

# Art

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**Lynn Hershman Leeson**

Interviewed by Isobel Harbison

**Curatorship**

Andrew Hunt

**Private Museums**

Aoife Rosenmeyer

**São Paulo · Riga**

Holly Willats · Chris McCormack

and wood have a flatness to them that is amplified by this mode of display. Drawing on comic-book characters and painted on old maps, bank notes and letters, these works are, ultimately, collages about queer American experience in the 1980s, the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Shown in this white-walled space, they lack the historical and cultural context through which their dense lexicon of political and historical references can be understood. The exhibition casts only a passing glance at Wojnarowicz's moving-image work, though it includes Super-8 footage recorded during trips to Mexico, some of which was later used in *A Fire in My Belly*, which is projected at a large scale in a small space, distorting its purpose as a filmic sketchbook and further complicating our perspective on this incomplete work.

A looped recording of Wojnarowicz reading texts with fury about queer bashing and the deaths of friends from AIDS (filmed for *Silence = Death*, 1990, Rosa von Praunheim's film about AIDS activism in New York) plays in an empty white room, underscoring the long-term impact of AIDS on Wojnarowicz's life and work. This transitional space, overlooking the waterfront, signals a shift in the exhibition from painting back to photography and print. The final two rooms bring together many of Wojnarowicz's hybrid photo-text works from the late 1980s and 1990s, in which AIDS and American homophobia are more readily identifiable as the artist's

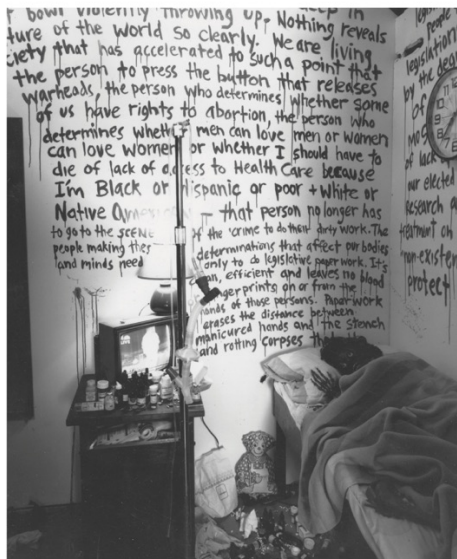
subject matter. In many of these works, printed text attacking particular politicians or religious leaders is overlaid on images of skeletal bodies or erotic scenes from gay porn films. Other works deal with loss outside language, including three of Wojnarowicz's photographs of the photographer Peter Hujar in his hospital bed immediately after his death. The hang is clean and spare; there is scant evidence of the posters, flyers and badges that might accompany an activist's life. As with the cathedral-like presentation of Wojnarowicz's paintings, this mode of display risks canonising the artist as a singular talent whose re-evaluation is long overdue. There is little room in this retrospective narrative for understanding the breadth of Wojnarowicz's politically engaged practice, in which a rich, queer network of friends and lovers played a crucial role, as collaborators, subjects and fellow activists living with AIDS (see Barbara Pollack's 'The Killing Machine', *AM224*).

Two exhibitions elsewhere in the city – 'Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins: The Installations of David Wojnarowicz' at PPOW Gallery in Chelsea (which represents the artist's estate) and 'The Unflinching Eye: The Symbolism of David Wojnarowicz', a display of archival objects, unpublished texts and plans for completed works at New York University's Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, where Wojnarowicz's archive is held – engage with the messy, erotic and earnest expansiveness of Wojnarowicz's practice. At the centre of 'The Unflinching Eye' is 'the magic box', a personal archive of totems acquired throughout his life, from dried flowers and prayer cards to toy soldiers and tweezers. Along with documentation relating to *You Killed Me First*, 1985, an installation and film work made with Richard Kern and Karen Finley, PPOW has faithfully recreated a set of large-scale installations from the 1980s and early 1990s, including most of the collaborative project *Lazaretto*, 1990. Statistical information about HIV and AIDS has been updated to reflect the current state of the crisis. *America: Heads of Family/Heads of State*, 1990, is the exhibition's centrepiece. Occupying a whole room, incorporating family photographs, twigs, dried leaves, a monstrous papier-mâché sculptural head, one of Hujar's books of photographs, letters, video footage from trips to Mexico City and children's toys, the installation is an absorbing statement of rage and resistance, a confrontation with the brutal effects of the partnership of familial rejection and state-supported homophobia in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Here we see the breadth of Wojnarowicz, the artist and the activist in context, his complicated practice and its legacy: chaotic, angry, sincere. ■

**Fiona Anderson** is a lecturer at Newcastle University; her book *Monks of the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and Cruising on New York's Abandoned Waterfront* will be published by University of Chicago Press in 2019.

**David Wojnarowicz**  
*Lazaretto*  
made in collaboration with Paul Marcus and Susan Pyzow at PPOW Gallery 1990

Arthur Rimbaud in New York 1978-79



## Athens Round-up

Rodeo • Ileana Tounta Contemporary Art Center • MIET

One year after Documenta 14 prompted visitors to 'learn from Athens', the city continues to exert a strange fascination over artists and curators, many of whom have either moved to the city or spend considerable amounts of time there. In recognition of the creative energy and openness of the city at a transformative moment, London's Rodeo gallery opened a new space in Athens in June. The choice of the port of Piraeus as the gallery's location signifies a desire to further the dialogue with different cultures, remain open to multiple subjectivities and shed light on hidden narratives. The new gallery is located in a former warehouse with high ceilings and thick



stone walls in which the architect has only minimally intervened. Against this imposing setting, the paintings of New York-based **Leidy Churchman**, which inaugurated the new space, looked startlingly unmonumental. Yet, despite their modest size, the paintings are complex, ambitious and far from tame. With a plethora of references from mythology to concrete poetry, these works celebrate life, instinctive knowledge and spiritual growth. The artist assumes the role of a storyteller who allows various, and at times conflicting, subjectivities to unfold.

