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A new art show on the frontline of the refugee crisis

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An exhibition on the Greek island of Samos hopes to inspire refugee crisis solutions



©Yannis Behrakis

A Syrian refugee and his daughter near the Greek village of Idomeni

Behind a white-walled cemetery on the Greek island of Samos, 1.6km from the Turkish coast, is a graveyard for children who have drowned trying to reach the sanctuary of Europe. Artificial flowers mark a row of nameless graves, identified only by numbers and the year 2016. Other gravestones

marked “Syria” have names in Arabic, including a mound with three tiny graves on which a grieving mother has propped soft toys.

Along the south coast, in a repurposed 1970s hotel, Tanja Boukal’s three-minute video “The Children and the Sea” captures the incongruous tranquillity of this deathly spot, with its birdsong and crickets. The film is spliced with harrowing text about three under-fives who washed up on Samos’s shores in January. In the artist’s insistent memorial, the hidden graveyard becomes a focus of contemplation and questioning. Her collage “Memories of Travels and Dreams” contrasts the safe tourist passage from the Turkish port of Kuşadası with the perilous and extortionate crossings at the hands of people-smugglers. Images of discarded clothes, tyres used as lifebelts and other traces of clandestine arrivals are arranged like postcards on a sea of blue, around an advertisement for a high-speed ferry.

These new works by Boukal, a Viennese artist born in 1976, form part of *A World Not Ours*, a group show devoted to the global asylum crisis, at the Art Space Pythagorion in Samos. The space was created in 2012 by the Greek-German Schwarz Foundation from a derelict hotel on Pythagorio harbour, a picturesque waterfront of tavernas and painted boats. The €500,000 renovation struck some Samiots as a luxury amid Greece’s unending economic woes. Yet Peni Petrakou and Stelios Loulourgas’s elegant white cube draws visitors, giving a fillip to a faltering local economy. From its panoramic back window, Mount Mycale in Turkey seems almost within reach.

The Art Space’s founder, Chiona Xanthopoulou-Schwarz, a psychoanalyst from Athens whose husband’s wealth derives from pharmaceuticals, also hopes Pythagorio’s 7,000-year history can inspire solutions. The city’s golden age between the 8th and 6th centuries BC peaked under Polycrates the tyrant, host to artists, engineers and philosophers. Herodotus deemed the six-storey Temple of Hera “the greatest I have seen” (one column still stands). The Sacred Way to it was lined with 6,000 statues. Museum treasures testify that such achievements came with the free flow of people, goods and ideas from Egypt, Assyria and Mesopotamia — also sources of today’s refugees. Outside the Art Space is a statue of Pythagoras, the Samiot after whom the town was renamed, who brought geometry from Egypt, identified the maths behind musical tones and coined the term “harmony”.



An exhausted refugee arrives on Kos, in a photo from the series 'Europa, Europa', by Giorgios Moutafis

One of the largest Greek islands, Samos, along with Lesbos and Chios to the north, has been on the frontline of the Mediterranean refugee crisis since 2015. Of more than 1m irregular sea arrivals to Europe last year, 850,000 — mostly Syrians — came via Turkey to Greek islands, more than 800 dying en route. According to the island's mayor, Michalis Angelopoulos, Samos saw 153,000 arrivals within a year — five times the local population. The controversial EU-Turkey deal in March cut daily arrivals from 1,700 to fewer than 20. Yet in the hillside above Vathy on the north side of the island, more than 1,000 people — a third of them children — remain in an overcrowded, nominally closed camp ringed by razor-wire.

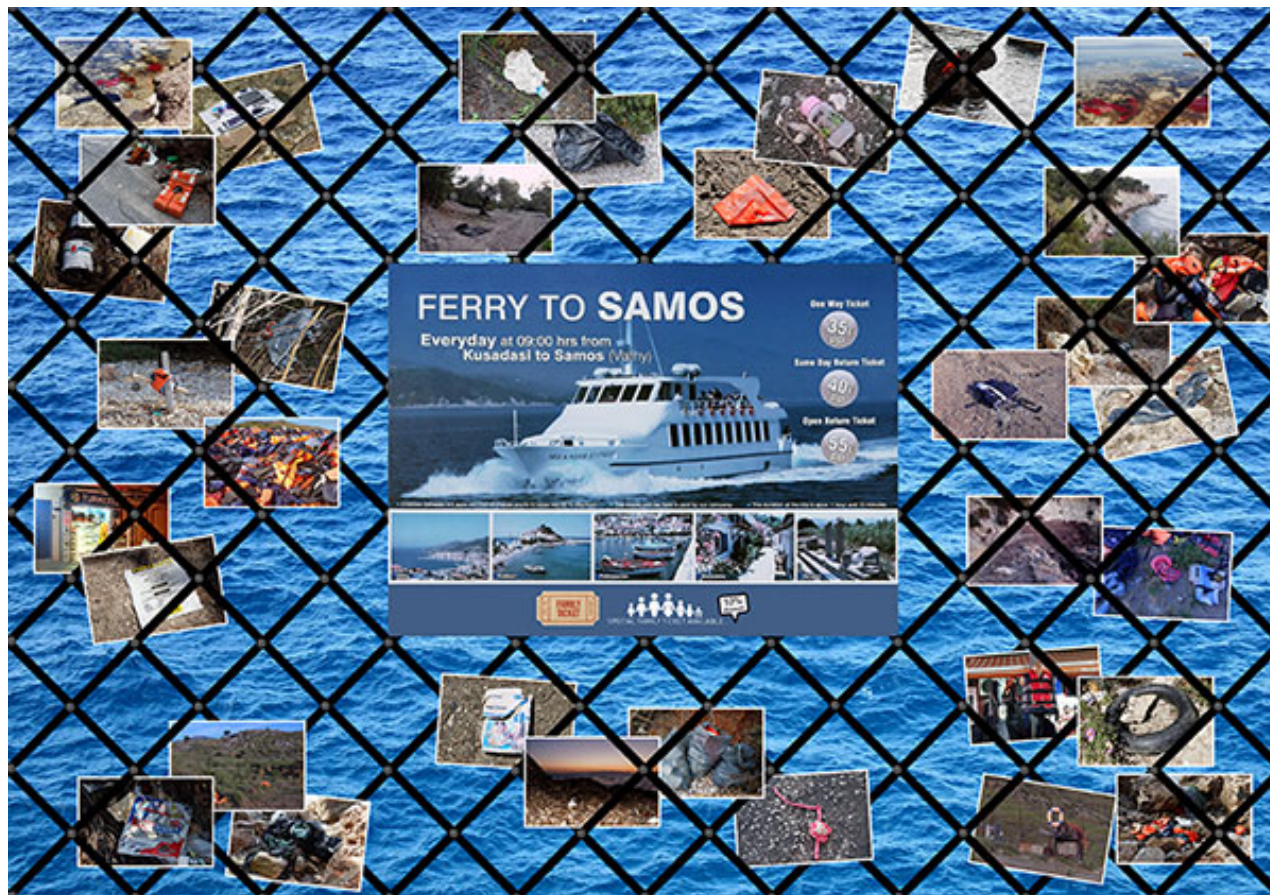
Tensions are rising. Tourism accounts for 80 per cent of the island's economy, but tourist numbers are down this summer by at least 40 per cent, visitors deterred by images of death and desperation. "The social tolerance of half of this society is exhausted," the mayor told me. "We gave everything to a humanitarian effort; municipality volunteers prepared 4,000 meals a day. And central government does nothing."



