

Lifestyle by Lauren O'Hara

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Feel with the mind

Two artists will represent Cyprus at the Venice Biennale – male and female, Greek and Turkish, worlds apart, but are they?

Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense is the theme of this year's Venice Biennale Art Exhibition, the 52nd edition, which opens next Sunday, running until November. The international exhibition is regarded by many as the most important showcase for contemporary art in the world. This is a record year with about 100 artists contributing from 77 countries. The whole show will be curated by the first ever director from the US, Robert Storr.

Cyprus is sending two artists, chosen from 65 entries by curator Denise Robinson: Mustafa Hulusi, a London-based Turkish Cypriot and Haris Epaminonda, a Greek Cypriot from Nicosia. It is the first time a Turkish Cypriot will represent Cyprus. Robinson, who was born in Australia, is an independent curator, critic and essayist, based in London since 1996. She has a history of work across the visual arts and cinema and has curated numerous international exhibitions and film screenings. Her choice has made an inspirational pairing, not for the obvious yin yang of gender, ethnicity and class, but because their work, so different on the surface, is united by exploring dream worlds, identity and cultural representation through hyperrealism and superimposed images.

It is coincidence that both artists were students at the Royal College of Art in London at the same time, and both wonder if they were influenced by a particular ethos, a "way of seeing", that linked imagination and reality, a "faction genre" of the art world.

Born in Nicosia, at 27 Haris Epaminonda must be one of the youngest artists in the show. She acknowledges that she never believed she would achieve this recognition so early in her career. But those who see her work will immediately be struck by her original voice. Haris has always been a collector. As a child she would take discarded toys from her friends, broken dolls, bits of fabric, old photographs, and reuse them. Her pleasure lies in the alchemy of creating something new from something old. Some might view her as a vandal as she cuts up period magazines and books, but she argues that she is reinventing the stories they tell. She creates small, intricate collages: juxtaposing layers through a paper cutting technique that creates complex new images. Small, intense pictures with the mystery of a Hitchcock film. She scours old bookshops for her material and admits that her searching is as much fun as her creation, like going through old attics to find lost treasures. Her work is playful, mixing the familiar with the surreal.

Like Alice Through the Looking Glass or the windows of a doll's house, her collages invite you to delve into a fantasy world. "Each painting is like a thought," she says. "It's important that the viewer takes a role, they can create their own meaning. I can make an image in half an hour or in three days, the

work lies in collecting the pieces that can express an idea. But until I start work I do not know what that idea is."

Haris' work is intriguing, it has the fairy tale quality of childhood memory. Each little picture creates a narrative, begging you to ask the question "Why?"

Robinson explains the use of multi-media in Epaminonda's work and its link to memory, "videos, collages and photographs are a series of mediations on image and sense in a chain of associations in relation to time - an encounter with the vicissitudes of memory and history. Accessing TV broadcast archives in Cyprus, her work includes a return to the transmissions on Cypriot television since the late 1950s. Whether the symptomatic 'soaps' or the news broadcasts and films, here they are the breaches in memory." She continues, "she spatialises time, as Walter Benjamin would say, so that we can get our hands on it. Her earlier video works from 2005, filmed off TV screens both in Cyprus and the region of the Eastern Mediterranean, are a montage of moments overlaid, slowed down."

After Venice, Haris has been funded by the UNDP to follow a foundation on a year's residency in Berlin. As yet, she does not know what direction her work will lead in the future, she is keen to experiment more with film to accompany her collage material. But she will always remain a collector. Her eyes glint with excitement when she tells me that Berlin has some of the most wonderful secondhand book shops, you feel there is still a child in there looking for hidden treasures.

Mustafa Hulusi often returns to north Cyprus where his family has a home. The day I met him, he had been photographing the prolific wild flowers and indigenous fruit of the island for the images he intends to use at the Biennale in his 'Elysian paintings'. He is going to create his work in situ in Venice. He works on a huge, industrial scale and one can plainly see the influences of his former career in advertising in his work. "My work is 'image' based, in so much as my starting point is always based on the publicly consumed images that surround us. I may either use a camera to record this then reproduce it using techniques such as screen-printing, painting or photography. I sometimes use text next to, or within, an image also to alter its meaning."

His large canvasses are bold and beautiful. Large, photo-realistic hands pluck perfect flowers in a world as surreal as it is real. They could be kitsch but something is happening beneath the surface, something that makes you take a second look. As in Haris' work, all is not exactly what it seems. The method of combining hyper real painting on to photographic images creates a shift in focus.

A Cypriot raised in London, Mustafa has a clear understanding of the complexity of identity and multiculturalism. "Cyprus has a large influence on my life in many ways; psychological, philosophical and political. Knowing that this is where I originate from even though being raised outside it, leads to many questions, identity being a prominent one. It has also led to a political awareness few people around me in London need to attain," he says.

Although both artists are keen to stress that they are not political animals in a narrow sense, their art expresses thoughts and ideas beyond the confines of a culture, and Hulusi's earlier work undoubtedly has a political reality. I remember in particular a black and white image of Tony Blair with Mustafa's name imprinted in red over it. It's called 'Phoney Tony'. Hulusi literally made a name for himself when he emblazoned his signature across billboards and posters around London, inviting us to question the cult of celebrity. Mustafa who?

