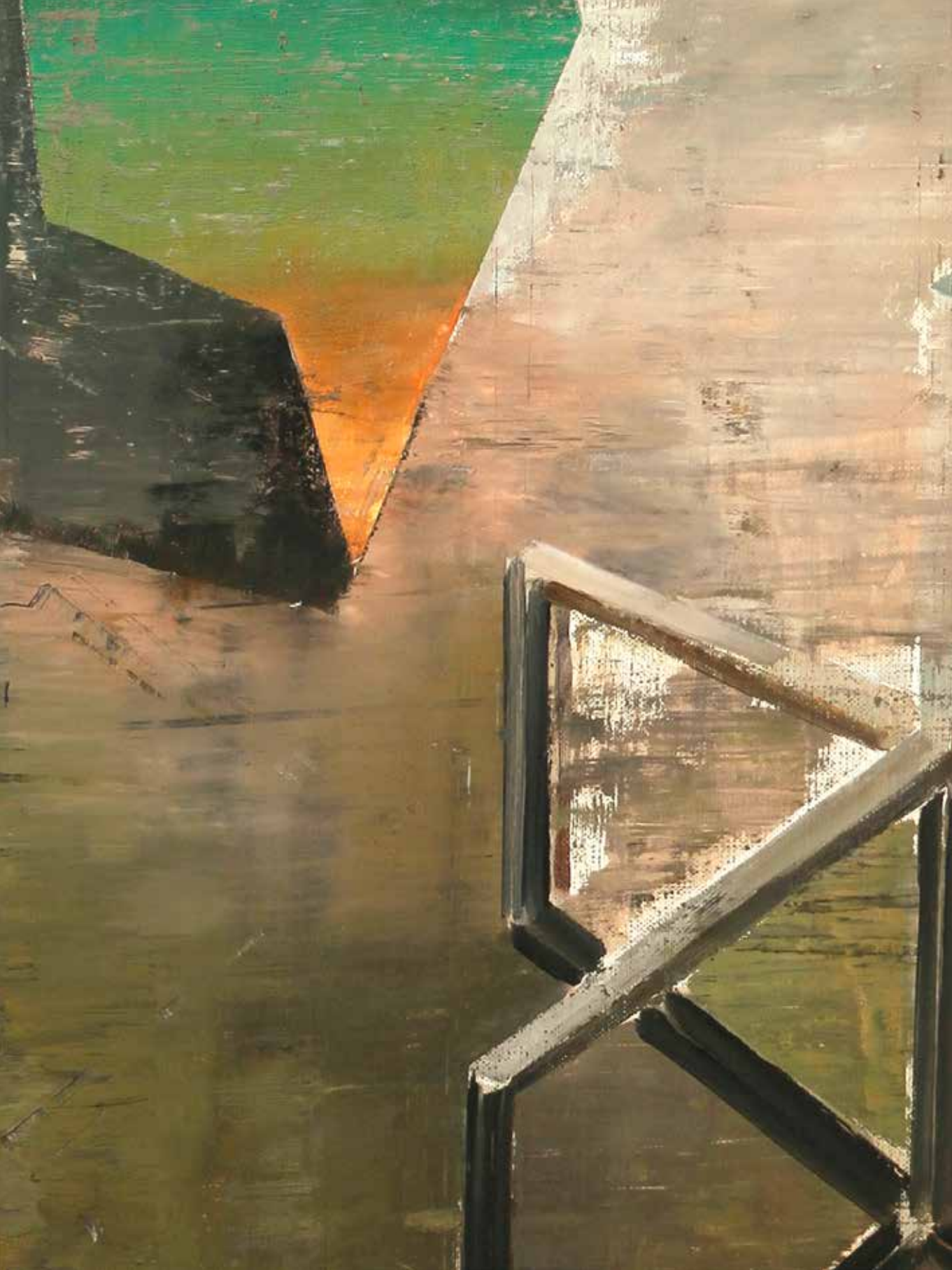


THE OBJECT
AND ITS
BACKGROUND

GENTI KORINI

2014







Abstrakt nr.11-11 2011, oil on canvas, 160 x 120 cm



Genti Korini, Documentary photography 2010 - 2014

THE HYBRID

Jane Neal

From the arrival of the seminal essay: “The Death of the Author” in 1967 by the French literary critic and theorist, Roland Barthes, it has been considered outmoded to follow the traditional practice of criticism when considering an author or artist’s work: that is, to look for the intentions and biographical context of the originator in order to better understand their practice. Barthes argues that writing (or art), and the creator are unrelated, and that to look for the artist’s background in his oeuvre, is to limit his work. That is all well and good, but what if the artist’s surroundings and intentions concerning his personal environs form the basis for his actual practice? What, one wonders, would Barthes have made of that?

