



Photography is a language, it is often claimed. If that is the case, it inevitably influences the way in which we see the world, and, as with language, the more formulaic it becomes, the poorer our experience of that world.

That photography can be dangerously conducive to cultural cliché is self-evident. Consider the way in which, almost subconsciously, our view of France has been influenced by the gentle documentary humanism of Robert Doisneau and Edouard Boubat (key concepts: quirkiness and urban lyricism); that of America by the new topographic school (highways and tacky tract developments); and that of Japan by the frenzied images of Nobuyoshi Araki (consumerism and kinky sex). The power of such images, a power independent of their quality, lies in the way they become a shorthand for the culture depicted, to the virtual exclusion of any alternative representation.

Greece has been no exception. In the 19th century, the country was endlessly presented as little more than a landscape rich in classical ruins, with the addition now and again of the odd picturesque native thrown in, as much for scale as for a quick dose of exoticism. In the first part of this century, a newly emergent urban middle class sought its roots in a nostalgic ruralism, glorifying the values of a fast-vanishing peasant society. For the photographers of this class, seduced by an idealised image of a world they could no longer enter, the only approach available to them was a romantic

It's all Greek to them

With a wide range of images, a new generation of photographers is challenging our clichéd image of their country. By John Stathatos

pictorialism totally alien to their subjects.

A further twist of the kaleidoscope took place in the late Fifties, as mass tourism became a major government-sponsored industry. Spurred by commercial demand, a new image of Greece was invented: that of a country on which the sun always shone brightly, where the sea was always blue and placid, where the houses – of a uniformly Cycladic style – were invariably freshly whitewashed, and where all of the inhabitants remained improbably cheerful, welcoming and colourful.

It was, to a large extent, in opposition to such pervasive clichés that a movement, which became known as New Greek Photography, took off in the late Seventies. The first concern of the young photographers allied to this movement was the depiction of their world in terms that they could accept as both true and intelligible. Given the overwhelming sense of a new beginning, it was natural for them to turn to an exploration of their



Top: Study No 3 from 'Studies 1-7' (1990-93), by Lia Nalbandithou, depicts a friend of the photographer eating a piece of fruit in a sequence of 25 images – 'you reveal something of yourself while eating,' she says. Above: *Kakavia Border Post, Department of Ioannina* (1993) by Paris Petridis, from a five-year project – completed last year – called 'Borderland'. Opposite: from *Ocean I* (1992) by Panos Vardopoulos

PHOTOGRAPHY

Below: *Untitled* (1990) by Panos Kokkinias. Right: *In the Underground*, by Panos Vardopoulos (1988). Below right: from *Gorworks* (1984), by Nikos Markou, who spent several months documenting the interior of Athens' 19th-century gasworks before it closed. Below left: from *The Garden* (1995), a series of poetic evocations of Athens' old Royal Gardens by Alexandros Avramidis, the youngest photographer in the exhibition



immediate environment. In so doing, they adopted a wide variety of styles, techniques and practices. Broadly speaking, however, much of their work demonstrates a new interest in urban landscape and its exploration, a concern for the concrete, and, significantly, a distrust of sweeping generalisations. Above all, there is an evident enthusiasm for this new venture, the exploration of hitherto unconsidered spaces. Arguably, their work demonstrates representational photography's greatest strength – the ability to discover the new and to rediscover the ignored ●

'Image & Icon – The New Greek Photography', is on show at the Royal Photographic Society, Bath, from 16 June to 12 July.

John Stathatos's latest work, *'The Book of Lost Cities'*, is on view at Wignore Fine Art, 104 Wignore Street, London W1 to 19 June.