

THE SHROUDED GODS Lizzie Calligas's "Metoikesis"

*"The statues are in the museum.
Goodnight".*

George Seferis, *Thrush*

The figures in Lizzie Calligas's photographs are severe, almost hieratic. The once perhaps familiar statues, wrapped now from head to foot in white linen cloth and on the verge of moving to their new home, seem suddenly and strangely remote. Shrouding has changed not just the statues' appearance, but their very nature. The anthropomorphic depiction of ancient Greek gods went well beyond a generalised human aspect; significantly, sculptors did not aim at an expressionless or inscrutable appearance, like that of the Egyptian divinities, but gave their statues realistic expressions which are still recognisable today. Naturally, the gods were of their very nature represented as infinitely more impressive, flawless and remote than mortals, yet they remain graven in our image and after our likeness. In contrast to most peoples of the ancient world, when Athenians turned to representations of their gods, they would be confronted with something at least partly familiar. The expressions worn by the gods might suggest condescension or effortless superiority, but they were easily comprehensible.

In Calligas' arresting images, the statues have acquired a new and almost disquieting gravity. Whereas one might expect the enveloping fabric to diminish their authority, banishing any hint of individuality and reducing them to abject bundles, the effect proves to be exactly the opposite: unrecognisable, the muffled shapes rear up imposingly, virtually demanding our respect. They might be priests, seers or even warriors, were it not obvious that these are deities.

The concept of veiled or covered deities can be found in many different cultures. The Aiseras or Dii Involuti of the Etruscans, the Shrouded Gods, governed the destinies of gods and men alike, much like, according to Bulfinch's *Mythology*, "*the inscrutable Necessity [Ananke] that filled the dark background of the old Greek religion*". Nor is the notion alien to the monotheistic religions. In a well-known passage, Martin Luther wrote, "*Until now we have dealt only with the veiled God, for in this life we cannot deal with God face to face*", whilst according to a Sufi belief, the word "Allah" derives from "al-lâhu", meaning that which is hidden or veiled. Shrouding, of course, serves two purposes: on the one hand it hides the deity from the unworthy eyes of sinful worshippers, but on the other, it can also blind. Triglav,

the three-headed god of the ancient Slavs, was veiled in order to avoid seeing the sins of humanity.

Calligas had the privilege of photographing the Acropolis museum statues as they have never before been seen and as it is unlikely anyone will ever again see them, since she approached them outside normal time and space, suspended in the limbo of relocation. Her interest in the subject is anything but opportunistic, representing as it does a natural development of ideas present in her earlier work. The relationship with *Metamorphoses* (1990) is unmistakable, not merely because of common formal elements, but mostly because both sequences literally transform the bodies depicted, whether by wrapping them in fabric or veiling them through overpainting and photographic manipulation. *Encounter with the Aphrodite of Milos* (1991) considers the synergy between audience and paradigmatic ancient statue, a synergy which, as Calligas' camera reveals, successfully illustrates both the common ground and the gulf between mortal and divine. The recent sequence *New Life* (2007) continues, if rather more light-heartedly, to play with the contrast between the ancient and modern, lifeless and living.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the issues which this latest work raises in the context of the debate around positive and negative sculptural space. If an ancient statue, for example, occupies positive space, and a cast such as Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Monument in Vienna's Judenplatz occupies negative space, where should we place Calligas' shrouded gods? The statue's positive space is now bounded and defined by the enveloping fabric, resulting effectively in an imprint or cast of the original. And in any case, what exactly are we dealing with here? Photographic images? Sculpture? Photographic images of sculpture? Photographic images which, having acquired a monumental quality, are laying claim to the status of sculpture? Such a claim is less unlikely today than it would have been even a decade ago; after all, Gilbert and George have been calling their large photographic compositions "two-dimensional sculpture" for some time now.

The statues were once in the museum, and are now again in the museum; whether the change is for the better, only time will tell. The Shrouded Gods, suspended in temporary limbo by Lizzie Calligas, maintain the cryptic silence proper to their nature.

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