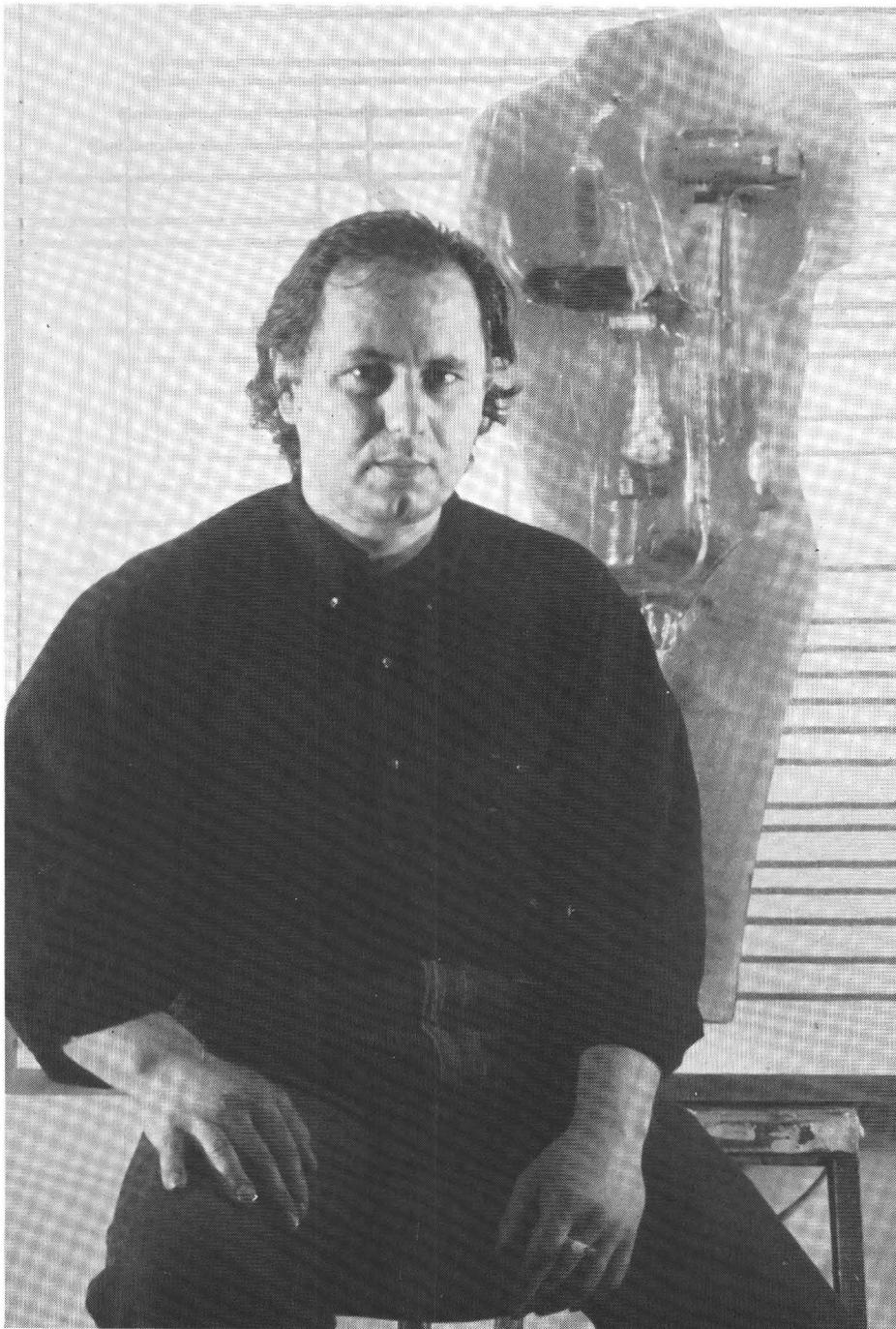


THE "MACHINE IMAGES" OF BABIS VEKRIS

A Reflection of Our Times

By Olga Victoria Karras

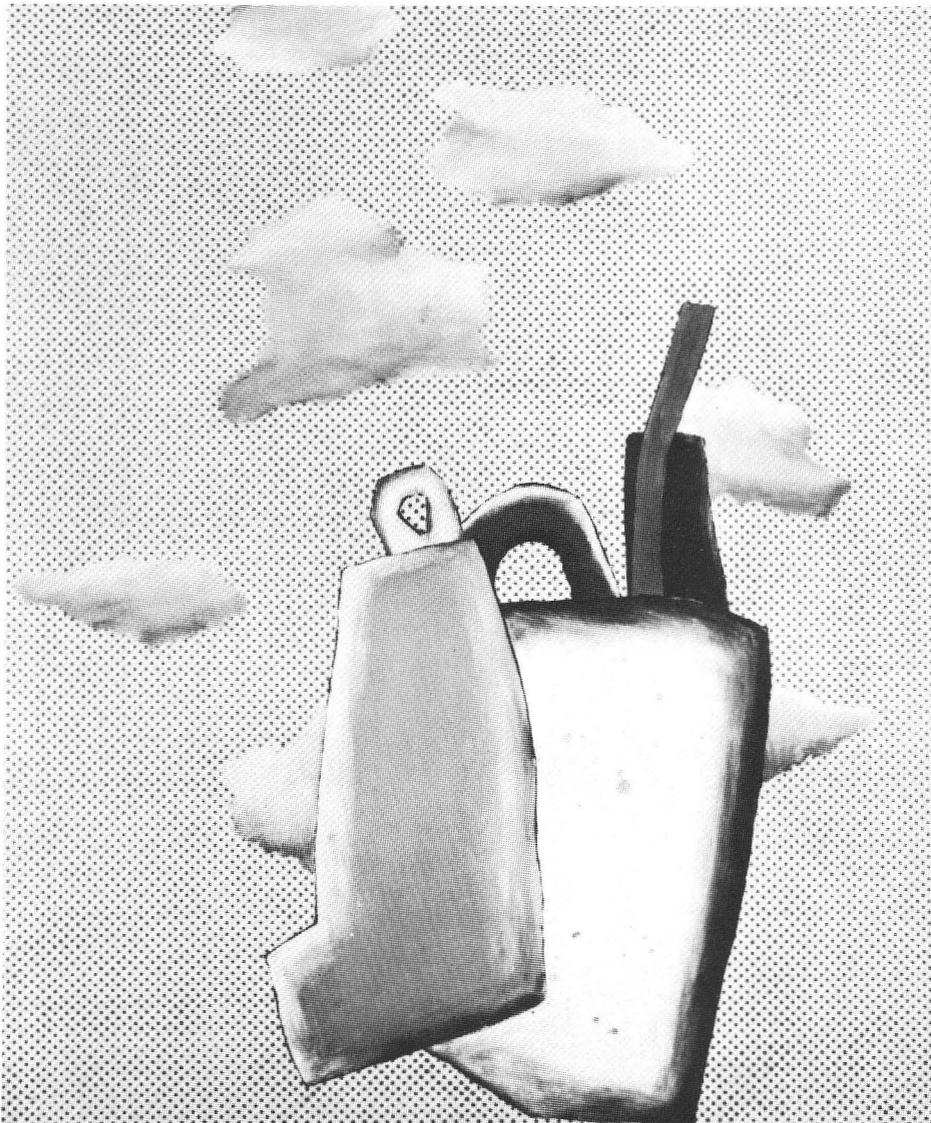


The artist in front of his work "The Toxic-Ated Man".

"I am an artist of forms. More and more I find that my work strives to go beyond the representational and seeks to objectify the concept of the unreal-meaning that although the object is real, the reality is manufactured. I create fine art utilizing untraditional techniques, a combination of both the human and industrial touch. I want to reinterpret aesthetic and emotional principles and make new work that stretches to new extremes the definition of beauty. What I imagine then is a machine image, much quieter, less busy, much more seductive and aesthetically pleasing to the eye than hard-edged machinery."

Babis Vekris

Step into the work studio of artist Babis Vekris and you sense straight away an atmosphere charged with anticipation. Your eyes immediately dart across the cavernous room, bouncing off walls and floors as you take in its provocative as well as unlikely contents, from the large, highly organized construction mounted on the walls to the floor littered with a junkyard heap of nuts and bolts and disemboweled typewriters, assorted plastic, glass, and metal shapes, carefully boxed computer chips and circuitry, as well as hammers and screwdrivers and more elaborate tools of the electrician and mechanic trades. It doesn't take long to realize that this artist's studio is unlike most others. Babis Vekris put away his oils and acrylics, his brushes and palette knives and stretched canvases some time ago because he felt that these traditional materials of the painter's craft no longer served his expression of art. The material content of his recent artwork, on the contrary, directly connects with



Dreams, Dreads and Desires, 1989, enamel on canvas.

the subject of his work, today's thoroughly technological world.

