

# YANNIS MANIATAKOS PAINTS UNDERWATER

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The artist's *Four Paintings* at Sylvia Kouvali, London reverberate with a potent mixture of freedom and deep unease.

Yannis Maniatakos (1935–2017), a sculptor, painter and educator who lived and worked on the marble quarry-laden Cycladic island of Tinos, had a benign addiction: whenever possible, he had to be in the sea. As recounted in the 2012 film *Underwater Painting* (not on show), which documents his self-concocted method of painting underwater, after spending several days out of water he would develop what his spouse called a 'landlock[ed]' look in his eyes. All of this was, in turn, integral to his painting. The four blurry blue landscapes in this show, dated between 1972 and 2007, were painted entirely underwater, Maniatakos studying the seabed for several hours at a time, entering his vast, quiet, benthic studio with the aid of a dinghy and air from rubber tubes, working over multiple dives, with all the processual purism and desire for direct experience of a turn-of-the-century plein-air painter. His canvases, fixed to lead weights so they'd float upright, were prepared with a hydrophobic oil-based primer (oil sticks to oil, water to water) so that his pigments adhered by pressure and occlusion: a process visible in the paintings' slathery, spatula-laid impasto, which is nevertheless so flat as to look almost burnished, shimmering here and there.

When you're many metres down, the volume of water is not only an excellent insulant of sound but of all wave frequencies, like visible light and colour. Speaking as someone who paints and dives (albeit not simultaneously), I know that hues change in deep water, since the water soaks up the red and yellow wavelengths of sunlight – red parrot fish can appear brown – yet your perception can retune colours to compensate, and I'm guessing this is what happened to Maniatakos. These paintings' abundant blues, and the intricate differences between them, must have been ever so subtly unlearned, corrected and relearned, dive by dive, as his colour perception was bent by the water's absorption of radiation.

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

What Maniatakos was painting, meanwhile, isn't outwardly dramatic or rich in features. These aren't coralled crevices or dizzying depths but, rather, simple flat and fairly featureless shelves of sediment, at times framed by dark formless rocks and punctuated by patches of seaweed: the equivalent of an impressionist portraying a plain field, exotic yet quotidian, an emptyish aquatic stage set. Yet these works also reverberate with a potent mixture of freedom and deep unease, and Maniatakos says as much in the voiceover to his film: "The fear which is present in every seabed... is a powerful feeling that draws me in like a magnet."

This mix of feelings is arguably that of being immersed in an element that may let you fly and glide but can also, as when the landscape suddenly slopes down to where light doesn't go, overwhelm and remind you how powerless, weak and easily extinguished you are. (In the ancient seafaring Greek cultures that Maniatakos referenced heavily in his sculptural work, beneath the ocean was the underworld of Hades, god of the dead.) The tonal gradient of these paintings, from the blissful turquoise shallows of *Untitled* (2007) to a blue-black abyss and that ultramarine zone of permanence that sits in the middle of *The deepest seabed, Hydra* (1972) suggests that this boundary may be a place of wonder but also of tomblike grief.

As such, Maniatakos's canvases, made in a place where you're only ever a fleeting guest, suggest portals and moments of reckoning; beauty, ecstatic immersive joy, alongside trepidation and the itch of wanting to know what is past your limits. They're paintings of the seabed but they also scale up existentially: a play of contrasts, constituting the prism through which we experience the immense privilege of being alive.

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