

East of Eden: Fractured Histories, Constructed Identities, Fragmented Realities

A proposal for the Greek Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art

Curator: Cathryn Drake

Artists: Petros Efstathiadis and Stelios Faitakis

Designer: Maria Maneta

The artists will transform the Venice pavilion into a diorama employing Greek history and culture as a lens for examining the most pressing issues we face today. As different as their works are in style and material qualities, Faitakis and Efstathiadis play similarly with the multivalent dimensions of perception, critiquing society with idiosyncratic visual languages and subversive humor in parallel universes that expose the facades concealing the cracks in absolute conceptions of reality, whether true or false.

The title “East of Eden” refers to the biblical Land of Nod, where God exiled Cain as punishment for his brother’s murder. A place outside of Paradise, it is the very origin of human violence, deceit, and wickedness. Cain is the original “other,” wandering restlessly in savage regions where the establishment of fortresses and property division is necessary. Nod also refers to the mythical land of sleep—in other words, a mystical place outside the realm of consciousness beyond rational order and empirical reason, evoking Western notions of the East. East is also outside of the Western conception of civilization, at the center of which is Eden. Yet this ghettoization, echoed in the separation of diverse populations enforced and justified by physical borders, is what ultimately causes fear and conflict. And it is where we are today.

In terms of the deceptive dichotomy between East and West that has emerged since the eclipse of the great empires and the emergence of modern states, Greece disproves the notion while bearing the scars of its consequences and contradictions as much as any other single nation. Characterized by an Eastern religion and an ancient history that spawned the origins of Western democracy, Greek culture exemplifies the mingling of rational and mystical in an uneasy choreography. On a human level, the collateral schism between empirical science and intuitive intelligence has engendered both a move away from a holistic worldview and the conceptual separation, or imbalance, of mind and body.

In their work Petros Efstathiadis and Stelios Faitakis examine Greece as an essential exemplar of this artificial conceptual chasm between orient and occident. Both artists were born just after the fall of the military junta during a critical postcolonial period when the establishment of the new republic constituted the splicing of a Western parliamentary system on a country whose political culture was based on a modern history



Dance of the Bride, 2013



Philosopher, 2013



The Debate, 2012



Untitled, 2012



We Can Manage on Our Own, 2012

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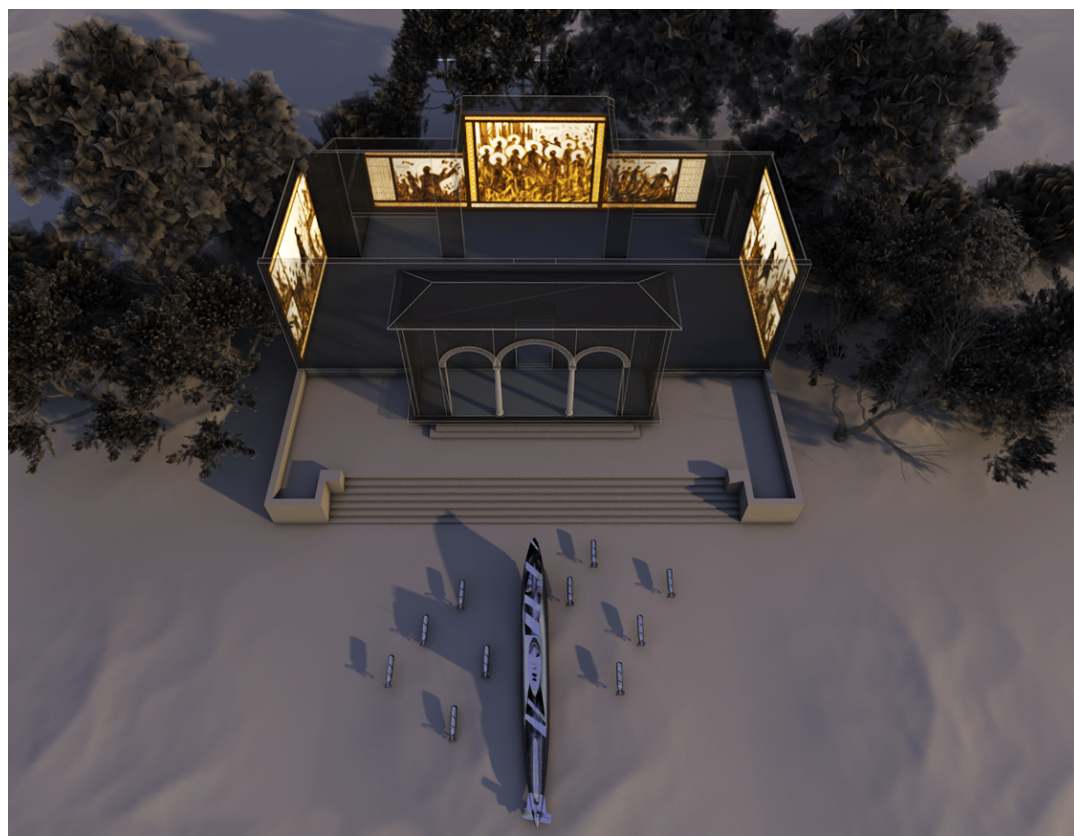
of authoritarianism. This systemic discontinuity recalled the building of neoclassical structures after the fall of Ottoman rule: “Only in the land of the ancient Greeks, for the sake of this same historical discourse, did the ‘construction’ of the past and the future have to take place simultaneously as restoration of classicism (antiquity) and creation of neoclassicism (modernity),” architectural historian Panayotis Tournikiotis has written. “Broken time had to be mended, and the continuity of history from ancient to modern times had to be invented and materialized in a completely new country called Greece” (“Quoting the Parthenon,” *Perspecta* 49, 2016).

