

Aegean: Identities + Journeys

Group Exhibition

June 25 – September 17, 2016

Poros

The exhibition “Aegean: Identities + Journeys”, presents a fusion of artists’ viewpoints and references to poetry. Specifically, nine contemporary artists comment, both through words and their works, on a subject, timeless, yet intensely current. Two art forms, visual art and poetry, work together and complement each other through the works and poetic selections of the participants.

Accompanied by poetry, the paintings are of a wide range. The artists’ approaches differ in appearance, interpretation, and execution; at the same time, they are united by the common thread of a journey in our sea, the Aegean. The differences are evident to the viewer, who transitions from one vision to another, and thus witnesses an astonishing narrative.

Jannis Psychopedis, on first impression, focuses on the present. In terms of subject matter, he focuses on the current plight of the refugees. The impression is created by the broken railing, an introductory element dramatically repeated in the three parts of Psychopedis’ work. The visual narrative, sailing on the Aegean, is reminiscent of collage in terms of its style and aesthetics, although this technique is not used. In this triptych, with the suggestive title /dedication “Homage à Delacroix”, the artist presents images of death that directly hark back to the history of art, Greek and European. The painting “The shipwreck of Don Juan” by the French Romantic painter Delacroix is in juxtaposition with two Greek funerary monuments: Chalepas’ “Sleeping female figure” and a

fragment from a funerary stele from Classical antiquity. With his tragic images, Psychopedis as an artist and as an intellectual, traverses the centuries and bridges time.

Constantine Xenakis has an affiliated perspective. In his works, however, the Greek tragedy is charted geographically. In part, the maps retain the precision of scholarly observation, but then this impression is cancelled out. Objective inscription is chaotically confused with symbols/references, both personal and largely cultural. He creates sea arteries with arrows, directed forms, and elements of the sea, not leading anywhere. In the 2013 map, perhaps prophetically, a red Greece floats uneasily in a sea of symbols. Language, as code and as writing, has a decisive role in the heart of the work. The mapped Aegean with its sea arteries is presented as a “mosaic of shipwrecks”. Constantine Xenakis, an artist of the diaspora, uses the Aegean to present a dramatic ideological critique of the existing socio-political system: a Greek sea which is both a cradle of culture and a centre of Greek tragedy.

The primal subject of the sea has occupied Tassos Mantzavinos in almost all his works. Both the framework and a leitmotif in his work, the sea evokes a common origin, coexistence, a collective cultural heritage; that is, everything that defines the Greek experience. In the works presented in this exhibition, the Aegean is a closed sea, personal, with personal references running through the artist's life. Mantzavinos paints in a characteristic idiom. Memory dominates his work and plays a decisive role that drives all that ensues. The visual identity of his work is redolent of Byzantine and folk art, references to Fotis Kontoglou, the shadow puppet theatre and Karagiozis - varied sources which, in an idiomatic marriage, tend towards a common destination. The destination is the fear and awe of death, as it arises from the dark, deep blue, almost black sea; an inhospitable sea, dangerous, threatening – the kind we see in our nightmares. In this narrative, the past and the present are identical, because time functions exclusively as an unreal backdrop: the father/sailor is identified as Odysseus, the Homeric hero is associated with votive offerings and the relics of saints in the Orthodox religion. With the raw material of memories, both as feelings and as wounds, Tasos Mantzavinos presents a particularly associative, connotative view of the Aegean.

Memory is the springboard for Alekos Kyrarinis' works. But his is a temporally focused memory which systematically and decisively

influences his subject matter. Byzantine art, rooted in Orthodoxy, imbues his work with Greekness. In his artistic vocabulary, one can find the symbols of church history, with the prevalent form being the dragon – successor to the ancient dragon as the symbol of evil. It is exorcised by other recognisable symbols of Orthodox devotion. Alekos Kyrarinis, in contrast to Tassos Mantzavinis, has a «καρδίαν νήφουσαν», a serene heart. The journey, the struggle with Evil and expectation of salvation, lead him to a mental image of the sea; the sea is more hinted at than painted. Even its vey reference, «ἰχθύς», the fish, is also the main symbol of the early Christianity. Its role is to bring peace, framing a world in search of spirituality, a world which has transcended a tangible interpretation of reality, and even more so, material reward. The mystical Alekos Kyrarinis offers another interpretation: an immaterial Aegean which blends with all the other elements of space and time, both visible and invisible.

