

The Greek Australian who returned from Vietnam

Melbourne-born-and-bred George Papadimas creates cutting-edge art in the largest urban capitals of the world

PANOS APOSTOLOU

Over the last nine years, George Papadimas has been spending his time between Ho Chi Minh and New York, carrying his experiences through his works, which are currently on display at the fortyfivedownstairs gallery in Melbourne's CBD. George gave an exclusive interview to Neos Kosmos, sharing some of his deepest thoughts and artistic views.

Neos Kosmos (NK): How connected do you feel with your Greek background?
George Papadimas (GP): My father comes from a village called Athamano and my mother from a neighbouring village called Kapsala in the region of Epirus. My father emigrated to Australia in the early '60s - with my mother following him on her own whilst carrying three children shortly after. I am the youngest of five children and I was born in Australia. I have only been to Greece twice, yet I would like to travel back more often.

NK: Whereabouts in Melbourne did you spend your childhood? Was it hard for a second generation Greek to develop his artistic side in public?
GP: I grew up in the northern suburb of Reservoir and as much as it was hard as a child to assimilate as a second generation Greek Australian, I was fortunate enough to become involved with the early wave of graffiti writers in Melbourne in the early '80s. It was this passion for art and a strong subculture that was not socio-racial oriented that helped me develop my love for creativity and art. I left school to take up an apprenticeship, then decided to put myself back in school, finished and studied a degree in Fine Art (Painting) at RMIT - I finished with Distinction - the first person in my immediate family to go to university.

NK: You haven't exhibited your work in Melbourne since 2003. Why is that?
GP: As I had left Australia and relocated to Vietnam, I felt somewhat distanced

from Melbourne. During this time, I tried to put a stronger emphasis on continuing to develop and exhibit my work and ideas within my current locality, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I was represented by an international gallery in Vietnam, the Galerie Qyush. Living and working in an emerging country can, somewhat paradoxically, give you access to a larger assortment of international people and opportunities that might otherwise not present themselves in a more developed country like Australia. It was towards this that I aimed to develop and grow.

NK: Does a local artist need to have an international career first in order to secure a place in Melbourne's art map?
GP: I don't believe you need to have an international career to find a place within any art map locality. However, the more internationally you have yourself established will undoubtedly give you more access and opportunity."

NK: Why Vietnam? What are the things that connect you and Ho Chi Minh City? Was there something special you discovered there that made you want to stay?
GP: The connection to Vietnam was very 'loose'. An opportunity to live and work in Vietnam was presented to me by my then partner-now wife, and we both decided to take it up. The things I discovered there were a sense of possibility and that anything is achievable. Vietnam offered me a creative outway that might have been more difficult to find in Melbourne and it was these avenues that allowed me to further develop my work towards a more sculptural practice. For example, I particularly enjoyed working with local artisans making metal sculptures that up until that time, I had not been able to afford to make in my hometown. I learned Vietnamese and we worked side-by-side. I lived and worked in Vietnam for seven years (2005-2012), and from there I moved to New York City for two years and relocated back to Melbourne towards the end of 2014. I participated in two group shows in NYC and found it an incredible experience to be in a city where so much of my favourite art and strong influences reside.

NK: Ho Chi Minh City, Seoul, NYC, Sydney, Melbourne. Why not Europe? Where do you think the global centre of art is today?

GP: I do not think there is a global art centre. I do believe there are many global art points. The current trend and importance of art fairs means the global art centre is now fluid and ever changing. I would love the opportunity to work in Europe, but at this point the opportunity has not emerged.

NK: Athens, and Greece in general, have been at the centre of international attention during the last five years because of the severe financial and social crisis. Do you believe that this type of crisis creates new artistic movements? Has Australia's recession of the early '90s affected you?