By the time of the European Enlightenment, the Parthenon was identified as the quintessential icon of Western civilization and the representation of ideal beauty and the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy. Europeans came to Greece, studied the classical architecture, and incorporated its elements in the architectural vernaculars of their own countries—thus coding it as intrinsic to Western European culture. The dispute over possession of fragments of the Parthenon frieze speaks to the overwhelming significance of these emblems as metaphors defining the nature of reality. Yet the history of the Acropolis as the site of pagan temple and mosque, fortress and armory, cathedral and ducal palace, conflict and near destruction, and finally tourist destination reflects the trajectory of the Greek territory. It also demonstrates how cultural forms have always been continually borrowed, copied, combined, and rebranded from one civilization and empire to the next.

Even the Greek Pavilion—a neo-Byzantine structure with a Palladian-style neoclassical portico—embodies the hybridization of cultures, as does the architecture of Venice, long a conduit of trade between North and South, East and West. It is no accident that the design of the pavilion, built in the wake of the disastrous Greco-Turkish war in 1934, reflects the layout of an Orthodox Church, the institution that preserved the Greek language and identity, from the medieval pulpit of the Byzantium through centuries of subjugation to Ottoman rule. In the essay “Geography and Common Imaginary,” architects Elia Zenghelis and Zissis Kotionis write: “As the Greek Pavilion’s glass roof has recently been covered, the interior remains dark. This fact makes it suitable to refer to a ‘dark unconscious,’ a region of the repressed, behind the neo-Byzantine mask. Inside there is a region of a lost consciousness” (*Common Pavilions*, 2013).

In the cruciform interior of the pavilion, Faitakis will create the ambience of a church through a sequence of monumental paintings based on the formal traditions of Orthodox frescoes. Three large wooden structures mimicking the walls, an upside-down T-shape reflecting the vertical and horizontal planes of the building along with two lateral rectangles, will cover about 170 square meters. The cycle of allegorical paintings will be divided into symmetrical sections filled with icons, inscriptions and symbols, and

