

Infinite Nostalgia

What you see is what you got in the installations of Yannis Ziogas

By Patricia Rosoff

If the fine arts have anything to teach, it is that where you "stand" has everything to do with what you "see" — that the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, even tasting) are in the largest sense a matter of position in space.

What art knows — what it counts on — is that sense perception has the power to catapult you to the vivid (and timeless) world of memory, and thereby reconstitute events and feelings forgotten in the waking world of everyday life.

It is by tapping into the vividness of the dreaming world that art finds its voice. It is the means by which artistic expression takes on both power and momentum and finds its place as a medium between the artist's intent and the viewer's perception.

If there is magic to be had in the world of art, then, this is it — the conductor's magic, that is, the magic of composition.

Certainly, this is Yannis Ziogas' magic, as he spills his sprightly, fantastical epic tales into the plainsong arena of Wesleyan's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery. It should come as no surprise that Ziogas is Greek — not as you look at the way he composes his site-specific installation, not as you pay attention to the narrative he provides.

Ziogas was born in Greece in 1962. He received a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Athens. He attended the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in 1988 and earned his M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts (New York) in 1991.

Ziogas has exhibited widely in Greece and

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abroad. This is his first solo exhibition in the United States, and represents a culmination of his 10-year career. It is jointly sponsored by Wesleyan's Classical Studies Department and the Office of the Dean of the Arts and Humanities; it is funded in part by the J. F. Costopoulos Foundation and Betoil Corporation (both of Athens, Greece) and in part by the Samuel Silipo '85 Distinguished Visitor's Fund.

In the Zilkha Gallery, Ziogas has created a work that evokes timeless themes in Greek literature and poetry couched in a wry send-up

of modernist utopianism. He accomplishes this by an acrobatic relation of forms in space, fashioning images suggestive of human dramas of departure and return, risk and adventure — in short, an *Odyssey*.

Ziogas' construction is not monolithic; it has more of the character of a mobile. It does not stand on the ground, like conventional sculpture, but is mounted to the walls and strung from the rafters — suspended in space by colored cords.

What you encounter as you enter the gallery's 90-foot-long exhibition space is more like a hobbyist's model of a constellation than an installation — complete with miniature landfalls and planets, bridges and chasms. These are anchored together with string and wooden dowels; constructed out of hardboard, basswood and paper maché.

Small human figures (toy soldiers) constitute the spare population of this world — and the viewer moves through it like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians. Each little sentinel peers out through tiny binoculars, searching the distance — looking for landfall, perhaps, or, just as Greek in character, scanning the horizon for homeward-returning ships.

Greek, too, is the consideration of lighting — the way the elements cast delicate, echoing shadows (like line drawings) on the walls of the gallery, like Plato's shadows on that hypothetical cave.

