

Fergus Allen: "Greece by Greeks"

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Supported by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, the Royal Photographic Society in Bath gave over its main galleries in The Octagon to a summer show called 'Image and Icon: the New Greek Photography 1975–1995'. The exhibition was curated by John Stathatos, himself a prominent Athenian photographer, and his magnificent catalogue weighed in at 2.4 kg.

Greek photography came of age in 1979 when five young freelances founded the Photography Centre of Athens (an organization not unlike the Photographers' Gallery in London). The new institution stimulated interest in the art by putting on shows by well known foreign as well as Greek photographers and by lobbying successfully for the establishment of a department of photography at the Technical Institute; and one fruit of the group's efforts has been the appearance of a new generation of talented practitioners. What the RPS exhibited was a selection of the work of these contemporaries, old and young, some 44 in all. A sketch of the background to these developments was given by Platon Rivellis in LM's special Greek issue [April/May 1996].

The expression 'New Greek Photography' is misleading if read as suggesting some peculiar Greekness in the use of the camera and the making of pictures. What is meant is simply photographs taken by Greeks, mostly in Greece, over the last 20 years. They are not photographs taken by, say, Italians in Italy. Lenses and emulsions do not behave differently in Greece, and there is nothing special about the way Greek photographers' eyes form images on their retinas. Nor, after all these years, are there many, if any, places, subjects, styles of illumination, viewpoints, camera angles, tonal variations and technical tricks that have not been explored by photographers in other countries. If some of these had not been exploited in Greece before the creation of the PCA, that deficiency has now been made good. Today's Greek photographers know what has been done and the exhibition showed that they too can do it, to very high standards – portraits, landscapes, urban scenes, still lives, genre pictures, documentary, social commentary, the lot. And in the last part of the exhibition, rather ominously called 'The Artistic Dimension', there were examples of "photographically based works which intentionally or by their nature belong within the wider context of the visual arts". These included double exposures, oddly toned prints, enigmatic polaroids, large screenprints on canvas and collages à la Hockney. This section may not have appealed much to those for whom photography should be concerned less with artistic prowess than with ways of looking at the world, but the examples shown were as interesting and accomplished as their British equivalents. Strangely memorable were a set of small, rather blurred, Polaroid colour prints by Nayia Yakoumaki of partially dressed little female dolls, gesticulating or disporting themselves against blank

backgrounds. With their inane smiles and air of possibly malevolent infantility, their staring, glittering eyes seemed full of a life being lived on some not very distant plane, a plane from which irresistible spells could be cast over the human viewer.

Not surprisingly there were pictures that were stylistically reminiscent of the work of photographers familiar in western Europe and America. Ah, the viewer might say, here is a Salgado, there a Ronis, and here a Friedlander or an Erwit; but this was not to the discredit of the Greek photos, but rather a testimony to their quality. To speak of resemblances or shared chords in photography is not like saying of a poet that he or she has too obviously been influenced by, perhaps, Yeats or Auden, which implies that the poet is wearing someone else's clothes or speaking in an assumed and therefore unnatural voice. If, like Panos Kokkinias, you snap a Great Dane looking mournfully over the back seat of a convertible in a city street, it may remind people of the work of Elliott Erwit, but the photograph is no less interesting or entertaining or genuine an image on that score.

It is impracticable to give an even-handed account of so large and various an exhibition. All tastes were catered for. John Stathatos' black-and-whites of whales' skeletons in a three-dimensional lattice of scaffolding ('Homage to Melville') will have appealed to some, while others may have carried away memories of Aris Georgiou's pairs of pictures taken eleven years apart, one pair of an elderly barber in his salon, the other of an ironmonger in his shop, his pose in 1990 identical to the one he had adopted in 1979. Admittedly the interest of these portrayals was more gossipy than aesthetic. One noted a slight recession of the hairline and the resort to spectacles, the new sweater, the acquisition of an electronic cash-till, the banishing of the old weighing scales and the changes in the stock that filled the unaltered shelves and drawers at the rear. But there was a revealing contrast between the black and white print of 1979 and the colour of 1990, the latter so convincingly naturalistic, the former more redolent of transience and a moment in time. Costis Antoniadis also made an impression with his 'Interiors', in muted colours with a pinkish tinge. Very ordinary furniture, carpets, house plants, TV sets and Venetian blinds featured in these pictures of airless, over-tidy rooms, in which the presence of a few people was signalled by the inclusion of some clothed torsos, legs and cheap shoes, but no heads or faces. These were like photographs by Martin Parr without the unkindness.

Photographs that combined the strikingly pictorial with evocations of the pathos of mortality and the quirkiness of national funeral customs were a group of silver prints by Stelios Efstathopoulos called 'Cemeteries'. Here, through glimpses into tombs, we saw faded paintings or photographs of the dead ones, among stained drinking vessels, vases, religious emblems, decorative panels, broken fragments, cracked glass and dust. The portraits of young women – some stoical, some fearful – and of genial men with moustaches and collars and ties were to be seen staring out at us from the clutter. These were not subjects for painters. To make their effect they had to be what they were: photographs,

impersonal or mechanical records of the real thing.

The most self-consciously accomplished of the exhibitors was perhaps Nikos Panayotopoulos (b. 1945), one of the five founders of the PCA. A series in colour called 'Small Chapels' showed the interiors of simple places of worship, taken orthogonally, all right angles and semicircles, with candlelight and daylight falling obliquely on rough whitewashed walls. In this, and in another even less spontaneous set called 'Electric Lights', he limited the chromatic range in the areas to be photographed and made sure there were neutral zones that would bring out the flavour of the colours, in these instances reds, blues and yellows. By so doing he made colour the secondary subject of the photographs, something more than just a quality of the objects before the camera. Human beings were conspicuously absent, but their existence was made known through their artefacts. In complete contrast was a disturbing group of photographs of the inmates of an asylum for the insane on the island of Leros. A dozen naked men lounged at a crude table or cringed against a green wall, some with arms raised as though in self-protection, others indifferent or withdrawn or facing the photographer with a mad glare. Another naked man crouched in front of an open fire for warmth. These were taken as part of an exposé by a news magazine of a notorious State Infirmary –which looked more like a concentration camp than a hospital. Accompanying Panayotopoulos on his visits to the island was another photographer, Yiorgos Depollas, who recorded the same scenes at the same time, but in black and white. Depollas' pictures are both more distressing and pictorially less striking, while Panayotopoulos' images might be perfectly posed stills from some tragic play. However, they are without the worrying beauty that undermines some of Salgado's photographs of destitution and suffering [LM Vol 32, Dec/Jan 1993].

The best of Panayotopoulos in this exhibition was in black and white, a group of four large silver prints called 'Common Imaginary Places' – sunlit, exceptionally humdrum urban scenes, without a soul in sight. In one a bus paused before negotiating some railway tracks, in another a white car could be seen in the middle distance crossing a main street, while the others were vistas of concrete and emptiness. What made the pictures special and pleasurable was their extreme graininess. Each grain could be seen and counted. Close up (these were 21" x 14" prints) one saw little except dotted areas of varying density, but standing back there was a world both sharp and fuzzy, real but distanced, something that could well be a foretaste of an afterworld, a world for habitation by ghosts. Their atmosphere was reminiscent of Cocteau's *Orpheé*. At any moment the mysterious figure of a glazier might emerge from a side-street, crying "Vitres à vendre! vitres a vendre!".