

From Here To There: Cristos Gianakos' Works in the Portalakis Collection

“All things are symbolical; and what we call results are beginnings.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson on Plato¹

I saw Cris Gianakos' sculptures for the first time in 1971. I was a literature student who was having his first inklings about how much art would come to mean to me. Seven years later I began writing reviews of contemporary art for *Art in America*, and have been writing about art ever since. Little did I know that nearly thirty years would pass before I would have the opportunity to write about Gianakos' work. Despite the intervening years, and the many artists and works of art I would come to know and write about, my initial encounter with his work remains vivid in my memory, particularly a resin sculpture² that I returned to repeatedly during the course of the exhibition. The object I see in my mind's eyes belongs to the same family as *Resin Sculpture 115* (1971), a squat structure with a hollow shaft running through it, and *Resin Sculpture 132* (1972), more wedge-like than pyramidal. I was fascinated by the interplay between the structure's rough, layered exterior and the light-filled interior. The hollow shaft recalls the burial chamber in Egyptian pyramids, a place of mystery and, for some, beginnings of the occult. It made the light palpable, as well as invited the viewer to look closer, and to even try and peer all the down into the object's interior. I remember how aware I became of my body when I tried to see down the hollow shaft. It was like trying to peer over a wall and see the bottom of a wishing well. I also remember that the sculpture seemed absolutely contemporary even as it stirred up associations with pharonic Egypt.

I would later learn that, in contrast to the Minimalists, and their emphasis on purity and literalism, Gianakos deliberately established a network of associations that enabled the viewer to see his form while recalling a history that, in the case of the resin sculptures, stretched back to Egypt, its pyramids and pharaohs. For him, the goal was a multilayered field of associations and an impure experience rather than a pure non-associational, aesthetic experience arising from a pure form. Gianakos' work suggested that even primary forms had a cultural history; and with that history came intimations of time passing, on both an impersonal and personal level. The most telling difference between Gianakos and the Minimalist generation is the different ways they occupy or, in the latter case, reject a field of reference.

Gianakos' resin sculptures make clear that he felt that Minimalism was too constricting in its philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings. It did not allow for the wide range of disparate associations that he wanted to access in his work—the time he spent as a child in Greece, his years working as a graphic designer, and his interest in the relationship between typography and architecture. And much to Gianakos' credit, he has been able to imbue his work with aspects of Abstract Expressionism, Constructivism, typography, and personal history without retreating from the challenges posed by Minimalism. Thus, in contrast to the industrial surfaces one found in the work of Donald Judd and Carl Andre, Gianakos' resin sculptures were made of layers of resin, with a seam appearing where one layer joined the next. The layers and their rough seams recalled the poured

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Introduction by Mary Oliver, “Plato; or The Philosopher,” *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000) p. 435

² The resin sculptures were largely made between 1967-72.

paintings of Jackson Pollock. For all their refinement and use of contemporary materials, Gianakos' sculptures never look machine made.

In 1977, "working alone and feeling his way in the dark,"³ Gianakos began working on his "ramp" sculptures, a form that has preoccupied him for nearly three decades, and which is considered to be his signature form. Gianakos' ramps consist of a diagonal element supported by a substructure made of repeating, vertical elements. In their use of a diagonal, the ramps can be seen as extension of Gianakos' resin sculptures, their use of angled, triangular planes to make a pyramid. The difference is in the field of associations they define. Gianakos' resin sculptures tap into a history that includes the Egyptian pyramids, while his ramps evoke a much wider range of associations and never settle into one specific lineage. They are more open-ended in that regard, as well as more resonant in their levels of meaning. For one thing, whether made for an outdoor or an interior space, many of Gianakos' ramps evoke the possibility that they are abandoned structures whose original function we can only guess at. They invite speculation. Their eloquence is the direct result of their monumental muteness; they do not tell us what they might have been used for in an earlier life. Thus, they are not only witnesses to something we cannot name, but in the case of certain ramps, such as *Styx* (1987), the act of both witnessing and speaking seems inherent to the piece itself, and its use of a platform.

Art historians have generally credited Marcel Duchamp with the collapsing together of the utilitarian and esthetic domains. His placement of a urinal, shovel, bicycle wheel, and bottle rack within an art setting forever altered our understanding of the relationship between use and uselessness, the non-aesthetic and the aesthetic. And while this reading, and its subsequent codification, opened the door for generations of artists to make ironic commentary (a kind of final statement about commodity and commodification, for example), Gianakos' ramps define a realm of experience in which irony is downplayed for something larger and less susceptible to discursiveness.

Gianakos is interested in acts of witnessing, speaking, passing from one realm to another, and moving from the material to the immaterial world, perceptions which never interested the more literal-minded Minimalists. His resin sculptures and ramps suggest a metaphysical dimension to his approach, but do not insist on it. Despite their very different goals, what Duchamp and his heirs share with the Minimalists is an emphasis on the here and now. As Frank Stella famously said, "what you see is what you see." In contrast to this insistence on the present, Gianakos' ramps define a "here" while alluding to a "there." By utilizing a diagonal to propose that public space exists vertically as well as horizontally, he redefines it in ways that extend beyond the aesthetic.