GP: I think all crises influence artistic moments in time, and certain artists respond and comment on those moments. But it will not be until further in the future when we look back on these times that we see really clearly any artistic movements which may have been generated from these crises. Because I do not comment directly on socio-political issues within my art the Australian recession has not been influential on me from an artistic perspective. As per all artists, the investment in and opportunities for art can be affected in times of recession.

NK: Have you ever tried to exhibit your creations in Greece? Is there a Hellenic influence in your work?
GP: I have not yet tried to exhibit my work in Greece although I do think about trying to make a stronger connection to Greece and my

Greek heritage via my art. There are some galleries in Athens I think are great and I have tried to make contact with. There is not a Hellenic influence to my art per-se, yet you could draw some commonality with Pythagoras and the early Pythagoreans and their beliefs in the metaphysical and mystical nature of mathematical logic.

NK: You are saying that in your current exhibition, 'greyscale spectrum', you use "multiple computer programs to manipulate colour and numerical information". Could you explain your method, as well as

which artists have you been inspired by?

GP: The method I used to create my current series of work was one of strict process. I formulated a preconceived set of rules and methods and followed them out accordingly for each separate work. As with my previous work - rather than creating a structural form based on numbers, within these works, I used the inherent 'pixel' information of each typed number (0 through 9) as the basis. I have been influenced by many artists and musicians and art styles: Sol Lewitt, Carl Andre, Steve Reich, minimal and conceptual art. The inspiration for this series of works was the Italian artist Piero Manzoni, and a project he created in 1961 titled 'Living Sculptures'.

NK: You say that your intention is to create a body of work that is free from the arbitrary qualities that art construction/production can seem to hold. Do you think that today's art (and artistic expression) have boundaries or taboos?

GP: I think art has no boundaries or taboos. Some art was about shock value

while other art speaks of issues in a shocking way. The term 'artistic expression' legitimises and breaks the boundaries of what normally may be considered a boundary or taboo. Personally, I have tried to strip as much randomness away from my own practice and what I do, in an attempt to create something that becomes universal and can communicate across cultures.

NK: Do you believe that art is for everyone and all the social classes?

GP: Yes I believe art is for everyone and all social classes. Certain art may be misunderstood or unorthodox, but it is ultimately there and open for all.

NK: Where do you see yourself in 10 years? What are your plans, your future projects?

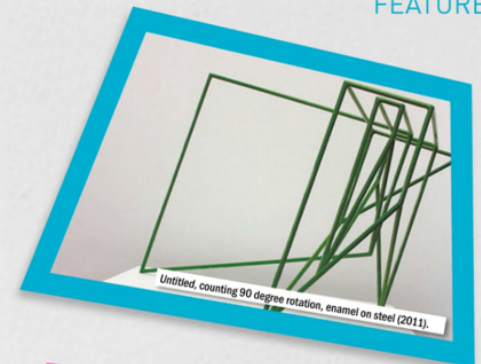
GP: If I look back on the past decade, anything can happen within ten years; I did not expect to live and work overseas for the last nine years so am happy to be open to opportunity to see what comes on offer. I am enjoying being back in Melbourne with my own family and hope I can continue evolving my projects and practice. I hope to develop a stronger public sculptural and artistic presence in Melbourne and Australia. My goals include the support of a commercial gallery, and also outdoor public sculptural pieces. I currently have works in the Montalto Sculpture Prize. Let's

say a 10-year dream for me would be to achieve those things in Australia as well as have my work in a gallery in Greece.

* The exhibition will run until 19 April. For more information visit www.georgepapadimas.com or www.fortyfivedownstairs.com/events/george-papadimas



Untitled, falling - paired, enamel on steel (2013).



Untitled, counting 90 degree rotation, enamel on steel (2011).



Untitled, counting, cmyk, pigment print, Museo Cotton Rag (2010).



George with his children Poli (Polixeni) and Toi (Apostoli) in the Montalto Sculpture Prize Park in Mornington Peninsula.

Untitled (fold), enamel on steel (2012-2013).