

## Vangelis Rinas: The Art of Hybridity

The Greek-born and –Athens/New York based realist and sometimes figurative painter Vangelis Rinas manages to find set scenes for art that compel us to think anew, both technically and thematically. His views, often of architectural forms or manmade industrial products such as ships, make themselves clear over a period of time, demanding a concentrated focus on the part of his viewers. Rinas makes art that has to do with envisioning mostly real phenomena; he is not so much a painter of political engagement. Instead, he develops apocalyptic scenarios for their own sake, often embarking on a realism that holds our interest despite the desolation being represented there. Metaphorically, for example, the subject matter of a hot desert possesses strong possibilities, so that bright scenes of sunlight and sand can be seen as symbols of ambivalence, or pleasure and trust. Additionally, the kind of constructed chaos we find in Rinas's art has a lot to do with a reading of life that is both formally interesting and instructive for viewers who are interested in the way life has a tendency to break down and fall apart. Entropy is the unmentioned theme of this artist, who works out highly detailed visions that make little rational sense except as scenarios of physical abandonment and decay. But this is not to call Rinas a complete pessimist, for his vision has positive aspects and, indeed, sometimes plays a role that salvages the composition from becoming a merely sour prophecy.

One of the major reasons for Rinas's skill and, likely, his popularity has to do with his extraordinary sense of detail. The particularity of his figures and stalwart objects like complexes of buildings fill his picture plane with a remarkable amount of information, which compel the viewer to take a long look at the people and objects that he paints. Mostly Rinas's art is about seeing—he portrays his vision as a metaphorical, metaphysical gloss on the slightly surrealist implications of his art. Things don't fit together—in one earlier painting, a woman's torso is displaced by a large building, likely an actual edifice Rinas knows. This intimacy of awareness, coupled with a disruptive visual arrangement, is key to Rinas's power as an artist. He shares what is new or novel in his world. And the strategy works because we haven't seen his arrangements before; their originality gives the nod to the world as he knows it, and even more important, he invests his art with the imagination of a master painter, someone who wants to capture the essence of what he visualizes.

Thus, Rinas is to be recognized for a certain doggedness in his paintings, whereby the details serve as a means of alerting his audience to the pleasures of memory—even if they have never seen the image in actual life! The surreal aspect in his art enables him to play extravagantly with the imagery he chooses. Thus, Rinas plays with the eros his memory locates in contemporary life, no matter what the subject matter. Still, there is an implicit melancholy to what Rinas does. Our memory of his environments may start to fade with time, in part because the artist paints fragments of things, enabling Rinas to gather our awareness primarily in a fleeting manner. The idea of a person bridging the gap

between the old and the new is, after all, not so very original. Perhaps the nude women found in some of his recent paintings are both objects of desire and evocations of the muse, whose very attractiveness necessitates that she remain beyond the grasp of the artist—or, for that matter, beyond the audience looking at the painting. Rinas's realist approach gives him the ability to paint decisively scenarios and situations that would otherwise be beyond the reach of rational understanding. This happens because Rinas's poetic sensibility presents imagery that would strain belief—for example, a girl standing and looking off in the distance, surrounded by flotsam on what looks like a winter's day.

The juxtaposition of the girl and her environment strains credibility slightly, but that does not mean it is impossible to recognize Rinas's theme, namely, the role of beauty in paintings that speak very much of the real world. Wearing a smudged yellow turtleneck, she looks at us with melancholy eyes, while the lumber behind seems to be floating in a winter mist. It is a striking painting of female vulnerability, contextualized within the composition by a harsh and cold environment. The contrast between the two renderings results in a sad, evocative state of affairs, in which the audience is taken aback by the emotional drift of the composition. The female represents, in her loneliness, the isolation all of us feel, even when we are surrounded by people. And the pile of lumber might also be seen symbolically, as an image of unfulfilled capability. One hesitates to overinterpret here, but the point is that, by focusing on such isolated, emblematic imagery, Rinas asks that we look to the metaphor suggested in the image—a strategy regularly found in his art. His women enact poses of vulnerability, and in doing so, they mutely ask for our sympathy, a quality that is key to the perceptions of his paintings.

