

'A Closed Country' —
 Photographs of
 contemporary Greece
 by John Stathatos
 at Camden Arts Centre
 reviewed by
 Nicholas Sinclair

'A Closed Country' — a strange title for a sequence of photographs of contemporary Greece, surely one of Europe's most popular and accessible holiday resorts. Or is it? Is there, in fact, behind the publicity machine, behind the traditionally open and hospitable nature of the Greeks themselves and behind the noise and profit of an economy based on tourism, a more private and personal, almost secretive way of life in Greece which remains closed to the outsider?

John Stathatos draws for the title of his exhibition on the work of the Greek poet George Seferis and in particular on a poem from the *Mythistorima* series: 'Our land is closed, nothing but mountains/forever roofed above by a lowering sky'. Both Seferis and Stathatos share a feeling, clearly expressed in their work, of an underlying melancholy in modern Greece, a sense of confusion and rootlessness, despite the weight of the country's past. Where the myths created by the tourist industry steer us towards a romantic view of Greece, both the poet and the photographer go beyond these myths and beyond the numerous historical references which so often act as a barrier to understanding, and touch a nerve of enclosed loneliness of the Greek character.

'We have no wells no springs no rivers/only a few echoing, empty cisterns which we worship. A stagnant hollow sound similar to our solitude, similar to our love, our bodies.'

'A Closed Country' is a personal and lyrical portrait of a nation. Throughout these photographs Stathatos nurtures and re-directs our attitudes to his country. Moments from intimate social gatherings, public occasions, carnivals, elections and festivities are carefully structured to present an honest and penetrating account of contemporary Greece. Farmers on the island of Kythera discuss their olive crops. Four generations of



Athens, 1982.

the photographer's own family assemble for a christening. In the remote village of Mega Dereion, inhabited by Moslem Pomaks, gypsy musicians are immersed in the rhythm of their music. As Stathatos moves close to record these occasions so he maintains and respects the dignity of his subjects. Never is there a sense of intrusion or disturbance. Instead what he brings to the work is a quality of relaxed attention and understanding.

The Greek landscape, pure and balanced as it is, does not offer itself easily as a source of inspiration to artists. Even Roger Palmer, one of Britain's most accomplished landscape photographers, who received a British Council travel scholarship to Greece, described his three months there in 1976 as 'a disastrous exercise in terms of finished work'. Greek light must at least be partly responsible for the difficulties in recording the landscape. Clear, hard-edged, creating wide tonal ranges and casting into shadow anything that is not directly lit by the sun,

this light is inhospitable to photography. Stathatos overcomes these difficulties in a small group of landscape photographs which act as pauses or punctuation marks in the overall structure of this exhibition. Photographing from high ground at that moment when sunset and moonrise combine he distils the elements of his picture to create sparse but evocative compositions. Burning fields, abandoned and half ruined cottages, agavef and stretches of water between the islands and the mainland of Greece describe the physicality of the land. Here is the Greek landscape bearing the marks of history. Here too is an expression of the solitude inherent in the Greek character. ■

● 'A Closed Country' is on show at the Camden Arts Centre until 18 May. It will then travel to Photogallery, St Leonards-on-Sea, where it can be seen from 24 May to 21 June.