoiding the traps of self-identification.

The pictures of *The painter A.K. - A Novel* are organized in eight major chapters coinciding with the nine walls of the exhibition architecture designed to accommodate the project and inserted into the space of the museum. The installation of the pictures determines the sequence of looking at one piece after the other; it represents a linear chronology – if the analogy of the work is a novel, it's a novel from the 19th century refraining from challenges to sequential logic marking modern literature. This novel develops step by step to trace A.K.'s movement through time as a painter. The first wall, the first chapter, is devoted to the self-portrait. It is the beginning in the sense of a consideration of the author of the work, it is the beginning also in terms of the life time.

Next to the painting of the ethereal young man taking in, eyes wide open, with neither response nor judgement what is in front of him, the painter painting his portrait, himself, another painting's dark space is invaded by the downside of the bright face, disassembled heads in numbers, Ensor's masks, rendered with excited brushstrokes, expressive and ridiculous, conventionalized depictions of a nightmare, the grotesque opposite of the serenity of the fair face of the first picture. That is what the painter hasn't seen and what he doesn't want to see. The manner of painting rebuffing the gaze's approach, those empty heads are what the imagination rescues for the realm of the visible; they are the leftovers, the remains. Then on a small canvas, another head, raw painting in violent contrasts, an older man, the eyes – different from the full black pupils of the young man boundlessly open to anything that would make itself seen and equally different from the carnivalesque goggle-eyes of the faces of horror – pointed shapes, empty sockets, a face of death. This small painting recalls another one by Hadjimichalis titled *Funeral*, a mural-sized oil painting he made in 1969 at the age of fifteen, in the year after the sudden death of his father. Then another head, face chalk-white, severed from the body, in the middle of a landscape, one of Géricault's heads deprived of its drapes, a common feature of mad agriculture in the 20th century, killing fields. The self, the nightmare, the ancestor, the murder – the beginning of a myth of origin.

Then more heads or masks bound by the size of the frozen, woodcut image of the face, haunting, the bad dream of modernism, resulting from the desperate pubertarian will to express strong feelings without commanding adequate means. A bearded face, disfigured by a bloody scar, blindfolded. An electric bulb with its halo of light making the head of a hanged male figure invisible, something of Magritte: the blinding

¹ Quote from Yehuda Safran, "Not so much to be seen as to exist," in George Hadjimichalis, *Works 1985-2000*, exh. cat. Athens: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p. 28.

light replacing the head with its living face and shining eyes; total illumination confined to the other side of an open door; an eyeless face shone upon – the eyesight being taken away, the source of artificial illumination claiming its place where it is impossible for the eyes to see, otherworldly illumination being out of reach. Both the blinded and the illuminated body deprived of their faculty of perception. Shedded light, nothing to see, reference to the years of war and occupation, the civil war. The myth of the self an imagination, a nightmare in the face of such events. Conjunction of the personal (the death of the father) with the collective disaster.

An organ-less mummy clad in white brushstrokes as if in bandages, a torture victim tied up, painting the inscription of eternal death on an embryonic figure, juxtaposed with the reappearing young man from the first picture, a three-quarter figure loosely painted, in a more worldly way than the initial self-portrait, again the eyes wide open, this time the gaze going outward though, freezing the person subjected to its stare, a gaze that is nevertheless remote from activity and life. As if to make explicit the implications of the self-portrait, as if to confirm a decision made in the wake of deadly illumination, this figure is clad in a painter's smock and beret. A hand projecting from beneath the cloak exhibits fingers which under different circumstances would be read as Christ's gesture of blessing. The saviour, the sufferer, the painter. The myth of origin is the myth of the godly artist bound to the figure of the father, threatened by terrifying visions of history and death, violent rather than peaceful, inescapable and unavoidable.