Rinas is not an overtly symbolic painter, but his quietly described situations possess something of the emblematic, which extends the meaning of his imagery. Caught in the sweep of his detail, Rinas's viewers contemplate the incompleteness and, with greater sadness, the isolation of the individual. But it is also true that the impassive, slightly impersonal quality of his point of view also allows for the demonstration of pure description, achieved by a remarkable hand. Recently, the artist spent a couple of months working in his New York studio, and some of the paintings reflect the city's complex, jazzy influences. In one work, we see a sticker with the word "Fulton" on the painting; it likely refers to the street near where the artist was renting a studio. Outside of the bald fact of the word, Rinas has painted an abstract field as the background, mostly white but with a little blue toward the bottom of the piece. The "Fulton" sticker identifies the place in a legible sense, but not in a visual one. A similar painting has a street sign, but its letters are covered by a photo of a ship and on the right there is a different photo of the Brooklyn Bridge. Again the ground is completely abstract, probably to contrast with the literalism of the sign.

For this writer, many of Rinas's best paintings are of architecture and its details. There is a painting that looks like it is a study of a corner in the artist's studio: a

brown wooden or cardboard box lies against a green frame outlining the window. In the upper right, there is an orange and white striped barrier pole, along with splotches of white—bits of abstraction that punctuate an otherwise figurative imagery. Part of Rinas's achievement has to do with the tension between abstraction and realism in his art; while he is primarily a realist in the Old Master tradition his paintings use the two kinds of art both to quote the real world and to establish an identity outside of it. In a way, one style comments on the other, and the contrast between the two keeps the painting vibrant and alive. Rinas manages this very well, in ways that make him a very contemporary artist.

The contrast, however, is generally missed in much of contemporary painting, where artists adhere to a conceptual framework or to a self-reflexive realism. There is little room for pure painting right now, which is a problem because the idiom remains very much alive in the hands of an artist like Rinas. Committed as he is to a view of art that incorporates things seen and things imagined, Rinas may find himself within a small minority of artists interested in similar kinds of art. Although at first, the group may find contemporary art daunting when faced with the kinds of painting now being practiced internationally, a large part of which is dominated by a pop sensibility, both in the West and in Asia. But it seems to me that the pop vision has its limits, and serious, constructive painting will come into play again. Rinas absorbs culture without finding his position ironic, which is unusual in our culture now, overintellectualized and jaded as it is. Sincerity and authenticity come together in the long run, and it seems almost certain that Rinas will have his day of recognition. But the point is even larger than the relatively simple injunction of recognizing a hybrid style; opposing esthetic mergers tends to flatten out and circumscribe contemporary painting.

So, in the final analysis, Rinas has developed a style that is more than a style—it is an esthetic that refuses to give up tradition even as it moves toward the limits of the medium. It is clear that painting will always survive, despite the current popularity of high-technology art. But it may not play the same kind of role it played before; it may be relegated to a relatively marginal space, where its strengths and deficits as a genre are discussed by a small number of people. One of the more striking images we have by Rinas is the painting of a nude, lying partially on her side and looking upward. Behind her, in the background are a series of black verticals nearly merging with the black mist surrounding them. They look like trees at night but with a nearly bodiless identity—perhaps the better acknowledgment would see them as ghosts of trees. Rinas is not an instinctively spiritual painter—he is rather an artist focusing on what he sees. But this painting possesses a mystery that refuses to explain itself simply. Perhaps the woman is a muse in whom eroticism plays a large part. Certainly, there is a thread of erotic expression that runs through many of Rinas's paintings.

A small but important group of works belonging to Rinas's oeuvre are the sculptures he makes. There are the nudes, female standing figures, one before a wall and the other before an abstract form that undulates back and forth in front

of the woman. Both have crossed their hands over their chest, perhaps in a gesture of supplication—it is hard to tell as the women display a classical restraint. And there is another work of a woman lying sideways in the fetal position—a powerful image acutely evocative of vulnerability, again engaging a female rather than male figure. Finally, there is a model of a red figure entering the opening of a house or mausoleum. Is the person stepping into darkness to face her own mortality? The imagery does not direct us toward a definitive answer, and this refusal to say—to explicate in an analytical sense—is one of Rinas's strongest attributes as an artist. He is seer-like in his intuitions, which remain somewhat foreign to the viewer. Explanations of a rational sort cannot solve the conundrums he proposes. As Rinas's audience well understands, it is not necessarily a bad thing *not to know*. Riddles can remain unanswerable in the face of consistent investigation. Rinas mystifies us in order to make the enigma more stimulating, requiring our time and attention. Like all good artists, he recognizes that it is our time and our attention we offer. The conversation, even if fraught with secrecy, between artist and viewer remains alive because mystery is not forgotten.

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