

Photographic journey to planet Tlon and back

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SPECIAL TO THE ATHENS NEWS

THESSALONIKI - Photographers from around the world immerse themselves in fancy at the 13th annual *Photosynkyria 2001*, opening tonight with a photo exhibition of Nobel laureate George Seferis, at 8pm at the Thessaloniki Centre, 108 Vas Olgas St. Thirty-one phantasmagoric openings are to follow.

While photographers' perceptions of the real world are insightful, this year's terrestrial explorations into extraterrestrial worlds open up whole new vistas. Guest artistic director John Stathatos described his responsibilities to the *Athens News*.

"Photographers should be able to relate to the subject chosen; in other words, it mustn't be too narrowly prescriptive, or the response will be poor," he says about his choice of theme, *Photography and the Fantastic*. "On the other hand, it shouldn't be so vague that all sense of cohesion is lost, or you wind up with a bunch of disparate exhibitions."

This is the second year that *Photosynkyria* founder and coordinator Aris Yeorgiou, the artistic director of the Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, has decided to work with a guest director. Stathatos is a London-based Greek photographer, writer and freelance curator, as well as an expert in Greek photography history. He has curated a number of recent group exhibitions of Greek photography as well as a large survey exhibition, *Image & Icon: The New Greek Photography*, on behalf of the culture ministry; the latter is a three-year international tour which will open in Montreal on March 7. His last solo exhibition in Greece was held at the Lola Nikolaou Gallery last year.

Stathatos continues, "Having come up with a subject, the next step is to choose work relevant to the theme, both for the large group exhibition and the satellite one-person shows. In my case, I tried to commission entirely new work for the group show - not something particularly easy, since commissioned work is normally subsidised, which is obviously not feasible for the *Synkyria*. In the event almost all the work in *The Vindication of Tlo* at the *Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art* (MMCA) is new and original, with I think only a couple of exceptions."

"A large number of the solo exhibitions on the subject of photography and the fantastic are also new, including many of the ones from abroad - something of a record for *Synkyria*," says Stathatos. "There are also a number of one-person exhibitions which lie outside the principal theme. I think this is a good idea, as it provides a bit of variety, while still leaving an opening

for photographers, particularly Greek ones, whose work does not fit the main subject."

Solo exhibitions

While coordinator Yeorgiou always provides the *Athens News* with tips on which solo shows to see, he says it has become difficult to single out impressive works. Two to four exhibits open daily, but Yeorgiou definitely recommends catching the French contribution by Burattoni & Abrioux, which introduces *A Cabinet of Photographic Curiosities* on Wednesday at the *AAS Gallery 2* (59 Ermou St).

On the same day, the shows of two up-and-coming Greek artists open: Natassa Markidou shows *Monuments* at the *AAS Gallery 1* (59 Ermou St) and Lizzie Calligas exhibits *Swimmers* at the *YMCA Exhibition Hall*.

Both Yeorgiou and Stathatos stress the importance of the world premiere of an exhibition of photographs taken by Ian Jeffrey, the near-legendary photographic historian and critic. His work, *A Bestiary* opens on Thursday at the *Z-M Gallery* (1 Proxenou Koromila St).

Joan Fontcuberta is probably the best known artist, especially in the field of the fantastic, and is also the organiser of a big festival in Barcelona. His solo work, *Semiopolis*, opens a week from today at *Yeni Tzami* (30 Archeologikou Moussiou St). The Spaniard is also participating in the group exhibition at the MMCA. Also opening next Friday are don't-miss exhibitions *Des grands nord*s by Riwan Tromeur at the *French Institute* (2A Stratou Ave) and *Incantesimo* by Italian Marialba Russo at the *Italian Institute* (1B Fleming St). These and other openings all take place between 8pm and 10pm.