On the same wall are presented, somehow disconnected from the group of the painter's self-portraits, five dark canvases exhibiting places marked by nature and culture. The difference between these works and the other paintings on the same wall can serve to announce the works on the second wall which are not painted in oil or acrylics, but in powdery matter, pencil, pastel, charcoal, also ink. In contrast to the expressive romanticism of the oil paintings from the first wall, the dry materials of the second set of works indicate a more abstract and conceptual approach. They contribute images delineating place and time. Barren landscapes with rugged mountains, a mountain range with the evocation of a waterfall obscured by fog, cloudy landscape, landscape of clouds. All of these are depictions of remote swaths of land. There is only one interior space, sparse, empty with the exception of a table and a light-bulb. This time the space beyond is obscured to the degree of complete darkness. The sobriety of the room matches the simple and savage land. Then one portrait, another portrait, implicitly relating to the male figures on the first wall, but belonging to another time. Their time is the Roman Empire, or rather Byzantium, large almond-shaped eyes, the pupils almost completely visible, a long straight nose, a small mouth with full lips, curly hair, men. Such people had made their appearance earlier in the work of Hadjimichalis, they are the onlookers or witnesses present at the exhibition of the *Synaxis Maroneias* excavations, contemporaries of the destroyed basilica. The place is an archaic landscape and an interior untouched by current culture – the time is Byzantium. That is the time and the place locating the myth of origin exposing conjunctions of the self and the ancestor, nightmare and murder, the painter and the saviour.

The third wall is devoted to the appearance of the woman. This chapter starts with a narrow vertical painting in cold grey-blue of a bodyless garment, a nightgown possibly, which, even though there is no flesh and skin, does display female shapes. The vesture without the body it is supposed to cover, isolation of the functions of protection and ornament, preponderance of the shell, primacy of the secondary, metonymic evocation, pure premonition – to be compared to the narcissist exposure of the full male self in the first painting of the *Novel* – echoed by the painting of a further abstracted gown, a hooded cloak made of shiny, thin and wavy fabric, inscribed with elegant and relaxed brushstrokes in the black field of the painting, a nocturnal vision, the commonplace image of a ghost's cloak, the garment that has never been shaped by a body. These two pictures indicating the difference between phantasm and desire are separated by an image of barely identifiable darkness, the darkness of the invisibility and inaccessibility of the female body. This third picture represents an obscured portrait whose gloom merges with surrounding murkiness. Sticking out are only the eyes, white eyeballs, white light on the pupils. The eyes of darkness catching light, the light of a vision emanating from the woman.

In opposition to the obscurity of an absence, the zoom on a woman's mouth, contrasted like the Ying and Yang symbol, isolated body part, *pars pro toto*, highly significant and heavily charged with projections. And next to it another image of shifting away from the carnal reality of the woman: Lady Owl, bird of

wisdom, Athena's companion, messenger of death. The owl is the only bird that knows how to close the upper eye-lid like humans. Desire, phantasm, avoidance. In the next sub-chapter the woman finally makes her first appearance in the flesh, a veiled silhouette against a strip of light. This painting is based on a photograph that was part of the filmed sequence of still and moving images that, under the title *A Moment in the Mind of Mr. A.K.*, participated in Hadjimichalis' work *Hospital*, that occupied the Greek pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. The irruption of light in a dark space had already been traced in the two preceding paintings: light entering from the fissures between door, door frame and floor, and the beam of light emitted by a beacon to direct seafarers in the dark. Then a sequence of small abstracted pictures of mountains, thickly painted, involving colour and the physicality of the material missing from the landscapes on the second wall – a shift from the woman's corporeality to painterly matter. In addition to that shift does a metaphorical connection exist between woman and mountain? – Remember the names of iconic Swiss peaks, the Jungfrau [virgin] next to the Mönch [monk], leading to the comic postcard showing a group of monks mounting the virgin. Finally, the entrance of the physical body of the woman, seen from the back as if she were leaving, a condensation of yellow, an incarnation of bright light, inserted in a field of pure painting covering a canvas in landscape format, encrustation of red. Red hot desire, horizontal exposure. In the following picture the body of the woman can be seen under a naked light-bulb, she is bending down to pick up a piece of paper or something similar, the colours are red and purple. Announced by light, giving the light a body, the woman becomes visible through the electrical lighting that replaced the man's eyesight in a previous painting.

