

Grecian Yearn

Exploring the Continuing Allure of an Ancient Culture at Grimaldis

BY ROBERT SCHREUR

Symbols/Objects: Stories and Facts Untold

At the C. Grimaldis Gallery through Oct. 2

The influence of ancient-Greek culture is all around us, but perhaps Greek artists feel it most acutely, and most paradoxically. The civilization of Homer, Plato, Sophocles, and Euclid is more pervasive and more remote than ever. Democracy, economics, metaphysics, and tragedy are global institutions, but the culture that invented them is left to antiquarians to understand. Contemporary artists from Greece, who must imaginatively comprehend their world and the world of their past, find themselves in a culture that is present everywhere yet oddly inaccessible. The three Greek artists whose works are currently being shown at the C. Grimaldis Gallery meet this paradox with lively insight and individuality.

A large construction by Effie Havalopoulou that hangs at the rear of the gallery offers a metaphor for this situation. Three large paper panels are suspended from the ceiling. Two are white and contain nearly illegible Greek script in white paint. A third black panel bears dark handwriting, as well as sulfur-colored scrawls that gather toward the center to suggest a face. Light bulbs are embedded in the two white panels, illuminating the paper and making it seem as translucent as skin.

This work, entitled "Interactors," suggests a frightening symbiotic relationship between ancient Greece and the contemporary world. Either Greek heritage survives today on life-support alone, or contemporary culture is only a subcutaneous implant in the enduring body of the past. These unfurled scrolls recall our ever-tenuous relation to that past. Much of Sappho's poetry, for instance, is known today because the papyrus it was copied on was torn into strips and used to mummify the bodies of lesser Greek aristocrats; archeologists later discovered the strips and deciphered the writings. Havalopoulou's piece seems to ask whether ancient Greece endures as a living presence or a well-preserved corpse. In other pieces, she wraps small cotton cocoons in her work, implying perhaps that the past comes to us both as dead remains and as dormant seeds of an unknown future.

Yannis Ziogas uses technological rather

than biological themes in his surreal and whimsical exploration of Greek (and by implication, world) culture. He runs a toy electric train along a track shaped like an elongated infinity sign. It's surrounded by the derricks and trestles of childhood fantasy, now transformed into fantastic dream shapes in Technicolor. The flying machines that hover overhead might have been designed by Archimedes, had he read Roald Dahl.

Another work by Ziogas consists of computer-aided drawings corresponding to the 22 letters of the Greek alphabet (the alphabet itself being a Hellenic invention). The drawings show images of the artist in landscapes of conic sections, cultural detritus, and literary allusions to T.S. Eliot and Friedrich Hölderlin, the most Greek of German poets. If Ziogas' darker meanings remain undisclosed, the playful energy of the piece reveals a life inventively celebrating the contradictions of its time and place.

The most deeply realized works in the show are by Angelos Antonopoulos. Casts of human legs balance in a series of open metal frames. Legs appear elsewhere in schematic drawings and, most dramatically, in a large horizontal sculpture hung in the middle of the gallery. In several works, the legs are scorched, peeled, or otherwise ravaged, with wire armatures extending where they might have continued.

The legs always appear singly, but bluntly defined toes indicate whether each appendage is meant to be a left or right leg. The limbs seem oddly out of place without the missing half of their pair, like the inventory of a prosthetics warehouse. Their singularity raises questions. Is the missing leg the absent past, or are the sculptures themselves stranded artifacts of a lost time? The legs are squat and stout, suggesting they might have broken off statues of warriors. Are they amputated limbs in an army hospital from the Punic wars, or plaster casts of broken legs that have long since healed? Perhaps in our questioning we supply the missing legs, giving these powerful, haunted works the life they lack and inspire.

The exhibit, partly sponsored by the Foundation for Hellenic Culture, presents three Greek artists who have taken up the perennial problem of European culture and how its Grecian past relates to its multicultural present; in doing so they have fashioned distinctive, ingenious, intelligent works of art. If these pieces do not rise to the grandeur of the culture that engendered them, neither do they lose their persuasiveness of personal vision to a contemporary culture that might extinguish it. ■