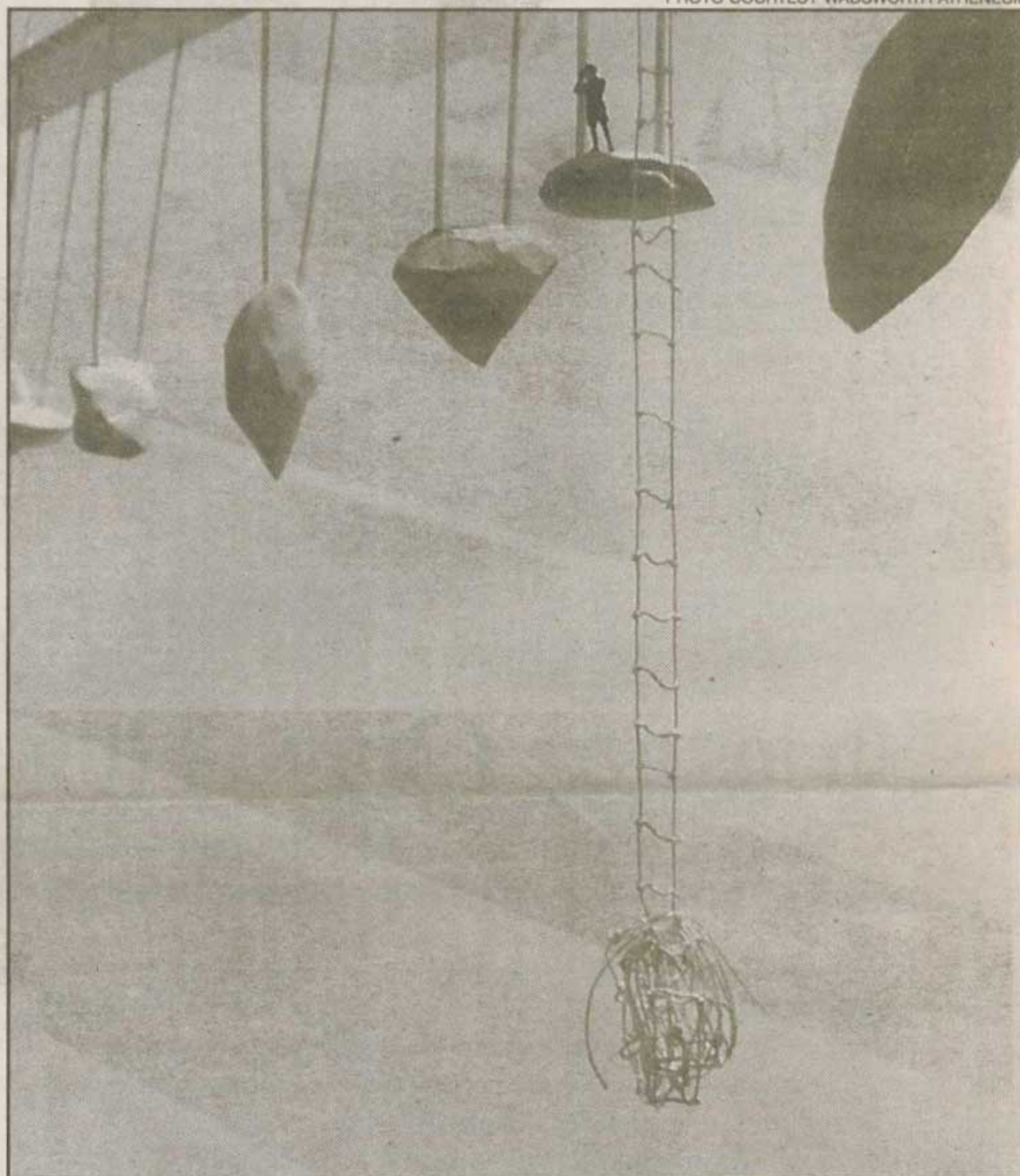
Ziogas' central concept is taken from both poetic and popular tradition — lyric poetry and comic book fantasy. The installation is framed as four interwoven "ballads": "The Ballad of the Lost Sight," "The Ballad of the Forgotten Tree," "The Ballad of the Toy Train of the New Agitatsia," and "The Achilles' Shield Ballad."

In "Lost Sight," a red toy soldier negotiates a gap-strewn network of white bridges and rope ladders. In "Forgotten Tree," a tightrope of wooden dowels skewers a series of honeycombed "planets" that sprout scruffy little "trees" of supermarket-fresh oregano.

The "Toy Train" underscores the whole in a straight line, running diagonally across the gallery. It employs an actual toy train (with a cargo of Henry Moore-like sculpture) chugging back and forth on a blue-painted track.

"Achilles' Shield" provides a decidedly more conceptual take on the notion of *odyssey*, since it is linked with an exhibit of related "shields" in Athens. (The journey in this instance is actual — the artist's own travel between Greece and America.)

The shield itself is like a cubist version of an architect's model — roughly resembling a violin case — constructed out of white foam board pegged with wooden dowels. This, too, is suspended in air, canted so that the viewer can see into, as well as around, its architecture. Small details — the dowels, a few hand-



A detail from "The Ballad of the Lost Sight." In the installations of Yannis Ziogas, we all take part in the *Odyssey*, a long adventurous journey, back to where we started.

whittled knobs — echo details in the other three ballads, but the character of this large-scale, floating sculpture is related to the 12 other iterations of legendary Shield on display in Athens.

How the whole thing (the four-part harmony of ballads) works is a matter of almost-musical juxtaposition — four distinctly separate sequences of "notes" interweaving with one another in space. The overriding effect is a dawning sense of what the Greeks called "nostalgia" — the yearning for home (or for the return to home) by the wayfaring adventurers that so deeply underlies Greek poetry and legend.

Ziogas' are sagas that cast us waist deep in the oceans of space. They reference comic book epics and the great narrative sagas of Greek literature at the same time, depending

on the confident, sprightly, pensive nature of the artist for their effects. His Giocometti-like forms make tongue-in-cheek reference to the invention and hopefulness of early modernism, even while he shrinks them to manageable size — critiquing that utopian spirit by looking at it from the wrong end of the telescope.

But Ziogas also toys with our childhood experience — and our sense of place in the world — in a way that feels like nothing I've seen before. I found this to be a genuinely moving exhibition — not to mention a charming one — wistful, long-sighted, and poetic.

Yannis Ziogas: *Ballads at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University, 283 Washington Terrace, Middletown, (860) 685-2684, runs through Oct. 20.*