

# THE RED ACTION AND THE MEMIBRANE

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KATJA  
MEIROWSKY

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# KATJA MEIROWSKY. THE RED ACTION AND THE MEMBRANE

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The exhibition of Katja Meirowsky's work that opens at Es Baluard today has several aims. Firstly, it seeks to shed light on the work of artists who have hitherto received little attention from art historians. It also wants to draw attention to the far shores of the aesthetic canon that has dominated tastes, bibliographies and the art market for decades. Outside the canonical waters, we find artists whose work "doesn't fit" and who are difficult to place in the deterministic narratives that seek to explain art from the modern period. The show also reflects the current idea that public museums should be pushing to rewrite broad areas of art narratives in the light of the debates of the time, while at the same time swimming against the tide of fashions and commonplaces. In short, it is a matter of making room for "the other half of the avant-garde", as advocated by the Italian art critic and historian Lea Vergine (1936–2020, Milan).

Shaped by the modern spirit of the arts, Katja Meirowsky was an artist who, following in the footsteps of the avant-garde, sought ways out of modernity without falling into nostalgia or languages of the past. Her work is anachronistic, having left its own time to seek out others, beyond the present and its predominant styles. We maintain that Meirowsky's work is timeless because the artist saw it as a means to escape the era in which she lived. "Although I wasn't born in the best century, I've made the most of it," she told the journalist Heidi Jäger shortly before her death in 2009.<sup>1</sup>

However, to understand her work we first need to know a few details about Katja Meirowsky's life, although without suggesting that her painting has exclusively biographical motivations or considering it as documenting a particular moment in time.

1. Heidi Jäger. «89 und kein bisschen leise». In: *Potsdamer Neueste Nachrichten*. Potsdam: 7 March 2009.

Katja Meirowsky, *Zurück in der Stadt XIII* [Back in the City XIII], 1947. Pastel on cardboard, 50 x 62.5 cm. Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck Collection, Potsdam

Katja Meirowsky trained as an artist in Berlin between 1938 and 1942 in an environment that continued the pedagogical, technical and intellectual contributions of the Bauhaus at the institution now known as the University of the Arts (Universität der Künste Berlin), where she experienced firsthand the Nazis' tightening grip on power. In a remarkably calm and frank interview recorded for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2006, the artist described how her ethical commitment led her to become involved in the anti-fascist resistance network that the Gestapo called the "Red Orchestra". The Rote Kapelle was composed of a motley crowd of individuals with very different political and ideological profiles and positions, united by their rejection of the authoritarianism of the Third Reich. Modern art was particularly hard hit by the Nazis' institutionalised barbarity. As early as 1937, the Nazis declared avant-garde art forms—the very forms in which Meirowsky would shortly train—to be "degenerate" art<sup>2</sup> that was to be excluded from the public sphere. What for many was an expression of life, a language of utopia and fertile ground for new forms of beauty, for the German government of the time was pernicious, corrupting material that had to be culturally purged from society. When Meirowsky realised that she was under observation by the Gestapo for hiding and aiding persecuted political dissidents and Jews—she herself was Jewish and feared expulsion from the art school, as well as knowing that her own life was in danger—she fled Berlin and took refuge in Poland, her mother's homeland, until the end of the war. After 1945, having returned to the German capital, she married Karl Meirowsky, whom she had met before the war and who, also Jewish, had been released from Sachsenhausen concentration camp thanks to the deep pockets of his uncle, a banker in Switzerland. His freedom won and life spared, Karl Meirowsky took refuge in England in 1939, where he spent the war years; after 1945 he took part in artistic projects with his wife in Berlin.

The traumas of life under the Nazi regime, the persecution and murder of so many friends and acquaintances, the war and, we

might add, the harrowing human and political conditions in post-war Berlin, underpinned an attitude and approach that led Meirowsky to devote the rest of her life to translating life into painting, into images that still challenge and provoke us today. They can also disorientate us and are likely to take us to oppressively descriptive places. Sites where Meirowsky's work attempts to reconstruct the utopia of modern art, torn apart by fascism and dashed on the rocks of prohibition and persecution. German artists of the time were aware of the fragility of what they wanted to build: a new aesthetic space for a new humanity, based on the supposedly universal values of freedom, equality, solidarity and faith in improvement: everything that the Enlightenment identified with progress. This space had to be built by art, and German artists of the time could feel a sense of its extinction at the hands of the government and the society that had created it. Surviving this experience should have provided a sense of double responsibility: individual on the one hand but of commitment to others, to humanity, on the other. For those who had lived through persecution and still felt the holocaust and the postwar period close at hand, the relationship between the individual, the group and society had to be articulated differently, beyond the apparently simple equations of "I-others", "inside-outside", "past-present". It also profoundly undermined trust in societies which, still reeling from the memory of the First World War, had gone on to wage an even greater one that included the project of exterminating Jews and other "inferior races", as well as ideological and cultural dissidents and those with functional or cognitive differences.