Still from 'A World Not Ours' (2012)

The show's curator, Katerina Gregos, attempts to tackle these tensions with global context. "EXIT", a superb collaborative video installation, deploys a spinning globe and ingenious infographics to animate statistics on population flows, remittances and the "push factors" of conflict, urban density and climate change, underlining the futility of Fortress Europe.

Gregos chose artists with long engagement with refugees. Boukal volunteered in Lampedusa in 2007 after first learning of the drownings. The US artist Sallie Latch interviewed arrivals in Samos for a sound installation. Excerpts were read by actors to a rapt audience in Greek and English. Three curatorial scholars offer guided tours. For Xanthopoulou-Schwarz, "it's up to Greece to participate in the discussion, not just be passive to a wave of incomers".



Memories of Travels and Dreams' (2016) by Tanja Boukal, which contrasts the journey from Turkey to Greece of tourists with that of refugees

Many Greeks are themselves descendants of refugees, which sometimes creates unexpected wells of compassion. Many of those forcibly expelled from Turkey during the war and exchange of populations of 1919-23, known as the Asia Minor Catastrophe in Greece, came to this island — memories stirred by Marina Gioti's seven-minute video "Saint Marina". Probing the family history of an icon she inherited from ancestors who fled to Samos and then Piraeus, the work is a meditation on what is lost and saved in flight.

"My family's story is everybody's story," Gioti says. In the 1940s the flow went the other way, as a third of Samos's population fled to Turkey during the Italian and German occupations, many in rowing boats.



Pythagorio harbour on Samos with the waterside Art Space Pythagorion

Two of the strongest exhibitors are photographers who do not regard themselves as gallery artists. “The Persecuted”, by Pulitzer Prize-winner Yannis Behrakis, is a large-scale slide projection of photographs documenting last year’s refugee crisis for Reuters. But Giorgos Moutafis’s “Europa, Europa”, tiny black-and-white pictures in light boxes, draws the viewer in closer. A new arrival kisses the European shore. Another on a ship’s deck resembles a deposed Christ, haloed by a white hood, with echoes too of the transatlantic middle passage.

Moutafis took up photography 12 years ago “in a recovery programme for drug users”, and now works only with refugees. With black-and-white photography he seeks “to put memories in your head”. “My grandfather did this trip from Izmir to Chios in 1922, in the Catastrophe,” he says. “Greeks and Italians went to America in the 1950s. In the economic crisis, Greeks are going to Holland and the UK. No one can stop it just like that.”

Using cheap, disposable cameras, “you only have 12 exposures, so you have to think,” he notes. “I want the viewer to stay and think, too. I don’t want to inform them; they know already.” The final images are of the even more treacherous passages from Libya to Italy that have resumed since the March deal.

Beirut-born Ninar Esber fled civil war to Paris at age 15, and this experience of reluctant exile informs her performance piece “The Blind Lighthouse”. Its red-dressed woman on a tower is part seductress, part Medusa. “People are attracted to Europe like Ulysses to the sirens,” Esber says, “but she is blind, she cannot guide them.”

By contrast, Mahdi Fleifel's 2012 documentary *A World Not Ours*, shown in the open-air cinema, gave a profound insight into the compelling reasons for flight. It is set in the Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon where Fleifel grew up. With a nod to Woody Allen, the film's humour draws viewers by stealth into a nightmarish cycle that traps generations in camps, barred from jobs and with nothing to lose. By the time one character makes a break for Europe via an unnamed Greek island, this audience, gasping with recognition, was rooting for him.

'A World Not Ours', to October 15, Art Space Pythagorion, Samos, Greece art-space-pythagorion.com

Photographs: Yannis Behrakis; Giorgos Moutafis; Mahdi Fleifel/Nakba Filmworks; Costas Vergas

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