

*No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither, with
modesty enough and likelihood to lead it, as
thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried,
Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of
earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he
was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!*

Shakespeare Hamlet (5.1.214-223)

On 12 July 2014, in the enclaved village of Ayia Triada on the peninsula of Karpasia, the funeral of Yiannakis Liasi took place. Each one of us present on that day at the half-abandoned village cemetery had a strong feeling that we were experiencing the events unfolding before our eyes in a very different way than usual. I would dare to say that, without actually realizing it, we acted and performed –as individuals and as a crowd– in a transcendental dimension, in a dimension where the essential is filtered, distilled and diffused, while simultaneously (and inexplicably) the trivial, the worthless and the ordinary are transubstantiated into indispensable elements of a [primordial] ritual.

Toula Liasi has been living and creating in the Netherlands for nearly forty years. At the same time, she has been carrying a heavy and very personal burden that is constantly present and keeps shaping her work in a crucial way. Her brother, Yiannakis, had been a missing person for many years: since 1974, when as a reservist of the Cyprus National Guard he fought during the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, until 2014, when his remains were found in a mass grave near Klepini on the slopes of the Pentadaktylos mountain range and were identified through DNA analysis. Additionally, Toula's father (her mother died in 2015) has been living since 1974 in the enclaved village of Ayia Triada, where his home is located, along with a dozen more people, who have since remained under Turkish occupation.

It is, therefore, inevitable, and perhaps one would even say expected, that Liasi's artistic research and oeuvre would focus on these important personal –and not only– facts. The more so in this case, where we are not just talking about “traumatic” memories or experiences, but about a daily, tangible and repetitive personal reality. A twofold reality; one that could even be characterized as paranoid, where, on the one hand, forty-four years later, mass graves are still being discovered in unsuspecting places that in all other respects are idyllic. The human remains are identified and subsequently handed over to the relatives in “pygmy” coffins. In the last act of the drama, “heroic” funerals are staged in an attempt to alleviate the pain and let the unfortunate deceased “rest in peace”. On the other hand, all of this is taking place in a [European] divided country, where there are still enclaved people, who even today continue to be deprived of their fundamental rights and freedoms.

While similar issues have often been a taboo for a lot of contemporary Cypriot artists, usually fearing being associated with a sensationalist approach and an undermining nationalism, for Liasi they are a coherent and natural conceptual development of her work, a work that originates from her turbulent personal story. This intimate archive of Liasi, which constitutes the creative substance of her works, relates perfectly to her country, as well as to the socio-political reality, where both the personal and the intimate become signifiers of a broader, universal system.

So far, Liasi's major works, namely *Achaeans Coast* (2004), *Rusted Evidence* (2013) and *Home and Identity* (2015), have been developing their narratives through the concept of being enclaved, of how people and objects exist and perform in this enclaved and limited system of coordinates, both literally and metaphorically. The artist collects, records and processes not only the effect of time on space, but also vice versa, having always been guided by this "enclaved condition" that has been haunting her for decades.

Her new project, entitled *Where Have You Been?*, deals with the artist's relationship with her dead brother. A due "debt" for a (common) path that was never realized. A rhetorical question, whose answer she personally knows very well, unfortunately. By activating her personal story, Liasi, on the one hand, exorcizes her heavy fate –that of her enormous loss– while, on the other hand, she sheds light on key issues and questions, balancing with mastery between the emotional proximity and the distant and dispassionate observation.

The works exhibited stem from Yiannakis Liasi's funeral, who happened to be the first missing person to be buried in the occupied part of Cyprus. For this reason, the fact itself takes on a particular weight and dimension in the modern history of the island. The video *Coming Home* shows instances of Yiannakis' funeral in the occupied village of Ayia Triada. A funeral of a man, forty long years after his death, attended by hundreds of people, clerics, politicians, government officials, ordinary people, known and unknown individuals, all deeply moved, under the eyes of the military and the police of the occupying forces. Liasi, one of the main protagonists of the funeral ceremony, becomes at the same time a silent witness to the whole process. A process full of tension and uplifts, where the personal becomes at the same time public, the familiar becomes suddenly unfamiliar and the accessible obviously inaccessible.

The artist also seeks to reconstruct the place of death within the exhibition space and to give substance to the latitude and longitude in which her brother was killed and buried in a mass grave. Her project *36swe3941106651* consists of a video of the idyllic region of Klepini and five photographs of the area taken by the excavation team of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, before, during and after the official exhumations. In addition, she presents a large installation consisting of transparent photographic banners, entitled *Jump and Shout*, which seeks to attribute "identity" to the site of the mass grave, as Liasi so aptly points out.

