ALMINE RECH

Gerasimos Floratos
Maps

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Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to announce *Maps*, Gerasimos Floratos' second solo exhibition with the gallery.

A map is an abstract rendering of space that stands flat. It differs drastically from the reliefs and territories it refers to; it's a coded cultural marker that you need to learn to read in order to navigate.

Even though Gerasimos Floratos paintings are figurative, they are more like landscapes. Floratos is a New Yorker. His work is entropic, like a psycho-geographical translation of the city. He was born and still inhabits the center of the center—Times Square (which is actually not square, but more twisted).

The vivid colors of his confronting figures remind of the extreme experiences that define NYC. Floratos does not paint crowds per se. One or two characters appear on each painting—but their presence is reminiscent of passersby encounters. Some look down, others look sideways, some look up; they could be among the hundreds of people you cross every day in hectic neighborhoods. They also bring to mind advertising billboards and huge LED screens: all this cacophonic anarchy containing both aggression and poetry.

Floratos paints on the floor of his studio, which is made with the same concrete as the streets above. Graffiti is urban land art, but Floratos is not a street artist. He doesn't allow for drips. Still, I cannot help thinking of the erasures, the constant painting over of street art by city officers or other graffiti artists as a natural cycle of emerging and disparition. Floratos uses acrylic and oil. One being sleek and smooth, the other more textured. He creates layers of darker lines on larger, often horizontal painted surfaces, recalling Picabia's *Transparencies* series as well as x-rays—which are both a medical and a museum conservation technique—revealing layers of paint and hidden realities below the surface.

Floratos' biography is quite public. He often speaks about his father's deli and his family's Greek origins. However it's clear that he is not an outsider artist (even if he admires William Hawkins and many others). He is an insider, well aware of the social tensions and power games all around.

Floratos rejects the idea of being self-taught. He doesn't really align himself with neo-expressionism, or 'bad' painting movements even though he admires them—from Basquiat all the way to Kippenberger. Above all, he tracks emotions, similar to Man Ray stating: "I paint what I cannot photograph." His paintings reflect—in a slightly deformed way—our current times, where distinguishing high and low culture is a less relevant question. It has already been digested. Streetwear and cartoons are omnipresent, and shifts in taste move faster than ever.

Floratos was trained in capoeira. It is common to say that one 'plays' capoeira, and he seems to have taken this to heart. Painting is for Floratos a physical performance. He is at ease with large, billboard formats. His paintings could form one coherent body of work. Even his sculptures (exhibited in parallel in the Boisgeloup exhibition) capture acutely different body languages, involving the five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. Our organs are sensory data collectors, both anatomical and relational: the relationship is always reciprocal, giving and receiving.

Eyes allow us to see and be seen. We, the viewers, are looking at the big eyes of a figure who is also looking back at us. There is a seer / stalker dynamic which is also present in Carol Rama's work. Floratos figures' eyes are either intense, focused, vague, or exploding, always reflecting some activity inside the mind.
Noses allow us to smell, revealing the delicious and the dangerous. The way Floratos paints them from below recalls Daumier's caricatures of the political elite of his time. The ones who look down are the ones to be ridiculed.
Floratos' **mouths** are often, if not always, wide open. A mouth enables you to eat, taste, kiss, speak, laugh, shout, or even bite—like Lee Lozano's jaws showing off their teeth. Sometimes a tongue stands out: Chinese medicine takes the tongue very seriously; it is where we decipher messages sent by our internal organs.
Painting by **hand** gives more freedom than digital strokes ever could. Hands serve to grab, but also to sense, and feel what surrounds us, even in the dark: to touch and be touched. They also engage in silent communication: like waving, checking, agreeing, holding, pointing out, and threatening.
Finally the **ears** allow us to listen and hear but also guarantee our internal equilibrium, our ability to stand and move around. Floratos' figures often wear headphones, cut off from the outside world. What are they listening to?

Many of his figures are smoking, too. Of course, this might bring to mind tobacco lobbies or Edward Bernays' experiments and manipulations, convincing women that cigarettes were their torches of freedom. However smoking can also be seen as a way of communicating, like the Native American tradition of smoking peace pipes. Can smoking be a way of thinking... inhaling a means of introspection?

In some of his most recent paintings, Floratos also included some collage elements, adding different materials, scales, and colliding perspectives as if looking in the rear window of a taxi from the backseat, the landscape refracted. The collaged images of city skyscrapers of Las Vegas and its surrounding desert were inspired by tourist shops and hotels near his studio or during his research trips to Vegas.

Other images he chose are mushrooms, red spotted ones. Fly Agaric, also known as the smurf mushrooms, are psychoactive and medicinal. They deactivate our defense mechanisms and enhance the senses, which can be observed both in peyote ceremonies or in current lab research at Johns Hopkins University. They open the 'doors of perception,' to quote Aldous Huxley. However their therapeutic virtues were aggressively suppressed for decades. Why would humans outlaw natural species that can alter consciousness and create awareness? Why was it considered so dangerous?

Mycelium remains understudied. They are revelatory structures, helping us make connections rather than oppositions. They are interconnected to trees and share many characteristics of urban construction and societal organization. MAPS is the acronym for an American multidisciplinary association for psychedelic studies. The word *psychedelic* originates from ancient Greek, meaning *manifestation of the mind*.

Floratos was always interested in schizophrenia, mental or neural differences, and extrasensory perception. He curated exhibitions with the Fountain House Gallery in his neighborhood. One might think of the nude portraits by Maria Lassnig or of the quantum psychology of Robert Anton Wilson, who tried to break down pre-conditioned associations.

Edvard Munch once said, "I do not paint what I see but what I saw." Floratos, the psychonaut, certainly relates.

- Anne Dressen, Curator, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris.