

Norbert Lynton, July 2007
An Epic Art for Our Times

All history is contemporary history (Benedetto Croce)

The art of Kalliopi Lemos is, as all significant art is, metaphorical. Its visual attractions may distract us from its all-important roots in the realities of the world. Her art is always inventive and thus surprising, and produced with skill and evident efficiency using ever-differing means and processes, and, when presented with her usual élan, strikingly beautiful. She gives us so much to enjoy. But this beauty should not persuade us to stay at its superficial level; it is an invitation to look and think more deeply, engage our minds more fully. The museums have taught us to receive art as a conveyer of beauty and styles, without encouraging us to connect with it at a more human level; inside museums and outside too, art is often conveyed to us as part of the entertainment industry. Lemos's art calls for better attention and for an awareness not detached from life. It is profoundly, seriously metaphorical, embodying meanings and references that are at once poetic and of pressing importance to us all as part of humanity.

This was already apparent in the first finished sculpture of hers I saw in her London studio, probably in 2003. We called it *The Big Egg*, for short. It is about two metres high, a rounded form made of soaring rings of bundled reeds, tied together at a few crucial points. This form is the support, the source and the magnet of a swarm of flying phalluses, cast in plaster. They put me in mind of cherubs fluttering about in the skies of baroque paintings, but these bird-like presences are neither decorative nor merely amusing; perhaps they are desperate. The Anglo-Saxon world is not at ease, even today, with seeing sexual organs in open display; classical Greece (to which we still look as the essential source of our civilization, but wear blinkers when we do so) did not feel the need to veil the organs of sex any more than the joys and pains we associate with sexual activity, but replicated the erect penis as monuments and as charms, as concentrated images of life.

A much larger version of this sculpture, *The Big Egg and the Free Roaming Phalluses*, rising to five metres and made of steel rods and beset by phalluses cast in bronze and painted turquoise was an exhibit in 'Rites of Passage', her solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of the Cyclades, at Hermoupolis on the island of Syros, in June 2006. Because of its size and energy, and perhaps because I knew the piece already, it dominated the exhibition for me; it was the biggest exhibit and it had a very potent presence in the noble spaces of the gallery and under well-placed artificial lights (in Lemos's studio and in daylight the slightly smaller, hand-made version was less awesome). But the other spaces there were occupied by sculpture that appeared to be in different vein, and these took more and more of my attention and loom large too in my recollection of the exhibition.

At base, I now realize, everything she does these days conveys the same underlying messages. In her Syros exhibition, a flotilla of long boat-like pods, made of reeds and white cloth and bursting open to release the seven smooth white plaster seeds that had been swelling inside them, floated a little above the ground which was partly moulded with sand from the beach. *Beanboat* is the name she gives them. Nearby, on the ground, were her *Principal Eggs*: white plaster again but less smooth, more like balls of dough worked to make bread. Each of these is set into, and growing out of, neatly tailored calices of dark grey felt. What were we looking at? The close conjunction of felt and plaster, and of plaster, reeds and fine white cloth, the rounded forms of the *Principal Eggs* and the long, pointed forms of the *Beanboats* were enough to engage our attention. There were several other sculptures and sculptural groups, including some deeply affecting white plaster forms nestling into each other, and other stretched, compacted ones that seemed to flow like water, and a totemic phallus in timber, bearing plaster seeds, but I do not want to overload this account.

Her range of materials is significant, and so is the way she shapes and combines them. Like every good artist, Lemos is deeply involved in her media. That has always been so whether she was working in two dimensions or three.

Important though this is, and beguiling for the spectator, her means are not her ends. At the same time, the two elements are interdependent. She finds materials that will enable her to pursue and realize an idea, but the idea is modulated – often enriched – by the demands and the opportunities the materials bring with them. Take the *Beanboats*. Such long reeds are not always easy to obtain. She cut some herself, then learnt about a possible supplier. Bunches of reeds can be tied to make a slim boat, as indeed they have been through centuries, for real journeys along rivers and across the seas, but often also for ritual use, notably for many an individual's last journey on this earth. Reed boats function better if the reeds are held together by an added integument; their forms are more permanent, their movement straighter. Lemos covers them in white cloth; the ancient Egyptians shrouded their dead in white cloth and the Indians do so to this day. So her boats speak of life and death, seeds to grow and become humans; the journey we call life; the later journey that transports us into another realm. The opening pods are wombs, and we return to the world of wombs when we die, in the shroud, in the coffin, in the earth or in the waters. At the same time, the aesthetic character of the reed boats is enhanced, and lifts them onto another plane of visual encounter, a reality which touches on our dreams. Reeds and cotton are nature's products. One is garnered more or less as found and then shaped in the studio. The other, after a more refined process, accompanies us in many forms throughout our lives. Brought together, the shaped, bound reeds and the sown linen envelope acquire nobility and elegance. The plaster forms swelling inside them are a little more remote from the sand, lime and water from which the material is composed, but, again, plaster is commonplace in our lives though few of us handle it creatively. Lemos's handling of it respects its nature but also serves her purposes. Malleable when still moist, it will take and hold the form she gives it. On occasion her plaster forms can be cast in metal just as her bundled reeds can be recreated in bundled and bound steel rods, but until she made the second *The Big Egg* this extension of her means and methods, though always available to her, had not been prominent in her work.