It is true that behind a landscape (and indeed in an area heavily loaded with historical events) a lot of readings are hidden. In his fundamental work *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell writes the following regarding the depiction of landscapes in disputed

areas that seem idyllic: “*We have known since Ruskin that the appreciation of landscape as an aesthetic object cannot be an occasion for complacency or untroubled contemplation, rather it must be the focus of a historical, political and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye. We have known at least since Turner –perhaps since Milton– that the violence of this evil eye is inextricably connected with imperialism and nationalism. What we know is that landscape itself is the medium by which this evil is veiled and naturalized. Whether this knowledge gives us any power is another question altogether.*” (W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 29).

Indeed, the northern part of Cyprus, and in this particular case Klepini, is a very special area. For the occasional tourist or the conscious settler, the landscape can easily be idealized as a pastoral paradise, subconsciously ignoring or consciously going past the marks of history, which often allude to the imposition, the violence and the brutality, and which are scattered everywhere on the ground.

In this case, as in her previous work *Home and Identity*, the artist acts through a dual role: on the one hand, as she says, “*by combining the beauty and the peace of the landscape with shocking musical sounds, I aim to intensify his [her brother’s] very last moment*” and, on the other, her work thoroughly proves the ambiguous nature of the particular landscape: behind the first “aesthetic” reading, there is a daunting and intimidating narrative of power and horror.

The work 661-10/01-006B presents the skull of Yiannakis Liasi with a bullet hole in it, which the artist manages to photograph when she was allowed for the first time to see her brother’s remains. Inspired by the official summary report on the identification of her brother’s remains: “*Based on the information available and within the context of this case, the human remains labeled as 661-10/01-006B are identified as Yiannakis Liasi*”, the artist processes the photo with a dark filter so that the skull is barely visible. A little further, in a showcase, Yiannakis’ personal belongings –his military trousers and rusted metal parts of his belt– are exhibited exactly as they were found in the mass grave of Klepini, ragged and decomposed by the soil that had been covering them for four decades. Here, Liasi plays the difficult and at the same time tragic role of a peculiar archaeologist. An archaeologist, whose (macabre) findings once again challenge History. Their public exhibition does not aim to trigger ideological and nationalist mechanisms in the viewer, but rather to emphasize the futility of the above mechanisms and to remind every single individual who sees them that barbarism should not have a place in our modern culture.

Right next to it, the newspapers of her work *14081974*, named after the date of the second invasion of Cyprus on 14 August 1974, intensify the whole installation by defining the historical context of the events. Although nothing is being said about the tragic events (the newspapers had been printed a few hours before the actual event), the fear of death and the imminent destruction is evident behind the lines of ink.

The installation entitled *With Love Yiannakis* consists of four letters that Yiannakis had sent to his sister a year before he died, when he was studying in Greece. The letters are printed verso so their contents are unintelligible to the public. A bright neon

sign with the phrase “*With love Yiannakis*”, the way he used to sign his letters, dominates the space. Beside it, 27 old photos of Toula with her brother taken at the time they were both children. The photos are magnified and have vivid colours on the background. Here, Liasi’s story becomes completely personal: an inner dialogue with her brother, in which we are invited very discreetly –and from a distance– to participate and share with her.

However, the carelessness of this childhood bonding is abruptly disrupted by *361*, a large collage with the portraits of ninety missing persons from Yiannakis’ battalion. A bright red light covers the ninety photos, while five of them in a lighter tone show the soldiers who were buried together in the mass grave of Klepini. Reality is much tougher than we hope and almost always precedes any human desire and social consciousness. A reality that unfortunately is increasingly stemming from barbarism and human self-destruction.

This self-destruction, through decay and decomposition, is evident in the series of pixelized works with wreaths and flowers, which both officials and non-officials and known and unknown individuals laid at Yiannakis’ grave on the day of the funeral. Plastic, dried laurels, coloured artificial roses, blue-white ribbons, in contrast to “carefree” coloured pixels. Wreaths for the Greek Cypriot son, brother, soldier, hero, missing person, symbol. Double face *memento mori*, death memorials, prominent remnants of the futility and harshness of human systems, cut off from their natural environment, become symbols of a generalized decline.

Where Have You Been? is an agonizing call by Toula Liasi. A call to her brother, whose continuous tragic absence has defined her existentially and artistically, but also a call to us all, the viewers of her work. A call, the answer to which she herself devises with her work: everything we do, every action we take, each and every step of our earthly course should be aimed at life rather than death.

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