

HARIS EPAMINONDA

Haris Epaminonda interviewed by Francesca Gavin
Twin Magazine, Issue 20
2019

There is nothing obvious about Haris Epaminonda's artwork. Whether working with installation, collage, sculpture or film – or most likely an amalgam of all of these – her art exudes atmosphere. Stories hover around her spaces but the action is always over and unclear. Her audience enters spaces filled with found busts, vintage photographs, small super 8 film fragments, plinths and pedestals as if they had invaded the stage of a play. The Cypriot artist lives in Berlin, after years training in London at Chelsea, Kingston and the RCA. She has had major exhibitions at the Secession in Vienna, Documenta in Kassel, Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice, Modern Art Oxford and is represented by the well-respected Rodeo gallery. What has always tied her work together is a very unique visual language that is haunting and considered. Her large screen film work Chapters recall edges of Jodorowsky, while her ongoing series of sculptural spaces (now on volume 24) that combine the strange classicism of John Fowles' novel *The Magus* with the visual history of modernism. The artist opened up her studio space, brimming with red Chinese vessels and neo-classical objects, to talk about improvisation, space and the landscape of Cyprus.

FG: You began making collage work. How did that process start happening? Looking at your work over the past decade it felt that became a method which expanded into so many different mediums.

HE: After finishing studies in London in 2003, I moved back to Cyprus for about 3 years. During that time, I oftentimes found refuge at a local second hand bookshop, where I started collecting old travel books and magazines. I'd tear out pages from those old books and magazines, placing them on the floor, and eventually started cutting through them and layering them up, juxtaposing one over the other. I experimented a lot. Over time the possibilities became clearer to me. Collage seemed like a very natural process. It was as if the distance I felt towards these b/w images (from another time and place) I was led to reimagine, reconstruct a more familiar setting, something that I could relate to, that I could connect with. These images evoked memories of home, my childhood. It took two or three years working in this

process until I could see a group of collages coming together. When I started using found colour images later on, the interventions were more subtle. A slight shift or a cut, replaced by color or another form or image, would be sufficient in altering the perception of that very same image.

FG: Eventually it felt like you would barely touch a found image, just recontextualize it. Rather than cutting up the image, it's almost like you cut up space.

HE: Yes, a simple intervention in the image would transform the represented space within it, changing its architecture. The collages became propositions for alternative realities, spaces, or imaginary sculptures and situations. These collages led me to work in actual, physical spaces - geometric shapes that appeared first in the collages translated into structures and architectural interventions 'cutting' through space. I started introducing objects and thinking about spatial relations between images and objects.

FG: Is this something that you script before the exhibition or you're literally improvising things in space?

HE: Most of it is improvised.

FG: Wow, I'm really surprised. One of the things that really hits you is the way you use architecture. Let's say the corner of a wall or a support column or whatever seems so part of the installation that you've made. It's wild to think that you've improvised that or created that in situ. So, installing is hugely important for you?

HE: I usually build architectural models of the space, to get a feeling for dimensions and proportions and to understand what needs to happen inside the space. Some sort of urgency builds up. I start to imagine a specific scenography. Apart from any major architectural interventions that need to be planned and completed in advance, or any support structures or other sculptural elements that I develop during this affair, the rest happens while installing. Once I am in the space, I am constantly moving and shifting around the various objects and elements, composing and recomposing to find a kind of gravitation point - like a compass that needs adjustment to help you navigate across the ocean. It's a physical and intense process. Colour, light, mood, movement, and precision of placement, all are playing a role. It is an intuitive action, one that allows me to test the limits of the space. During this time many surprises and chances occur. When everything is set, there remains still a feeling of vagueness, a faint question mark hovering in the air.

FG: You work felt really more architectural from the moment you created an entire house as an installation in Documenta, in collaboration with your partner Daniel Gustav Cramer. Things felt reduced in the space. The architecture reinforced the ideas of

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classicism within your image choices or even the way you were working with planks or columns. Do you think it changed how you make work?

HE: We never before had the chance to work so extensively with a space. We transformed the offices of a former train station, three floors housing 15 individual rooms. We changed most, built walls, doors, closed walkways and windows. A few places we kept as they were. We kept the corridors, stairs and the attic as they were to integrate a glimpse of the history of the space.

FG: *It was a weird location - a random building at the back of a train station.*

HE: Very much so. The first thing we decided upon was “Let’s close any window or other opening to the outside, so that the viewer enters a disconnected and seemingly other realm.” While preparing, we were talking about tone, color, mood, but we never really showed each other exactly what we are going to bring, what we are making. We wanted that sort of spontaneity to happen on location. When installing the pieces we both felt like we were choreographing an exhibition acting like a single character, a single voice. We decided on the works upon entering the first room as that which sets the scene: a small calendar hanging on the wall with just the name of the month ‘June’ written on it giving a sense of time, an image half hidden behind a pedestal indicating a place, and a metal stick resting diagonally on the wall, a placeholder, a punctuation. From there, we stepped into the next rooms led inside a maze, shaping the experience along the way. That’s how we built it up to the attic and back to the beginning.