If it were possible to borrow H.G. Wells’ time machine and bring Barthes to Tirana, the capital city of Albania and home to the young painter, Genti Korini, it is possible Barthes would have made an exception to his argument. Since 2007, Korini has been drawing inspiration from the post communist architecture that has quickly sprung up to populate his city. Unlike conventional architecture (which considers the suitability of design in relation to function, permanence and the relationship between the impact of a new building on the existing surroundings and community), the majority of the new buildings that have been erected in Albania are an eclectic mix of shapes and styles that have fused into each other. Though the individual designers behind each building might strive for uniqueness, because they borrow and blend elements from various styles, the result is what Korini calls: a ‘state of hybridity’.

Albania's experience of communism was not an easy one. With a heavy dose of irony, Korini explains: 'Here we had the "real deal". The others were flirting with it. Think North Korea and good old-fashioned Stalinism.' It is unsurprising then that post communism brought with it an aggressive refusal of the former uniformity. It is possible to see the architecture that followed as a direct, physical manifestation of the mindset of the people: they yearned to 'do their own thing'. Korini believes that if you're not an insider you might not recognise this, but for him (a painter who lives and works in the city), it is apparent that everyone is trying to break the uniformity of the past because they feel so strongly about it.

Albania is embracing the new ideology of consumerist, capitalist individualism, but in response the buildings that have sprung up, do not so much suggest a bold vision for the future, instead they resemble a state of ephemera, closer to stage design than architecture. There is a dream-like, computer game sensibility to many of the buildings (which is unsurprising considering that the majority are created through the use of architectural software programmes). There are petrol stations that appear more like museums of contemporary art, and restaurants that look like castles: a multitude of incongruous forms resulting in a plethora of unlikely buildings.

While this might be problematic from a purist, architectural perspective, it has proved very interesting and inspiring for Korini. Witnessing the democratisation of architecture thanks to the computer software that allows youngsters who (though they might not be trained as architects, are better equipped with the skills necessary to use the architectural software than their older, less 'Tech friendly' counterparts), Korini started to think that it would be interesting to take the phenomenon as a

starting point for his own painting practice. He wondered what would happen if he used the same software and manipulated the computer-generated forms in an abstract way. Since the Surrealists exploited automatic writing and painting in their practice, there has been a tradition within abstraction of allowing a work to evolve (we might use the word 'organically', today), as opposed to creating a strict, narrative structure that operates according to the laws of perspective with fore, mid and backgrounds. The difference with Korini's work is that the software supplies the 'surprise' elements, and as a consequence, the paintings (in terms of the origin of their process at least), are situated firmly in the 21st Century.

Though 21st Century technology might be involved in the genesis of Korini's practice, the resulting works are extremely painterly. Korini trained in Cluj, Romania from 1999 - 2001. The school has become known internationally for its figurative painters, artists such as: Victor Man, Adrian Ghenie, Serban Savu (and two of Korini's classmates), Marius Bercea and Mircea Suci. Korini credits his time there as strongly affecting his painting style and technique. While he himself was a student in Cluj, Korini made figurative paintings. He sees himself as belonging to 'this strong tradition'. He is fascinated with the social and cultural implications of the buildings that now surround him - they are his inspiration - but he loves: 'the process of painting.'

Korini believes that a painting has to work on two levels: the conceptual and the sensual. He feels that there needs to be an intuitive and open process involved, not only in terms of choosing the subject matter, but in the decision making inherent to the painting process: the colours, brushwork, consistency of the paint, and so on. Without this process, it is possible for a painting to work conceptually, but not

to function in itself as a technically-balanced painting. Korini is clearly passionate about this issue: 'If I was working with other media then maybe this wouldn't be so important. You need the skill, you have to find a way yourself. Painting today, it seems, has a 'double assignment', it has to have an alibi. Painters can't simply paint, they have to have this reason for painting, an excuse. But we have to let go of this alibi. Painting should not need an excuse. If there is the subject and the desire to work, that should be enough.'

