ALMINE RECH

Jannis Kounellis
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For his first exhibition in the City of Light since 1985, Arte Povera pioneer Jannis Kounellis has taken over the 18th-century Paris Mint (La Monnaie de Paris) –one of the oldest, still-running manufacturing institutions in France– with a mix of historical and recent works amounting to a concise survey show that simultaneously resists the tropes of the retrospective exhibition genre.

Upon entering the formal, historical rooms of the Mint, an antechamber greets visitors with an arched metal rod gracefully bending over a monumental doorway, from which hangs in equilibrium a succession of eight antique trays once commonly used as weighing scales, each holding a small heap of yellow powder, delicate pyramids of an elemental substance that reveals itself to be sulfur ('Untitled', 1993).

The contrast between the seemingly simple sculpture, elegantly framing a vista of the next room, and its heavily decorated monumentality, functions as an explicit preface to the whole exhibition, pitting not so much the difference between rough materials, sophisticated architectural ornamentation, ceremonial formality, and unassuming substances against each other, but rather engaging them together in the space to create a meaningful, poetic ensemble whose vibrancy is a testimony to the intensity of an oeuvre developed over decades and whose power is undiminished in the 21st century.

The quasi-operatic theatricality of some of the artworks, such as the set of oversize easels supporting large metal plates in the opulent, main reception room ('Untitled', 2016), is a poignant counterpoint to the grandiose gilded ceilings, crown moldings, stone pillars, and the abundant luxuriousness of the décor, contrasting the industrial simplicity of the metal rectangles with the sophisticated rococo architecture of the space.

The elemental presence of fire runs throughout the exhibition, at certain times literally, at others by allusion. Its transformative capacity is evident in the significant presence of metal in all of the rooms, but also in the form of actual flames, as some of Kounellis's works are lit at various times of the day. The combustible properties of objects reference as well the capabilities of fire, such as coal pellets, heaps of sulfur, or the waxy leftovers of a melted candle in 'Untitled, (Libertà o Morte, W. Marat W. Robespierre)', 1969, a small artwork referring to the French Revolution, when social discontent flared up to topple royalty and establish democracy, but not without a lengthy episode of assassinations, vendettas, and flaming confrontations within the parties vying for power, known as The Reign of Terror. Liberty or Death, was the revolutionaries' slogan, and indeed many of them only very briefly enjoyed a hint of freedom from the Church and monarchic State before meeting an early, violent demise administered by that lethal technological novelty of the era, the guillotine. The piece's exhibition in this historical space underlines the continuity of monetary fabrication – hence metallurgic activity and transformation of mineral ore through fire – through upheavals and revolutions, from the Middle-Ages to the 21st century, from an archaic, precapitalist time where trade and exchanges existed to a new ultra-capitalistic era where rampant global inequality led to desire and repeated calls for a new revolution.

History and revolutions are omnipresent throughout the exhibition, not only with the 'Untitled' 1969 work (for which the candle is regularly lit, extinguishing itself as it burns) but steeped in the various dates inscribed upon the backs of metal plates in the reception room. The dates allude to the birthdates of artists Kounellis admires, at once historically specific and made anonymous.

The cycles of art history at large mingle with Kounellis's personal history as an artist in the form of older works, as with the "reactivated" performance work 'Untitled (Da Inventare sul posto)', 1972, a delicate painting of an excerpt from a Stravinsky score inscribed over a chaotic pink and white background. The painting, however, does not function independently as a traditional object of contemplation. Its full resonance and significance only come to life, in the context of a performance in which a violinist plays a repeated melody while a ballerina moves gracefully around the space. As with the lit candle, the presence of the two live actors or activators of the painting leads to an expanded experience for the viewer, who in turn is drawn forcefully into the piece.

The work was one of the earliest of its kind to introduce such an interactive structure, directly implicating the viewer in the completion of the piece. Kounellis is famed for his legendary 1969 exhibition at the Galleria l'Attico in Rome, where he exhibited twelve living horses for two weeks; since then, he has often used live animals as elements that bring in a certain vitality but also an element of surprise, awe even, to an art experience where the viewer is incorporated from the outset, invited to move beyond passive contemplation and to reflect on art forms that do not merely "blur art and life" in a traditional sense, but that firmly embed life in the work itself.

In 'Untitled', 1991, an enamel basin filled with water and a submerged kitchen knife, is placed on a bentwood chair, in the same room as the steel plates. A pair of live goldfish dart through the water, moving flashes of burnt orange, simple animality visible to those willing to spend a few moments observing the bowl. Nearby, two camp beds, one lit with a coal fire twice a day, the other serving as a cage for live rats, are arranged over a rectangular bed of nails that suggests a hybrid between a base or pedestal and a rug; elsewhere in the room is a closet filled with folded burlap bags, the rough fabric set in relief against the gilt of the surrounding architecture.

These elements simultaneously hint at what Kounellis does, what he is: he has insisted throughout his career that even though he is often perceived as a sculptor or an installation artist (a term he dislikes), he views himself primarily as a painter, as evidenced in his 2014 exhibition at the Almine Rech Gallery in Brussels, with Works combining traditional canvas and oil paint with iron. Fittingly, here at the Monnaie de Paris, the dramatic presence of the easels in the reception room offers viewers an unmistakable symbol of painting made with other materials: steel, coal, glass, fabric, bentwood chairs, water, fire, goldfishes, rats, knives, etc. These aesthetically disparate works are accompanied by genuine paintings, such as the aforementioned 'Untitled (Da Inventare Sul Posto)', and many artworks that make oblique references to the genre, their shape, size or scale recalling or resembling traditional painting formats.

In the manner of a traditional painter, Kounellis uses the materials or objects touched upon above as part of a vocabulary conducive to creating new forms, but also to conveying associative meanings. An accumulation of everyday, mundane glass objects hanging on metal trays at a window brings to mind the permanence of glass as a manmade substance as old as ancient civilization and still in use everywhere today, a sharp reminder of the permanence of human industry made possible by the mastery of fire. If Kounellis alludes to the French Revolution, he also alludes to another, the industrial one, with its proliferation of mass-produced materials, such as the coal necessary for the steam engines to generate the metal ore for steel factories. The metal is present in each room of the exhibition with the rectangular steel plates employed in various arrangements as a kind of Ariadne thread linking together the various components interspersed and repeated throughout the installation.

Kounellis has often expressed his admiration for Jackson Pollock, whose painting did away with centrality and with the necessity of a focal point, yet still conveyed an essential cohesive totality. Nowhere is this kinship more evident as in his exhibition at the Monnaie de Paris, where all the separate elements converge to express a decentralized mode of thought where each has an equal role in creating an overall picture, heavy with historical or social associations yet resolutely living in our present.

- Noëllie Roussel