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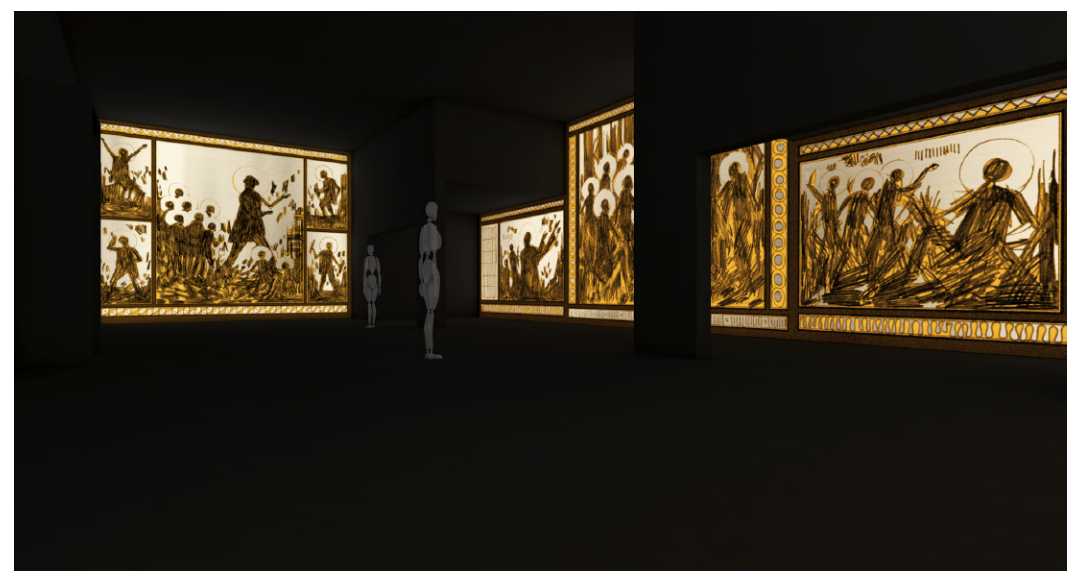
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ornamental patterns narrating the theme of science as the supreme modern religion. The space will be bathed in complete darkness, aside from spotlights on the paintings, and ambient sound and aromas may be introduced to produce the feeling of immersion in a mystical sensorium.

In the series “The New Religion,” Faitakis portrays the spurious reliance on empirical knowledge and the worship of industrial progress in satirical yet deadly serious scenarios where the enlightened are likened to saints, a status signaled by haloes. Scenes of pivotal moments from past and present will portray the prophets and priests, temples and doctrines, potentials and limits, conditions and consequences of this dogmatic cult. For example, the painting *Ecstasy* depicts the goddess Science with a papyrus citing the gospel according to physicist Max Planck: “Science cannot solve the supreme mystery of nature. This is because, in the end, we are part of the mystery we are trying to solve.”

The anachronism between the Byzantine genre and Faitakis’s subjects produces a surreal realism that reflects the disintegration of human consciousness through the disjunction of clashing conceptions of reality. Cryptic inscriptions in an invented language elicit the mystical enigma of existence as well as the fear of the unknown that engenders the impulse to define and control. Yet in this unorthodox iconography the divine still shines among the rubble of contemporary urban chaos, bringing the sacred firmly down to earth. After all, life is, by definition, both miraculous and uncertain. As the hieroglyph in a painting by Faitakis reads: “Just say maybe.”

While the pavilion interior will be a sanctuary summoning the spiritual realm, the exterior will evoke the sensation of siege and conflict conveyed by a secular reality ruled by the precepts of science, industry, and economy. This duality also reflects Greece as both a touristic paradise arousing collective desire and a geopolitical pawn in an escalating international conflict over underwater resource exploration rights. The location of the Greek Pavilion, at the far end of a remote garden across a canal from the main constellation of pavilions representing major economic powers, reflects a Western skewing of civilization wherein Greece lies at the periphery. This orientation is remarkable particularly in light of the numerous structures quoting or replicating the Parthenon, such as Walhalla and the Lincoln Memorial, that have been constructed in Europe and America as signifiers of power.

Born and raised in the northern Greek region of Macedonia, Efstathiadis uses his native village, Liparó, as an open-air laboratory to make temporary constructions portraying absurdist scenarios based on local life. The final product is usually the artist’s photographic documentation of the work, effecting an aesthetic distance that influences perception and meaning via its representation. Macedonia is a divided region where a