Group exhibition

The opening of the group exhibition, *A Vindication of Tlon*, is the last on the programme. It opens at the MMCA (on the Helexpo grounds), on February 24. The central theme is in honour of the short story *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. In it, Borges not only creates an imaginary country - Uqbar, which lies somewhere between Khorasan and Armenia - but he also describes an

imaginary planet - Tlon - which is the sole literary concern of Uqbar's writers.

Photographers from 10 countries feature, with a good European representation - Cyprus, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Poland and Spain - as well as Australia, Canada and the United States.

On the same evening, five final solo exhibitions will



'Photosynkyria' 2001' includes the work of Alexandra Kirli.

also open at the MMCA on the theme of *Tlon*. They are impressive works by Eric Emo (France), Phillip George (Australia), Viktor Koen (Greece-USA), Erasmus Schroeter (Germany) and Sean Kernan (USA).

Peripheral events

Besides the exhibitions, several peripheral events are also set to go next weekend. On Thursday there is the Ferdy Carabott Seminar on *Photography and Sound* starting at 5.30pm at the *British Council* (9 Ethnikis Amynis St). Friday sees a one-day conference at 11am at the same location, with English-language lectures and discussions hosted by Yves Abrioux (France), Joan Fontcuberta (Spain), Holly King (Canada), Emmanuel Hermange (France), Ian Jeffrey (United Kingdom), Erasmus Schroeter (Germany) and Costis Antoniadis (Greece).

Saturday is jam-packed with events. For the first time, a musical concert, *EchoSynkyria*, will be integrated into the works. "One major innovation this year is the musical component," says Stathatos. "Having commissioned a composition from young Greek composer Panayiotis Leftheris for the opening of the MMCA exhibitions, I thought it would be a shame not to take advantage of his presence and do something more ambitious for contemporary Greek music; lucki-

ly, at this point Dr Harry Lefakis bravely agreed to take over the musical side of the *Synkyria*, and has organised a concert to be held at the Byzantine Museum."

The concert starts at 7pm at 2 Stratou Avenue followed by the premiere performance of Leftheris' *The Vindication of Tlon* at 9pm at the MMCA. This is in conjunction with the opening of the group exhibition there and the subsequent presentation of awards: the Sani Festival/Shell Award for best overall solo exhibition and the Koynio/Hasselblad Award for the best Greek solo show. Those wanting to prolong the journey into the fantastic may do so at the party, which continues from 11pm onwards at *Cafe Sante* (70 Mitropoleos St).

It's not over yet, February 27 promises the *Cafe Littéraire*, which will deal with *Imaginary Lives* hosted by curator Emmanuel Hermange and art critic Thalia Stefanidou at 8pm at the *French Institute*.

Belonging to the realm of the fantastic is the fact that Stathatos has done most of the organising on his part from London. "Though I did visit Salonica a couple of times over the year in order to look at venues and work closely with Aris Yeorgiou on matters such as layout. With e-mail and courier services, it's no different from working out of Athens," he says.

"Having chosen the participants and the work they will contribute, my other responsibilities include keeping track of everyone, picking up the pieces when something goes wrong, liaising with artists, galleries, museums and institutions, and trying to coax more resources out of Aris."

"Also, of course, preparing press releases, writing the catalogue and monograph texts in both Greek and English, and badgering Aris about the design of the publications."

But when the day is done and the new worlds packed into boxes, what do the photographers - and viewing public - take with them?

"For Greek photographers, the *Photosynkyria* has become the place to showcase new work, and because it is always attended by a number of critics and curators from abroad, it is also Greek photography's window on the world," says Stathatos.

"On a less careerist note, *Synkyria* retains a personal charm and atmosphere that is unique among such events, and which brings some people back year after year even if they have no direct involvement."

✓ *Photosynkyria 2001* is being coordinated by the Thessaloniki Museum of Photography in cooperation with the State Museum of Contemporary Art and the culture ministry. Detailed programmes including maps in English and Greek can be obtained from Camera Obscura (23 Mitropoleos St, tel 031-280743, fax 031-286847).