Just as you've grown accustomed to the studio and begin to examine more carefully the works on display, your host moves around the room plugging into the wall circuits the electrical wires dangling from each piece. The anticipation that something is about to happen is over. Little beeping sounds and the rhythmic motion of colorful, flickering lights awaken you to the fact that there is much more here than that which initially meets the eye. These multimedia "machine images" communicate to you now on more direct, even human levels, teasing, provoking, daring you to take a good long look at what man has wrought, both industrialized man and his mega-technological advances and creative man and his interpretation of Life and Art.

The works on display are part of "The Digital Series", a body of work that Vekris developed over the course of the last two years. He is fond of the series

format because it affords him the opportunity to grow gradually while experimenting until he has exhausted the possibilities within the scope of the series. The Digital Series represents years of exploring man's love/hate relationship with technology. Even as a student, in Greece, working in classic materials, the subject of his work was invariably linked to technology. He was always experimenting, with lighting, movement, and materials, with collages and construction, and with elements of surrealism. An enthusiastic admirer of the works of the Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), who was born in Athens of Italian parents, Babis Vekris explores in his way the realm of mystery. To one degree or another, sometimes directly and sometimes quite indirectly, his works pay homage to the Surrealists' concern with the realistic representation of fantastic subjects.

"The central image of the works in the The Digital Series," as the artist himself explains,

"is a classical torso made out of clear polyester resin set in relief and positioned over a labyrinthine background of digital components — an intricate network of real microchip circuitry, transistors, transformers, and equalizers, and tiny colored lights flickering in sequence. Among the circuitry boards, I have arranged a system of small laboratory parts — plastic tubing, vials, beakers, bubble chambers — which I have invariably filled with mineral chips, bits of broken glass, silicon powder, liquid tar, nuts and bolts, and colored beads, and a green liquid

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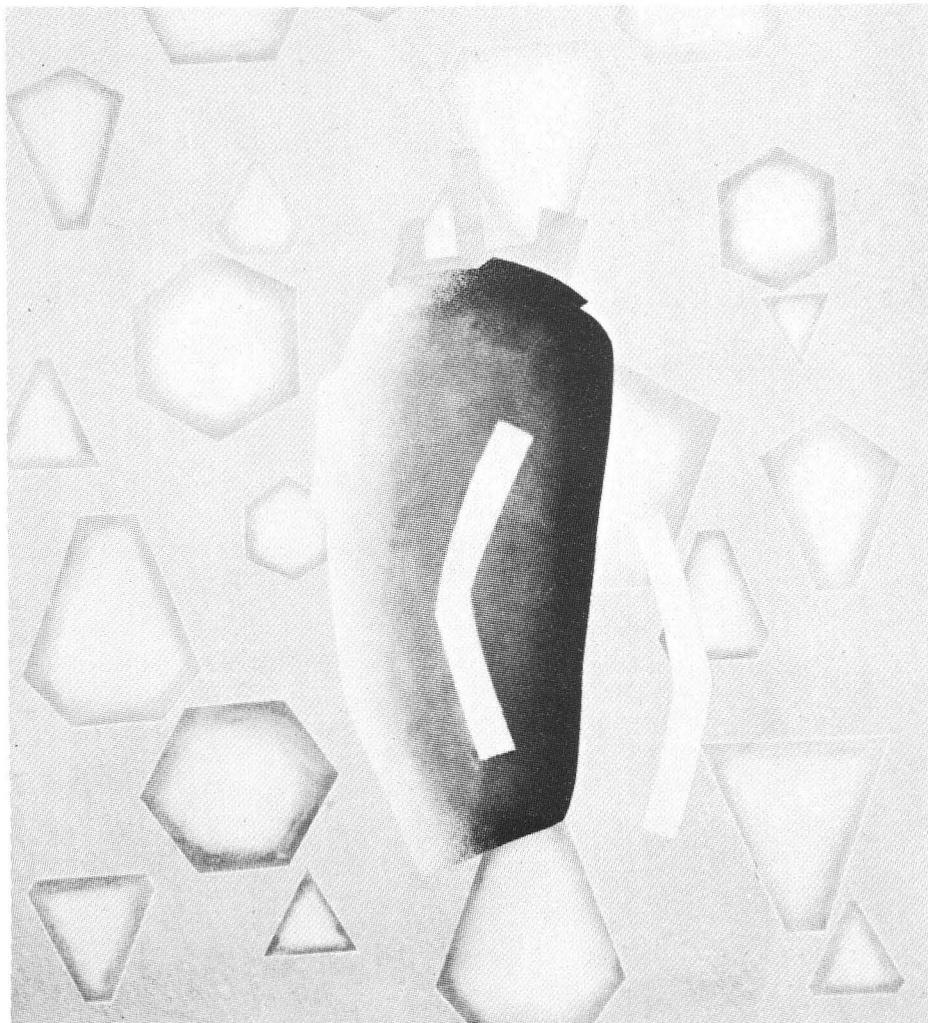
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made luminous by a soft neon light that suffuses the torso."