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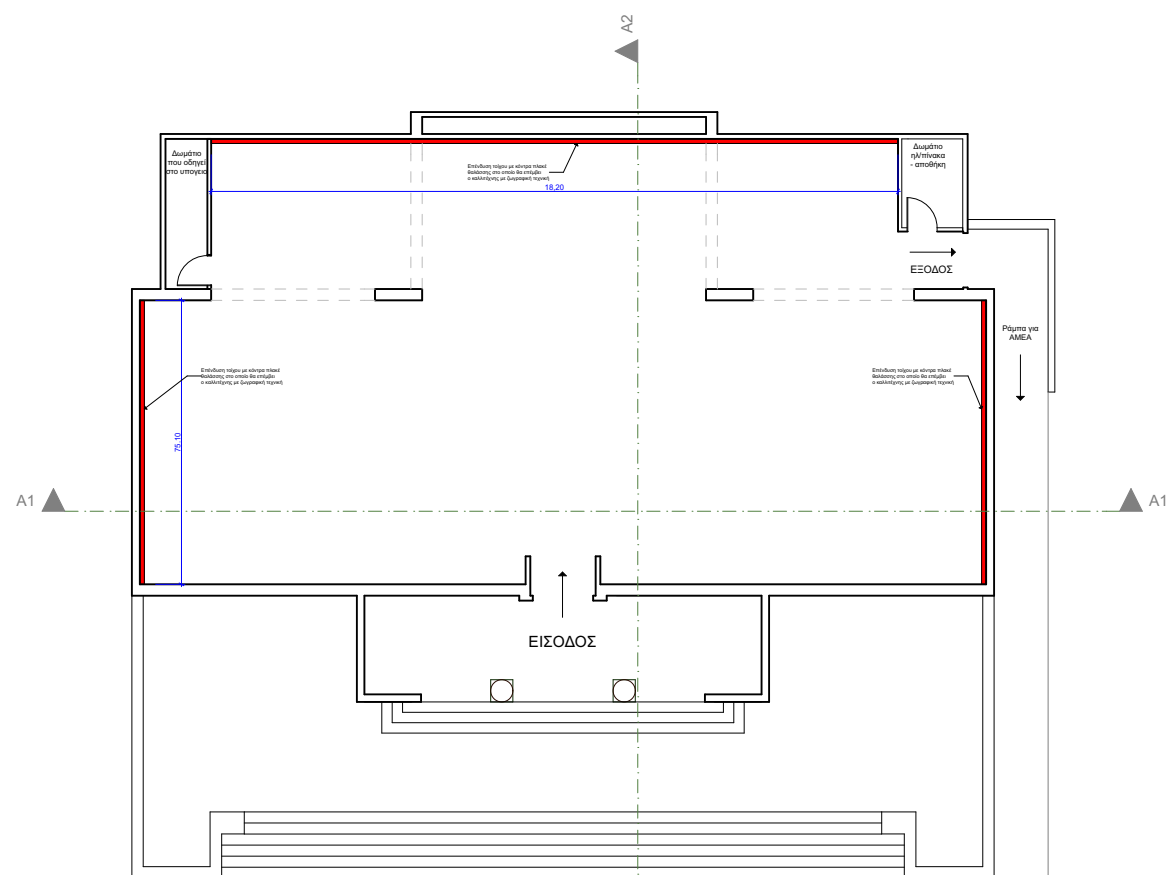
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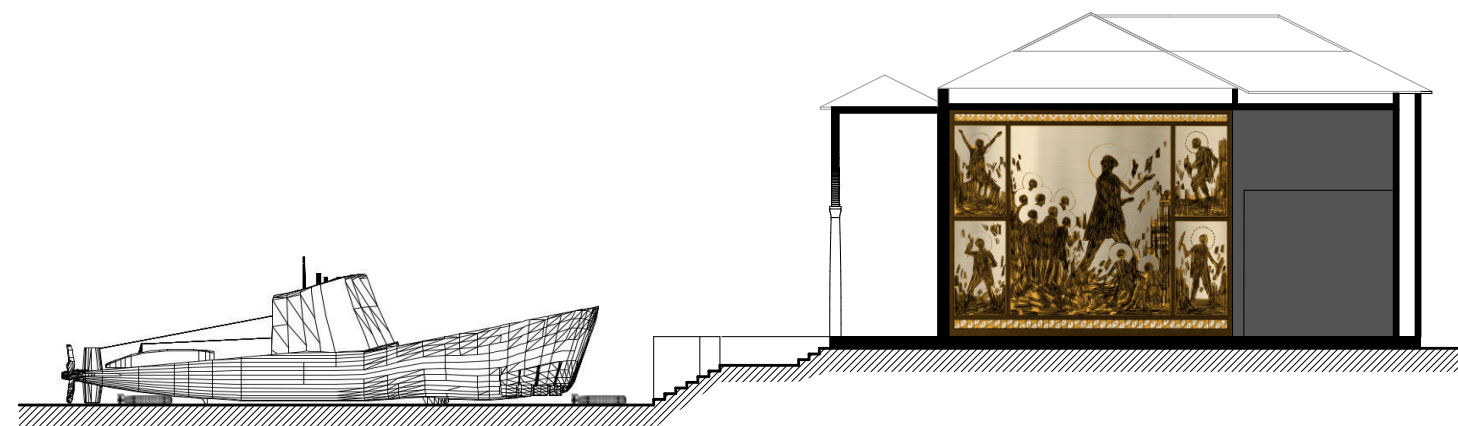
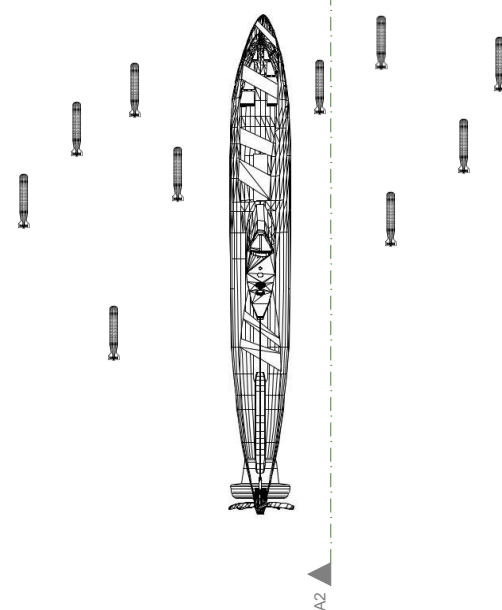
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ΟΨΗ Α1

