

The Metropolises of Vassilina

By Ventzislav Iliev, Architect

I accepted Vassilina Dikidjieva's invitation to share my thoughts on her paintings immediately, without thinking. As always happens, after a moment of elation followed a sober doubt: perhaps this time I'd exceeded my limits as an art critic. Perhaps I had been too quick to agree to the request of my colleague and old friend. Would I be able to reach the depths of authorial individuality, to tease out the secrets of creative invention over works that I'd never seen before?

I looked over the body of work periodically and at different times of day – in the rare moments of emotional equilibrium I found during the daily grind, and during breaks in my work, but most frequently during my long commute to the office. I took this “unmuseumlike” approach to looking at the gallery of images so that I could reflect on their value from different angles and in different spiritual states.

“Metropolis” – whatever one understands by this concept – is an attractive theme for creators in all genres, but especially those in the figurative arts, and even more so for an artist like Vassilina Dikidjieva, who is an architect by training and calling. Gradually, I got the feeling that behind the clear, near-realistic depiction of buildings, streets, facades, and bridges hid an almost invisible background that expresses humanity's drive towards creativity and fantasy, one which also gives off a fleeting, mysterious aura – a unique “Et in Arcadia ego”, a presence that is mysterious, indecipherable. This spiritual backdrop has its own veiled presence in the canvases, expressed through human silhouettes woven into the buildings. Especially impactful are “Orpheus and Euridice”, the modernised images of the Three Graces, and the figures in “Metropolitan” Nos. VIII through XIII. These poetic depictions – in shades of antiquity and the Renaissance – of the woman creator, of the saint protectress of the megalopolis, and of woman in her dutifulness and sensitivity, are given a more active presence in “Metropolitan VII”, where the dark lord of the city's underworld is depicted in the foreground with his tattooed back. But here, too, the precise drawing and build-up of colors are just as poetic and leave as lasting an impression. The masterfully rendered figures, some of them paraphrases of well-known classical works, intentionally span the height and width of the entire paintings – the city with its roofs, towers and windows dominates in the composition, but the incorporeal human forms dominate in their scale. It seems to me that this intentional inversion of the scale of the human against the city is one of the greatest

distinctions of Vassilina's creative work.

Clearly the phenomenon of "Manhattan" and its superstructures, invented by the human mind, powerfully move Dikidjieva as a creator; and through her poetic worldview she has painted an endlessly interesting story about the cosmopolitan metropolis where "people leave an impression with their ideas, dreams, styles, and ambitions". In her statement, the artist shares that "at the same time, for many people the city is only an unattainable dream, and they are but shadows, disappearing reflections on shiny facades, or invisible silhouettes in the fabric of the city." In fact, in Dikidjieva's images the facades are not shiny at all, and the city is woven out of blue-grey nuances that spill into ochre-purple shades and accents of neapolitan yellow. Dikidjieva's mini-landscapes are built in this colorful – or perhaps *achromatic* – scheme, in which the hard geometry of skyscraper facades gradually falls apart, leaving their structures as an interconnected, monolithic mass that melts into the cosmic unity of water and ether...

The interest in antiquity, with its myths, architectures, and philosophies, frequently makes an appearance in Dikidjieva's graphic dreamscapes. Her pencil and colored pencil drawings of ancient classical sculptures, placed on the background of orderly fragments of temples, are another expression of the artist's non-standard creative philosophy. The Latin texts under the graphic triptych of themes from antiquity ("Know Thyself" - "Nothing in Excess" - "Surety Brings Ruins") lead to the conclusion of unknowableness in one's understanding of oneself – to the destruction that follows an unproved guarantee, to the nagging doubt that nothing can be added to that which has already been created – whether in life, in art, or in the immaterial energy of thought.

I'll leave these reflections without a traditional conclusion, as Vassilina Dikidjieva's "Metropolises" have no end, like they have no beginning. They are only the visible creative side of a rich artistic spirituality, one devoid of any loudness or excess. Poetic sensitivity and contemplation – Nihil Nimis.

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Translated from Bulgarian by Iana Dikidjieva

** Ventzislav Iliev is a Bulgarian architect and public figure. He is known for his original architectural projects and is a holder of the prestigious award of the City of Ruse for achievements in the field of architecture. He has a strong professional interest in the cultural heritage. In his articles, interviews and documentaries, he advocates for preservation and restoration of the historical monuments and*

buildings in the country and Ruse, where he lives and works.

** Vassilina Dikidjieva was born in Bulgaria. Throughout her career as a professional architect, she worked in Bulgaria, Ethiopia and New York. She was a winner in the Japan Architect Central Glass International Architectural Design Competition in 1981 and in the 31st Chelsea International Fine Art Competition in 2016. She was a resident artist in the Time and Space Printmaking Program at Guttenberg Arts, NJ in 2020. She currently lives and works in New Jersey, USA.*