Here, I want to expand on a point first broached by Stephen Westfall in his insightful essay on Gianakos' ramps. As Westfall pointed out, "one of Gianakos' favorite artists is [Giorgio] de Chirico. The empty colonnades of de Chirico's deserted plazas find a contemporary echo in the silent monumentality of Gianakos' outdoor work."⁴

Westfall's point enables me to hazard a guess that Gianakos' engagement with de Chirico's paintings of empty plazas may have aided him in his understanding of the porous barrier between the utilitarian and the aesthetic domains. As I see it, de Chirico's empty, alienating plazas and mysterious monuments, rather than Duchamp's ready-mades and sharp wit, play an important role in Gianakos' work; and the connections

³ Thomas McEvilley, "Cris Gianakos: The Way Up And The Way Down" *Cris Gianakos* (Thessaloniki: State Museum of Contemporary Art, Costakis Collection, 2002). P.19

⁴ Stephen Westfall, *Cristos Gianakos* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989), unpaginated (ex. cat.)

between the two are multi-layered. For Gianakos, both the shaping of public space and the meaning of monuments are ongoing concerns. One could further say that not only is there a kernel of originality in his reading of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, but also that he was able to manifest it with remarkable economy in the ramps and related works. On a formal level, there is the echo linking de Chirico's tilting planes, particularly in the street rising sharply on the right side of *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (1914)⁵ to sculptures by Gianakos such as *Wedge 1* (1984) and *Zumikon Ramp* (1997).

The variousness of the ramps should not be overlooked; each evokes the possibility of having once had a specific function that is now remote from us. It is this feeling of a lost function that gives his work a resonance that is missing from the work of many of his peers. It also defines time differently. Whereas Andre's sculptures reject historical time in favor of present time, Gianakos' ramps bring both present time and historical time into play. However, Gianakos' ramps allude to neither a specific historical moment nor do they articulate nostalgia for some lost or golden period. Rather, they are testimonies to the fact that functionality (including ritual) is not guaranteed, and that time renders everything obsolete.

Consider *Styx* (1987), which consists of two opposing diagonal ramps leading up to a stage-like platform in the middle. The viewer is invited to interact with the entire piece, and to imagine standing on the platform and possibly speaking. Once up there, what would one say? Who would one address? At the same time, we ask ourselves, who would have once stood on this platform and spoken? The ramps can also be read as physically ascending and descending, which one registers as indicators of our passage through time. And if we approach *Styx* from another angle of inquiry, we are apt to contemplate the relationship between form and function. Does it need a function to hold our attention? Is its power to enthrall us connected to its functionality? Again, viewers sense Gianakos' regard for architecture, both ancient and modern. In *Styx*, he brings the viewer to the realization that there is a rift in the public space, that it isn't (and perhaps never was) a site for discourse, but a contested field where domination is the prize. And, at the same time, the loss of functionality conveys a sense of alienation; that no one will ascend the ramp and speak because no one is listening. It is in his ability to generate these associations that Gianakos' work extends beyond the realm of aesthetics in a way that is neither programmatic nor ideological.

Gianakos' non-programmatic approach is equally apparent in *Déjà Vu II* (1988) and *Equinox* (1989), which are very different in feeling than *Styx*. In both *Déjà Vu II* and *Equinox*, he combines triangular plates of glass with the supporting substructure. Each plate of glass leans against the bottom edge of one structural unit and the top edge of the adjacent unit, thus visually underscoring the shift from vertical substructure to diagonal structure. Like dominoes, it's as if all the plates of glass are in a permanent state of falling. In addition to adding a feeling of vulnerability and falling into the work, the glass brings the element of light into play, as well as recalls the tonal shifts in his resin sculptures. Both *Déjà Vu II* and *Equinox* cast a set of shadows that range from dark structured sections to semi-opaque geometric shapes. It is worth noting that in de Chirico's paintings shadows play an important role; they make the silence palpable, an experience which I believe also preoccupies Gianakos.

⁵ The painting is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where Gianakos would have had ample opportunity to see it.

One reason that Gianakos uses glass is because he wants to make the silent dance between shadow and light become physically palpable, as well as stir up a complex state of contradictory feelings. The perceptual states one encounters in *Equinox*, for example, include ascent (the ramp's diagonal), the inevitable collision between expansiveness and constriction (the room or container in which the diagonal structure is placed), time passing (the changing relationship of light and shadow), silence (the interplay of the solid sculpture and its immaterial shadows), vulnerability (the leaning plates of glass), and a vanishing point (the visual recession of the repeating substructures). Each of these perceptions adds another layer of meaning into our experience of the work. Finally, there is the feeling that the ascending/descending diagonal is to be understood both literally and metaphorically.

