

# CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU *Wonder Land, Never Land*

Review by Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Defining Contemporary Art: 25 Years in 200 Pivotal Artworks  
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*Wonder Land*, 80 colour slides

*Never Land*, 135 colour slides, 3 synchronized slide projectors

*I Land*, 160 black and white slides, 2 synchronized slide projectors

Christodoulos Panayiotou is perhaps the epitome of today's artist, his generalized expertise seamlessly bridging many spheres of inquiry and modes of practice. He belongs to an emerging generation that, in different ways, is redefining the present as a contemporary baroque, within which polyphonic oeuvres weave complex tapestries from an overproduction of material that tends to make strong demands on its audience – not only for their time but also for their trust. 'I am very attached to the baroque idea, which perceives reality as a conscious performance; it makes sense of the world as theatre, the world as stage. This fundamental understanding illuminates the process of the construction of humanity's myths and narratives and, in doing so, places us in a position where we have no other choice but to assume the responsibility of their production.'

Panayiotou practice has moved from its origins in choreography and anthropology to flourish as a performative and archival engagement that continually returns to the artist's home context of Cyprus. The stigmata of globalized popular culture here move in and out of prolonged engagement with the local: a highly charged postcolonial patchwork still caught in the clutches of a territorial rift while buoyed by the optimism of the island's 2004 accession by EU. Panayiotou retools literary, theatrical and musical devices – narrative, metaphor, motif – towards the visual construction of allegorical fragments, all the more potent politically for what is left unsaid than for what might be revealed.

The trilogy that begins with *Wonder Land*, continues with *Never Land* and culminates with *I Land* is Panayiotou's most ambitious and complex project to date. Each work in this series both returns to and extends the

concerns of its precursor, and in this way Panayiotou's trilogy belongs to pantheon of contemporary artists' projects that include film series such as Yang Fudong's *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003-2007) [p. 344] but also intricate, recursive and long-durational projects like Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002) [p.256] or Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* (1994-2002) [p. 158] in which a complex conceptual journey of difference and repetition unfolds around a central motif. One such theme sits at the centre of Panayiotou's projects like a musical refrain: 'My work has always revolved around ideas that often emerge from social observations. They are shaped in thematic circles, which somehow establish connections among the works but also define the distance between them. I tend to see it as a book bound to remain unfinished and in which the chapters that fascinate me the most are those missing'.

The recent political history of Cyprus orients Panayiotou's trilogy. The first of the three installments gathers eighty colour slides from the Municipal Archives of the City of Limassol, the artist's home city in southern Cyprus, to present a muted history of the island since the late 1970s' told through images of an annual carnival for which Limassolians increasingly dress Disney characters – thus contradicting the historic and political narrative of 'tradition' – and parade along the city's promenade. Cultural self-definition and celebration move by detour via the creeping path of Americanization, which today barely registers as such. As the artist puts it, 'The carnival parade is a revelation of everything we would like to be, of everything we know we cannot be, and of everything we cannot afford to accept that we are'.

The follow-up episode, *Never Land*, deploys photographs taken for Cyprus's leading daily broadsheet, *Phileleftheros*, during the 1990s, a transitional decade for the country – of political reform, modernization and exorcizing of old ghosts. The form of the work (135 colour slides is determined by the archive itself, which exists without a before and after, hovering poetically in indeterminate historical space, since the newspaper's earlier holdings were destroyed at the end of the 1980s and all new entries to its library since 2000 have been digital. The concluding chapter of trilogy, *I Land*, is also the bridge to a new sequence of projects that Panayiotou is currently researching at the Press and Information Office in Nicosia, a state library whose holdings record the presidential and ministerial activities of the island. *I Land* documents the seventeen-year period of Archbishop Makarios III's rule as the first President of Cyprus after the departure of the British in 1960. Here we move further back in history as we progress through Panayiotou's narrative, returning to the present via past.

There are no ends and no beginnings in Panayiotou's practice, only proliferation – new stones unturned and new paths to explore. History is a data mine, a nightmare from which we are trying to wake but also a dream to which we continually return.

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