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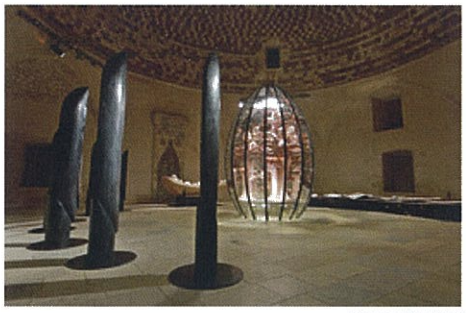
Navigating Through a Crisis

Contemporary Greek artists are confronting troubled times

By EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

On a blowy day in Kilburn, north London, Kalliopi Lemos, calm but purposeful, forges ahead into a large workshop beside the railway. Ms. Lemos is a Greek artist, born on the small island Oinousses, near Chios, in 1951, but a resident in London since first coming here as a student 40 years ago. This is the heart of her activity.

"I have not learned to exist as a person in Athens," she tells me. "The magic is here in my studio." As we enter, we are confronted by a huge steel and perspex egg, the central piece of a large installation now in situ in the Ibrahim Khan Mosque on the island of Crete (until Aug. 31). This is the cocoon for three lifesize papier mache goddesses (or are they furies?) with multiple heads and hair for eyes. Next door lies a large hewn trunk of wood, both a sea vessel and the sea itself, with the white salt heads of dead souls nestling in its folds.



Rowan Durrant

Installation view of 'Navigating in the Dark Part II' (2011) by Kalliopi Lemos, at the Imbrahim Khan Mosque on Crete.

These works will contribute to the second of a major trilogy of shows Ms. Lemos is preparing this year, collectively entitled "Navigating In the Dark." For Ms. Lemos they sum up what life has taught her in 60 years: That it is in going inwards, to the dark interior spaces, that you find "the wealth that supports you during life and actually projects you forward."

Ms. Lemos studied printing and painting at the Byam Shaw School of Art, Central St Martins. For the last 12 years her focus has been sculpture—often on a large scale. Between 2006 and 2009, Ms. Lemos created a three-part project, "Crossings," about migration, using scuttled migrants' boats found abandoned on Chios and other fishing boats. The final part of the project was a forlorn and monumental pagoda of battered fishing boats standing beside Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. It was erected to mark the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a stark reminder that the cause of freedom is never finally won—that new oppressions and exclusions will replace the old. It was a poignant reminder too, in the prosperous heart of Europe, of the continent's more fragile peripheries.

For Greece is currently deep in crisis, a crisis that is not just financial but also cultural and spiritual. With many of its most successful sons and daughters living abroad and stringent public-sector cuts, Greece is under siege. Curiously, however, for Greek contemporary art this seems to be a moment of remarkable energy. For many years leading Greek artists found their homes in New York, Paris, Berlin, London or Rome. Artists who matured in the middle years of the last century, such as Nassos Daphnis, Stephen Antonakos, Constantin Xenakis, and Lucas Samaras, all made their reputations abroad. Over the last few years, however, the local Athens art scene has seen a dramatic growth in activity.

Already since 1983, collector Dakis Joannou's Deste Foundation of Contemporary Art has shown regularly works by Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, Urs Fischer and other significant contemporary artists. Since 1999 the Foundation has also sponsored the Deste Prize, awarded every two years to a Greek artist living in Greece or abroad. This year's candidates will show their work in spaces within the beautiful Museum of Cycladic Art (May 25-Oct. 30). Struggling still to find a permanent home, meanwhile, the highly regarded National Gallery of Contemporary Art (EMST), founded in 1997, has run exemplary shows.

The Athens Biennale—founded in 2007 by Deste director Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, critic Augustine Zenakos and artist Poka-Yio—has also put the city on the international contemporary art festival circuit. This autumn, the directors are collaborating with French curator Nicolas Bourriaud on Monodrome (Oct. 23-Dec. 11), an altogether different format for a Biennale, more like a political sit-in than a series of exhibitions. The participants are invited to debate the global socio-political and financial upheaval.

Another spur to contemporary artists has been the changing collecting habits of the wealthy. Whereas an earlier generation of renowned Greek collectors focused on classical or modern art, a growing number of today's have preferred to collect the work of their own time. Zacharias Portalakis has, since 1987, collected in depth the artists who have caught his imagination—pre-eminently Theodoros Stamos and Nicos Baikas but also international artists like Thomas Schütte and Philip Taaffe. Indeed, one of the most significant collections of contemporary art in the world is that of Greek magnate Dimitris Daskalopoulos. Last year we were offered the first glimpses of his collection, in the highly selective four-part presentation, "Keeping It Real," at the Whitechapel Gallery.

This summer, the Guggenheim in Bilbao is hosting "The Luminous Interval" (until Sept. 11), a far more extensive opportunity to encounter his tremendous gathering of installations, sculptures and other art works. The title is taken from the writings of the Greek philosopher, Nikos Kazantzakis, who saw life as a "luminous interval" during which struggle and disintegration are necessary for creation and rebirth. While Mr. Daskalopoulos acknowledges that today "We are at the fringe of Europe, we are a small country, we have a small market, and no major wealth to support the arts," he reminds me that Greek language and thought have permeated Western thinking and "the words that have been transposed into other languages are the words full of significance."

Other initiatives too—the opening of the new Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens last autumn, currently showing Polyglossia (until June 30), an exhibition of leading Greek artists from the diaspora, and the renovation of the contemporary arm of the Benaki Museum—are contributing to a new sense of local excitement about contemporary art, despite lack of public funds and infrastructure.

It was in the courtyard of the Benaki Museum, under an unseasonably grey March sky, that I caught up with the first part of Ms. Lemos's three-part installation, four large, expressive steel sculptures, speaking of creativity but also of vulnerability. The third part will consist of a series of installations distributed through the crypt of St. Pancras in London (Oct. 1-Nov. 30), a journey to the underworld. What Ms. Lemos identifies as particularly Greek about her work is its respect for the human body, "and that principle of the human being as the center of the world."

Full of mythological resonances, expressing a deeply personal, sensuous interaction with both materials and imagery, Ms. Lemos has, through this trilogy, also sought to express that very contemporary Greek experience of being both inalienably rooted in an ancient culture and adrift on the seas of the world.