

# review

## LOSING TRANSLATIONS AVOIDING VOYEURISM

### A POST CLASSICAL LANDSCAPE GREEK PHOTOGRAPHY AT FFOTOGALLERY CARDIFF

Most people have been on holiday to Greece at one time or another, but I haven't. I have never been to Greece, though I have seen enough holiday snaps and scanned enough brochures to feel as though I have. We no longer think of Greece as the cradle of Classical culture, but instead we think of it as a gigantic holiday camp. The ironic title of this exhibition, and the choice for its catalogue cover of a black and white photograph by Yiorgas Depollas showing a no doubt sparkling blue polluted sea with two paddlers who are on the wrong side of qualifying for an 18-30 holiday, prepares us for an exhibition of images designed to displace notions of Greece formed through the agency of Judith Chalmers. But in fact the group of photographers here represented is more concerned with re-defining the face of contemporary Greece *for themselves* than for our benefit. They are in the course, it might be said, of re-claiming an activity (photography) which until very recently, according to the exhibition's originator, the London-based photographer and writer John Stathatos, was 'in the hands of outsiders'.

In the late 70s a group of photographers came together almost fortuitously in Athens with the shared desire to make photographs in conditions free from commercial or touristic constraints, and in 1979 they set up co-operatively the Photography Centre Athens, which has become the only serious gallery and meeting place for photography in Greece (if you keep your

back copies of *Creative Camera* filed neatly away, you can read an account of the PCA's history in CC No. 238 December 1984). Despite this obvious strong link between the eight photographers in this exhibition, they do not otherwise comprise a group drawn together in support of one stylistic or ideological platform, although it might be said that at this still fairly early stage in the history of independent photography in Greece, they have all freely chosen to eschew interior monologues or fashionable formal excesses in favour of (for want of a better term) 'social landscape photography'. Read Stathatos' long introduction in the excellent catalogue (really a fine publication in its own right) outlining the history and current condition of photography in Greece and it is easy to see why.

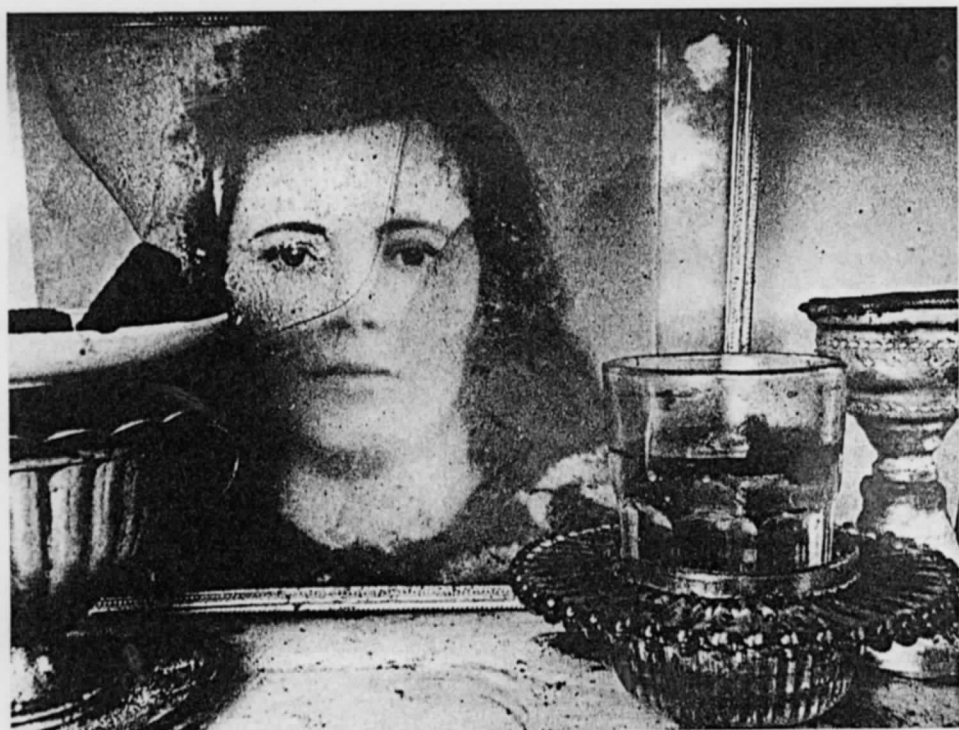
As it happens, I went to the opening of this exhibition with a Cardiff-Greek friend, and I asked her if there was any aspect of the photographs which struck her as particularly 'Greek', and which I might miss. She referred affectionately to the incidence of used plastic cleaning fluid bottles and cooking oil cans leading a continued life as vessels in holy places. Some of these ad hoc holy water containers occur in Nikos Panayotopoulos' 'beautifully considered pictures of interior details of modest country chapels, as well as in Stelios Efstathopoulos' black and white *Cemetery Photographs*. These latter are photographs of photographs, namely the commemorative portraits placed among votive objects in glass-covered niches in family monuments, some now decaying. Photographed as self-contained arrangements of objects (compared by Stathatos to Joseph Cornell's boxes), these photographs are full of sadness through not the despairing sort.

