

## **Kalliopi Lemos in conversation with Ioanna Blatsou**

**I.B. Your two new sculptures that are currently on display in two of the most central areas in London belong to the "Tools of Endearment" series. How did you get inspired to create "The Plait" and the "Bag of Aspirations"?**

K.L. Since 2006 my practice has focused on the subject of human rights. I expanded this study in 2011 to include the lack of respect accorded to women and their position in today's society. Then in 2013, coinciding with the 13th Istanbul Biennial, I had a solo exhibition entitled "I Am I, Between Worlds and Between Shadows" that took place at the Ioakimion High School for Girls in Istanbul, a Greek educational institution that ceased to operate in 1988. The body of work presented in this exhibition examined issues of identity and the unequal treatment of women, including their oppression, injury to their dignity and abuse both in physical and psychological terms.

Following this exhibition in 2014, I began working on my film "At the Center of the World", which talks about the various roles a woman must undertake in her lifetime. Coping with the complex structures of both family and society, women are often trapped in the realm of obligations and oppression.

Beginning in 2016, "Tools of Endearment" was the next evolution in my study of women's rights. This ongoing series continues to the present with six large-scale sculptures, the latest additions being the "Bag of Aspirations" (2018) and "The Plait" (2020). Currently located on Bond St, London's hub of high fashion, "Bag of Aspirations" takes on an additional and significant meaning, representing the ammunition of the contemporary woman: not just of hopes, dreams and expectations but also one of demands, progress and achievements.

"The Plait", which was first publicly presented this year as part of the Frieze Sculpture Park in London's Regent's Park, manifests the effort of every woman to stand boldly in front of the world, defending her values and self-esteem. Standing upright at a height of 6.5 meters, the sculpted braid, opposing the natural condition of hair, resembles the effort of women to stand up for themselves with courage and confidence, making a strong statement about the power of the feminine psyche.

**I.B. What symbolises each work for you?**

K.L. "Bag of Aspirations" is bright and glamorous, and is in keeping with the latest fashion trends of colour and design. In contrast, "The Plait" is dark, forceful, extremely tall and bears a certain sense of stillness. These two works, both part of the "Tools of Endearment" series, highlight the different aspects of the psyche of a woman, illustrating the way in which she faces society and identifies her place in it.

**I.B. You chose for both of your works a very hard and resistant material: steel. The choice of your primal material is definitely not accidental.**

K.L. Drawing inspiration in its form from a well-known fashion brand, "Bag of Aspirations" is made out of steel and has been worked in such a way that its surface looks uniquely like ostrich skin. I chose steel because it is a very resistant material that stands in perfect contrast with its appearance. From afar it gives the viewer the impression that it is a soft, leathery sculpture, but upon closer examination the viewer is confronted with the rigidity of steel. This contradictory quality is in itself a property that I am interested in illustrating through my work. That is to say, when we talk about the power of the contemporary woman, stereotypical appearances can be very different from her reality.

The same principle of materiality applies with "The Plait". The surface has been treated in such a way as to give the impression that the sculpture consists of glossy, freshly washed and combed hair. However, upon touching this work it reveals itself to be made of a rigid, strong material, that of steel.

**I.B. The works on display at Frieze Sculpture Park, like "The Plait", were completed during quarantine or right after. How did this unprecedented, dystopian condition affect you as an artist and as a human being?**

K.L. I had already been working on "The Plait" when I was informed that it would be presented last June as part of Frieze Sculpture Park. However, due to these extraordinary conditions, the exhibition was postponed until the autumn and then again until the spring. There was no further announcement that the Sculpture Park would be going ahead for this October, but as you know, things were—and still are—very fluid. The realisation came suddenly in early September, which was not a problem, as the work was nearly ready for display since summer.