Later an image of the snake complements the image of the owl. The common denominator of the symbolic animals, one from antique, the other from Christian mythology, are knowledge or wisdom and death associated with the woman – this association may be what is thwarting the man's desire.

Finally, in another sub-chapter of the third wall, the woman in flesh and blood takes the stage, not the woman in general, but a real individual recognizable by a curious notch in the shape of her pubic hair, represented frontally and from the back, as a full figure and in detail, a declination of female nakedness. The different pictures are organized around the female counterpart of the youth in the first image of the *Novel*, the woman's upper body clad in a loosely-fitting shirt, her head tilted at the same angle as his, a twisting movement of the body as known from El Greco's saints – the return of the Byzantine youth. While the young man's eyes are wide open to take in the image of himself, hers are closed – Bernini's Teresa, the panel with photographic images of women in ecstasy, arranged by Salvador Dalí in the 1920s, now abandoned to interiority – as if she were dreaming her own body. The male and the female both centred on themselves, missing the other. Finally, after she was associated with the expulsion from paradise and the night of death, the woman is connected to a stain, a speck of blood on a piece of white cloth. The myth of origin has turned into a bachelor machine. The woman is there, incarnated out of light, between the phantasm and the stain, object of unfulfilled desire, as inaccessible as she is close.

The fourth wall exhibits an incoherent collection of isolated and fragmented items, living things and dead objects, a face with the eyes smeared away, extreme, partial views of a head in unbearable pain, the folds of an unidentifiable bundle resembling a brain deposited on an unstructured black surface. The row of images recalls things that had appeared before, such as the naked light-bulb, the torture. Taken up again and exposed in an erratic sequence they evoke decay and disaster. The fourth position from the beginning is held by the frontal and symmetrical view of a woman's head that is difficult to identify as female – unimaginable she could be the woman from the previous wall. It is a head of lost hair, the bald head of someone with a terrible illness. The disintegration of the world as the basis of ultimate personal misfortune.

On the fifth wall death and an intimation of birth. At the beginning once again appears the stain of blood previously associated with the female body and a male trauma, a dark red smear on a white sheet, a contamination of the virginal canvas. The next image exhibits another use of the cloth: as a shroud it covers a dead body lain on a bier. The bed sheet of love and birth, the painter's canvas, the shroud veiling the dead. Life and death, man and woman – essential oppositions addressed through the work of the painter. In another picture the shroud again, a large creased blanket closing off the pictorial space – the unfolded, intensely coloured sheet in Rogier van der Weyden's crucifixion in the Escorial pushing the cross with the suffering saviour and two mourning figures towards the space of the viewer, foreclosing any perspective to

bypass the catastrophic scene, to access a liveable place and a time *au delà*. The blanket in the painting by Hadjimichalis is made of heavy starched linen, it falls freely, metonymically evoking the sky from where the wind softly blows to swell this sail that is not moving anywhere, this canvas, this painting that neither awaits nor needs any painterly mark to show what it has to express. The descending sheet of linen is traversed by a narrow horizontal ledge, an element of separation and connection between the numbed space of the picture and the exterior space into which the painting is inserted, the spectator's breathing space, memory of the countless ledges in Renaissance paintings supporting the portrayed person's arm or elbow. In this case – replacing the stones and bones of Golgatha – it carries the body of a little dead mouse. In the following picture there is another portrait, a head covered with stubble echoing the bald one from the previous wall. Another person, the one who died is the other.

