

CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU

Review by Rachel Withers
Artforum, Vol. 58, No. 5
January 2020

The troubled island of Great Britain has not seen a great deal of work by the troubled-island specialist Christodoulos Panayiotou until now : *Act II : The Island* is his first major UK solo show. A really good one, too – a bouquet of seductive, resonant works, sheerly articulate through their visual and physical presence, plus a booklet of contextual glosses intrinsic to Panayiotou’s practice but of questionable utility. By removing most of the doors on the Camden Arts Centre’s exhibition floor and tucking works into places normally out of bounds, Panayiotou de- and re-territorialized the space, rendering it a whole entity with different “regions” – maybe an island by analogy. In the room visitors are likely to enter last, accessed via a fire escape, he installed his three-channel color-slide display *Never Land*, 2008, featuring more than a hundred photographs from a 1990s Cypriot news archive. These document religious rites, everyday activities, street protests, touristic excesses, hardscrabble landscapes, and all sorts of damage: violence, smashed vehicles, exploited nature. Stitching it all together are hints of a simultaneously cherished and degraded grand past, visible in a bikini-clad bather as Aphrodite, soldiers in T-shirts as classical Greek brothers-in-arms, and muscle-bound Odysseuses posing on motorboats.

These images ground Panayiotou’s conceptual island in the predicament of his Cyprus homeland, but his practice doesn’t broadcast simplistic sociopolitical messages. It largely turns on artful, highly refined recontextualisations of found materials. Its focus is not only on transmutations of stuff (earth into floor tiles, as in *Spoil Heap*, or sheet metal and a bucket into an indoor fountain, as in *The Price of Copper*, both 2015), but also on transformations of value, and its feel is aesthetically rarefied, not flag-waving. His objects – for example, the five monumental, splintery, tar-perfumed electricity poles studded with metal tacks that lie felled in *Independence Street*, 2012, or the straggling trompe l’oeil weeds of *Mauvaises herbes*, 2019, a pale-as-dust mosaic that both suppresses and converses with the gallery’s terrazzo floor – are articulate in

themselves, revisiting the artist's core interests with a poetic incompleteness.

However, his works always come with supplementary backstories: visually incommunicable details, made available at Camden via the aforementioned booklet. Maybe they add an essential dimension (by establishing a “stratigraphy” of reading, a before-you-know and after-you-know, that echoes other archeological references in the work); maybe they are symptomatic of an ongoing tension in contemporary “poetic” conceptualism. The backstories may expand one's knowledge and tie together the threads, but they also shrink the work's poetics. Of course, one can ignore the booklet and proceed via eyeball power alone. Call me a slacker, but that was my method. Take *Spoil Heap*, a room empty but for a herringbone floor of roughly crafted terra-cotta tiles and hidden but for a telltale strip in one doorway, the venue's polished herringbone parquet. This upside-down stratigraphy – rough slabs of baked mud atop elegant modern parquet – inverts the hierarchy of manufacturing technology and commodity prestige in a way that is visible and tangible without a gloss; and when walked over, the uneven tiles share a little secret, a dancing rhythm, with one's soles. The backstory: The bricks were made from scrapings from an (unspecified) archaeological dig. Does this explanation help? Likewise *Bastardo* (Bastard), 2018, a marble bench graffitied with the work's title: The smack-in-the-chops puzzle set up by the combination of aggressive script and “classy” material dissipates on learning that the spray-painting is simply a quarry mark denoting a flawed stone. Critics of my criticism may object that it's a depoliticizing maneuver: Panayiotou's backstories are essential to his work's Cyprus-specific historical and economic critique. I'm not convinced; but irrespective of whether one is guided by the artist's glosses or goes freestyle, this is a seriously sophisticated, absorbing practice.

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