Crossing, the installation she showed in Eleusis last year, is technically a milestone in her development, and deepens, and to a degree focuses, the concerns she wishes to share with us. Every artist's work seeks a public and Lemos's has certainly done so. Now it compels public attention, stimulates public awareness. *Crossing* did so by means of scale and together with a dramatic change in her means. It was over ten metres high; the central construction and the surrounding wall or frieze, occupied a roughly circular area 150 metres in diameter. The tall construction at the centre consisted of seven boats she had collected from the shores of Chios: boats used by hundreds of illegal immigrants from Turkey and further east – in order to reach Greek shores. They experienced grave hardship even before they entered these old, crowded vessels, apart from the pain of abandoning their homes. They crossed the sea by night, many of them in a poor physical state themselves. If their unseaworthy boats delivered them safely, they knew they had to make the boats wholly unfit for use lest they be sent back in them, and so broke open their hulls and damaged their keels. The wrecks Lemos found in many cases still displayed their names and gave some hint of the colours they had been painted.

The work of shipwrights is precious. Ancient or modern, it embraces human history in many significant ways and is the basis of many immortal images and stories from those of the crazy boat in which miserly Charon ferries us to Tartarus, and Odysseus's ten-year journey home from Troy, into the arms of faithful Penelope, to the Ark by which old Noah was allowed to save his family and many animals from the great biblical Flood, and on to the *Mayflower* in the seventeenth century. Athenian naval forces triumphed over the Persians' in the fifth century BC - but let us leave aside the great historical sea battles, victories for some, defeat for others, much death and suffering on both sides. It must be excruciating to wreck the boat that has, through whatever difficulties, carried you to possible safety, lest it should be made to take you back. There is something wonderful about Kalliopi Lemos resurrecting such boats and enrolling them as the key elements of her new work.

She had not previously used found objects. She felt she had to do so in these cases: why re-present, why deliver in effigy, what is available in reality and speaks volumes? Her criterion was of course the opposite of Duchamp's when he chose his readymades: not indifference but passionate engagement. She could make her reed boats and load them with meaning, but here were boats that had lived and been left to die, pregnant with their individual histories.

'Unwelcoming wombs full of pain and drama', she has described them as. Real presences, not actors, they stand also for the many other boats that never reached dry land. Lemos's own forebears had had to uproot themselves and seek new homes. At the centre of *Crossing*, these boats stand magnificently, proudly, in spite of their gaping wounds. That their pointed forms suggest Gothic cathedrals adds to their resonance. Lemos has anointed them with beeswax to bless and to heal them, a devotional act; beeswax also coated the anonymous standing figures that she painted on the surrounding enclosure she had set up.

One need hardly point to the work's meaning and messages. History is full of migrations; today migration is a daily media topic. The movement of individuals and whole cohorts of people of this or that origin, all travelling in hope but often also in fear for their lives, is a multiple thread through time. (I write in the United Kingdom, with its mix of peoples accumulated over the centuries, myself an immigrant many decades ago.) We are told there will be more as climate change and global economics make some places unfit for life while others become more attractive, and the media implication is that we should worry about this prospect and guard against it. In fact, we half welcome those who come, half resent and fear them, depending on our selfish needs of manpower and skills, and on our willingness, or lack of it, to cope with different cultures, languages, colours. Perhaps it was always like that. Welcomes were never wholehearted, even for those who sailed beneath the promises made by the Statue of Liberty before submitting themselves to harsh immigration procedures. All that is given a new, almost biblical dimension by our present fears for the survival of nature whom we thought to have made our servant, in addition to our anxiety about 'terrorists'.

