MARIA KOMPATSIARI

“The Seal Stones”: From the Small to the Grand

The secrets of high art are indeed to be found in the details: in delicate contours and fine drawing, in subdued hues and the subtle play of light and shadow, in short, in those values that lend a unique beauty to the work, such that it appears to be an ethereal creation not wrought by human hand, to borrow the language of art criticism.

Great artists became known for their ability to harness the power of detail to create such images and render scenes of the material world in miniature. It is extraordinary to discover what great narratives, existential questions and intellectual concerns lie within the smallest, barely discernible objects of visual art (drawing, painting or sculpture),and depicted with the representational power that only talent and inspiration can render.Undoubtedly the alchemic nature of art is at work here, which allows for a theme, whatever it is, to be completely transformed and elevated to another sphere, producing in the end something quite unexpected. If, in addition to the foregoing, we also consider the sorts of magical or metaphysical properties with which these images are associated, we will have understood many of the secrets that characterize high art and the inimitable works of art that gifted artists have given us.

Maria Kompatsiari is an artist who is inspired by small art objects, here, by the ancient seal stoneswhich the archaeologist’s pickaxe continues to bring to light and which grace the collections of our museums, including the Epigraphic and Numismatic Museum, where her work is now on exhibit. The diverse character of these seal stones is well-known. Fashioned in most cases out of semi-precious materials, these small objects are both functional and decorative in nature. They are found in various shapes and usually bear an engraved scene, the subject of which, as well as the choice of colors, vary and, depending on the historical period, depict scenes from the imaginary or the real world. They are, in essence, small sculptures that reflect

stages in the development of art in the ancient world, which is why archeologists classify a number of them as works of art of universal value and significance.

Seen from the perspective of the visual arts it is fascinating how Maria Kompatsiari has transformed these ancient objects into contemporary works of art. The original subject is evocatively referenced as a source, which, depending on artist’s inspiration, can be partly found in the seal stone’s shape or in the scene it depicts. The development is remarkable. There are works that loom in space like sculptures, thanks to their “laminated” surface, with its uniform colors, austere forms, sharp contours and the alternation between fullness and void. Her singular technique is clearly one that demands considerable time and manual dexterity. Other works combine word and image, motif and decoration, the concrete and the abstract, rendered solely with the visual elements of art but in a way that manages to infuse these works with another feeling to create richly expressive images.

Suddenly the deeply symbolic miniature world of the seal stones of Antiquity—whether decorative, functional or talismanic—is transformed through the painter’s virtuosity and imagination into an articulation of modern-day reality. The works display an exceptional sense of space and palette and a robust command of shape and form—all subject to a dynamic structure that reveals affinities with abstract art. Maria’s paintings stand out for their balanced symmetry and the precision of their geometric forms, which fashion a world that can breathe in its own “magic”and bring a contemporary understanding to these ancient symbols.With their fertiledialogof revealing colors and geometric shapes and with an originalperspectivethat is based on illusion, namely,on the collocation of the ancient subject matter and the dramatic atmosphere of the chromatic planes, this series of works is among her most accomplished.Whatever the case,Maria expresses herself in her paintings with the vocabulary of Post-Painterly Abstraction, deploying bold pure colors to truly grand effect.

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