For a while after leaving art school and moving back to Tirana, Korini was taking photographs. The contemporary international scene demanded a new form of socially engaged art, but the situation for Korini in Tirana was demoralising, even impossible. 'You cannot be a conceptual artist here because no one will fund your project. You cannot be a photographer either because no one would sponsor you.' Increasingly, Korini realised that he wasn't interested in conforming to a prescribed 'type'. He decided to come back to the medium of painting to execute his ideas and to abandon 'the artificial components' of his painting practice (the acrylics and sprays), concentrating instead on using the traditional medium of oil to depict his very contemporary subject matter. Korini also made a deliberate decision to situate his abstract forms within a classical portrait format. As with a traditional portrait that might depict a king or queen in the centre of a canvas, three quarters turned, so Korini has set up his subjects, thus creating his own homage to the ruling state of hybridity in Albania's post communist landscape.

There is a power inherent in Korini's paintings. They address Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, the desire to live in a state removed from reality, but they also serve as monuments to the collision of two major

occurrences that changed the course of history. The early 1990's saw the countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc adjusting to life after communism while simultaneously, the world started to experience the greatest technological expansion of all time: the advent of the global internet. A new freedom enabled the construction of this new state of hybridity, which Korini's paintings brilliantly encapsulate. Much as Morandi's still lifes of the early 20th Century often seem to function more as portraits than depictions of objects, so Korini's abstracted shapes speak of a people struggling to find expression for their new found autonomy and consumerist desires.

Korini is not yet decided on how he feels about the architecture that has become his muse. On the one hand he enjoys the exotic nature of the buildings and the identification in people's minds of Tirana with an architecture that would not be out of place in Las Vegas. On the other, he does not think this is the way the city should be. Whatever his feelings, Korini's painting raises an awareness - not only of the architectural situation, but of the place of abstraction. Abstract art is problematic for Albanians. Thanks to the influence of Constructivism, there was a short-lived movement of abstraction in Albania, but this was soon rejected and censored by the state and, under communism, only socialist realism was permitted and supported. Consequently, even today, Korini believes that Albanians have a problem understanding abstract art because they had so little contact with abstract language. Ironically and paradoxically, if someone in Tirana was to look at Korini's painting and then look outside their window, we might imagine they would make a connection and realise they were in fact living amongst this abstract scenery. Yet somehow, Korini feels, they can neither see it, nor feel it; it is an unconscious response.

Formally, this series of works by Korini is strongly influenced by Constructivism, most notably: El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevich and Antoine Pevsner. Yet the influence extends beyond the works from the movement; Korini is also inspired by the utopian vision that lay behind the establishment of this new language. He returns to Constructivism in order to connect with this period of Modernism, in effect drawing a metaphorical line from the movement to now, 'like an architect'.

Korini enjoys the mixture of hard geometry with a painterly non-perfect surface in his work. It is possible to look beyond the Constructivists as instrumental in the development of his practice. Picasso is a great source of inspiration - not only in terms of subject matter but in terms of his handling and mixing of paint. "Portrait of Jacqueline" 1961 has proved a particular reference for Korini, also the works of the Hungarian artist, Laszlo Moholy Nagy.

Though Korini's works are powerful there is a tenderness woven into the treatment of his forms. It might seem a diametrically opposed impossibility that a monumental structure can also be fragile, but somehow Korini manages to evoke this. Some of the paintings resemble torn paper, others seem more plastic, as if Korini has first modelled his subject in clay and then depicted it, as a painter would address a still life. As afore mentioned, it is impossible not to think of some of Morandi's arrangements of still lifes when looking at Korini's paintings, but though some of his paintings' palettes also consist of closely related tones, others are much more lively and vibrant, revealing a debt not only to Constructivism, but also to Fauvism. Cubism is clearly also a reference for Korini, indeed the early years of 20th Century painting and sculpture seem to hold a strong fascination for the artist.

The state of hybridity that Korini finds himself living in, plays out in the extremely effective combination of technologically derived subject matter, executed in a painterly manner and combined with the influences of the vivid modernist movements of the early 20th Century. From the way he treats his subject matter, Korini clearly has a certain fondness for the buildings that have become a source of fascination for him. However, we should not lock the artist into acts of social and cultural observation. His figurative training and understanding of the human body has also inspired him and we cannot help but anthropomorphise his subjects.

Korini epitomises that rare combination. Though all his work is undergirded by a rigorous intellect, conceptual drive and pertinent engagement with the world around him, he is more than simply curious or committed to recording events. Korini is first and foremost a painter. He is driven by the seductive nature of his chosen medium and its plastic potential and buttery facility to breathe warmth and life into the artists's subject of choice. He does not simply use paint to evoke the state of hybridity that so fascinates him, he creates a convincingly consistent world where we can feel the full phenomenological force of this state of being, and the human desires that have driven it. Like so many before him, Korini needs no alibi to paint, he just needed to find confidence and inspiration in the world around him; and from the strength of this new body of work, he clearly has.

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PAINTINGS