The following set of paintings contains a meditation on the place of death merged with the canvas. Pure geometry used to represent the rectangle of the undisturbed painting, the grave. A creased piece of white cloth, the opposite of the painter's stretched piece of fabric, cloth after use, after the removal of the body that disturbed its quiet calm. Then a crate seen straight from above, fitted snug in the shape of the canvas, the canvas hollowed out to release the image of an open case, the painting of a coffin, a vertical format, a portrait. Then again the catafalque, the trestle – trestle from the Latin *transtrum*, crossbar – the shrouded body without projecting features, levelled, sunken into flatness. The creases are indicated in bold transparent brushstrokes, some sort of tinsel. Painting the tomb.

Another sub-chapter of the fifth wall exposes an opposing set of images starting with an architectural opening featuring a reflection of intruding light, hinting at an invisible window. Then there are the creases of a piece of cloth twisted to evoke a belly-button in the centre of an upright format, the navel of the world, a signifier of the very first birth complementing the indications of death. Three cushions as if lying on a bed, two rectangular reflections of light on the wall, a red speck: a matrimonial constellation with a wound in the middle.

Following a sequence of heads, a grotesque red face, roughly sculpted from some unknown material, a head wrapped in a shroud, a head covered by a blood-stained handkerchief. The murder, the violence, the disdain for the human body. To end the sequence of paintings on this wall again an architectural setting with an open door – this time however light enters the room from the outside. There is both the termination and another beginning.

After this passage through death, the sixth wall presents darkened colourless and bloodless pictures marked by the enclosure of life in images. A soiled piece of paper attached by needles to a wall, covered by a rectangle of faded light, a souvenir visible in an opened drawer, ghostly bodies in a round mirror, the framed picture of the bald woman who previously was introduced, struck by an unexplained illness, then the central picture of this group of works featuring a shrouded ghost-like figure turned towards a picture with a peaceful landscape with fruit trees, a lake and mountains in the background, finally parts of the body, the feet as one sees them looking down one's body, a head represented in a three-quarter profile from the back, a ball, the face of the person from the very first painting worn by exhaustion and patient suffering, burning eyes in this aged head. The paintings, including a mirror or a picture on the wall, refer to works by Hadjimichalis from the 1970s in which a male figure (probably the artist himself) in an erotically charged setting appears in a mirror relating to a woman who is seen in the depicted real space. The images on the sixth wall represent a melancholic review of life past but also of the past work of the artist of the *Novel*, densely painted in contrast to the loose, expressive brushwork of previous pieces, a farewell gazing at the self, the world and the work having moved out of grasp.

The seventh wall constitutes a turning point in the *Novel*, a point of incisive change in the lifework of A.K. which is indicated first of all by the use of another pictorial medium: photography. The light that had been painted before on numerous occasions in a photograph is the primary agency of image production. All the different references and connotations of light from the paintings – the light of annunciation, of illumination, of blinding – are preserved in A.K.'s photographs but now they are not only elements of iconic resemblance or symbolic charge but are indicated as arising from the actual environment.

The pictures are black and white and a number don't seem to have any mission other than to exhibit the interplay between light and dark. Great emphasis is on the arrangement of contrasts, gradations of grey

and the quality of the light. In terms of composition most of the images display joining and intersecting planes organized according to a cubist grid, i.e. privileging the horizontal, the vertical and the diagonal break. All photographs are of interior settings, many are architectural, and the few views from the inside towards the outside are obscured – there is just light connecting the present space and the space beyond. Only their luminosity – the luminosity that is missing from the paintings on the sixth wall – saves the depicted spaces from being claustrophobic.

Tracing the term *carnet de bord*, the first image brings the notion of the journey into the equation, and indeed that is what the *Novel* is, a record of A.K.'s journey through life in the guise of artworks, his paintings recording different stages of a passage from youthful beginnings that from the first moment were burdened by grief and denial towards loss and melancholic recollection. The last photograph of that sequence shows paintings packed in cardboard for transportation leaning one against the other, the paintings of a lifetime, a painter's achievement, his past. These photographs set a seal on the downturn of A.K.'s life and work. There is nothing more to do.