I think we were all completely unprepared for the challenging conditions of confinement and uncertainty. Our mortal nature proves that no one can be sure of what tomorrow will bring. However, we take certain things for granted, much like the sunrise and sunset as they succeed one another day in day out. During this period, we learned that nothing is a given, as we can get sick and everything can be overturned at any time. These challenges push us into an introspection, so that we can look for a new ground on which we can exist. Overcoming the initial shock of the confinement which made everyone feel utterly limited, it did not take me too long to regain my balance in these new conditions as an artist. I dedicated myself to my personal space, that of my studio and my home. There, new ideas, thoughts and reflections slowly began to take shape. I am interested in this phase to discover, what are the common elements that we all share within our different religions, cultures and languages. How do we all express our anxiety and insecurity about these prevailing conditions? What is our need for protection, for certainty, for communication and for the existence of other people both surrounding us and within our lives?

**I.B. How did you spend the days of the confinement? What thoughts or actions helped you?**

K.L. I am used to looking after plants and trees and be close to nature in general, and this helped me a lot throughout confinement. Inside I felt that something had gone wrong, and I instinctively wanted to cure it. As if Mother Nature was punishing us for our long mistreatment of her. I wanted to dedicate my time to my garden. There, I found consolation and a way to heal. As it was spring when the pandemic broke out, forcing us to limit life as we knew it, I discovered the joy of the continual observation of plants. Each one I cared for grew and opened its flowers towards the sun, something that gave me hope, joy and courage for the future.

**I.B. In interviews, journalists usually ask the interviewees about their future plans. How easy or difficult is it for you to make future plans under the current aggravating epidemiological situation in Great Britain and in London where you live?**

K.L. One lesson we all learned from the pandemic is that we cannot make fixed plans, as they may change again and again. Therefore, living in this new normality, we experience work and everyday life as if it was a new gift.

**I.B. There have been many critical articles about the way British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has handled the COVID-19 crisis. What is your opinion?**

K.L. It is very difficult for me to judge a government or an entire system. There are many divided opinions on how the UK has dealt with this health crisis. We are all confused about which regulations to follow, as they are never clear, which intensifies the everyday feeling of insecurity and anxiety. In this country, unfortunately, we do not yet have the ability to conduct effective governmental tests for the coronavirus. There are different proposals and opinions on how one should deal with this situation, but we haven't yet found a common ground. There is a dangerous increase of COVID-19 cases these days, and we all fear that many more lives will be lost just like last spring.

**I.B. Recently we have seen the usually very disciplined British people protest against the regulations taken to tackle corona virus, as well as not following the measures for social distancing in pubs and other public places. How has life changed in the UK since the pandemic outbreak?**

K.L. The public behave in this way because of the unclear instructions we receive from the state. There is turmoil, a sense of insecurity and a lack of trust in daily announcements.

**I.B. What was the financial, social and creative impact of the closedown on artists in UK?**

K.L. The lockdown resulted in a mass turn to intangible, digital communication, using software like Zoom and social media, as a reaction to and denial of such isolation. Artists in UK, as well as all over the world, have tried to tackle exclusion by presenting their work and communicating their practice through these digital platforms. However, in the months that followed, it became clear that real contact with humans and art objects could not be replaced by a virtual reality. In any case, these

media outlets helped tremendously, otherwise we would all be completely silent and isolated.

**I.B. Has the government supported artists during this difficult period?**

K.L. Some art institutions, like museums and organisations, have been financially supported in part by the government, but artists suffer and face issues of survival and sustainability.

**I.B. The World Health Organization reports that the West is currently going through the second wave of Covid-19. What is the current situation in UK and especially in London?**

K.L. London is currently in the second, rapidly increasing wave of the pandemic. It has now entered the Tier 2 stage of confinement where it is forbidden for even members of the same family to gather indoors.

**I.B. What are you afraid of and what gives you hope during this difficult time?**

K.L. What scares me the most is the uncertainty of tomorrow and the fact that this pandemic made us all face important existential problems, hiding inside us. In these difficult times, we look for courage from The Higher Power that governs everything. The fact that I have already faced this challenge in spring 2020 gives me hope that I will succeed again.