

Jan-Erik Lundström: "For Reasons of State: John Stathatos assembles New Greek Photography"

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If there is such a thing as a nation-building exhibition, this is one. A manifestation and monument in itself, this survey of New Greek Photography is impressive in scope, detailed in research and clearheaded in argument.

John Stathatos, curator of *Image and Icon: The New Greek Photography, 1975- 1995*, generates, almost single-handedly, a history for Greek photography. The exhibition *The Invention of Landscape*, presented at Photosynkyria in 1995 and accompanied by an extensive catalog, set the standard. Tracing the genre of landscape as it took shape in Greek photography, it gave a valuable in-depth account of the overall evolution of photographic expression in Greece, from the medium's beginnings until today.

Image and Icon, as the title states, targets the last twenty years of activity. Indeed, the choice of time period is the main argument of the exhibition. Greek photography, Stathatos claims, was reborn in 1977 after a long period of post-war inertia, with the establishment of the magazine *Fotografia* in that year and the foundation of the Athens Centre of Photography in 1979. Five male photographers – Yiorgos Depollas, Costis Antoniadis, Nikos Panayotopoulos, Stefanos Paschos and John Demos – and a magazine editor, Stavros Moressopoulos, are regarded as the founding fathers. A combination of Greek photographers with international schooling and the general market and institutional boom in photography in the late 70s is cited as the inspiration of this Greek snowball. Such institutional shifts are given a precise account in Stathatos's lively and, as always, well-written catalog essay. Key players and influential organizations are named and credited.

The original version of this exhibition, which contained 244 works by 44 photographers, premiered in the young and ambitious Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, the only institution at the time that seemed aware of the city's status as cultural capital of Europe. This survey is divided into three sections – "The Exploration of Place" , "Reading the Medium" , and "The Artistic Dimension" – organizational devices that suggest more than define. As analytic proposals, however, this division suggests the slow integration of photography into the visual arts, a late development in Greece, but clearly visible in the work of the youngest participants in *Image and Icon*.

Image and Icon has two faces. It is a conscientious, generous and democratic listing of any contribution, minor or major, to Greek photography during the chosen years. As such it is a remarkably thorough and comprehensive history lesson, a gently ordered archive given public hearing, thus constituting invaluable source material and establishing a basis for any future endeavours with Greek photography. At the same time, it showcases original work and individual achievements that light up the mass of the survey. One of these is the work of Yiorgos Depollas. Represented with a wide range of projects, his

photography includes a series of jesting and sprightly black-and-white portraits; the unforgettable, unsparing Attic photographs from the Leros lunatic asylum; the facetious and playful *People on the Beach* and *Unpublished Documents*, all works in which a skillful and versatile exploration of the medium meets precise observations of the human condition.

In the same founding generation, Yiagos Athanassopoulos's landscapes and Nikos Panayotopoulos's photographs (which turn the same Leros asylum into a bleakly surreal and incongruous place, differently colored than in Depollas's tragic view) stand out, as do Costis Antoniadis's work in color, Yiorgos Katsangelos's witty *Religious Matters*, and Stelios Efstathopoulos's wide-angle photographs in which subject matter meets media explorations.

In addition, *Image and Icon* confirms that a younger generation, firmly grounded in contemporary visual art, is making photography-based work of good quality. One would like to see a more substantial presentation of Christine Dimitradi's double exposures in *Private Spaces* and Maria Papadimitrou's self-mocking *Dummies*, as well as of Lizzie Calligas's suggestive, hypnotic yet melodic imagery, which has a tone completely its own.

Image and Icon surveys Greek Photography from the last two generations without assigning a school or a style, and with few specific characteristics that would delimit it from other national photo histories. Rather, it links Greek photography to the general themes and trends of the period. Enjoy its highlights, take pleasure in its thoroughness.