The artist's period in Berlin has given us several formative works, as well as a series of drawings which refer explicitly to her war experiences, feelings of loneliness, memories of the dead, fear, danger, the uncertain future, emptiness and the like. Railway tracks might offer a path to escape and freedom, but in *Ausweg* [Way Out] (1947) they lead to the concentration camps discovered just after the end of the war. These early works take us back to everything from which the artist was fleeing, but which she had to keep firmly outside her. Drawing it is like saying it, not in order to remember it, but to prevent it from coming back. *Zurück in der Stadt* [Back in the City] (1947) is a series of 14 charcoal drawings in which the artist depicts a city, probably

2. The "Entartete Kunst" [Degenerate Art] exhibition was held at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 1937 and included numerous examples of avant-garde art to be banned and destroyed.

Berlin, after her years of hiding in Poland. We see a city dismembered and torn to pieces by the bombings, expressed by the abstract forms of cubist and surrealist grammars, with twisted spaces, curved shapes and right angles amid oily, grey shadows and lights. Meirowsky rehearses representations of spaces that we think of as urban, but which are already mental, with no identifiable references beyond the title.

The fact that performances of the Die Badewanne artists' cabaret, which Meirowsky founded with other artists in 1949, regularly contained former members of the Nazi party and regime officials in the audience was proof that the operators of the machinery that had eliminated so many people and unleashed a devastating war continued to form part of the society in which the artist now lived. The Allies' victory in the war did not lead to the Nazis' disappearance: they were still present and functioning in the new administrative structures. We also think that, owing to her involvement in the Rote Kapelle's resistance activities, Meirowsky may have been suspected of Soviet sympathies in the eyes of the new Western authorities, who were already developing Cold War strategies of surveillance and counter-subversion.<sup>3</sup> For a number of reasons which, in the absence of an in-depth study of the artist's archives and correspondence, must remain as mere speculation,<sup>4</sup> Katja and Karl Meirowsky decided to leave the German capital and travel to Ibiza in 1953.

It was in Ibiza that Meirowsky produced the bulk of her work, or at least the pieces that form the centre of gravity of this exhibition. The main universe from which we have selected the works presented here is the body of work that the artist kept with her until her death. Once Meirowsky had secured the support and help of Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck, owners of an art gallery

3. "Then voices were raised attacking her for her involvement with the Rote Kapelle, as if it were some kind of unsightly 'birthmark'. While the officers of the 20 July plot were celebrated as heroes, the Rote Kapelle resistance fighters were branded as communists." Heidi Jäger, *op. cit.*

4. In her interview with Julio Herranz published in the *Diario de Ibiza* on 23 August 1992, the artist mentions the death of her mother as one of the decisive events that led her to leave Berlin.

in Berlin, her return to Germany in 2000 opened a final chapter in her life close to the city where she had set out as an artist. The Lippecks, who also had a house in Ibiza and spent long periods on the island, were able to help a now elderly artist who had been the victim of a scam that left her in a precarious situation. The Lippecks not only offered her a lifeline of support and assistance, but also organised exhibitions of her work and have acted as custodians of artworks, archives, objects which the artist left behind as witnesses to a life of upheaval, survival and reinvention.

In Ibiza, the artist found a space disconnected from metropolitan culture, from a past filled with disruption, intrigues and dangers, from the memory of persecution and destruction. Or from the various forms of destruction that fascism, war and the postwar period had entailed. The island offered her landscapes, people and things diametrically opposed, utterly antithetical, to everything she had had to leave behind.