FG: *You have this muted, 1950s palette. Even in your last show at the Vienna Secession, there’s a sense of you touching on a historicized color. What draws you to the palette?*

HE: Living on the island as a child...I was absorbing the landscape. The sun, the earth and the sand, and so many ruins, all over the island. Nature eats away all surfaces and elements exposed -and yet the sun’s movement influences the existing colors at different times of the day continuously. The light atmosphere changes drastically in the morning and evening hours. When I close my eyes and think of Cyprus, the garden of my grandmother, the beach, I see specific light, shadows, colors. Certain colour combinations, certain contrasts can bring magic to a moment. At Secession I wanted the viewer to enter a white washed interior space. The space was both as glistening bright as the day yet then again all vistas and clues pointed towards the night.

FG: *Sometimes the work can almost feel like a set, almost as though the objects are your actors. The human is there, but it’s off stage. Is that theatricality intentional?*

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HE: When I start working, I have nothing more than a vague feeling. At first I gather different objects and images. Eventually there will be a moment where all these different elements come together. Each time I am setting up an exhibition, I travel with a lot of objects and not much of finished pieces. There is no list of works, just lists of objects – and many of those objects never become works.

FG: *This explains why there are not many catalogues of your work out there! There are some recurrent kinds of objects. Grecian busts and pieces of statuary, which are often facsimiles I'm assuming?*

HE: They're usually found replicas. For me, each object is perhaps like a line in a poem, floating, disconnected. I might combine a vase from China, with a Greek bust. I do think of them more as acting elements being part of a whole.

FG: *You have been increasingly adding Oriental elements, the Japanese and Chinese things. How did that first start happening for you?*

HE: I am not quite sure how or why, but I have been obsessed for years with Asian antique ceramics. My mother on the other hand, has been a member of the Cyprus Ikebana Sogetsu association for the last 25 years or so. In her excursions around the island, she was collecting branches and bushes and other materials she would find interesting for her flower arrangements. On her returns from longer travels, China, Japan, India, Africa, she would bring with her all these fascinating objects made with fine craftsmanship. Home for me was a cabinet of curiosities and it functioned as my mother's testing ground, an ever transforming environment. Growing up in this surrounding, it would drive my imagination wild. Only the last few years I actually understood more how much impact this had on me. I guess that's where I learned to respect the objects in my work for what they are. When I use such objects, I don't like to alter them, but to re-contextualise them, to activate them, to give them new life.

FG: *You have a lot of objects in your studio. Do they all end up in your work?*

HE: Most of them for sure. Some of these objects though I'm probably never going to use.

FG: *Tell me about Chapters, the larger film installation work you made. It felt different to the Super 8 fragments you insert into your installations.*

HE: Chapters is a 16mm film filmed in Cyprus and completed in 2013. It is a four-hour long, four-channel

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audiovisual installation with the projection screens running independently and in a non- consecutive order, each about an hour long. There is no linear storyline as the screens and sound are asynchronous. Love, longing, afterlife and rituals are a few of the matters touched upon throughout the film. Many ideas developed out of continuous conversations and concerns, which I shared for quite some years with a good friend of mine and collaborator who lives and works in Cyprus and who runs a non-profit Art Center in the heart of Nicosia. Meanwhile, I was at that time reading *The Divine Comedy* by Dante, which though I never managed to finish, I found really fascinating.

FG: *Whoever goes beyond Purgatory anyway?*

HE: In the scenario and drawings I was beginning to sketch out, I included several scenes from the tormented souls of *Inferno*. Dante's X ascent of Mount Purgatory found embodiment through the several depictions of a small triangularly-shaped mountain, located inside the UN zone. More and more I begun envisioning my own fantasy world inspired as well by Greek mythology, the films of Pasolini and Paradjanov, the frescoes of Fra Angelico and so on. Though it's not a film about Cyprus, it is in some ways also for me a portrait of the island, this mystical and troubled place I will always call home. The portrayal of remote landscapes and abandoned sites gives the film X a sense of timelessness, meanwhile the performers being both local and foreigners, were mostly amateurs with the exception of a few X professional actors, and were all living and working on the island.

HE: Through making *Chapters*, I felt I got much closer to its reality and complexity.

FG: *So fantasy made you closer to reality. Let's finish with the idea of composition in, because it seems so central. Your approach reminds me of drawing - the reduction almost to line. Would you agree?*

HE: Yes, I often feel like I am drawing into space. And because drawing mostly happens automatic, quite spontaneously, I feel much connected to this process. In the end it all becomes an experience.