Showing her work in Eleusis, Lemos aptly linked it to the ancient Mysteries of Demeter, the Greek corn-goddess or, according to some, earth-mother, associated both with the fruits of the earth and with the underworld, and of her daughter Persephone, who was carried off by Hades, lord of the underworld, and forced to become his wife. Demeter wandered the world, seeking her daughter, and came to Eleusis disguised as an old woman. In time, she revealed herself and her powers to the Eleusinians. Zeus, the lover of Demeter and, some say, of Persephone, and thus the probable father of Dionysus (who is credited with at least two mothers), permitted Persephone to return to her mother's world as long as she spent part of each year with Hades. Thus Demeter was persuaded to re-establish the annual cycle of the birth, growth and death of life-giving corn. The Eleusinian built her a temple and developed the Mysteries, which celebrate the return of Persephone in the spring and especially in the early autumn, when the earth grows green again after the long, dry summer and the corn begins to show above the soil.

Thus Lemos links migration to the seasonal cycle or circle, placing her tower of boats at the centre of an endless human ring. They are generalized beings, mostly unnamed (those who arrived are listed in ledgers; those who failed to arrive are name- and numberless), ungendered, unaged, and so timeless witnesses to events without dates. We cannot tell, if we regard *Crossing* as a kind of cemetery, whether they are the deceased, watched over by the monumental boats, or whether they are there to honour the boats that once lived on and for the water. In anointing them with beeswax, Lemos promises them life. She forces us to receive these metaphorical images as present and the future facts, not merely remnants of a regrettable past. She would have us remember them but also to see them as part of all time. Cemeteries serve to give roots to the descendants of those whose passing is marked in them. Migrants have had to cut themselves free of all roots to make their journeys in dread and hope, many of them from distant lands, some seeing a sea for the first time. At its closest point, Greece is merely three and a half miles from the Turkish coast, but

even this requires a hazardous journey in those simple, unequipped boats, especially in the dark of night. Lemos wants to honour the survivors and to help us see them as a fragment of universal history. Therefore the boats too must stand upright. Her installation bridges the modern Eleusis, and modern world problems, with the ancient past and with archetypal myths. We tend to treat these as pleasing fictions which we sweeten with nostalgia, but nostalgia is entirely not what her work is about.

The work she is now building to show at Istanbul's new Bilgi University is titled *Round Voyage*: In it, she takes boats back to Turkey that crossed from Turkey to Greece. Just two of them, hanging below a steel arch or bridge. The boats point this way and that, coming and going. The arc of the bridge does more than support them. Its seven linked units are part-painted with the seven colours of the rainbow, the ageless symbol of hope and regeneration that smiled over Noah's ark on Mount Ararat. If *Crossing* spoke more of suffering and loss, *Round Voyage* delivers, in remarkably simple and direct terms, a promise of positive action that we should attend to.

The two boats under the semicircle of the arch are yin and yang, the feminine principle and the masculine in dynamic balance. They speak of continuity in situations driven by contradiction: antithesis is not to be avoided. The two boats, found but strengthened internally to serve here, floating weightlessly, are spiritual presences more than material facts. The rainbow arch too has to be strong, but the seven steel units of which it is constructed echo the steel of the adjacent museum built by the University. It is three metres wide and seven metres high, and thus fourteen metres in diameter, Each boat is seven metres long. Lemos values the symbolism of numbers: in using them she attaches her work to all humanity's constructive thought and actions. Seven symbolizes nature's complete cycle. It unites the ternary (spirit) with the quaternary (matter), the triangle with the square. We have long counted seven colours in the rainbow and seven planetary spheres, and western music used to be built from seven-note series. The symbolism borne by water is diverse and almost infinite across space

and time, but all cultures see water as the source of life and, as it circulates through evaporation and rainfall, its renewal. Through water we are refreshed and reborn (baptism, Venus). Water is transparent and limitless, it is wise, with intuitive wisdom some would say, associating it with the unconscious, personal and collective. Water is also air and clouds, and so Lemos's floating boats are not removed from their habitat, but offered to us as a sign, itself transparent in an environment made for thought and learning. Grey and off-white pebbles will demarcate the site of this sculpture. Lemos's linking theme is always the voyage we call life, the personal adventure which is also our personal fate, and its involvement with the whole of humanity and nature. A sixteenth-century edition of Herodotus pictures the major symbols associated with the primordial waters: ship, woman, bees.

...All art is contemporary, or it is not art.