

Stratos Kalafatis's "Journal 1998-2002" The Diary of a Greek Photographer

Contemporary Greek photography is not what one could characterize as 'well-known' in today's art scene but there are undoubtedly cases of Greek photographers who have attained in producing engrossing work and have managed to exhibit it abroad; one of these cases is that of the 40-year old Stratos Kalafatis.

Kalafatis didn't start out his career as a photographer but rather as an athlete who at some point in his life, out of luck, choice or coincidence decided to devote himself to the art of photography and has been doing that since 1993. One of his most original works is that entitled "Journal 1998-2002", in summary a series of photographs of people, faces, animals, places and objects he took on the island of Skopelos within four years.

Using a special technique, he transforms up to an extent, the real into the surreal, reminding us of the images we see while dreaming or even daydreaming. The invisible and usually ignored uniqueness of simple, ordinary moments of our lives reveal their concealed magic, the one we tend to neglect or forget. Stratos Kalafatis doesn't keep a written diary; his diary is a picture one...

INTERVIEW

You've studied physical education but then something made you turn to photographic studies. How did that change occur? Why did you choose to study in the USA instead of Greece?

There have always been parallel paths. I grew up in the countryside and the technical autonomy of photography allowed me from very early on to make pictures as well as dreams. After I stopped my career in sports, I found myself in the States; my instinct and my conviction made me feel that this was the place that would offer me, in a short time, experiences and information necessary for my future.

Do you believe that there are differences between the Greek and foreign photographic reality?

Greece has made important steps during the last years. However, more time and effort is required for Greece to exist on the global photographic map.

What would you say, in general, about the Greek photographic reality?

There are relatively new-established institutions that focus mainly on exhibiting and try constantly to prove that their existence and durability is necessary. There is no planning and no long-term strategy for contemporary Greek production that could function as a passport abroad.

There have been cases when I asked foreign photographers to name Greek photographers and received no reply. Why do you think this happens?

The huge difference in Greek photography is that there are no photographers who produce personal work with professional permanence and continuation. That is, there are no photographers who can devote all their time and energy to their artistic work; whereas for most photographers of the world this is considered *de facto*.

You've exhibited abroad. What was the people's reaction there to your works?

The reaction of the people abroad doesn't really differ from that of the Greek audience. What is interesting and makes me feel optimistic is the positive response of the curators who organize festivals, photographic projects et al; this proves that despite all our weaknesses, there are works that can stand equivalently to works abroad.

How did the pictures for your “Journal” evolve? Are they ordinary, daily moments that inspired you?

They evolved from a four-year systematic, daily observance and documentation of my everyday life. It is a kind of a diary that is composed of visual thoughts and notes about space and people.

Do the people you photograph feel they're participating in something special? What do they comment once they see the pictures printed? How do you feel about these shootings?

The people I photograph are all “familiar” but not necessarily friends. Some of them I never meet again; but with others I have a long-term contact and this creates a different, evolving dialogue during the photographing that can be seen in the pictures afterwards.

I try to explain the reasons that make me choose specific pictures, what would make them more interesting and usually I decide to take more pictures. It is always like an auto-portrait procedure, a way to count time.

There was a very positive review in a leading Greek newspaper about your “Journal”, how did you feel about that?

It's always a pleasure and very optimistic to read a good review (not necessarily a positive one) from people you appreciate. You don't feel that lonely when some people understand profoundly what you're doing and when they manage to depict your weaknesses.

On the other hand, there have been cases when people commented that although they liked most of your pictures, they couldn't understand what made you include certain photographs in the book. What do you think about that?

It's fair and democratic when a work receives different criticism and approached in various ways. Also, the same work can be perceived differently in an exhibition, a projection or a book. Quite often there are images in an edition that function as bonds that help in the reading.

Is there a demand in Greece for editions such as the “Journal”?

I'm not the most suitable person to answer that. Somebody like Stavros Petsopoulos, the director of AGRA editions (most photographic titles in Greece have been published by AGRA) can say what he's selling and why to the Greek market. As far as the “Journal” is concerned, it was well-received both in Greece and France; a difficult and important attainment for a Greek edition.

Sometimes I feel that the (exaggerated) analysis of a photographic work is redundant. What do you believe?

The analysis has really nothing to do with the work itself. Usually, it is required by the “market” and by those who need to read something in order to cover up their inability to understand the work.

What is Art for you?

Art like religion is a non-utile human invention. But, at the same time, they are very useful to us to better cope with great truths such as love, life and death.

How easy or difficult is it in our days to combine professional, non-artistic photographic work with your personal, artistic one?

It's difficult but it's an indispensable evil. I try to give more time and energy to my personal work. There are many examples of talented photographers who dreamed of artistic creation but were ultimately "devoured" by their professional obligations.

Finally, what are you working on at the moment?

I recently completed the project Saga that took place in Japan as part of the EU-Japan program. I just returned from the 10th Venice Biennial of Architecture; I presented images from the Aegean Sea as part of the Greek participation. Finally, I continue taking photos with the same passion and more agony, taking thus notes of my life and of the people around me. I have the feeling that as time goes by my images become less lyrical and have more and more within them the scent of love and death.