Among the motivations for all this, there is a relatively romantic, partly modern, partly archaic desire: the will to find one's own voice as an artist, a singular language that does not depend on the past or on the environment.<sup>5</sup> To be original is, as the American historian Rosalind Krauss has said, one of the modern myths of the avant-garde. For modern artists, especially after the postwar period, being an artist meant being original. And Meirowsky went in search of originality outside the constraints of the Berlin and German artistic environment. Going to Ibiza became an initiatory journey that allowed her to find herself as an artist. The effort to detach herself from her previous learning would let her make a fresh start in a primordial world hitherto unknown to her. This new beginning would enable her to articulate the visual grammars that were now emerging: another world, a different physical and cultural environment would create the forms to produce a new utopian space, because the old world had been destroyed and the humanity of the past was morally bankrupt. On the one hand, in Ibiza the artist sought to leave behind a past she would never forget but which she did not want to have as the protagonist of her art; on

5. "Werner Heldt told me: 'Become independent, find your own way.'" She looked at the map and discovered Ibiza. "That looked far enough away from Germany..." Heidi Jäger, *op. cit.*

the other, the island became the object represented and the subject of reflection. Like other German artists from the same period, and others before,<sup>6</sup> Meirowsky sought to be an artist outside the urban conditioning of the metropolis. But above all, she was an artist in a distinctly preindustrial environment, eminently rural, poor but populated by respectful and proud people. In Ibiza she found an indigenous population with no bourgeois education but with a profound culture that got on with its own life while letting others get on with theirs, that welcomed visitors and lived alongside them through a process of profound transformation from a subsistence to a service economy which, in the 1950s, was just beginning to undergo its absorption by the tourism and luxury industries that dominate today.<sup>7</sup> Although the conditions of poverty described by Vicente Valero in his account of Walter Benjamin's time in Ibiza<sup>8</sup>

6. Before the war, a number of German artists and intellectuals, and those of other European origins, had stayed for long periods on the island from the early 1930s onwards. Raoul Hausmann, Walter Benjamin, Wols, Will Faber, Erwin Broner and Josep Lluís Sert, among many others, left us accounts of the encounter between modern minds and the traditional, archaic world of the island. The German art collector Jeanny Goetz mentioned how the island also welcomed numerous expatriates from former European colonies that had gained independence in Africa and the Middle East. First beatniks, then hippies and later intellectuals and artists created a cosmopolitan melting pot in parallel to the local world. Franco's dictatorship was only perceptible in the city and on certain days. Ibiza and Formentera were islands of freedom in a country ruled by the one-time ally of Hitler and Mussolini.

7. "Choosing Ibiza as a place to live in those early years meant having to painfully witness the gradual destruction of the island by tourism without being able to defend herself, to flee without ever reaching a perfect world... The solitude and sanctuary, the minor war against the expanding urbanisation and her sadness at the change in the character of the island from arid outpost to commercialised holiday destination have changed her love for this place but not diminished it." Stefanie Endlich on the work of Katja Meirowsky, Klaus Mancke Archives.

8. Valero, Vicente. *Experiencia y pobreza. Walter Benjamin en Ibiza* [Experience and Poverty: Walter Benjamin in Ibiza]. Cáceres: Editorial Periférica, 2017.

before the war cannot be applied to Katja and Karl Meirowsky's experience on the island, it is clear that they did not enjoy urban comforts such as running water and electricity, for example, until they had made adaptations and renovations to the house where they would live for many years, Cas Damians,<sup>9</sup> in the municipality of Sant Josep de sa Talaia, near the road to the town of Ibiza. Cas Damians is an estate documented from the time of the Arab occupation and forms part of a group of buildings that includes other houses, in a dryland landscape with a chain of mountains behind it and, in front, an expanse of plain that slopes down south-eastwards, with views of Ses Salines and, on clear days, the island of Formentera.<sup>10</sup>

Meirowsky left behind a body of work and traces of a little-publicised life, details of which we can glean above all through the accounts of several people who knew her well. Maintaining relations with only a few close friends and acquaintances, she left few public documents or publications about her life apart from her work, although she did leave a number of private ones. Her archives, conserved by the Lippecks, have been donated to the German Art Archive at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, where they will be kept and, we hope, studied in greater depth from now on.<sup>11</sup>

The Meirowskys went to Ibiza in 1953, having made a first trip to the island in 1951. We can safely say that a series of

9. The house is referred to in different sources as Can Damià and Cas Damians.

10. After these renovations, a local newspaper published in English devoted a richly descriptive article to the house as an example of adapting traditional architecture to the basic comforts of modern life.

