

GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Jannis Kounellis, Beauty in burlap sack," *Financial Times*, December 7, 2012



DECEMBER 7, 2012

Jannis Kounellis

Beauty in a burlap sack

Jannis Kounellis uses 'arte povera' materials – coal, coffee grains, cardboard – to find poetry in the everyday. Jackie Wullschlager visits his London show



Untitled', 1995, by Jannis Kounellis

Jannis Kounellis says he is a Greek man and an Italian artist. The reticently beautiful show at London's Parasol Unit argues that he is a European painter, and one whose original way of advocating "the return of poetry with all available means", gives him global significance. Placing Kounellis's *arte povera* work from the 1960s in dialogue with recent and new pieces, some made spontaneously in situ so the gallery becomes a sort of studio, this exhibition is a condensed retrospective of museum stature.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

An opening display of key early loans, including the Centre Pompidou's shimmering rectangular steel plate hung with a braid of hair, and another untitled, austere graceful linear piece in which eight iron weighing scales, each loaded with a mound of coffee, are suspended like a mobile, establishes the balance between structure and sensibility coursing through Kounellis's oeuvre for the next half century. Throughout, classical balance, oppositions between strength and lyricism, hardness and softness, earthy materials and grand design, all play their part in this poetry of the everyday.

So does human scale. The steel plate is one metre by 70 centimetres – the size of a type of paper made in Fabriano, an Italian paper-making city since the 13th century. Two further early works – burlap sacks roughly sewn together and held in an iron frame, a homage to Alberto Burri, and "Carboniera", a square iron container filled with coal – reference the proportions of a double bed.

Those dimensions recur. Jutting out along the length of the lower gallery is "Catrame" (2007): ramshackle chairs and tables studded as violent diagonal appendages on to a line of bed-size black canvases and iron bases, hung upright, allude to Malevich's black square, to the Russian artist's radical dynamic of suprematist forms, to questions of the endgame of modern painting. Upstairs, in a series of 2008 works that by turns glisten and seem to dissolve in the sunlight, pools of lead, melted in sand to achieve randomly biomorphic shapes, then wired on to square iron grounds, call to mind both Richard Serra and Joan Miró: heavy metal transformed into fantastical lightness of being.

Such wall-mounted three-dimensional pieces seem to me to talk the language of painting rather than sculpture. So does a massive, poignantly flopping black cross created from several navy coats tied together with wire and screws, hung against a wall. Each coat is a human measure, a stand-in for a human presence. A new floor-piece memorial to the Italian film-maker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, murdered in 1975 by being run over by his own car, has a single coat lying crumpled – squashed? – on a flat piece of steel, double-bed size, intersected with two metal beams to form a cross. One thinks of Carl Andre and American minimalism but this is a very European image – melancholy yet defiant, drenched in historical resonances to Christianity and revolution, reaching back through Malevich's black cross to the absurdist overcoat of Gogol's short story.



Untitled' 2012 (coats, wire, screws), by Jannis Kounellis

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Russian allusions have always haunted Kounellis; as a Greek, he looked east as well as west. He was born in 1936 in Piraeus, an ancient Greek harbour city that is now Europe's largest port. Both the order and restraint of the classical world and a democratic inclusiveness infuse his work. He left Greece in the 1950s to escape civil war and repression. Married at 17, he settled in Rome at 20, made his name in the 1960s with certain provocations – notably installing 12 live horses in Rome's Galleria l'Attico, thus challenging the commercial function of a gallery – and became a leading arte povera figure.

His raw paintings from 1958 and on, in which letters and numbers ("Tabacchi", "5629", "SE V") are written in black oil on wood or cardboard, in a stencilled manner, are here – installed on shelves placed against a black square painted directly on the gallery wall. Jasper Johns was also painting numbers and letters at that time, but in an expressionist style. Kounellis's make no allusion to depth; he rejected expressionism and art informel in favour of the immediate communicative value of poor materials.

His 1960s installations of burlap bags filled with household grains – coffee, lentils, white beans, green peas – became iconic. Inspired by childhood memories of goods being loaded and unloaded at the port, they are simple, elegant, attractively tactile, evoking the bustle of trade, displacement, ideas about how economic and cultural conditions determine our lives. Today, they also look nostalgic: in a media age distanced from such basic physical properties, Kounellis's sacks resemble exotic treasure.

Curated by Parasol's superb director, Iran-born Ziba Ardalan, this show emphasises strands in Kounellis's work connected with journeys, exile, transformation, regeneration. I loved the energy of a strange untitled work from 1977 where an electric toy train zooms around a spiral of iron looping up a white pillar. And "Metamorphosis" (1984, but recreated differently at each installation) has just one constant – a minimalist arrangement of iron shelves attached to a wall at a certain distance from each other.

Above these, fire has been transmuted into soot, with a variety of feathery black marks created on the wall by rubbing cloth burnt in heavy oil. Between these elements Kounellis places other objects according to the setting – here he draws out the light and transparency of Parasol's garden gallery with items of old glassware assembled impromptu from local second-hand shops. The result is baroque, Venetian in tone, full of theatrical flair and optimism.

Too much contemporary work hides under the excuse of "process-based" art. Kounellis is the real deal: every piece is deeply considered, formally rigorous, its outcome determined by the will to construct an image. This is a perfect-pitch, revelatory show.

At Mima, Middlesbrough, Kounellis is the subject of one of the most impressive Artist Rooms touring displays, opening on December 14. His use of coal and iron will resonate in this former Teesside coal port, whose Victorian nickname was "Ironopolis". The selection includes a steel bedstead suspended against a yellow painted backdrop, a framed sack of coal, and an arrangement of bells, silent but tilted as if about to chime, fixed to wooden beams.

Louder, when "activated", is a 1971 oil painting reproducing on monochrome green part of the score from Bach's "St John Passion". This is painting as performance when a cellist plays alongside it, or it evokes absence and emptiness when (as mostly happens) there is no performance: a marvellously anarchic vision of what art can be.

'Jannis Kounellis', Parasol Unit, London, to February 17, www.parasol-unit.org; Jannis Kounellis, Mima, Middlesbrough, December 14-March 10, www.visitmima.com