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A Heat-Wave Dispatch from Hydra

In the DESTE Foundation's summer shows, new art from Greece (and Kiki Smith)

BY [CHRIS WILEY IN OPINION](#) | 18 JUL 19



I am writing this dispatch from the Greek island of Hydra, where I have been flown for the annual DESTE bacchanal – a magnet for the Rimowa-toting cultural jet set, still nursing their Art Basel hangovers and keeping the party rolling. Our generous impresario, the industrialist Dakis Joannou, has organized a two-day marathon of art and hedonism, which began in Athens and terminates on this rocky paradise.

Here, we have been treated to a small but exceedingly elegant exhibition of newly commissioned works by Kiki Smith, staged in a former slaughterhouse that has been transformed into a project space. For 'Memory', Smith has summoned a fantastical cast-brass menagerie: twisty-tailed mermaids, a menacing owl of Athena, a mascot-like mer-goat perched on the structure's roof. At the opening, the space smelled distinctly of burning sage – a nice complement to the works' muscular witchiness.

The main event, however, was over on the mainland. Occupying the ground floor of the Benaki Museum, 'The Same River Twice' – curated by Margot Norton and Natalie Bell of the New Museum in New York – offered a rough sketch of the Athens art scene stretching back to the 1990s. (This curatorial exchange programme could be seen as the second leg of a collaboration between DESTE and the New Museum, the first iteration of which was the controversial Jeff Koons-curated 'Skin Fruit', which brought Joannou's collection to New York in 2010.)

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The art environment in Athens has become more complex and international in recent years – with the gravitational pull of documenta 14 in 2017 and the wave of expat bohemians that swooped in to take advantage of the city’s post-2008 economic drubbing – but the Benaki show focussed on mostly Greek artists.

Photography was a large and notable presence, with the dreamy, enigmatic street shots of Yorgos Prinos (*Red Hood*, 2017, for instance) and the Nan Goldin-esque, 1990s-era, drag-queen images of Pavlos Fysakis (‘Dolls’, 1996–98) leading the pack. Painting, by contrast, made a relatively poor outing, though I was beguiled by the so-bad-they’re-good-taste canvases of Panayiotis Loukas, whose harlequin-coloured scenes of priapic hex victims, oracular cats and a Croc-loving bathing Pan look like they should be airbrushed onto a T-shirt covered in lightning bolts. Unexpectedly, fashion also made a star turn, with a large presentation dedicated to Dimitris Tsouanatos, whose concept boutique, Remember, was like an Athenian version of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren’s London store, Sex.

Many works were concerned with Athens’s ongoing economic and political troubles. A humming and sputtering light panel by Iris Touliatou, *Untitled (Still Not Over You)* (2018), constructed out of florescent ceiling fixtures retrieved from abandoned office buildings, infected minimalism with the post-crash blues, while a poignant, humanizing video of salvage workers by Evi Kalogiropoulou, *Neighbours* (2018), sees one of them declare that politicians

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are 'the trash of society', and reckons they deserve to be hanged. LGBTQ+ rights, in conservative and patriarchal Greece, were also on the docket. A gut-wrenching video showed a trans woman whose tattoo, reading 'My Life, My Rules', belied the fact that opposition to her transition now prevents her from seeing her child.

From my plush perch on the island, sandwiched between a preposterously picturesque edifice covered in assorted bougainvillea and the pellucid Aegean waters, you'd hardly know anything was wrong. Except, maybe, if you stop to think about the heat. Another heat wave in a wave of summers marked by heat waves. Once this thought worms into your brain, you can't get it out. Some exotic island beetle suddenly drops dead out of the tree that's shading my laptop and I think: species extinction. I remember the group of Greeks who died in last year's wildfires. Their charred corpses were found locked in a morbid embrace: a final gasp of human affection sucked in before the wave of fire churned them under. We forget them at our peril.

'Kiki Smith: Memory' runs at DESTE Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra, Greece, through 30 September 2019. 'The Same River Twice: Contemporary Art in Athens' is at Benaki Museum, Athens, through 22 September 2019.



IN THE STUDIO: Panayiotis Loukas

BY EFI MICHALAROU

Starting with new artworks by artists, that are on exhibition or are ready to exhibit or that are work in progress ... we are visiting their studios, interacting with them and we present them. The reason for our meeting with Panayiotis Loukas, is a series of new works, where his painting has changed from the one we knew until now. Fairytale and scary, unconventional and charming, neo-psychedelic and personal, that operates simultaneously as a mirror of all us.



Mr. Loukas, watching your progress, we see that you insist on large canvases, what is the reason and what they serve?

I do not insist in large canvases, the simple truth is, that I have great difficulty with the medium sizes. My difficulty, leads me to large or very small dimensions. In both cases, I works the same way, so I guess the whole issue relates probably to some psychogenic dysfunction.

Although you are painting, your artworks create a strange feeling, since your iconography moves between painting, fairy tale and comics.