11. For our ongoing research, we have consulted two types of sources: firstly, part of Meirowsky's archives at the Lippecks' house in Potsdam and recent publications, especially the biographical text by Elena Ruiz, director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani d'Eivissa, as well as the book by Klaus Mancke (*Katja Meirowsky. Einblicke in ihr Werk*. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2011); secondly, firsthand accounts by people who knew the artist well, such as Antonio Colinas, Christina Bechtold (widow of the recently deceased artist Erwin Bechtold) and the German collector Jeanny Goetz.

gouaches from 1957 and 1958 were made when the artist had fully settled on the island. They are, as the titles of some of them indicate, studies of set designs, projects linked to one or more theatre plays or dance pieces we think must have been designed to be performed in Germany. The set designs convey certain features of avant-garde painting: the identification of dreamlike organic and sidereal spaces within proto-constructivist structures, always abstract, in which perspective dominates but is gradually broken up by coloured surfaces and spatial resources that combine geometry and the amorphous. We believe that the use of the stage as a metaphor continued intermittently throughout her work with greater or lesser clarity. This might have been the result of Meirowsky's intense, albeit short-lived, involvement with the world of cabaret, which made her an author, performer and probably producer of experimental micro-plays akin to "living paintings". In *Die Badewanne*, as in the other cabaret projects Meirowsky put into practice, new components belonging to the surrealist visual and literary milieus are evident. It seems that Raoul Hausmann, one of the most active leaders in the Dada circle in inter-war Berlin, along with Johannes Baader and Kurt Schwitters, among others, became interested in *Die Badewanne* when he heard of its existence.<sup>12</sup> Hausmann had been a precursor to these satirical and avant-garde experiments and was also one of the first artists to spend long periods in Ibiza between 1933 and 1936.

We have mentioned the surrealist component in Meirowsky's work, and we should also point out that, as a connoisseur of the experiments, attitudes and techniques of the different branches of the avant-garde, it is quite likely that part of the Dada spirit passed through Meirowsky's unconscious. In Ibiza there was no longer any connection with bourgeois culture, the rejection of which explains the Dadaist ruptures. It also seems clear that Katja Meirowsky wanted to be an artist in a different way: she fled from the bourgeois hypocrisy that had created Nazism

and the war; she needed to found and give shape to her own art far from the big cities; she needed to find her own voice; but she also wanted to be heard.<sup>13</sup> She never completely severed her ties with her place of origin. Despite not having a busy schedule of exhibitions in European galleries, she regularly sold her work and made a living from it: she was even able to buy and refurbish Cas Damiàns, her home on the island since 1963.

In the 1960s, Meirowsky explored a series of visual options in her painting which, moving away from the Expressionist, Informalist or Tachiste aesthetics that dominated postwar art, were inspired by the artist's surroundings, the fields worked by hand and inspiring "tilled" compositions in which earth, stones and paths alternate in works with no sky or horizon. *Ventana de Pintora* [Painter's Window] (1964) is one of the first paintings to have a title in Spanish, and somehow stretches the fragmentation of perspective (as she did in the set design projects): what should have been a "window" to the outside seems to have become an interior landscape, composed of incongruous planes, where the misty mass of the painting is geometrically divided. Three paintings from 1968, entitled *Tafel I, II and III* [Panel I, II and III], open up a line of visual research that connects with the world of vegetation, apparently trees and leaves. These paintings develop vertically with colours that refer to the earth and nature.

Throughout the 1970s, Meirowsky experimented with typically avant-garde materials and grammar, especially with the technique of collage. The early examples are in black and white tones that include greys and ochres to produce shadings that give volume to abstract spaces in which perspective does not appear. By the end of the decade, she was using bright, luminous colours previously unseen in her work that now connected with oils and acrylics to extend the presence of light. A 1978 oil painting also exists as a seemingly identical collage and print. It serves as remembrance of one of the most dramatic events on the island,

12. In this and other hypotheses, we follow the artist's statements in the unedited version of the interview Meirowsky gave to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2006. See videos 42 and 43 of <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn84871>. Last accessed on 12 April 2024.

13. Throughout her life, she regularly exhibited her work in cities such as Berlin, Stuttgart, Hanover, Basel, Sankt Gallen, Chicago, Madrid, London, New York, Frankfurt, Barcelona, Ibiza, Mannheim, Florence, Genoa, Stockholm, Palma (Mallorca) and Wiesbaden, among others.



the plane crash that killed 104 people in Ses Roques Altes in 1972. The schematic silhouette of an aeroplane has been broken on black volumes crowned by a green background. The idyllic island was thus also the scene of a huge catastrophe that remained in the minds of the islanders for decades.

