

Claas Reiss is pleased to present 'Re-touching Memory' by London based Konstantinos Argyroglou at PROJEKTRAUM LONDON in his first solo exhibition and an exhibition essay by Matt Carey-Williams, Head of Sales, Victoria Miro.

'Brushing Memory: The condensation of sensation in the art of Konstantinos Argyroglou.

"It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self." (Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* [1971])

"This is the gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions; these are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in womb of pia mater, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion." (Holofernes in William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Lost* (c. 1596), Act IV, Scene ii).

John Keats' beautiful poem "What can I do to drive away . . .", penned by him whilst still blooming from the simplicity of youth into the complexity of adulthood, voices the immortal phrase: "Touch has a memory". Keats' poem is not just an ode to longing but an entreaty to forget. So powerful, so agonising are his memories of his young, now lost "brilliant queen", that he wishes to eradicate any memory of her: "Touch has a memory. O say, Love, say/ What can I do to kill it and be free/ In my old liberty?" Touch and memory make up the foundations of Konstantinos Argyroglou's temple of painting. His is a practice that seeks to feel remembered moments from his childhood: some clear, others foggy; some comforting, others challenging with such moments offering a condensation of sensation; physically, psychologically and painterly. Touch and memory propose themselves as binary antagonists in a delicious oxymoron. One cannot touch impalpable memories. Haptics betray different truths to those evoked by anamnesis; memory being that tapestry of essence and sentiment wittingly recalled yet inexorably imagined. That Keats' jewel of a phrase points to the muscle memory of love unveils just how poignant such memories can be to pain or pleasure oneself in such a powerful way. For Keats, the past touches of his lost love impress upon his memory as if he were viscerally communicating with her. Memory now has its own nervous system, much like the semantics of Keats' words reveal the somatics of his yearning. Likewise, just like lost love, Argyroglou's surfaces throb with this tension between the desire to remember but also to invent, and, in so doing, unearth the artist's quest for the truth – sailed on seas of time – of his matter, mater and meaning as a painter, once child, now man, but ever son.

*Bath Time* (2022) eloquently frames the poesy of Argyroglou's haunting surfaces and the conversation they hold between touch and memory; invention and reality and how the truth of one nourishes the other. These are paintings that can be seen as portals, plunging us into the artist's own past, that coalesce in nebulous vapours; his surface efflorescing between passages of blurry recollection bent on bold registration that speaks of the figure but also unbosoms his delight (and need) for the abstract. Here, the infant Argyroglou, pacified and pacific, resplendent in a sunny yellow towel, worn as if it were a Sunday-best skirt, stands resting against the bath his mother has run for him. A hint of lilac water sits underneath the back of an apple green bath; moments of relative planar flatness discombobulated by a curious veiling green palette, cut through with a whispering delineation that reminds me of Richard Diebenkorn. Time for Baby's bath is usually a noisy, splashy affair yet, here, the mood is quieter, pregnant with other possibilities that we, as viewer, seem unaware of yet which are softly etched across the artist's remembered self-portrait. Eyes that confront yet look away; a body that is neonate yet posed and poised; a boy dressed like a girl. All this fluidity, purloined from the flat, still block of bathwater, now flows through the palpating, perplexing effervescence of this child. His physicality. His actuality. His identity.

This flux between the physical and psychological; between what is felt and remembered, pained yet painted feeds Argyroglou's self-description. Indeed, this whole exhibition can be seen as a single portrait that attempts to arrest an endogenous simultaneity of self. Snippets of the first five or six years of his life. Bath time gives over to *Pool Time* (2022), once more affirming the significance of water as a leitmotif in Argyroglou's work. As subject and object; media, means and meaning all wrapped up together. Water cleanses and baptises, both acts marking states of transition, from impurity to purity. That transition speaks to the

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evolution of boy to man; past to present (and back again) which nurtures Argyroglou's entire enterprise. We now find the artist in a small paddling pool, likely in his parents' back garden. The round pool, metra-like, embraces the young child, offering not just amusement but sanctuary. However, just like the burgundy bubble which will surely burst, and the water that not only baptises but drowns, feelings and memories of such security give way to darker notes. Environment all too quickly morphs into containment; protection now spoken in dialects of incarceration. Thus unfolds the tense and fragile dialogue between the adult now trying to remember themselves as a small child. The goal being to capture the rapture of an innocent, near-forgotten moment but which is – and ever will be – coloured by the anxiety of experience. Then is always constructed in the now, just as memory is both built and discovered. It plays, giggling in paddling pools whilst ignoring other people on subway trains. It makes bubbles listening to their mother in the hot Grecian summer whilst pressing a brush dryly against a canvas in the quiet solitude of an artist's studio in rainy London.