ΚΑΤΟΨΗ



ΟΨΗ Α2

swath of cultural tradition has been buried in favor of the nationalist agenda, fracturing the history and identities of its inhabitants as if to wipe out collective memory along with a dying regional language. Recently the village territory has been tagged for gas exploration, and the artist's father has sold off the family peach orchard.

In front of the Greek pavilion, Efstathiadis will construct large sculptural installations to activate the barren zone between the Romanian pavilion and the water's edge: an unseaworthy submarine will echo the submerged, covert political machinations being carried out in the Aegean in the interest of controlling contested zones for oil extraction, cloaked in claims supported by nationalist rhetoric. Skeletons of deteriorated torpedoes with movable propellers will be scattered around the vessel like fish out of water, and site-specific installations related to the theme will be installed at either side of the entrance. Poised at the edge of a canal next to the Adriatic Sea, almost as if it could easily launch itself and sail southward to the Mediterranean, the pavilion itself signals the decentering of civilization.

Efstathiadis is adept at responding to a context or situation by constructing incisive and visually engaging installations on the spot. Resembling a theme-park diorama, the proposed scenario will reveal, in a medium often deployed for propaganda, the unseen reality of a precarious present built on deceptive reconstructions of a faulty, disconnected past. The artist's *Parthenon* (2012)—built from metal pipes, red bricks, trashcan lids, a mailbox, and a Grecian urn made in China—suggests the folly of a fixed monument to anything. It reminds us that the remnants of everyday life we leave behind, along with their disintegration, are the best record of history—a chaotic, cacophonous cycle of continuous change and constant crisis—not the monuments we dedicate to a constructed reality.

“The invention of history does not seek to revive distant pasts but to establish instead a great leap forward, an ideal liberation,” Tournikiotis writes. “Buildings that look like the Parthenon, such as Walhalla or an American bank, pursue a completely modern world and announce a completely new order of things. The Parthenon and history itself are at once the flagship and the alibi of modernity—they are a construct of reason, they are *discourse*.” The most accurate perception of the world is through a shattered mirror, and the mending of the fundamental rupture between the rational and spiritual may be key to the reconciliation, and in turn the salvation, of humanity and the earthly body.



Rocket, 2014



Water Tower Leak, 2016



Lohos #1, 2013



Preacher's House, 2016



Apache, 2016

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