

In the Realm of Superreal: an Interview with Phillip Tsiaras

by Victor Tsilonis

translated by Violetta Tsitsiliani

In October 2009 the Photography Museum of Thessaloniki presented for the first time in Greece a big retrospective of the work of Philip Tsiaras, the renowned international artist of Greek Macedonian origin who lives and works in New York City as a parallel event of the 50th Thessaloniki International Film Festival. The exhibition presented more than 200 selected works of the artist from 1971 to today, thus covering the entire scope of his photographic oeuvre. The interview took place on Thursday 19 November 2009, shortly after the artist himself presented his work to the public, with the kind assistance of his cousin and attorney-at-law in Thessaloniki, Mr. Vasilis Mpatzogiannis; in the interview Phillip Tsiaras expresses *inter alia* his views on arts, law, justice, the life of immigrants and the Macedonian issue.

Victor Tsilonis: First of all, I would like to thank you for giving us an interview. Your collection presented during the 50th Thessaloniki International Film Festival at the Photography Museum of Thessaloniki is called “Superreal” and, hence, would like to ask you about the relation between ‘superreal’ and ‘transparent’. Because it seems that your exhibitions the last few years are almost exclusively focused on the issue of ‘transparency’.

Phillip Tsiaras: It’s true. The last retrospective exhibitions I have made have had the word ‘transparent’ in them as part of the theme. Because it had more to do with painting and sculpture which dealt with clear glass and mirrored glass, which is about transparency, i.e. the mirror, and also because many of the paintings I was working with had layers of information, transparently, that collectively made a painting. So this is why these works had transparency as their subject, they present the history of my photography. There is plenty of transparency here. Transparent meaning. Because what you see is what it actually is.

V.T.: Apart from ‘transparent mirrors’ you had also another exhibition called ‘glassy sultans’.

intellectum

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Phillip Tsiaras: The glassy sultans are a series of paintings that I made trying to depict the look of glass on paper. I tried to find a formula, a technique, for making the look of glass, because I am making a lot of glass now, on paper. And I made them in Istanbul where the sultan is the only thing that they want to look up those people. They want to look at sultans night and day. So I gave them some glassy sultans. But glassy vases is the main part, it's a technique that I invented which is like a transfer with an acrylic thing that looks when it's done like glass on paper. So I did the glassy sultans in Istanbul, the glassy vases in New Mexico and the glassy wine I am doing right here in Thessaloniki!

V.T.: Let's talk about this technique. Nobody has invented it before, it's yours, it's new, right?

Phillip Tsiaras: No. Everything I do is mine because I never studied art. So whatever I do 'by mistake' is mine. Like discovering rubber, you know.

V.T.: But did you ever have any difficulties because of the fact that you did not study the arts in order to get into galleries?

Phillip Tsiaras: It was a great advantage for me not to study. I wanted to go to Law School. It was a great advantage to study English literature and stuff like that because it gave me broad range of information. So, I can now talk about anything from mythology to jurisprudence. In others words an education is the most important thing an artist needs. An artist does not need to know how to make a matrix to make a bronze, he knows how to understand the matrix of the universe, and therefore he can make everything. He does not need anything else.

Vassilis Mpatzogiannis: And one could argue that while too many laws are needed in order to impose a certain morality, art can create a certain stream of morality and import rules of civilisation into society.

Phillip Tsiaras: Certainly. Look what the filmmakers can do. One image can change the world. Look at the famous picture, for instance, which was took during the Vietnam person with the person who was shot in the head. It changed the whole Vietnam War. Hence, politically and culturally speaking, they are married in a very important way. Arts is not just truth and beauty like the ancient Greeks thought, but it is also politics. It is also the truth, which jurisprudence is all about.

V.T.: Going back now again to your obsession with the notion of transparent, I was wondering what's the relation of 'transparent' with the quite a few family pictures you are presenting in this exhibition.

Phillip Tsiaras: In the family album, what you see is what you get. You see a very fresh, lively family. Very much close, knit, in the United States, a foreign land, that

intellectum

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

participate in the fantasy of the sun and create a whole body of work around the daily life of the family album. With a little bit of a twist.

V.T.: Yes, and this twist is often related to ancient sculptures.

Phillip Tsiaras: Immigrants when they leave their country they have no money. When they arrive in the new world and make some money, then they are able to buy some of the historical things from the culture they left. In others words they are able to buy their culture. They are able to buy statues and create the history of where they came from and miss in America. And that's why the house has so many of these kinds of things because they are trying to recreate something that they have lost and it hurts them.

V.T.: So you're not mocking this behaviour.

Phillip Tsiaras: No, I am not mocking. It is only kitsch in the sense that they don't have real replicas made in marble from some foundry, but that's not what is important is their desire to have a relationship with the culture that they are no longer living in. They want to recreate their Greek environment in another country and can afford to do it. Whereas, where they came from, it was impossible. You know, it was impossible, if you think also that many of them left during the war. You have to have time and peace to be able to appreciate an object of art. If you are running on a horse away from somebody, you are not going to be looking to buy sculptures.

V.T.: You seem that you had had quite a unique daily life in the United States, and thus I was wondering whether this 'uniqueness' you and your family seem to have experienced in the United States, had ever caused you any troubles with the police or the justice system.