The first few pictures expose from close-up carelessly assembled and discarded piles of paper and wrapping materials, among them, half-buried, at the same time conspicuously exposed, the photo of a young boy looking out from behind a screen. This boy must be either A.K.'s son or A.K. himself when he was small, the latter assumption being more likely in the context of a bachelor machine. This photo imbues the series with a sense of nostalgia, the suffering from an unattainable past which leads to the following pictures of empty rooms, a door slightly ajar, windows denying a view, architecture reduced to a lay-out of planes in different shades of grey. In one photo a simple hand-puppet is placed next to a brush, a hand-puppet among the painter's tools. It infuses his gear with a sense of make-believe, of tricking the kids, of creating futile illusion. Another photo finally, drawing attention to pieces of litter on the floor in front of a piece of cardboard, seems to anticipate what A.K. will be doing later in his painting after painting, after his work had been wrapped to be stored or shipped away: he will be obsessively, psychotically glued to the most minor details of his immediate surroundings, which he will paint on numerous wooden panels each the same size, square and small.

The note introducing the exhibition of *The painter A.K. - A Novel* leaves no doubt that the small paintings on the eighth and ninth wall – occupying more wall space than all the other individual chapters of the work – have been made after A.K. committed himself to solitary confinement in his home, where he died in the 1980s after finishing the film made in the model of his house that is also exhibited as part of the complete work. Seclusion follows the packing up of the work of a lifetime. Whatever the achievement may have been, it is over with. Seclusion and finally death at an unspecified date is the melancholic's reaction to the ultimate unattainability of the world. Further to the painter's decision to bury himself alive, the sense of melancholy stemming from an urge to hold on to things lost that permeated A.K.'s life work is transferred to the matter of painting itself. After the mythological narrative evoking a full cycle of history involving the self, the ancestor, the woman, the painter and Christ, a nightmare and murder, desire and denial, decay and memory, death and birth, the perished archaic landscape and the Byzantine past tied up with the downturn of the present, personal biography and collective fate, after history having fulfilled itself in the vanishing life and work and the beginning of a new cycle having been barely intimated, the ambition of painting is reduced to a zero degree. Painting turns into a smoothly running, serially producing recording machine that specializes in certain things to depict without resisting them, however, in terms of painterly zeal. Melancholy, mediocrity. With the working of the painting machine the real returns in the guise of its most banal details to which the painter is chained without appearing again as the author of the pictures and an individual concerned with himself.

The painting after the conclusion of the painter's mythological ambition is pure painting straightforwardly rendering nondescript things immediately under his eyes. Not everything and anything though. There are no tools, no crockery, no food items, no writing. There are, with very few exceptions, no separate objects to be handled, to be used to do something in and with the world. The exceptions are a glass perfume bottle, two decorated containers, a painted bowl, luxury objects that seem completely out of place in their frugal and deteriorated environment, isolated things charged with unspecified memory, evidence of another life. The bulk of the paintings depict elements and appliances related to different features of the

apartment: doors, windows, walls, floor, heating, electricity, water supply. They render a surprising range of fittings such as keyholes, locks, the door viewer, knobs, handles, hinges, cables, pipes entering the wall or connecting to a radiator, a screw in the bathroom, a hook, switches, power sockets, a strap to operate Venetian blinds, lamp fixtures, boards, flags, tiles, etc. On the one hand there is a focus on items epitomizing denied openings and functions of closing, on the other hand the painter indulges in the rendering of a variety of barely fitting cladding materials – in itself some kind of failed painting – and dirt, rust, cracks and other traces of negligence and deterioration. The memory of an exterior world which had stayed unattained while A.K. was living and working socially is active but thwarted by an irresistible attraction to surfaces of filth and kitsch.

