

Review | It still is as it always was by Kalliopi Lemos and Nancy Atakan

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Image courtesy Pi Artworks, London

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It still is as it always was

Hosting Kalliopi Lemos and Nancy Atakan's first ever collaborative exhibition, the neutral space of Pi Gallery wears its adornments well this season. When you walk in, the first thing that catches your eye is an installation composed of two wrought-iron mannequins. Both are naked but wear elaborate gold necklaces, inspired by Ottoman designs, Byzantine armour, as well as a loosely shared cultural experience between the two artists (Lemos hails from Chios and Atakan lived in Istanbul for decades). One necklace is conventional, punctuated by multi-coloured gems; the other has words in the place of jewels, reminiscent of the remaining fragments of Sappho's poetry: 'Birth', 'Love', 'Friendship', 'Marriage', 'Sad'. These symbolic tokens are passed down ritually, from mother to daughter to granddaughter. With age comes wisdom and the understanding that material wealth is transient – indeed both women, aged 69 and 74 respectively, share a glint in the eye that suggests they know a thing or two.



Image courtesy Pi Artworks, London

A joint exhibition, *It still is as it always was* stresses the idea of dialogue and collaboration. Although the artists work in surprisingly different ways, they share common interests. Both are determined to put theory to work, exploring 'beauty and its signifiers', starting with family photographers, storytelling and the female experience. 'Conceptual female artists are overlooked', explains Nancy, who touches my arm lightly, noting that 'collaboration comes naturally to women'.

An artist, teacher, art historian and critic, she'd always made drawings from family albums, but gave up painting in 1990 in order to focus on her wall hangings like the one before us. 'Challenging Cliché 3' was originally an American patchwork quilt made for her parents as a wedding gift in the 1940s, and has now been revamped by Atakan with subtle irony, with patches of the words 'Till', 'Death', 'do', 'us', 'part' floating about the atemporal, pastel space. Several other textile works, picking up similar themes, complete an ensemble view of the older woman as keeper. Here, threaded illustrations of 'Big Topics' like death and sickness are depicted with a mixture of poignancy and irony.

'I love the relationship between words and images', Atakan muses, gazing at her own work. A chic American girl, wandering around the gallery, calls it 'otherworldly'. Gothic and kitsch come to mind in equal measure: playful and intense at the same time.



Image courtesy Pi Artworks, London

Touchingly, the artists have used family heirlooms in both sacrificial and inventive ways. Kalliopi Lemos, a London-based sculptor, painter and installation artist, has produced striking work in 'I am Home'. A headless mannequin wears a long black mourning dress. At her feet, surrounding them, are decapitated cloth heads and wire wasps. The heads, symbolic of darkness at first glance, also represent the chorus of the ancestors, while Keres, or the wasps, represent spirits of misfortune in Greek mythology. 'Holding history around me', Lemos suggests. All of this is set out on a Bessarabian carpet: its worn appearance, Lemos notes, is itself evidence of life. She points me to a movable book, dedicated to her grandmother. Inside is a sequence of photographs of persimmons, covered in golf leaf. She documented

the process of their decay for four months; however she chose the fruit as a symbol of life, since it matures in winter. It is the first in an upcoming series of seven unique books – not an incidental number, I dared, a suspicion Lemos confirms with a smile. Lemos also presents two robes: Nancy’s has her granddaughters’ faces embroidered on it, as well as ‘a letter of hope’, while Kalliopi’s mimics the motifs on the Bessarabian rug, and includes a letter to her children and grandchildren. ‘The words create a texture’, she points out.

Both artists agree that their objective is a straightforward one: ‘an opportunity to find our voice’. In the darkness of the gallery’s last room, watching them on screen performing a ritual that complements the exhibition, there is no reason to doubt that they succeeded in their search. Anyone who has wandered through a contemporary art galleries of late is aware that the topic of female identity is, at present, a timely one. Yet, in comparison to similar works, *It still is as it always was* stands out from the rest. It is delicate and nuanced, as opposed to aggressively sexual, bloody, or indulgently corporeal, as is sometimes the case. This is not at all to say there is anything twee about this collaboration – rather, the end result is a psychologically bold *memento mori*, broaching the essential with elegance and grace.

Kalliopi Lemos and Nancy Atakan: *It still is as it always was* is on show at Pi Artworks in Fitzrovia from 21 February – 28 March.

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