A series of collages depicting the helmets of ancient warriors, from the Greek or Roman eras, for example, also dates from 1978. The series uses sometimes strident coloured paper, with dominant greys and reds in the backgrounds and blacks and dark colours representing the helmets, which have sometimes been heavily decorated with geometric and organic patterns. The series evolves from highly schematic images to create almost psychedelic atmospheres. A symbol of protection and a sign of preparation for battle, the presence of helmets also connects with one of the hobbies that the Meirowskys took up in Ibiza: archaeology and excavations. Ibiza is a land rich in archaeological remains and when the Meirowskys arrived on the island, there was still much to be done in this field.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Karl Meirowsky's background in history and the humanities brought him closer to past worlds, and he was the first foreigner to be admitted into the Institute for Ibizan Studies.<sup>15</sup>

In 1979 Katja Meirowsky produced one of her largest paintings. It is also one of the most enigmatic. This untitled diptych seems to represent the overlapping volumes reminiscent of the imagined space of a set design full of angles and curves like those produced by architecture. Again, we find no reference to the world of objects in this painting. We sense that it has more to do

with a state of mind than with any external reality surrounding the artist.

Following the death of her husband in 1980, she withdrew even further, if possible, into her studio, her work, herself. Somewhat aloof in character by nature, she became even more inaccessible, unsocial and unwelcoming. If it was already rare to see her outside her home, it then became exceptional. The work she produced from the 1980s onwards is possibly even more ferrous and complex. Describing it would be laborious and characterising it, longwinded. We will only say, by way of approximation, that the visual registers around which the paintings developed from 1980 onwards are much more varied and, to be frank, often baffling. Meirowsky does not seem to have sought stylistic constants. Certain works remind us of motifs typical of rationalist abstraction close to graphic design as practised at the Bauhaus—*Besinnung* [Contemplation] (1985) and *In der Reihe* [In Line] (1995)—while others continue her experimentation with the idea of dramatic space in stage design now transposed to landscape—*Untitled* (1989)—to architecture—*Klause* [Hermitage] (1996) and *Ist Spröde* [Is Edgy] (1997)—or to the primitive language of theatre—*Bühne Nr. 4* [Stage No. 4] (1994). In other works—*Lichter* [Lights] (1981)—she seems to want to return to an almost magical figuration. In paintings such as *Dalt Vila* (1994) or *Altes Tor in Dalt Vila* [Old Gate at Dalt Vila] (1994) she returns to the representation of half-organic, half-geometric abstract forms, aesthetic grafts or hybridisations which, when seen today, give the works an enigmatic edge, although the titles identify them with the walled city.

We do not believe that Meirowsky was a rationalist painter: we see no clear programme or strategy that we can now interpret, no stylistic coherence or apparent progression. The last two decades of the century that Meirowsky rated as not the best are years of solitude and continued experimentation. The artist goes so far as to produce a visual story in which she recounts her life with her husband Karl Meirowsky in an almost childlike language. We can see a clear vital attitude of wanting to find another way of making art, continuing in the tradition of painting, but with a will that transcends the idea of the artist as mere producer of images. The images Meirowsky creates seem to be membranes through which past and present are reconciled, and through which the

14. Work on the Archaeological Museum of Ibiza began in 1935, but it was not completed and opened to the public until 1966, next to the necropolis at Puig des Molins.

15. For a long time, it was possible to carry out archaeological excavations on the island fairly informally. The Spanish poet Antonio Colinas, who was a close friend of Katja and Karl Meirowsky, has written lyrically about these activities, as well as visits to the artist's studio, in several texts, such as the one reproduced here and above all the obituary he published in the *Diario de Ibiza* on 30 April 1980, on the occasion of Karl Meirowsky's death, under the title "Un auténtico ejemplo de amor a Ibiza".

artist's inner self is transmitted to the outside and exists for others, for us. "Can one paint from the avant-garde and yet not be modern?" Meirowsky seems to want to ask us through time. Here is a heartbreaking contradiction for our culture, which has so long believed in material progress and the promises of modernity. Contradiction becomes the driving force and energy of a whole artist's life. Consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, Meirowsky responds only partly and paradoxically to the paradox she herself poses.