Just before The Digital Series, which he began in 1989, he completed the "Silicon Season" (a series of canvases using a medium composed of pigment mixed with silicon powder, the very stuff of computer technology and, according to the artist, a substance that will last much longer than ordinary paint). In 1987 he completed the series "Without Gravity"; in 1985, "Froze Utopia"; in 1983, "Cosmogonia"; and, in 1981, "The Nuclear Age". Though all his works express his intrigue with the computerized world, no series is more aggressive in its expression than The Digital Series.

"Man, in his quest for progress, has ravaged the life-giving earth. Here man has become polluted, spiritually, culturally, and physically. There is tar in his lungs, mercury in his brain, lead in his blood, and radiation in his bones. Man's internal organs have been replaced by plastic tubing, vials, beakers, and bubble chambers. The disenfranchised torso, reminiscent of a classical torso, represents the essence of humanity that remains after the digitalization of human intellect. New Man is programmed and his life is organized into little segments. Also, working in relationship with the background and the torso and in sharp contrast to them and their meanings and means of construction, I refer to various symbols, part letter, part numeral, part Christian artifact — reminders of man's troubled history."

Babis Vekris was born in Tripolis, Greece, in 1950, making him a bona fide member of the baby boom/computer generation. Before arriving in New York City, in 1979, he studied at the Athens School of Fine Art. The moment arrived, however, when America, the land of technology, offered the fledgling artist more of what he needed in terms of creative inspiration and the materials with which to express himself artistically. In 1981 he was the recipient of a Ford Foundation Grant, and, a year later, he was awarded a scholarship to attend the New York Studio School. There, in addition to drawing and painting, he studied sculpture, architecture,



The secular and sacred vision of life. Acrylic, oil and silicon pigment on canvas.

stained glass, fresco, and design for stage scenery and costumes. Most recently, he was awarded a grant by Suffolk County under the auspices of the Office of Cultural Affairs. He has exhibited his works in numerous

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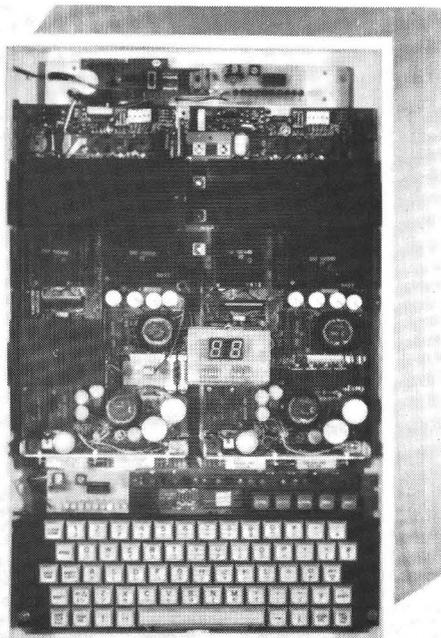
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museum and gallery shows held, among other places, in Athens, Geneva, Toronto, New York City. In the summer of 1991, the Museum Del Chopo of Mexico City hosted an exhibition of his works from the Digital Series. On October 3, 1991, selected pieces from the same series will go on display at the Jansen Perez Gallery in San Antonio, Texas.

