

# Tribute to Nikos Kessanlis, a pioneer and great teacher of Greek art

By Margarita Pournara



Armed with a forceful nature and an intrepid spirit, Nikos Kessanlis was a pioneer who changed the course of art in Greece, both as an artist himself but also as rector of the Athens School of Fine Arts, influencing the generations that came after him. Now, 11 years after his death, the a.antonopoulou.art venue is preparing a special tribute to the artists, the first of which will be inaugurated on February 10.

Titled "The Walls of the City," the opening part of the exhibition shows how Kessanlis discovered the poetic quality of walls as a subtext for life itself. Building layers upon layers of materials to produce a form of

automatic writing and impulsive gestures, these were the works that signalled his new narrative, starting in the late 1950s.

The second part of the exhibition will be titled "Friends" and dedicated to the period in the artist's life described by French critic Pierre Restany as mec-art, an abbreviation of mechanical art that refers to a movement which emerged in the 1960s. In Kessanlis's work this expressed in images of shadows depicting his friends.

Modern viewers may ask themselves why we still bother with Kessanlis's work. The answer is that the pioneering character of his work made it not just timeless but also a necessary point of reference. He is admired, if for no other reason, for the fact that he never shied from exploring new ground.

As Giorgos Tzirzilakis wrote in the catalog of an exhibition he curated in 1997 at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Kessanlis challenged conformism, which in the post-World War II era, "reproduced the mythologies of the Thirties Generation and particularly the tired aestheticism of 'Greekness' and that mortal enemy of creativity, 'good taste.'"

Born in Thessaloniki in 1930, Kessanlis was influenced by the work of Yiannis Spyropoulos and studied at the Athens School of Fine Arts under, among other great teachers of that time, Yiannis Moralis and Umberto Argyros. His experience of living in Rome and Paris allowed him to take in international movements and trends and make them his own. Together with Vlassis Kaniaris and Daniil, he was one of the Greek artists who matured in the 1960s and whose work has left an indelible imprint on Greek art.

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**Nikos Kessanlis. City Walls**

**10 Feb–28 Mar 2015 at a.antonopoulou.art, Athens**



Nikos Kessanlis

Exhibition of works by Nikos Kessanlis as a tribute to the 10 +1 years since his death, under the title “City Walls”.

As a mark of honor to an artist who traced timely and opportune paths for contemporary art in our country by means of his work and his crafty personality, there comes this tribute to Nikos Kessanlis commemorating the 10+1 years since his death.

Kessanlis was a strong personality who encouraged artistic research, experimentation, collaboration, and the social dimension of art. An activist, an eccentric, a restless mind, an extremely creative being, an important artist, a tireless ambassador of the artistic creation in Greece and of the need for its ongoing dialogue with the international one, always in motion, communicatively skillful, an aggressive commentator, a cosmopolitan man, and, in general, an enfant terrible of the 1960s.

Intellectuals and historians have written thousands of pages on his work. I draw from the catalogue issued by the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997, quoting from the foreword by the curator, G. Tzirtzilakis:

(...) It is well known that, by cultivating an international language, Kessanlis opposed the figurative character of conformist painting, which, in the post war era, reproduced the mythologies of “the Generation of the 1930s”, especially the wearisome aestheticism of “Greekness” and the deadly enemy of every blend of creativity, the “good taste.” I recall here that the great adventure of the modern in our country began belatedly. Most of the undertakings between the wars were nothing but fumbings in the dark. Painting was still representing an ideal world, which distracted attention from the troublesome reality, that is,

from the wall itself and the everyday world existing behind it. It will then be needed that the generation of the 1960s arrives, so that Greek art starts being dispensed from dullness, picturesqueness, and didacticism of ethnography, and opens itself up to an explosive reality existing around us. (...)

Just for this aspect of his work only, which broke the impasses of "Greekness" in which the domestic contemporary art had been ensnared, and, in short, resolved our picturesqueness, we owe him a great deal.

The tribute to his work will take place in two parts with two exhibitions. The first one opens on Tuesday, February the 10th, 2015, under the title "City Walls".

Here, handling matter is stronger, direct and pervasive. Fascinated by the suggestibility of walls as a substrate of life and the breath of the city, Kessanlis comes with violent gestures to detect the new metropolitan condition, which lends an unexpected character to the extensive urban surfaces.

It is a condition that, in our days of acute economic, social, and environmental crisis, takes on an emphatic character. In those works, the artist not only represents the multilayer and amorphous reality of the megalopolis, but converses with and, in a way, participates in it by multiplying the feelings and the possibilities of critical reception. Today, in those gestures by Kessanlis, we distinguish an experiential and precursor character, no less than a dialogue with the variations of artistic abstraction in the late 1950s, a time when the traces of the vast spread of megacities and of the "modern lifestyles" begin to become visible.

The second exhibition is scheduled to follow shortly after, and will be called "Friends". It is dedicated to the cycle of works by the artist that the French art critic Pierre Restany has called "mec art"; in essence, it is about the phantasmagorias of identity, shadows and immortalizing captures of the artist's friends.