I would like my Iconography to move between painting and painting. Surely, all of us are influenced by various images, hooked at times in our minds but comics and fairy tales, are mainly a narrative form. Painting on the other hand cannot contain any narrative form. The only substantive that a painting can tell, is that it happened, that someone painted it.

The stories you narrate seem to acrobat between fairy tale, horror and deep fiction, from what need arise?

I do not really know, perhaps my fears. Within each work, there are many smaller subsets. What seems like a narrative is their interaction, how one leads to another. If there



is a need, then probably this is, all to start and finish in the same artwork. Everything must justify its existence, no shape, no color, trace, or form not just happened to go by. Everything exist there for a reason, is the same reason why I started to make the artwork from in the beginning.

What are your references, you starting point and your source of inspiration?

The starting point is my head probably. The references are unavoidably everything that has been painted with interest. Fragonard, Ensor, Dostoyevsky, the Étant Donnés, Céline, Grosz before he goes to U.S.A. , Skaribas, Boecklin, Grandville, Alberto Caeiro, Jean des Esseintes and probably Peyo. As for the source of inspiration, I am not really sure but I sleep a lot, so I guess that I see many of them in my sleep.

Could these artworks cover the walls of the town, of the cities and if so, with the same images?

The truth is that I prefer the blank walls. I believe that blank walls maintain higher aesthetic criteria rather than any “artistic intervention”. In the house I grew up existed the 80s a huge alpha in a circle painted with a brush, I do not know when and who did it, but I cannot say I have seen something more interesting since then, in the wall.

You are using big surfaces and intense colors, your writing is expressionistic, futuristic and all elements contribute to the creation of a psychedelic, full of tense and extravagance, parallel universe. Do you experience this world this way, how close is it to you, this image?

We could say that the whole painting is real, everything is colors and traces on a surface. There is nothing more realistic than this; Malevich made it clear since 1923. Therefore, for me yes, everything is real. Beyond this, clearly all the works reflect the environment in which they have been made, so what is imaginary or not does not arise for me as a subject, as respectively does not arise the recording theme of any reality. Besides all the illustrations are fantastic (and beyond art...), or as said Villiers de l’Isle Adam “Realists are the peasants of the human spirit.”

Panayiotis Loukas born 1975. Lives and works in Athens. Studied Painting at the A.S.F.A., (2007) AICA Hellas award for best new artist. He has participated in a series of important group exhibitions in Greece and abroad, among them: 2nd Athens Biennale (2009), group exhibition “Evil” (2012) and “Hellas Pavillion” (2013) at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, he has also 5 solo exhibitions.

CACT-E STUDIO: PANAYIOTIS LOUKAS



Panayiotis Loukas' particularly interesting and highly audacious artistic search, moves between a reactive and effective mixture of mysticism and black humor. His nature, along with a relentless ironic lyricism, becomes apparent through a personal iconography and mythology reflected in his work. Above all, the versatile talent of the artist becomes implicit, revealing the excellent craftsmanship of a painter who creates large-scale paintings on surfaces where colors and beauty rejoice. The paintings of Loukas are overwhelmingly characterized by their enigmatic theme and noisy filling of the surface and support a visual language where realism and fantasy join forces to an unexpected dialogue. The surfaces of his works, lavishly decorated by the artist in an absolute horror vacui, match up with an unparalleled way the real and the imaginary, the high and the worthless, the traditional and the revolutionary. His worlds, however, are not at all familiar to us and seem to have sprung from a fantastic and an exceptionally surreal journey to the land of illusion. While these worlds are presented idyllic and imaginative, there is always and everywhere a sense of evil and the

unexplained lurking. On every place of the painting's surface one can locate various fascinating microcosms that are allegorical representations pertaining to symbolic meanings. The passage of time, the impermanence of life, the fragility of human existence, the decay of matter and finally death, are hints that unfold through images and symbols, such as candles (lit and extinguished), the exotic-and non-birds, the bizarre plants, the skulls (*vanitas*) etc. In addition, the titles of Lukas' works, which often leave satirical innuendos, on the one hand create deceptive narratives and on the other remain unclear, inviting the viewer into a game of divination, adventure of image and speech.

In his work *What you lack is experience*, the viewer is confronted with a captivating dual world where forms deservedly occupy their place in the unfamiliar space. The entire surface of the painting is converted into a field of vision, exploration and imagination. Maintaining a veil of mystery, a psychedelic mood on representation of the scenery and an attraction to the intermediate worlds, Loukas initiates a number of mental processes in the presence of emblematic metaphors that intertwine in a single composition. The prevailing mystical atmosphere combined with the artist's ironic mood is activated and the viewer somehow participates in the deposition of the artist's personal universe. In a very idyllic setting an indolent Satyr is indulged in reverie, surrounded by three animals that seem to appear to live stoically together and to enjoy the sinister scenario of chaos, while a series of grotesque figures and symbols, such as a pyramid with the eye, a construction reminding a pair of compasses, a nail with a frock coat, and a skull, compose a narrative open to multiple interpretations.

E.P.