

Cyprus at the Venice Biennale: Haris Epaminonda

by Vassilika Sarilaki

Representing your homeland at the Venice Biennale at just 27 may seem like something of an achievement. For Haris Epaminonda, however, who is currently representing Cyprus at the world's largest visual arts event, it was the logical next step in her career.

The strange seducer. There are all manner of myths about artists. One tells us that talent has to be yoked to experience if it is to produce work that is both interesting and of substance, another that an artist's powers are at their height in middle age and later. Unfortunately, these are heroic assumptions and the truth is often very different. Indeed, an artist's early work is often more luminous than the fruit of their maturity. Perhaps because it is their first, authentic voice which fell silent for a time only to burst forth once more, powerful and clear. Perhaps because it is a youthful voice that isn't afraid of telling it exactly as it is; that isn't yet tangled in a web of concepts or encumbered by a politically-correct stance whose aim it is to keep the artist 'in'... a poorly-conceived fashion that can only end in faddishness and variations on a fad. One could go on.

In Epaminonda's case, however, this freshness of voice comes with a maturity which is firmly rooted in the confidence of her instinct. Viewing *Stin Exohi*, last summer's major exhibition of the Leonidas Beltsios collection, Epaminonda's talent clearly marked the young Greek Cypriot out from her peers. Her video was a million miles from the tedious reworkings of irrelevant everyday moments clueless, conceited art youngsters are wont to show. Here was a work that really made use of the medium with its form-in-progress constantly folding in on itself, a body reflected and changing shape at a slow, ritualistic pace, a form entirely free that kept the gaze actively engaged by conveying a constant stream of intense impressions and sensations. I was particularly struck by three things: the flexibility she brought to handling form, her total control of visual gesture, and her sense of moderation (so rare in a young artist).

When I later got to see Haris' singular collages, things became clearer and more interesting still. Though her combining of innocent snapshots of the carefree Sixties with a contemporary sociology of objects and image-making underlain by hard rock architectonics may seem playful at first, you ended up dizzied before her daring disarticulations of every temporal rule which invited wide-ranging comments. Someone even described it as an original deconstruction a la Deleuze!

However, if one maintains a careful distance from reductions and pigeon-holing of this sort, it becomes obvious that it is better to go a little deeper and note the influences, starting points and substance of this 'difficult' image. An image which turns iconic models on their head, which creates temporal clashes by challenging our visual habits, which deals with the abolition of secular idols which emerge from the 'regularization' of History and which are ultimately subversive.

No more lies... Each one of Epaminonda's black and white collages has the air of a pseudo-documentary. In them, nostalgic relics from another time which has passed rise to the surface, heading resignedly towards a chaotic now whose outcome remains unknown. The poetic nature of this homecoming, or of this heterogeneity into which it willingly descends, passes judgement on a testimony to chaos and discomfort which provide both viewers and thinkers with considerable food for thought. In the words of the tragedian Samuel Beckett, whose work provided the project's title: "Old earth, no more lies, I've seen you...".

For instance, the intelligent and sensitive observations the art critic Jonathan Miles makes in his interesting essay on Epaminonda's work are indicative. He writes: "I thought it might be possible to enter into that remote zone in which everything was not only strange, but also unsettled by loss of essential belonging. The question on my mind related to the notion that this world has already passed over its threshold of representation, or if such a passage is not possible we have an apprehension of an edge that oscillates between a piercing, almost crystalline darkness giving rise to visions of an elsewhere and a leaden, dulling rhythm of time that we name as reality...".

In Venice. Epaminonda's career has been one, long upward progression. Born in Nicosia, she studied in London—at the Chelsea College of Art & Design, at Kingston University and at the Royal College of Art—where she now lives. She has taken part in a number of exhibitions in Cyprus, Greece, Britain, the Netherlands and elsewhere, and represented Cyprus at the 12th Biennale for Young Artists in Naples. Last year, she participated in various group shows in Greece.

As the show's curator, Denise Robinson, notes: "Haris Epaminonda's intense short video sequences have been screened widely in Europe and throughout the Eastern Mediterranean over the past few years, often interfaced with her scathingly beautiful collages.

"The artist will present new collages and her most recent *Tarabi* video works for Venice. The collages give a dark twist to her sources: interiors from French magazines from the 1950s, or more recently, images of civic and religious monuments, her technique where the cut in the image is all, new images where the monument loses hold of its iconic nature.

"For Venice, it is European cinema from the 1960s that is a touchstone for the *Tarabi* videos, where the rich saturated colors of the cinema from this period take on another life, through an act of disturbance by the artist, so that they might just do something else..."

*Cyprus is represented at the Venice Biennale—June 10-November 21--by Haris Epaminonda and Mustafa Hulusi. The Cypriot pavilion is in the Palazzo Malipiero, San Marco. Curator: Denise Robinson. Commissioner: Loulli Michaelidou.

*Vassilika Sarilaki is an art historian.