One of the key works in the exhibition represents a snow lion, the national emblem of Tibet and one of the four dignities in Tibetan Buddhism. While the snow lion is gender neutral, it is often represented in Buddhist art as assimilating both the male and the female in one entity and is considered a symbol of power and joy. Perhaps this power and joy stems from being genderless and, therefore, alleviating the pressures of performing gender. Or it could result from the state of being in-between genders. Another painting capitalises on the idea of transformation – it depicts an antique dressing table. The reflection in the mirror is that of a zebra, a symbol of transformation and balance through the blending of opposites: black and white, ying and yang.

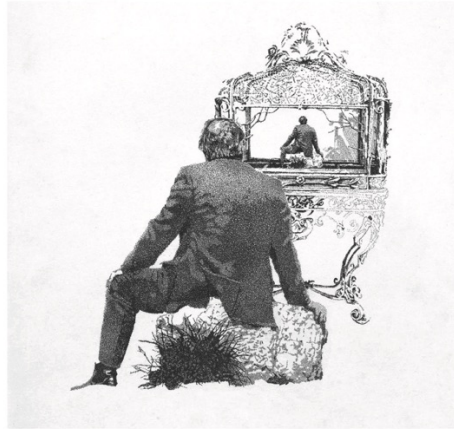
The values of gender equality are represented in works such as *San Francisco, 1973*, a painting of the cover of *Womanspace journal*, and *Poetry Iannone Concrete*, a homage to Dorothy Iannone's work. Churchman is at his best when he wanders into the wonders of painting itself: moving seamlessly from representation to abstraction, from the worldly to the esoteric, from Paul Cézanne's canon to the primitivism of Henri Rousseau, from structured pattern to organic flow. He manages to convey a banal landscape or a small flower with a sense of fluidity and generosity for life.

In contrast to Churchman, who searches for magic and meaning in the mystical world, **Ioanna Pantazopoulou**, a young Greek sculptor based in New York, looks for it in material culture. Using everyday objects that are often discarded as junk, Pantazopoulou creates large-scale installations that comment on the notions of value, embellishment and excess. In a solo show at Ileana Tounta Contemporary Art Centre S.S.S. (*Shining Super Star*) is a shrine-like industrial structure which stacks cans of pasta sauce, mushroom jars and other expired supermarket products. Lit with LED lights, these mass-consumer products become shiny totems of mystical value. *S.H.W. (Sweet Home Wish)* is a silver hammock from which hundreds of ex-votos are hung and in which playfulness and superstition collide.

Pantazopoulou's work is less about the tension between high and low culture and more about the symbolic meaning we ascribe to objects: how they can be fortified with spiritual power and how past narratives can be outgrown, allowing new ones to surface. What makes her work appealing is the ebullient way in which she questions grand narratives.

Some of the most pressing questions Greek artists find themselves asking are how to negotiate the legacy of Greek Antiquity in the present moment, how to highlight the personal in a global culture and where to position themselves in relation to other cultures. All these questions find convincing answers in a solo exhibition by **Nikos Papadopoulos** at MIET. Titled 'Flora Filopappou', the show refers to the hill of Filopappou, a green area near the Acropolis where the artist used to walk his dog. During one of these walks, he noticed a plant he had not seen before and took it for inspection and identification at the Biology Department of the University of Athens, where he was informed that the plant was smuggled into the country in 1850. This formed the basis of his research into the history of this species.

Papadopoulos initially sought archive photographs of what



**Nikos Papadopoulos**  
*Untitled* 2014

**Leidy Churchman**  
*'Snowlion'*  
installation view  
Rodeo



the area had looked like in the 1920s and soon came across Professor Stephen Harris of the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Oxford and author of *The Magnificent Flora Graeca*. Harris's book recounts the travels of British scientist John Sibthorp, who made several trips to the eastern Mediterranean in the early 19th century to collect a rich array of exotic floral specimens, all of which he documented in *Flora Graeca*. The original *Flora Graeca* is one of the most extraordinary botanical publications of all time. The quality of the watercolors by Austrian illustrator Ferdinand Bauer, the size of the publication and its price on publication all added to the book's reputation.

The exhibition at MIET, which includes a copy of the original *Flora Graeca* on loan from the Greek National Library, is conceived as a mental journey on the hill. Papadopoulos presents an installation of drawings rendered in a pointillist style that alludes to the precision of a scientist. He reflects on the modernist tradition of the garden and touches on issues such as migration, hybridity, evolution, inbreeding and depression that relate to the life of plants as much as they resonate with our own lives. In another room, a series of large-scale drawings document the happy times he has had on the hill with his friends.

In this peripatetic exhibition, the viewer can hear his dog's breath, can experience the artist's quest for his own Eden and can empathise with the artist's experience of loss. The denouement comes in the last room where Papadopoulos has brought in soil from the hill: a symbol of death and of the beginning of life. ■

**Vassilios Doupas** is a curator and a writer based in London.