But despite this ironic self-promotion, both Mustafa and Haris share a modest, self-deprecating view of themselves, keen to let the viewer judge their art on its own merit and to make of it what they will. They want their work to be accessible, they are refreshingly straightforward in an art world that can often seem full of jargon and pretension.

Curator of the Cypriot Pavilion, Robinson highlights the "risk of art" that the two participants share in the difficulties of constructing meaning, "that raises doubt as to the truths in the representations of a culture...The works of Haris Epaminonda and Mustafa Hulusi ...show what might be at stake in the manipulation and circulation of images in a culture - and in Cyprus in particular."

Most of us will not be able to make the trip to Venice to see the Cyprus Pavilion but it is worth taking the trip to their websites to view their work. Have a look, judge for yourselves, enter their magic worlds and be honest in your response. That is exactly what both artists would want for their art and identity. There is no doubt that the Cyprus pavilion will cause a stir, the sheer scale and vibrancy of Hulusi's work will draw in the crowds while the complexity and intricacy of Epaminonda's tiny worlds will keep them there. Expect good reviews, as ambassadors for art and their nationality these two will be hard to beat. But delve beneath the surface, things are not always what they seem...

www.mustafahulusi.com and www.harisepaminonda.com

THE ARTISTS

Haris Epaminonda

Born: 1980 in Nicosia, Cyprus

Lives and works in Nicosia and London

Education

1998 - 1997: Chelsea College of Art & Design, London

2001 - 1998: Kingston University, London /

2003 - 2001: Royal College of Art, London (MA Printmaking)

Solo exhibitions 2006: Haris Epaminonda, Domobaal, London Selected group exhibitions 2007: I am Future Melancholic_tank.tv, Tate Modern, London / Art Rotterdam, represented by Domobaal / 2006: Gift, MuseumMan, Liverpool Biennial / Haris Epaminonda & Daniel Gustav Cramer, Pharos CCA, Nicosia / Drawing Screen, Tint gallery, Thessaloniki / East International, Norwich, UK / What remains is Future, Patras, Greece / Fresh, Macao Museum of Art, China / 2005: Artist's Books, Qbox gallery, Athens / Peripheral Visions, Cork Film Center, Ireland / 12th Biennale for Young Artists, Naples / Accidental Meetings, Municipal Arts Centre, Nicosia / 2004: 21st World Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam / Hi-Lite 5, Archimede Staffolini gallery, Nicosia Residencies 2007-2008: Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin / 2002: Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris.

Mustafa Hulusi

Born: 1971 in London, UK

Lives and works in London

Education

1992 - 1995: Goldsmiths College, London

2002 - 1995: Royal College of Art, London (MA Photography)

Solo exhibitions 2005: The End of the West, Max Wigram Gallery, London / Mustafa Hulusi too, Rachmaninoffs, London Selected group exhibitions 2007: Abstraction, Millenium Galleries, Sheffield / 2006: Into Me-Out of Me, PS 1, New York; Kunst Werke, Berlin / To Here, Bloomberg Space, London / Right on - Write Off, The great Unsigned, Chapman Fine Arts, London / 2005: East International 05, Norwich / Culture Bound, Courtauld Institute, London / 2004: New Contemporaries 04, 14 Wharf Road,

London Curated Exhibitions 2004: Expander, Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington gardens, London /
The Progressive development Plan, Wadeson Street, London.

THE VENICE BIENNALE

The Venice Biennale is a major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years.

The Venice Film Festival is part of it.

The first Biennale was held in 1895; during the first editions, decorative arts played an important role. The event became more and more international in the first decades of the 20th century: from 1907 on, several countries started installing national pavilions at the exhibition. After WWI, the Biennale showed increasing interest in innovative traditions in modern art. Between the two World Wars, many important modern artists had their work exhibited there.

In 1930, control of the Biennale passed from the Venice city council to the national Fascist government. In the 1930s, several new sections of the event were established: the Music Festival in 1930, the International Film Festival in 1932 and the Theatre Festival in 1934. From 1938, Grand Prizes were awarded in the art exhibition section.

After a six-year break during WWII, the Biennale was resumed in 1948 with renewed attention to avant-garde movements in European, and later worldwide, movements in contemporary art. Abstract expressionism was introduced in the 1950s, pop art in the 1960s.

The protests of 1968 marked a crisis for the Biennale; the Grand Prizes were abandoned and more emphasis went to thematic exhibitions instead of monographic ones. The 1974 edition was entirely dedicated to Chile, as a major cultural protest against the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. New prizes - Golden Lions, like the awards at the Venice Film Festival - were installed; postmodern art entered the scene with increasingly varied and popular exhibitions.

In 1999 and 2001, Harald Szeemann directed two editions in a row bringing in a larger representation of artists from Asia and Eastern Europe and more young artists than usual and expanded the show into several newly restored spaces of the Arsenale.

At the 51st Biennale, American artist Barbara Kruger was awarded with the "Golden Lion" award for lifetime achievement.

In 2007, Robert Storr became the first director from the United States to curate the 52nd edition of the Biennale entitled Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense.

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