One of the abiding strengths of Gianakos' ramp sculptures rests in their ability to invite and sustain interrogation. He isn't satisfied with offering formal solutions to aesthetic problems because to do so is to assume that time is linear, and that a horizon where permanent resolutions can be achieved is, in fact, attainable. For Gianakos, something else is at stake; how do we live in time, particularly once we become aware that there are many kinds of time unfolding simultaneously. The ramps evoke both peacetime functions and war machines, and, to my way of thinking, are worthy successors to Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of imagined structures, Giorgio de Chirico's empty streets, Franz Kline's black-and-white paintings, and Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to The Third International*. While others have commented insightfully on Gianakos' relationship to de Chirico, Kline and Tatlin, most notably Westfall and Thomas McEvilley, I think it is time to bring da Vinci into the mix. Throughout his life, da Vinci drew detailed plans for non-existing machines, which anticipate Gianakos' ramps. The sharply angled diagonals, particularly the ones that are long and narrow in width, recall catapults and other machines of destruction used in pre-modern times. The association with a catapult folds another layer of meaning into Gianakos' ramps, as well as evokes a slippery relationship between ascent and assault, prayer and war.

Gianakos' sharp diagonals register a connection between earth and sky, and thus between the realm of matter and the immaterial world. However, in strong contrast to the verticality of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, Gianakos' diagonals tilt upward, thus acknowledging both the inevitability of descent and the irrepressible desire to ascend. Here, I think it is useful to stop and consider the different domains of experience that Gianakos' ramps conflate. There is the *here* and *there*, which are sometimes connected and sometimes not. There is the world of gravity and matter (the substructure) and the world of immateriality (the diagonal pointing upward). There is ascent and descent. While such pairings imply a metaphysical impulse to Gianakos' work, they also suggest a deep interest in what is irreducible about human feelings, the desire to overcome gravity and time, for example.

If Gianakos made only his pyramids and ramps, his reputation would be secure. Conceivably, it might even have made it easier for one to define and thus pigeonhole him and his oeuvre. However, this is not nearly the case. He has made intimate and monumental sculptures in a wide range of materials, including wood, stone, glass, and steel; collages that document the alteration or intervention in a landscape, city, or ancient site; paintings and drawings on large sheets of Mylar; large black stones that have been cut and polished. He has photographed sculpture-like aspects of the urban landscape; made large etchings; and designed and overseen the building of *Maroussi Ramp* (1995), a narrow, unsupported, bridge-like passageway across a deep ravine. He

has self-published a number of books as part of an ongoing project. Thus, he is a sculptor, painter, photographer, printmaker, and architect.

In his black granite sculptures and acrylics on Mylar, the extensiveness and depth of Gianakos' investigation of the relationship between order and chaos, and materiality and immateriality, becomes more apparent. In *Voyager* (1984), Gianakos has juxtaposed a 45 and a 90-degree angle within an upright, stepped triangle. On one hand, the rotated, granite triangle is solid in the way it sits on the ground, but in another way it seems vulnerable. This is just one of the many paradoxes embodied by *Voyager*. It feels self-contained and yet seems part of something larger and unknowable. In its combination of the diagonal and vertical, and the sense that it embraces two triangular forms, *Voyager* can be read as a memory bank for future civilizations.

In *Oceania IV* (1986), the sharp diagonal cut introduces a feeling of vulnerability into the smooth black granite. At the same time, *Oceania* recalls Gianakos' years working as a graphic designer. The sculpture is like a memorial of a letter from an unknown alphabet. It is both speechless and articulate. Working in different mediums, Gianakos' ability to stir up a wide range of associations suggests a poetic apprehension of the world. By poetic, I mean that he is able to compress multiple meanings into a single work. And, I would argue that part of his poetic sensibility has been shaped by his sensitivity to the relationship between matter and light, form and shadow. His poetics are rooted in the perceptual.

In his large, acrylic on Mylar works, he applies the medium and then wipes it away, to his satisfaction. In some works, the monumental forms can be read either as massive presences or as doorways opening onto a receding space. In others, a light absorbing geometric shape sits in or enters an atmospheric field. In the acrylic on Mylar paintings Gianakos favors a foggy light, while in his ramps and pyramids one senses that the ideal light for them to be seen in is all-over and bright, like the kind you encounter in Greece.

Gianakos' project is the monument, not as a thing, but as a large and resonant desire that recurs throughout history, and connects disparate civilizations and cultures. Historically, monuments have functioned as manifestations of praise, forms of public tribute, examples of collective memory, reminders and boundary markers. Gianakos does not make monuments, however. Rather, he makes works (sculptures, proposals, paintings, and drawings) that explore the roles monuments play in our collective lives. Instead of being bound to a historical period, as so many of them are, Gianakos' "monuments" acknowledge the pressures of both the past and the future while resolutely occupying the present. They are mysterious and compelling. And we are drawn to them, much the same way our ancestors were drawn to certain places and things. His works are persuasive without being didactic. They both interact and shape elemental forces, such as light and shadow. Even when we don't understand what we are looking at, we get it full force, and all sorts of feelings, both inchoate and articulate, are stirred up. We are left to both ponder and wonder, and, finally, to reflect. I don't think you can ask more from an artist.

John Yau, 2005