



A VINDICATION OF TLÖN. PHOTOSYNKYRIA 2001

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Photosynkyria 2001, curated by John Stathatos and coordinated by Aris Georgiou, is a festival that proves to be more than the sum of its parts. It is essentially a dynamic and divergent response by more than forty artists to a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. Though the influence of the text remains largely phantom (few artists make overt references), Borges' enigmatic writing, with its mood of abstruse mystery and labyrinthine narratives, provides an inspirational platform that galvanises and inhabits many of the works.

Comprising a major exhibition in the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki and thirty ancillary exhibitions around the city (from the French and Italian Cultural Institutes to a deconsecrated mosque, ten or so commercial galleries, and a diminutive coffee bar), *Photosynkyria 2001* is an inevitably multi-layered event. Certain works create a distinctly oblique hyperreality, more fantastic than fictional. Erasmus Schroeter's *son et lumière* transformations of Hitler's Atlantic coast bunkers lie somewhere between *Star Wars* aesthetics and kitsch tourism – he transforms these concrete bulwarks into fluorescent sculptural forms. Holly King's painstakingly constructed landscapes have an eerie

presence that has more in common with *The Mabinogion* than Borges, and Maggie Lambert's space-men seem to be disastrously adrift in a hallucinogenic inner space that's a welter of supersaturated colour. Other works, such as Sean Kernan's series *The Secret Books* and Olga Kaloussi's *Reconstructions*, allude to Borges' esoteric text as a source of mystery and escape, a doorway into another world; while Susan Trangmar's deceptively matter-of-fact *The Red Room (after Piranesi)*, three c-prints showing a deserted, brightly lit industrial space, and Jean-Jacques Dicker's *From Empty Rooms*, a stark array of less-than-basic African hotel rooms, both exude an air of the uncanny as they elide not only human presence but also any allusion to Borges. These accomplished images stretch the main theme in many directions, yet remain remarkably cohesive.

As a 'shop window' for Greek photography, this festival springs some surprises. Tassos Schizos, with his brooding and melancholic *Memories of the Underworld*, presents unorthodox images of the seabed – bizarre scenes from an alien world which leave the viewer to unravel their mysteries. Lizzie Calligas's *Swimmers* are bird's-eye views of a sun-drenched sea. Yet the swimmers are all but obliterated by glittering diamantine reflections which overlay the wine-dark sea, creating traces of sea monsters in the spiralling waves. Stelios Efstathopoulos's *Hypothetical Landscapes Generated by Hope* are hazy scenes in which simian figures lurk, seemingly engaged in



left: ERASMUS SCHROETER, *Bunker*, 1990, c-print, 120 x 160 cm. Courtesy: the artist

above: YANNIS KONSTANTINOU, *From the Oceans of Tlön*, 2001, inkjet print, 16 x 125 cm. Courtesy: the artist

opposite: SUSAN TRANGMAR, *The Red Room (after Piranesi)*, 2001, c-print, 36 x 44 cm. Courtesy: the artist



clandestine rituals. Reminiscent of pinhole-camera photographs, these images peer into a 'tunnel beyond time'. Nikos Panayatopoulos's work *Umbra Solis*, presented in exquisite light-boxes, shows variable clusters of crescent-shaped, semi-eclipsed suns against the deep blue of heaven – luring the eye into the infinite depths.

There is a strong contingent of digital works here, some hopelessly lost between mythology and technology, others providing evidence of running amok in Adobe Photoshop. Several artists manage to resist the pitfalls. Yannis Konstantinou, in his four-image series *From the Oceans of Tlön*, presents chromatically exotic, seductive seascapes. With scintillating cloud formations and wave patterns that verge on the kitsch and play with clichés, they still somehow hang onto their credibility. The stretched landscape format seems to offer a glimpse into infinity. Australian artist Philip George's *Secret Icons* is a large-format series of almost orthodox coastal landscapes which, on closer inspection, reveal subdued iconic images that radiate from rock surfaces. The cliffs broadcast a range of Orthodox, Islamic and Buddhist apparitions: like meditative visions, they imbue the landscape with a divine ambience – ancient rocks meet ancient culture.

One of the highlights of the festival is Riwan Tromeur's installation *Des Grands Nord* at the French Cultural Institute. Tromeur creates an extended fiction that chronicles a mythical journey by the equally mythical Arctic

explorer Sven Stördhal. It includes a synthesised archival display: photographic, cartographic and textual artifacts that pose as relics from the journey. The deception is made plausible by the distressed condition of many of these items, seemingly caused by an Arctic environment. The abstract nature of the photographs (all monochrome and mostly in exaggerated landscape format) creates an illusion of Arctic wastes, yet betrays very little that is recognisably figurative. There are many tantalising traces whose texture and form alone become aesthetically compelling. The myth is ultimately deflated when one reads that the photographers on the expedition were Arthur Gordon Pym (the hero of an unfinished Edgar Allan Poe story), Dan Yack (the central character from a Blaise Cendrars story) and Blaise Cendrars himself. The vulnerable junction between time's intractability and memory's mutability – the stamping ground of the confidence trickster and the propagandist – is neatly illuminated by this powerful installation.

The number of venues in this festival must have led to a difficult curatorial process, yet, in the final analysis, this year's *Photosynkyria* demonstrates a clear and strongly focussed vision that elevates it above the merely provincial and places it firmly on the international stage.

A Vindication of Tlön. Photosynkyria 2001 was at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art and various venues throughout Thessaloniki, 16 February – 24 March 2001

