

Dwelling in the Haunted City:
Paintings by Margarita Lypiridou

by Avery Larose

Melting, atmospheric and ephemeral – at first glance, Margarita Lypiridou’s cityscapes seem to have little in common with the rational, planned urban realms that so many of us call home. Worked up in flaming layers of crimson and gold with flashes of green, or evoking a desert palette of flat blues and sandy beiges, her canvasses allude to a city distilled from dreams, existing on the fringes of the familiar grey grid. Unreal and transient, her cities are populated by ghostly figures that perch precariously amongst the hazy buildings, or hover in faceless groups in nebulous streets and plazas; in their uneasy relationship to the urban landscape they occupy, these figures speak to an all-too-real sense of anonymity and dislocation that infects the experience of the modern city. At the same time, these works allude to the transformation and enchantment of urban spaces through the memories, dreams and desires of their inhabitants.

With their collapsed sense of space, surreal, diffuse lighting, and shifting perspectives, Lypiridou’s cities are pregnant with the uncanny atmosphere of the dream: familiar, and yet somehow strange, mysterious, and vaguely threatening. As the veils through which our unconscious reveals to us our deepest desires, simultaneously revealing and concealing them from view, dreams often escape their nocturnal limits and follow us into the light of day. Works like *Suspended Night* (2003), *Midnight Blue* (2003), and *Dark Musings A* (2006), seem especially to belong to the realms of reverie, as the cities they depict shift and change, disappearing into the dark distance of an empty street, or splintering into a star-filled sky. Their inhabitants are particularly fragile and evanescent, as if poised between substance and

vapour, suspended between waking and dreaming. Like the symbolic landscapes of dreams, these cities invite us to investigate, explore, and interpret, searching for meaning in their tangled passages and hidden corners. They are spaces in which Aristotelian narratives composed of clear beginnings, middles, and ends have given way to the shadowy twists and turns of dreamtime – it is easy to lose oneself in the doorways that open into infinity, the blank windows that open onto nothingness, and the staircases to nowhere. Resisting the pull to calcify into definite and logical forms, her cities remain pure potential, screens upon which the desires and dreams of their inhabitants flicker and glow.

Geographically, there is very little with which the viewer can situate him or herself: works like *Dusk* (2002), *Crowded* (2004) or *Birds on a Wire* (2009) evoke that which approaches a universal urban experience: dusky, faceless figures rushing by, a soaring field of verticals and horizontals made up of skyscrapers and winking apartment windows, birds swaying on electrical wires. The interesting exceptions are her paintings of Athens in various renderings of the Acropolis (2004-2005). Here, in the archetypal city of the west, the urban takes on a historical cast, providing a striking contrast to the relentless mutability and constant renewal that is the touchstone of the urban. It was in Athens that Aristotle defined humankind as creatures determined, first and foremost, by their participation in political society; without the state, without the social world, he argued, human beings cannot reach their full potential and are little better than animals. The city, and especially Athens, was the setting for this political and social engagement, characterized by the dialectical exchange of ideas – talk itself, carried out in the streets and squares, created citizens.

In the twenty-first century city, as we retreat into the isolation provided by our laptops and iPhones and watch our public spaces dissolve into high-rise condos and parking lots, this world of sustained discourse with our fellow city-dwellers seems as distant as the Classical

past. Lypiridou's shimmering cities, unstable as any mirage, mourn this loss, while simultaneously alluding to the possibilities awakened by a new understanding of the urban as a place where memories, dreams, and desires escape the confines of the psyche and roam the streets. The remnants of social interaction are visible in the gatherings and processions of *Red People* (2002), *Entropia C* (2002), and *Time* (2003), in the figures that flock together in groups, or parade up and down passages and staircases. However, both the anonymity of these figures, and their indistinct separation from the background, remind the viewer that the relationship between self and other, body and ground, have become blurred. Her faceless and almost formless figures threaten to dissolve into the cityscapes they inhabit, while these, in turn, seem on the verge of evaporating into the atmosphere, or crumbling into fragments. Signs of dissolution and diffusion are everywhere, as if acid had been poured on the unrelenting grid. The city is no longer a setting for rational discourse, but a site of fragmentary narratives, grasped in glimpses and half-heard conversations.

This clash between the rational and the fragmented is perhaps best illustrated by her grid paintings – *Narrative Nine Eleven* (2002), *Square Notes* (2003), *Theatrical Stories* (2003), *Fairy Tales* (2005), and *Terror on the Wall* (2006). Resembling the division of the page in a comic book or a sheet of ID photos, this orderly arrangement seems gently at odds with the disjointed narrative with which the viewer is presented: a skyline silhouetted against the sun, a thicket of signs raised in a peace protest, an umbrella caught in a gust of wind – these are the clues with which we must attempt to construct the stories of these cities and their inhabitants. The official narratives of progress and productivity offered by city planners, the nightly news, and the tourism industry, merge with those of a more personal nature: the memories, dreams and desires of those who walk its streets. While these urban visions might seem as shifting and mutable as the swirls of gasoline in a puddle, they allude to the many

ways in which those who live in the city inscribe it with their own narratives, superimposing layers of memory and meaning over the indifferent and seamless facades and streets.

There is something of the apocalyptic in these cityscapes, with their flaming, churning skies and toxic, unnatural colours. Occasionally, they seem threatened with total obliteration, as in *Invasion* (2006), *Memory Loss* (2006), and the *Entropia* series (2002). They are liminal cities, on the threshold between being and non-being, presence and absence. The solidity of concrete beneath one's feet, the rigid verticality of buildings rising on either side, have been replaced by spaces fading in and out, turning and transforming as they hover between restoration and annihilation. As such, they speak to the difficulty inherent in the act of dwelling, of making a place into home. Rich in connotations of stability, comfort, and permanence, dwelling brings to mind the rabbit snug in its warren, the bear in its cave, the mouse in its hole. And yet, for people, as Lypiridou's canvasses remind us, there is nothing natural or instinctive about dwelling – moving from place to place and living in environments that themselves constantly shift and change means that home must continually be made, torn down, and re-made. Rather than a built structure, home becomes an idea held in the mind, portable but fragile.

There is much to cause a sense of uneasiness and anxiety in Lypiridou's cityscapes: with their empty horizons and faceless populace, they reflect a disturbing vision of the urban, rife with anonymity, disorientation, and dread. Here, conversations and chance encounters have been replaced by eerily silent gatherings and echoing streets. Glimmers of change and potential are also found in these spaces, however, in their splintered narratives, hazy dreams, and evocations of a world in transition. While, at first glance, these cities might seem hostile and unwelcoming, even threatening and apocalyptic, they also reveal the possibility of a new form of dwelling. In his critical work on reclaiming public space, *The Practice of Everyday*

Life, Michel de Certeau poetically observes that “haunted places are the only ones people can live in.”¹ Lypiridou’s cityscapes offer us a glimpse of what these haunted places might look like, as the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, flesh and concrete, bleed into each other. As such, they show us that true dwelling happens when the dreams, desires, and memories of its inhabitants become the ephemeral bricks of which a city is built.

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¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 108.