In Ibiza, Meirowsky was briefly associated with the Ibiza 59 group, a new association with a group of artists with whom she shared a discreet portion of her career. However, Ibiza 59 did not have a specific aesthetic programme either: each artist went their own way but they came together to promote themselves, to making themselves known. The only woman in the group and one of the few female artists of her time, Katja Meirowsky was a solitary character who shied away from belonging or owing allegiance to any group. Her fellow artists did not hold her in particularly high regard and she did not feel in any way bound to a common position.<sup>16</sup> The instinct for survival and her own personal history detached her from her time, so that her belief in the values of the avant-garde in which she participated led her to an indefinite time, a time that had no place if not a place where time did not pass, the preindustrial, archaic, modest but free Ibiza that allowed her to be herself without having to be anyone else.

16. The director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani d'Eivissa, Elena Ruiz, describes the situation as follows: "The Ibiza 59 group, seen through a historical prism and in the light of past years, did not have an orthodox constitution. For example, they did not have a manifesto defining the principles that united them, just a few texts, especially by Broner, which prefaced their exhibitions and explained their intentions in a general way.[...] That is why the fact that one artist, in the case of Katja Meirowsky, did not agree with the rest of them is of little importance, because in reality she did not stop agreeing with anything other than simply a lack of interest in feeling more or less grouped together. In: *Grupo Ibiza 59. Passat i Present* [Ibiza 59 Group. Past and Present]. Eivissa: Museu d'Art Contemporani d'Eivissa, 1992, p. 21–22.

Katja Meirowsky's mature work is a kaleidoscope that turns and turns without ever repeating a single composition. Discovering and championing this art today might seem audacious if we did not know that if we want to rewrite history, as each generation must, we have to switch hemispheres and look at facts and things "upside down". The place we do so, in "the other half of the avant-garde", is not only quantitative in nature. It is above all qualitative and invites us to look with new eyes at things we did not see before. Aesthetics, beauty and pleasure are conditions of our behaviour and feelings, not qualities of matter ordered or ordained by convention.



Katja Meirowsky in her Berlin studio, 1948-1949. Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck Collection, Potsdam





Katja Meirowsky, *Untitled*, 1958. Gouache on paper, 41,5 x 53 cm.  
Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck  
collection, Potsdam



Katja Meirowsky, *Untitled*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.  
Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck  
collection, Potsdam





Katja Meirowsky, *Formentera, Es Calò*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck collection, Potsdam



Katja Meirowsky, *Cala* [Cove], 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 116 x 162 cm. Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck collection, Potsdam





Katja Meirowsky in her Berlin studio, 1948-1949. Katja Meirowsky Bequest. Marianne and Reinhard Lippeck Collection, Potsdam

## DAYS ON THE ISLAND<sup>1</sup>

Antonio Colinas

### *Evening at Ca's Damià<sup>2</sup>*

One evening I went up to Ca's Damià, through the island's pine groves and fig trees, to see the latest canvases by German painter Katia Meirowski<sup>3</sup>. Katia and her husband Karl came to Ibiza more than fifty years ago, in 1952. They did not come fleeing from any kind of setback, nor were they escaping from anything at all. They came instead in search of their *centre*, like so many others who have come to this land, looking for a better and more secluded set of surroundings where they could be themselves, being and living in a state of greater awareness.

During their earlier years they lived in Sant Antoni, but when one of the larger hotels was built between their home and the bay, they sought out the solitude of the interior mountain ranges, at Ca's Damià. Now, like just another painting, the island can be seen through one of the windows in Katia's studio, framing Serra Grossa in the distance and the purplish forests of Sant Josep, where the last of the sun slips away.

In essence, in this intensely melodious outdoor landscape, framed by the studio window, we find a concrete yet ready summary of Katia's pictorial work, as found in her most recent paintings. We also find in her work—just as in the landscapes around us, on the island, as in life—the wisdom of peace and of menace. A massive, metaphysical serenity, and a kind of aggression, a provocation imposed by the catastrophic tenor of the time we have been called to live in.

1. Colinas, Antonio. *Los días en la isla*. Madrid: Huerga y Fierro Editores, 2004.

2. So written in the original.

3. So written in the original.

Nowadays, human beings are closer than ever to both plenitude and destruction. To plenitude, because since humans feel more threatened, our sentiments have been intensified. We have lived more experiences than our ancestors and, as a result, we know more. We are close to destruction as well, because despite our wisdom, over the centuries we have accumulated endless failures and desperation.

