

Ships, Sea & Soul Kitsa E. Angelakos

But I never gave up my obstinate dream,
and the sea, when it roars, tells me a lot.

N. Kavadias, Our fo'c'sle
(transl. G Holst-Warhaft)

The sea, the aquatic world and ships with their crews have been depicted in art since antiquity. In ancient Egyptian art there are gods, pharaohs, noblemen and servants shown aboard riverboats during ritualistic processions or just going about their daily lives. Ancient Greek pottery, reliefs, sculptures, mosaics or the murals of Santorini and Crete are dominated by images of seafaring vessels, aquatic fauna, mythical hybrid creatures of the sea, gods, heroes and mere mortals. Over the centuries, ships and the life at sea have never ceased to inspire artists, poets, writers and craftspeople. Yet it was in the late Middle Ages that the systematic depiction of life at sea started evolving as a distinct genre in art. In short, ships emerged from early on as the main means of transport and communication, of study and discovery but also as a subject for both academic and anonymous folk art. The 17th century 'endowed' art history with a new genre, maritime painting, based largely on the growth of overseas trade by Netherlands as the major naval power of the time.

In Greece, its geography means that the sea is inextricably linked –or even equated with– seafaring. Captains, shipwrecks, some of them heroes and heroines, and whole generations of families from the islands and seaside regions have written chapters of the country's history at sea as well as ashore. In addition to stories, legends and exploits associated with their maritime activities they bequeathed us the new models of trade, entrepreneurship and shipbuilding they adopted in their profession, and established a new ethos and codes in the social arena with their participation in communal affairs and as benefactors. Many of them, especially since the early 19th century, helped promote the new ideological approaches to governance, the development of art and the new socio-political, entrepreneurial and cultural models in Greece as well as abroad. Moreover, they promoted the idea of the country's liberation and endowed the state with major social and educational institutions.

In the late 19th century maritime painting is enriched with the new subcategory of ship portraits and photographs. Since that time, subsequent generations of artists have been augmenting this old artistic tradition with new propositions and techniques.

Among them, since 2005, photographer Kitsa Angelakos has been systematically pointing her lens at everything on a ship, from preparations for a voyage to the return back home. The title of the exhibition, "Ships, Sea & Soul", reflects her emotional ties to seafaring, which are to be expected given her ancestral roots on the island of Oinousses or Egnoussa and her family history.

The ship is, to her, the place where everything happens; a microcosm with its own rigorous rules and its own fascination. The photographer's gaze does not stop only at moments of tension and action, when the balance is upset and the horizon 'moves'. She seeks and finds beauty aboard even when the ship is anchored. It is in such moments more than the others that her own emotional input is best inscribed. She walks around the ship and it reveals to her those minor occurrences that only an observant and loving eye can turn into artistic subjects. Manned or deserted, anchored or sailing, the ship is the absolute centre of her attention. She focuses on some minor detailed or on a dynamic perspective

which reflects the vessel's organic relation with water or its ambivalent dependence on dry land. She photographs her own inner and external world – a refuge of a microcosm that 'nurtures' both her dream and her soul.

The ship's aspect as a machine, a vehicle, a workplace, a field of action and above all as a moving 'landmark' on the horizon is at odds with the mariners' view of it as 'home'. Call it what you will – steamer, boat, destroyer, cargo ship – any seagoing vessel has the key property of travelling on water. This property may not determine the ship but it invests it with a special identity while defining, or even confining, the life of those who work or travel on it. Motion is literal for the hull itself but also for its people, no matter what its cause – necessity, choice, investment or ...destiny– and no matter how others may interpret it as: emigration, work, abandonment, thirst for adventure, speculation... In any case, and irrespective of any subjective reading or objective reason, all seafarers find themselves emotionally torn between the attraction of the unknown and the yearning for homecoming. This emotional ambiguity seems to have been transfused from the mariner to the photographer.

Which side should she follow? The answer may sound easy –but how easy can it be for a woman to go to sea, satisfying her wish and at the same time building on her family history? What is her status and her treatment amidst this tough, male-dominated world, even if her background ensures the best possible prospects? Kitsa Angelakos was bold enough to do it. The experience seems to have been positive and decisive for both her personality and her art. She conquered and entrenched her relationship with the sea. And this relationship is not about fighting with the waves, about the adrenaline, about the work on board or the joy of coming home: it is about 'belonging'. The gaze of Kitsa Angelakos attests to her dependence on –and her respect for– the sea. It bespeaks a woman's approach, defined by creation.

The aura [originally, the ancient Greek word for 'breeze'] of the sea is 'visible' in her photographs. The aura of the ship is harder to convey, because it has to do with the artist's gaze. In her case, by now this gaze is defined by experience. She turns to objects and details whose functional purpose she knows, yet she treats them like jewels or visual events. She captures the moment when the sea turns multicoloured and transparent by the ship's bow or stern as the light is diffused on it. She sees the explosion of colour and the birth of new material where iron gets eroded by salt. She spots unbreakable ties between rope and pulley, between the chain and the hawsehole through which it goes. Relations emerge between the ship, the water, the air, the land and the birds but also between the hull and its components; relations of tension, violence, care, beautification, eroticism and love. Indeed, LOVE was the word written on a bulkhead by someone who was cleaning the ship's hold. Such correlations can only be perceived by a loving, exhaustive observation of every inch of the ship's body.

The outcome is a series of details, 'mined' from an industrial structure and mature enough to be transferred in another space. Details that tell viewers not another story but another version of the same story, taking them from the macrocosm to the microcosm. Kitsa Angelakos 'lends' us her gaze so that we can discover the secret side of the ship, which remains unseen by most people.

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Translated from the Greek by Tony Moser