In a last effort to account for his life, A.K. produces a video filmed in the model of his apartment, the place of his confinement, a farewell note of sorts – essentially a restaging of the mythological narrative embodied by the paintings produced before confinement, shifting and replacing some of its terms. The individual images constituting the film, scenes of a theatrical arrangement, are separated by images of the labyrinthine space of the apartment, the camera turned downwards towards the floor. The scenes at the beginning and the end are the most mysterious ones: the first shows a person sitting under a shroud, the last shows two persons in separate rooms each sitting under a shroud. The other scenes are a boy giving a fleeting smile, the iconic childhood memory of A.K., the same moving image that already appeared in the earlier film *A Moment in the Mind of Mr. A.K.* part of the installation *Hospital*; then an elderly man clad in elegant street wear waving farewell, A.K. himself, but also his father in the same way the boy might represent his son; the face of an old woman on a catafalque, A.K.'s deceased mother or wife; love-making or fighting of two people under a bed-sheet; a neglected pile of stuff belonging to a woman, shoes, a jacket, a purse; finally the hands of a male cutting into one finger with a razor blade to produce a thick drop of blood – another interpretation this time of the blood stain in the paintings associated with the rejected woman, the woman attacked by cancer, a wound inflicted on himself by the man who is left with the woman's discarded belongings. The shrouded figures: a man and a woman turned into the ghostly manifestations of a failed life.

Through an extended mythological construction, the formation and de-formation of a myth by way of paintings, drawings, photographs, a film and an architectural model, George Hadjimichalis traces the life and work of the painter A.K. who is his own self as another. To conceive himself as someone else facilitates Hadjimichalis undertaking to reposition the diachronic sequence of his own work as a painter – his own work in terms of pieces that he actually made at an earlier point of his artistic career such as *Funeral* or in terms of pieces he might have made at certain times or even would never have made if not under the assumption of painting A.K.'s work – as a synchronic context and to reframe differences due to a painter's passing through an extended stretch of time as differences within one exceptional time layer. At this point it should be emphasized that indeed Hadjimichalis calls the work in question *A Novel* and organizes its different components in a strictly sequential way. Taking recourse to linguistic terminology we might say however that this novel, as much as it enacts a 19th century model, uses only nouns to tell the story. There is a sense of sequence but not of consequence which to a certain degree unties the individual elements from each other and accords them a movability that is veiled in the actual arrangement of *The painter A.K.*

It is Hadjimichalis' strategy to present his current work permeated by motivated or unmotivated, erratic or developed differences which otherwise were to be accorded to the notion of an oeuvre's organic development. Legitimized by a notion of dividuality and difference, Hadjimichalis may allow himself to paint a sort of painting – the expressionist pieces of his very beginnings for instance, but all the others for that matter as well – that he might otherwise never feel entitled to paint. To create a work of painting under the premise of painting another person's work releases all options to implement differences, be it differences that Hadjimichalis' own work of approximately thirty-five years already contained, be it differences he introduces when producing the work of A.K. – the recreation of differences becomes indistinguishable from their initial production: the fact that a finite set of work has been made over time does not imply that the oeuvre is complete. To redo the work means to initiate it, if not from scratch, then in an unpredictable way. Inversely to initiate a work would imply a practice of recreation. For Hadjimichalis to repaint his own work in the guise of someone else's oeuvre amounts to the abolishment of precedents, If it was his intention to use

painting to examine the life and work of the painter A.K., it now turns out that this project of research and recollection is consumed by the construction of his own oeuvre as if this oeuvre did not already exist. This construction even allows him to adopt a melancholic attitude without identifying himself as a first rank melancholic – the melancholy of creating work that is the work of the other and the melancholy of being absorbed by the details of a solitary place of confinement.

While the paintings A.K. made before secluding himself refer to the paintings of Hadjimichalis' own preceding oeuvre and a variety of other works that were previously executed or not, the paintings from confinement – while over-transparent to minuscule details of the given environment – are unprecedented. Here the painter Hadjimichalis identifies most closely with A.K. Neither one nor the other can turn his eyes away from the particularities to be painted, one and the other subjects himself completely to the demands of the things there, as if under a spell. One painter shares the other painter's psychotic fixation.