Emmanouil Bitsakis constructs his relationship with the Aegean in a utopian space, “οὐ τόπος”. Like Psychopedis, he alludes to the history of art: “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli, and “Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene” by Simeon Solomon are incorporated into the identity of the Aegean. The pokes fun at himself as “Venus in Extremis”, in an uneasy balance on a Botticellian shell; Sappho and Erinna, the “erotic” poets who lived two centuries apart, are in the foreground against a background of a castle which is reminiscent of the impossible constructions of Maurits Escher. The scenery is almost theatrical, and entirely imaginary. The landscapes do not belong to any recognizable geography: they are either composed as imaginary, or deconstructed as real. The landscape of Mytilene, with the well-known figures of lyric poetry, is similar to that of Corsica and Sardinia – equally difficult to locate. “The sea”, as the artist says, “at times a marble wave, at others water frozen as it forms waves, separates more than it bridges”. Reality is of minor importance; it serves only as a pretext for its reconstruction. Thus, at night, the mythical salamander can float in the air against the backdrop of the Lincoln Memorial. The identity of the Aegean, emerges from a ‘utopia’, a “notplace” in its Greek meaning, which is Bitsakis’ sardonic choice.

Demosthenis Kokkinidis imbues the Aegean with an identity emerging from myth. It is personified by the Homeric Odysseus, whose journey takes him over the sea, in space and time. In

mythical Ogygia, Calypso's island, which, according to some scholars, was the island of Gavdos, Odysseus dreams, is homesick. In these works, selections from his "Odysseus" series, Kokkinidis comments in painting on «νόστος», return, sailing, the journey. The artistic rendering of the Homeric adventures is not iconographical; Kokkinidis includes them in a timeless, universal reality, with the sea as the defining reality. The vague figures, archetypal, two-dimensional, without depth, are reminiscent of paintings on ancient pottery. The mythological inspiration evolves into a metaphysical quest. The issue is no longer the journey, Odysseus' adventure, but the meaning of destiny, man's limited ability to exert control over his life and satisfy his desires. At the same time, the sea as a dream-like element and presence, suggests both the fulfilled and unfulfilled in human life. The Aegean is presented in a similar dreamlike atmosphere, with suggestive landscapes, in the works of Yannis Adamakos. These landscapes are steeped in blue, but they are not representational. The sky becomes one with the sea. The image is independent of any allusions to reality. The artist plays with light and shadow, just as the colour of the water changes in the sea. His chromatic interpretation, however, is personal. The final impression is a dreamlike sense of space. The surfaces are laden symbolically, far from the individual or specific. They express emotions that arose from the subject, leading to a mystical relationship with nature. A railing and a fence are interjected in this dreamlike atmosphere an allusion to current events. Beyond his oneiric journey, Yannis Adamakos subjects the viewer to an evocative, imposing, yet familiar view of the sea.

Through a pervasive sense of melancholy, a deep silence, Sotiris Sorogas identifies the Aegean with a series of monumental artefacts. These objects function as allusions to the passage of time, the finite journey that is life. The dreamlike atmosphere, the mist with which they are surrounded imbues them with a fabulous dimension. The exhibited works are part of a series, whose central idea was the fishing boat. Objects of the sea, tools for the

Aegean, witnesses to human toil, signs of life and death, Sotiris Sorogas' boats are mundane and familiar, but also seem distant and unapproachable, as they are falling apart through the decay of time. This is the approach of the artist who transforms them into metaphysical objects and includes them in his own personal

nostalgia. Sotiris Sorogas' melancholic Aegean cannot be detached from its artefacts.

Michalis Katzourakis is an abstract artist. His work consists of materials coming from human endeavours, such as metal plates and broken glass. He also uses hidden lighting and mirrors in his compositions. The materials are chosen on the basis of colour, that is, successive shades beginning from the colour of sand, and then develop into the reflections of water, the foam of the waves, the reflections of the sky. His materials have been worn by time, and although they have become unusable, they retain the imprint of human life and effort. This creates an abstract sea, in which hope and desperation are enclosed. Michalis Katzourakis presents the Aegean as a refractive mirror which reflects human fate and history.

The artists' narrations, their contribution to one of the great issues of these times, delineate journeys and create identities in an inaccessible and precarious path.