Phillip Tsiaras: No, no, I mean that immigrants who leave their countries, not just Greece alone, usually, at least from the generation of my parents, are very conscious of the New World and its laws. They don't go there to break laws, on the contrary, they go there to become Americans, in every sense imaginable. But, the beauty of America is that you can maintain your identity. For instance an Albanian in this country has a big interest in becoming a Greek and blending in, because he is kept outside, whereas in America the immigrants like their status. And America is a country that gives you the right and interest to pursue yourself, and does not require that you become a yankee. They are very happy to be yankees and also have Greek Americans and Russians too. This is what United States is all about and what makes it a unique and great country. What makes it great is that those people together somehow they manage to be Americans, even though they are all from everywhere else. In a country like Greece, which is very homogenous and all Orthodox etc., there is a bigger pressure for Albanians or Bulgarians or Muslims etc. to become part of the

Intellectum interdisciplinary journal

✉ 2 Ermou str., 546 25 Thessaloniki, GREECE

🌐 www.intellectum.org e-mail: intellectum@intellectum.org

intellectum

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

society completely and lose their identity. And there is a big difference because the United States is really a melting pot where the people keep their identity.

V.T.: I haven't seen any photographs in this exhibition even remotely related to justice, but I've been wondering, because this interview will come up in a website for lawyers, whether justice had ever concerned you at some point of your work.

Phillip Tsiaras: Well, justice is a philosophical subject. Jurisprudence is something that is applied to the philosophy of law. Whether there is any justice in the world, is really a very debatable subject. In my opinion there is not much justice if you look around and see what the world is all about. However, in civilised societies, which Greece is one, more or less, justice appears always as an issue. I am actually making an article now for a magazine and the title of it is called 'Greece: a brothel without a pimp' (laughing).

V.T.: Where is it going to be published?

Phillip Tsiaras: It is going to be published in a major magazine. If I tell you now it will not be correct. However, the point of the matter is, even in civilised country like this, where there are laws and legal system, if you really want to get justice it may take you ten years to get something which is ought to be done in one second in a muslim court of law. You stole something? Give it back or we will cut off your hand. Here in Greece I have been robbed in a financial office with 5.000 guys with ties and is going to take me years to take my money back. Because the court cases are backed up, not as much that they are in America, much more so, and sometimes in order to get the justice that you talk about, it can take something like five or six years, or ten years, or maybe never. Look at this guy who was in Siemens. Where is he? He is not coming to Greece for extradition, and why is that? Money talks.

V.T.: But do you think that the justice system in the United States is better than in Greece?

Phillip Tsiaras: No, I am saying that the court system is quicker in the United States. In other words, to get from A to Z in a legal brief in the United States is much faster and they also have time limitations. You cannot go beyond a certain time without arbitration. I know something about the Law because I thought maybe to become a lawyer once. But since my cousin became a lawyer I said 'leave it' (laughing).

V.T.: Did you ever have problems with your artwork? I mean issues of copyright infringement and, hence, need for protection.

Phillip Tsiaras: I had a problem getting an artwork into Greece. If you want to here some justice let me tell you a little story. I rent an apartment in Kolonaki, and then send a painting to myself through UPS. It was stopped at Customs Office. The

Intellectum interdisciplinary journal

✉ 2 Ermou str., 546 25 Thessaloniki, GREECE

🌐 www.intellectum.org e-mail: intellectum@intellectum.org

intellectum

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Customs official said to me "How do we know that this painting is for you?" I answered "I am the person, I can send you know a fax of my ID and a letter saying that this painting is mine, that I am putting it in a house I have rent in Greece, it belongs to me, it is signed by me and it's for me. Why should I put a big value and pay a VAT, a value added tax, to something that I have myself made?". I said to the guy in Customs "Would you do this? Would you tax yourself for nothing?". He said "that's not the point, the point is how do I know that this is you". I said that "this is me". And then he said "I think you should send this painting to the National Gallery (Alexandros Soutzos Museum) to find its value". I answered "the value of the painting is high, but that does not make any difference. It's my painting; I am sending it to myself so that I can have it. Why should I pay a tax for that?" This is Greece a little bit, you know. Some guy who has nothing to do, a public official, who can ruin your day for nothing.

V.T.: You talked a little bit earlier about the difference living in the United States while you are Greek or Albanian or Muslim or Chinese. How do you feel about the so-called Macedonian issue, taking into account that you were born in Macedonia, right?

Phillip Tsiaras: No I was born in America. Macedonian is my family origin.

V.T.: So, having a Macedonian origin and being in the US, how do you feel about the Macedonian issue?

Phillip Tsiaras: First of all let's qualify the word 'Macedonia', it's a very big question. I am Macedonian of the Macedonia of Greece, *the real Macedonia*. Not the Macedonia of Skopje, not the adulterated Macedonia. There is only one Macedonia and there is in Greece. That's the Macedonia I am from. Therefore, how do I feel to be a Macedonian? I feel very proud, that is why I made this exhibition first here, not in Athens, as I just said in my speech, but first here where I am from, with the people they know, love and respect me, and where for the first time they get the real first fresh exhibition before it's been already in Athens and written about or somewhere else. They invited me here because I am a child of Macedonia and I did it.