Decay also features in Costis Antoniadis' *Used Photos*, which are probably the most individual images in the exhibition. Billboard images on the peeling walls of apartment blocks have been stripped out by Antoniadis and replaced with images of ordinary people, perhaps the residents of these buildings. The artist Braco Dimitrijevic did the same sort of thing to different effect using real hoardings in the real world, though Antoniadis' images are more poetic and touching (why do so many of these photographs seem sad?)

The beach photographs of Yiorghos Depollas, already referred to above, are marvellously deadpan. Shot on out-of-date film (perhaps this is all the real beach photographers can afford in a country where film and equipment is heavily taxed) and printed with the minimum of contrast, these square pictures of simple events on the beach have accompanying handwritten titles, also simple, though I believe their irony is somewhat lost in translation.

Panos Vardopoulos' strangely hallucinatory nocturnal photographs were taken from the interior of a car, and are framed by the car windows. Two in particular stick in my mind - a solitary statue suffused in the blue light of a deserted patios and three young kids, out too late and probably up to no good, posing momentarily in this lurid electric-lit dreamscape. Their pals no doubt crop up in Eleni Maligoura's studies of the floating nocturnal population of Athens' Omonia Square. Like Periclis Alkidis' edgy photographs of the patrons of an Athens flea market, and Nikos Markoy's strong non-intrusive photographs of workers at the old Athens Municipal Gasworks during its final grimy days, they hold no innovative formal surprises, but do not deserve to be thus relegated to being listed in a squeezed sentence. One of the very positive aspects of all these photographs of nocturnal low-life, poor people's graves, fat bathers, and churches full of kitsch, is that they have miraculously avoided all together the taint of the new sort of urban photography voyeurism.

I have to be honest and say that this exhibition did not make immediately compulsive viewing - but that's our problem in an exhibition climate where nothing less than giant Dutch set-up photographs will do. Calm down, tune in to these fairly modest,



**Stelios Efstathopoulos**

conventionally presented photographs, and you will find an exhibition which has obviously been very carefully selected, with not one dud on the walls. There is no sense that, in an updated version of the cultural colonisation from which these photographers are surfacing, an exhibition has been put together to be sent out into the heart of Western European contemporary art photography for its approval and club membership. But neither is the exhibition insular, although our response to it does become a bit complicated because of where it's from and where we are looking at it, and all the convoluted accommodations we may make accordingly.

Well, at those times, when you find yourself relishing the really exciting playing of a Norwegian jazz saxophonist, or when you see a stunning Georgian theatre company, or come unexpectedly across the work of a highly individual Slovakian print-maker, all such questions of relativity and the geographical provenance of art cease to pose themselves, though the artists concerned don't become any less Norwegian, Georgian or Slovakian. This exhibition is not quite on that level, though it is clear that Greek photography deserves far more than the ignominy of being marginalised as 'interesting' because of where it comes from.

**David Briers**

*A Post Classical Landscape* can be seen until February 28 at Untitled Gallery, Sheffield. The show then tours: April 17 to May 5 Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre, Cwmbran, Gwent; May 13 to June 17 Stills Gallery, Edinburgh and August 1 to 25 Picture House, Leicester. A catalogue of the work is available from touring venues and direct from Ffotogallery, 31 Charles Street, Cardiff, CF1 4EB, tel. 0222 341667.

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