Out of the pool we now move inside to the dinner table. The quiet introspection of Pool Time, saturated with a velvety throw of aqueous colour, now defers to the much more fractured, tense image of Dinner Time (2022). Here the young Argyroglou stares out of the abbreviated, ideogrammatic pictorial space, his head turned towards the viewer yet still not addressing them directly as his eyes wander away from us. That reticence for communion and communication is amplified in the brusque delineation of the chair he sits on and the table that awaits his dinner. The almost unctuous modelling of the boy's face is at odds with the drippy dislocation of the bare space in which he resides. Yellow pigment evaporates leaving only bones of memory upon which to hang the flesh of his being. And yet, whilst this painting reverberates in this struggle between definition and dissimulation, the image of the child's face is unforgettable. It is almost as if Argyroglou has depicted himself as a five-year old boy but with the mind and mindset of one much older. Wisdom seeps in and out of naivety in a never-ending osmosis of identity. Then, again, is now; now is always then; self remains in flux. So it is that Argyroglou paints a child wise beyond his years that stares into the face of his own future, pictured in the present. I am reminded of Benjamin Disraeli's rather sardonic summary of life: "Youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret." Perhaps the child eyes the inevitable obstacles that will (and maybe have already) turn optimism into pessimism? In so doing the artist shares some of his own anxieties regarding ageing, with the further one gets away from the past the harder it becomes to rekindle it. The harder it is to be lullabied by your mother; dried and swaddled in fluffy towels that smell of home on the beach; patiently wait for a plate of your favourite food. Argyroglou's past, to paraphrase L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country and so his determination to recall the sights, sounds and smells of those childhood moments often finds him employing an equally foreign vernacular of paint. Pigment that bubbles in evanescent transience; a surface, often in the throes of becoming, that offers a painterly transcendence, quiet yet heartrending made out multiple layers, touched re-touched like memory, remember.

Note that these paintings all have the same word in their titles: time. For Argyroglou, time – like space – never stands still, with his self-portraits all attempting to capture a specific moment in time whilst negotiating the very vicissitudes of the now. Time – again, like space – is fluid. It articulates all tenses, all the time, and it is this temporal fluidity that underpins the fluency of Argyroglou's contemplations of age and gender. I like to think that the artist realises both the juxtaposition and fusion of now and then; touch and memory through the coupling of soft and hard. In Blue Hour In The Balcony (2022) time is condensed to an end-of-the-day hour; his surface bruised with nocturnal blues and umbral greens, with the artist pictured against a balcony. The softness of his face and T-shirt, as well as the haze of the wall and window of the building behind him, is achieved through quiet licks of an almost dry brush. This sits in contradistinction to the hard, metallic, somewhat angry verticals of loaded pigment that make up the balcony bars and which, yet again, serve to protect yet imprison. The notion of a child alone on a balcony will make almost every parent sweat and so it is that, again, Argyroglou pitches the sanctity of memory against the profanity of reality. A halcyon past pitted and pigmented against a disquieted present.

And so we arrive at the final painting of this essay, Afternoon With Sleigh (2022). This work embraces all the content already considered; however, it also speaks explicitly to a subject that continues to intrigue the artist and nourish his practice: object relations theory. Whilst undergoing his own therapy (from which this extraordinary body of work is born), Argyroglou became fascinated with the writings of the paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald W. Winnicott. Winnicott proposed the idea of transitional objects. Phenomena such as dolls or blankets which a child would become almost obsessively attached to and which

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would essentially replace their mother's breast once they had stopped breastfeeding. Here the object of significance – that treasured possession that one once touched triggers floods of memories – is a plastic, orange sleigh, used as a child by the artist when he would play in the sea. This particular sleigh carries weight because Argyroglou was handed it down by his mother who also used it when she was a girl. That comfort, warm and fuzzy like the application of his paint, breathes in enclosed spaces that make him feel safe, such as the pool or the bath or the balcony. It also resonates because of the object's connection to his mother so whilst he is always depicted alone – often, such as here, in crumbling temples of remembrance – he is always connected to and mollified by significant others and, especially, the unconditional love of his mother. As such, this sleigh can be seen as Argyroglou's very own 'Rosebud'. The one thing newspaper mogul, billionaire and all-round rascal Charles Kane (the hero and anti-hero of Orson Welles' celebrated film, *Citizen Kane* [1941]) kept to remind him of his childhood. Of a time of delicate, snowy innocence now lost in the inferno of knowledge.

It was Winnicott who also famously said that "Artists are people driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide." This neatly sums up the very blueprint of Argyroglou's practice. He presents images that search for secrets that only the past can tell but which only the present can question. More than just an interrogation of self, these paintings beg to betray the dynamic of memory and how that, in turn, shapes the mechanics of invention. The artist wants to reveal himself, his narrative, his anxieties, his joy, his design, his faculty but often (and unavoidably) obfuscates that as memory and ambition flow in and out of elucidation and dissolve into the ether of time, once figured but now abstracted. Yet the desire and design to remember, remain, relate yet still reserve floats in the air of these mysterious, melodious, moving paintings. Poignant, penetrating works where the touch of sensation, and the deliquescence of it, brushed into exquisite bubbles of lingering, longing memory, cling on to one another, like a mother's love; like a favourite toy, always and forever.'

Matt Carey-Williams, November 2022