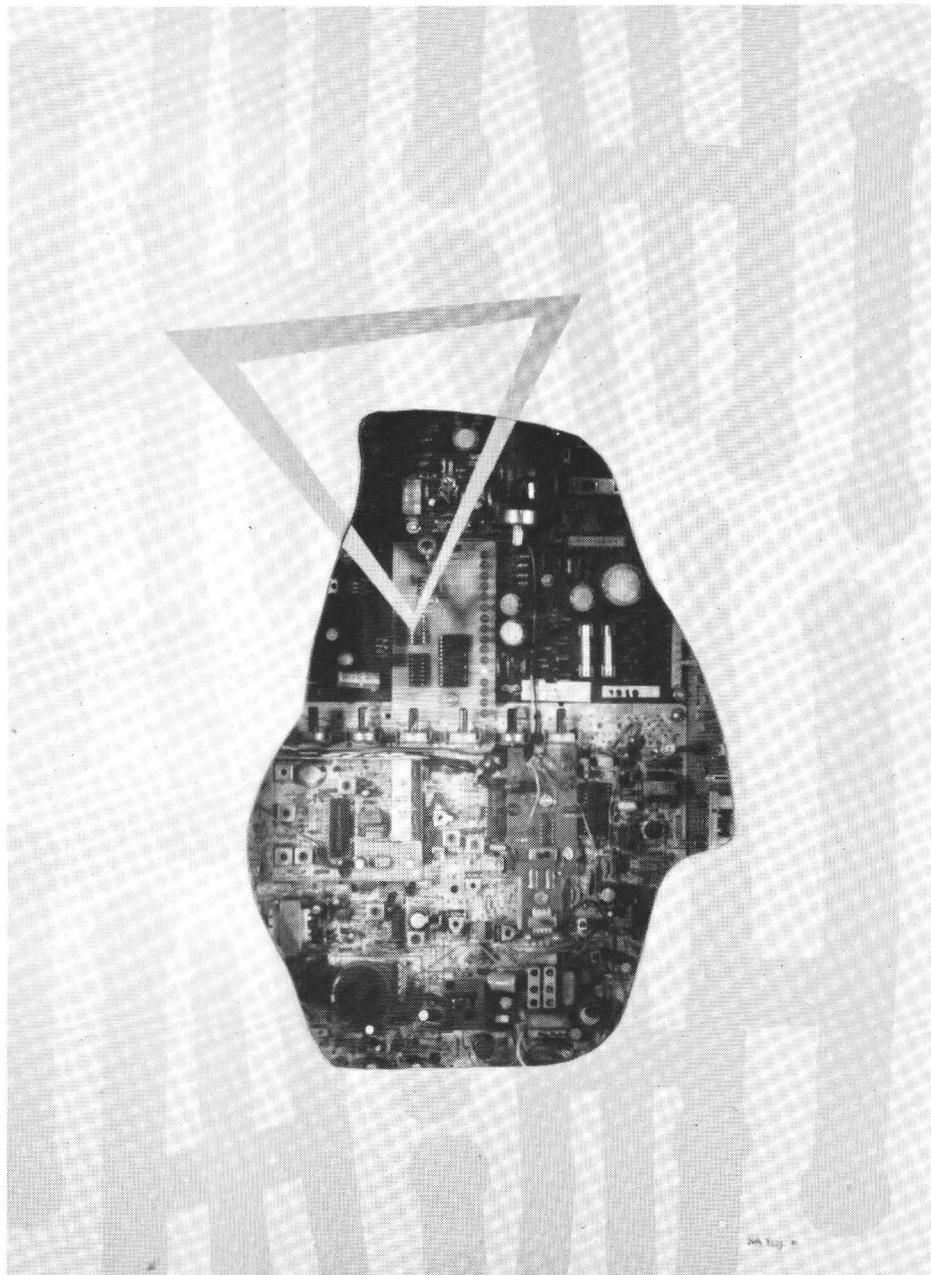
The work of Babis Vekris is in great demand. And no wonder: he has managed to incorporate his concerns (and, no doubt, ours) about man, the environment, and the future of our world in artworks at once entertaining as they are clever in their intricate use of high-



"Pandemonium Electronica."
Digital and electronic components
and light.

tech materials. Perhaps the real reason why his works are successful is that he truly loves the materials that he has learned to manipulate so well. The machine images embody the artist's enthusiasm and pass it on to us; without much effort on our part or theirs, they actually become endearing to us after a while. All this is new and challenging for us and the art community at large. But how will the future appraise the work of Babis Vekris? According to the artist:

"Historically, art is saved by humor, sarcasm, or by its self-irony. I have always thought, however, that the most influential moments in art history occur when our world is mired by confusion and decadence. One move-



"Cybernetic Serendipity". Digital components and light.

ment deteriorates, another is regenerated. Movement colliding against movement and so forth. It is precisely at the moment of intersection that a fusion of sorts begins. The results are alternately called madness, perversity, fetish, or transcendency, vision, genius."

As far as the present is concerned, Babis Vekris's position seems assured.

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