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Boudin, Bourbon and The Feast of the Assumption

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Bas Poulos: More Talk - Essay - Bas Poulos Paintings - Virginia Billeaud Anderson



When my buddy Gus Kopriva organized *Western Sequels: Art from the Lone Star State* in 2012-2013 in Athens, then in Istanbul, some crazy things disrupted the exhibition. Unaware of the importance of Texas art, the Greeks staged a transportation strike which delayed the Athens opening by several days. At the same time, they rioted in the Square at the Hellenic Parliament building, “near our hotel, with tear gas and flying pieces of marble,” Gus told me. “Then, when we brought the show to Istanbul, there were riots there too.”

Despite the foolishness, Bas Poulos went to Istanbul to see his paintings in *Western Sequels*. He chose paintings from the *Arcadia Vista* series, highly abstracted seductively colored landscapes with depictions of Hellenic stone bridges in the compositions, these objects disassembled to the point of non-recognition. Perhaps you saw some of his *Arcadia Vista* landscapes at Meredith Long Gallery in 2013, it was a breathtaking presentation.

The paintings evolved out of an imaginative and challenging project, to find and pictorially depict stone bridges in the Peloponnese. Old Hellenic stone bridges are not for cars, they are for seasonal crossings of river beds and gorges, used by shepherds and goat herds. Poulos located over thirty of them within one day's travel from his home and studio in his ancestral village of Karies, but not easily, most are hidden in the landscape, in olive groves and away from the roads. "Once near Dimitsana, it was only because I heard the sound of the gorge water that I was able to find the bridge."

Poulos' Greek and South Carolina landscapes knocked me over, and we eventually did a fun interview. Because of the time we spent discussing his art, I know a tiny bit about the paintings Klana (1984) and Pana (1985), which are prominently displayed in the exhibition Focus on the 70s and 80s: Houston Foundations II at Deborah Colton Gallery through November 4, 2017.

But before I get into that let me tell you about his welcome ritual. It might be a chilled bottle of water quietly placed near your chair, or something more elaborate, it is part of the Greek hospitality tradition in which even strangers are greeted with drink and food. It's there in Homer, and you'll encounter it throughout Greece and Turkey. In the villages. There was the old woman in the Peloponnese who handed me a basket of fruit, and the man on the mountain in Crete who poured me a glass of raki simply because I appeared. In the Eastern provinces of Turkey, villagers greeted us with trays of hot tea. Poulos and I talked about his excursions to Greek monasteries to see Byzantine art where the monks' ritual is to serve visitors a glass of raki, a glass of water, and a loukoumi (a Turkish delight), and I recall the day he searched Houston markets for loukoumi to have for the South Carolina museum people who were coming to his studio.

It was October 2014. Poulos and I were discussing the painting "Klana" which was propped against his studio wall in front of my chair. When he painted it, he told me, he had an interest in Jackson Pollock and automatic writing, then described his process. He placed an un-stretched canvas on the floor, and used a template to define then paint the primary image, around which he flung paint. Flung means a poured or dripped line. Flung paint "was the automatic part of it." Paint application was with industrial brushes and squeegees, in fact those horizontal bars in "Pana" 1985), his other painting in "Focus on the 70s and 80s" are squeegeed. Some may remember "Ornomenos" (1984), the painting Poulos exhibited in MFAH's 1985 "Fresh Paint" exhibition, which caught the eye of the "Artforum" guru, it was made essentially in the same way. He used this process until 1987.



He said more, I wrote it down. "At that time, I painted color field abstraction in the vein of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Helen Frankenthaler. I was engaged in this kind of art for a very long time, had many exhibitions, in fact for a time I worked with four galleries simultaneously, showing regularly in Houston, San Francisco, New York and Atlanta, while teaching full time at Rice. I was young, and felt powerful then, but eventually realized I could not sustain it, primarily because abstraction has to be supported with critical theory, and I realized my theory was based on nature, that I was a landscape painter."

That was 2014. Last month, in August, when Deborah Colton announced her "Focus on the 70s and 80s" show, Poulos and I began to discuss his paintings, again. "Bas, one further question." I felt timid about bothering him, a hurricane out of the mouth of hell was coming at us rapidly which made me a pain in the ass, but I'm happy we continued our discussion because ultimately he gave me the key to understanding his art.

Are we to understand that at some point in the 70s or 80s he shifted from non-objective and theoretically based "color field abstraction" to figuration drawn from nature and the world around him?

It is so that before he came to Houston to teach at Rice University in 1975, around the time of his Guggenheim fellowship, he had a studio in New York and showed at Andre Emmerich Gallery which specialized in color field, and Clement Greenberg praised his work. It would be natural for him to be influenced by Greenberg's priestly edicts against representation, and all the carrying on about paint reduced to its essence.

There was no shift. "Virginia, even in the early New York days, the paintings referenced nature." To back this up Poulos showed me four abstract paintings from the seventies which he considered referential. In one with horizontal bars similar to those in "Pana" he observed "clearly a sense of field, with an implied horizon edge at the top," in another "the figure started to creep in with the rounded edge." Two others he introduced as "earlier paintings with vertical bars that I now view as figurative."

Add to this his qualifying statements about the way he treats nature. Poulos spoke eloquently in his studio. "You know, Picasso said he observed the landscape then entered his studio. I take it one step further and walk the landscape, which allows me to see how the light filters through branches and leaves, hits trees and the ground plane, and casts shadows, so my beginning impulse is observation. From the photo or sketch I create the armature or structure of the painting, the drawing and blocked in colors, then arrange for cohesiveness. I'm not creating a portrait of the landscape, but a visual experience. It's the same with bridges, the patterns of stones in the arches form the drawing armatures for color that works in opposition to organic shapes of the foliage. I'm not interested in documenting the bridge, just taking from it for the painting's armature, which with color and luminosity factored in, are crucial elements of the visual experience."

It's my opinion the art always referenced his surroundings. As I told him, I'm skeptical about the purely theoretical and formalist baloney. And now critical shifts are sussing out botanical and marine forms in Morris Louis' stained paintings, Greenbergian dogma out the window. Could it be he was coming to a deeper understanding of his work at the time Deborah Colton was getting excited about trotting out Klana and Pana and I was asking questions? Perhaps. "I think artists who have long studio careers are constantly re-considering and re-adjusting their perception of their art work, a mark of the engaged artist."

You get what you need. In 2016 Poulos accepted a residency in a no phone, no television, honky-tonk shack in rural Georgia where he produced new landscapes, lovely and highly abstracted. These, and some

made before, are being shown at William Reaves/Sarah Foltz Fine Art in the exhibition Landscape Journeys, through October 7, 2017. See the “abstracted pond” series. Poulos will give an Artist Talk at William Reaves, on Saturday, Sept 23, 2017, 2-4 pm.



Images - Bas Poulos, "Klana," 1984, Acrylic on Canvas, 78" x 56.5"

Bas Poulos, "Pana," 1985, Acrylic on Canvas, 42.5" x 54"

Bas Poulos, "Carolina Landscape No. 1 with Figure," 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"

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