It gives distinction to the work of Hadjimichalis that he undertakes the labour of undoing precedence in the form of a mythological construction – and what is more, in the form of a mythological construction that is built in relation to the life and work of the other whose life dates given in the exhibition's introductory statement lead to the conclusion that A.K. was thirty years older than George Hadjimichalis and that he was almost the same age when he died as Hadjimichalis when he produced *The painter A.K.* The other whose self-portrait from the beginning of his artistic career and whose filmed farewell note at the end of his life Hadjimichalis created is also an ancestor. The ancestor in artistic terms is the teacher. In that relation it is telling that Hadjimichalis in 1988 as part of the work *Description and Interpretation of Points Opposite / 1* repainted a portrait his teacher Andreas Georgiadis (1892-1981) painted of him as a twelve year old. In a set of three pictures this recreation was juxtaposed against another painting Hadjimichalis did after a portrait Fotis Kontoglou had made of the writer Stratis Dukas (both from the place the father of Hadjimichalis originated from) and a photograph from 1920 of his father when he was still living at Ayvali in Asia Minor and was about the same age as Dukas painted by Kontoglou. Through repainting the portrait Andreas Georgiadis had made of someone else, the student George Hadjimichalis, it turned into Hadjimichalis' self-portrait, and the self-portrait was an acknowledgement of his teacher's ancestry which was as it were confounded with biological ancestry through the acknowledgement of a physical similarity between the young boy, George Hadjimichalis, and his father in the photograph. The teacher and the father are incarnations of the ancestor whose life and work Hadjimichalis explores using painting in such a way that the ancestor merges with the self in a way to create a being of dividuality.

While the mythological construction is essentially concerned with ancestry, the reference to an ancestor in itself has a mythological potential. Hadjimichalis' construction, *A Novel*, crosses personal traits with a general structure. In that sense, painting is considered not only a personal matter but a practice that exceeds the individual's concerns: "...beyond individual painting matter." The story that begins with the young man's self-reflexion and ends with the old man's farewell touches upon a number of points which Hadjimichalis already explored in earlier works framing them in a more general way. The juxtaposition of an image of murder with an image of the father on the first wall echoes an extended work from 1990-95, *Schiste Odos*, in which Hadjimichalis traced the crossroads where Oedipus killed Laius, his father. The oedipal assassination of the father, subject of one of the most important Western myths, is indeed parent to the acknowledgement of genealogical dividuality as performed in the work *Description and Interpretation of Points Opposite/1*. The meditation on the burial place contained in the paintings from the fifth wall is prefigured by the work *The Tomb I* from 1987-88 and the *List of Lighthouses* from 1991-92 is the objectified version of the metaphorical reference to the beam of light emitted by a beacon which is to be found in a painting from the third wall in the context of the appearance of the woman. The connection of the quasi-scientific reference to the early Christian and Byzantine past explored in the work *Synaxis Maroneias* with portraits and landscapes appearing on the second wall has already been mentioned. Thus *The painter A.K.* forms a multi-dimensional network of references connecting the self and the other, personal and general history, biography and mythology, Hadjimichalis' own painting and painterly precedents (including the precedent of his own work).

The work of undoing precedence by transferring historical development into a synchronic context of differences reaches much further than from Hadjimichalis' current work to the work of his own beginnings.

It includes namely painting from the Renaissance to Modernism that has been addressed through the *Workshop of Projects and Images in Crisis* and art and architecture from Byzantine times, and is paralleled by the synchronization of a genealogy that includes the mythological past of Antiquity and the instances of the father and the teacher. To produce his own work as the work of the other opens the possibility for Hadjimichalis to relate to history neither in a critical not in a hysterical or melancholic way but to assume the productions of history as contemporary. Inversely, to implement a notion of contemporariness it is necessary to pass through the sequences of genealogy. This opening however doesn't seem to be accessible for the painter A.K. His destiny is a melancholic confinement that exceeds all sense of history. It seems to fascinate Hadjimichalis. He fights this attraction however through a melancholy of the second degree.

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