In any case, Time—time that is naked and whole, abridging our experiences and anxieties—is, I believe, the essence of Katia's most recent paintings, which will soon be exhibited, simultaneously, in two galleries in Germany. The same time that is reflected in archaeology, a world which Katia and Karl have known so well. The message we get from archaeology is akin to the supreme, materialised expression of everything that has been. Archaeology's message is not subject to the confusion and subjectivity of passions: it is an objective, absolute message to a time where the heart of man is mere stardust.

The first time I saw Karl he was lovingly and rather physically working on Ibiza at the Santa Agnès cave, in Sant Antoni. The last time I saw Karl he was also working, physically and lovingly, at the Roman cemetery discovered in one of the empty lots on Aragon Street. Those who were working on the site know perfectly well to what extent the preservation of those remains was attributable to him. Just one day before going to Barcelona, where he was to undergo a very serious surgical operation—which in fact would lead to his death—Carlos was working in the muddy earth of that lot on Aragon Street. He worked amongst the dead when his own death was already upon him.

This is not the moment to precipitously review his efforts for popular culture on Ibiza, and especially in favour of its archaeological heritage. For me he is bound without question to each and every one of the cultural events held on the island: concerts, lectures, exhibitions, theatre, film clubs, popular dance, crafts. When it happened, I could not help but feel that with Karl's passing, part of Ibiza was suddenly lost as well, never to return, an Ibiza whose essence was quietude, nature and art.

What more might we recall about him at this time? Perhaps his generosity and affection? The interest he had in safeguarding the pictorial work of his wife? Shall we remember his work at

the site of the Roman fortress on Formentera, or the prehistorical settlements at Cap de Barbaria? Perhaps how he would climb (including shortly before his death) to the cave at Es Cuieram? Will we remember that he was the first (and during a time only) foreign member of the Institut d'Estudis Eivissencs?

Let us leave aside these memories and return to life, to that touching reality of archaeology found in Katia's paintings. In this painter's past and present work, Greek culture and that of ancient Mexico constitute and sustain her apprehensions, obsessions and dreams. The archaeologist Pericot once said that digging is similar to reading a text that falls apart while being read. Something like this happens with Katia's paintings. That testimony to the past and to the present, those paintings on a concern as substantial and ancient as humanity itself, arise out of decomposition, where only matter comes to the fore, leaving only symbols and signs interpreted by the eye.

In my opinion, the pictorial work of Katia Meirowski rests upon two foundations. On the one hand, its cosmic meaning; on the other, its historical charge, which she masks with rich and profound symbology, laden with archaeological and mythical roots. Both of these aspects of the work are at the same time immersed in pain, pain that is subtle and universal; but also in intimate, personal pain, particularly enriched in form and colour after the death of her spouse. Later still, in her most recent paintings, the painter has been able to surpass this pain as she shifts towards more imaginative works that are less severe and more refined.

What then are these symbols that entangle the meaning of her work? All we need to recognise them, is to pay attention to the words in the titles she has given her paintings: lights, agave stalks, cross, stone walls, Orpheus, wind, moon, kiss, star, megalithic, Troy, helmet, tomb, shelter, tree. She composes her titles with terms like these, setting limits on what forms and colours easily express. In these paintings, as close as they are to death, there nevertheless appears the ultimate sign of light. Daily light, aching and tenuous. Light filtered by windows and curtains, by agave stalks and branches. As well as the pure, hard light of celestial spaces, planetary light.

Night begins to fall. In Katia's studio, the shadows grow deeper. At first, they begin to confound the painting's shapes,



only to then erase them entirely. The paintings start to fade, silence is heightened. Outside, the vibrations of the air become increasingly harmonic. Night carries pictorial forms to their most absolute dimension, that of negation, void and nothingness.

As we head back down the mountain, the island seems both hollow and content-filled. Indeed, upon leaving that home, we comprehend that the world of the island is not what it used to be, although luckily for us, Katia's hand has left a message in her paintings, ordering our existence and clarifying it, defending our passions and charging our past and future with a sense of plenitude. Going down from Ca's Damià, we are still able to breathe eternity in the misty nocturnal air.

*The Red Action and the Membrane*  
Katja Meirowsky

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to 25th August 2024

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