

Jannis Kounellis

(Piraeus, Greece, 1936)

The weight of history and a sense of responsibility to the present animate the artistic research of Jannis Kounellis. After leaving Greece in 1956, the artist settled in Rome and began producing pictorial works that contained letters, numbers, and signs, or words extrapolated from commercial signs. Intentionally unrelated to references of a biographical nature or to the idea of a personal pictorial style, these works constitute an innovative language, through which the artist indicates his clear intention to move beyond tradition and adopt elements taken from everyday reality. Around 1965 Kounellis already felt the need for further dialectical confrontation with reality and, freeing himself from the metaphorical confines of the painting, he created installations with materials that were then new to art and which, instead, pertained to nature, such as stones, coal, coffee, wool, and fire. In opposition to rhetoric, and keeping in mind the logic of life, the artist welcomes its sense of fragility, inherent uncertainty, and pain of loss and has exhibited living animals, such as a parrot or twelve horses brought together in the gallery space.

For Kounellis, the security of a “synthesis” and the concreteness of a whole no longer pertain to the present, which, instead, is consigned to the drama of the “fragment.” In this context, the artist’s role is to elaborate this condition and to search for its possible “measure.” While in philosophical terms the human being is the measure of all things, both human presence and absence play a fundamental role in Kounellis’s work. In 1969 the artist began utilizing beds and the related metal frames, underlying their nature as meager supports filled with the memory of those who have occupied them or in expectation of human beings who will arrive. In one of the two works in the collection a single bed is covered with a mass of raw wool. The inorganic element—the iron bed—contrasts with an organic element—the wool—in a dialectical confrontation that Kounellis defines in terms of “structure” and “sensibility.”

Rich in symbolic implications but also absolutely real and unfeigned, fire often appears in the artist’s installations. In the second work in the collection it is present as burning metaldehyde, placed on five scales. Tools of measurement, they are hung from a bar that horizontally traverses a double bed frame that rests precariously against the wall.

The large 2009 installation is made up of a series of shoes and overcoats arranged in orderly rows, pinned down by lead weights. Worn and then abandoned, the garments preserve traces of the people who wore them, attesting to their historical truth but also affirming their inescapable absence. An earlier version of the work had been created for the Oratory of San Lupo in Bergamo, whose spaces, like those of many churches, overlook an ancient ossuary. (MB)