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An imaginative combination of art and the decrepit urban environment

Christina Mamakos chooses an unlikely setting for her large, nature-inspired paintings

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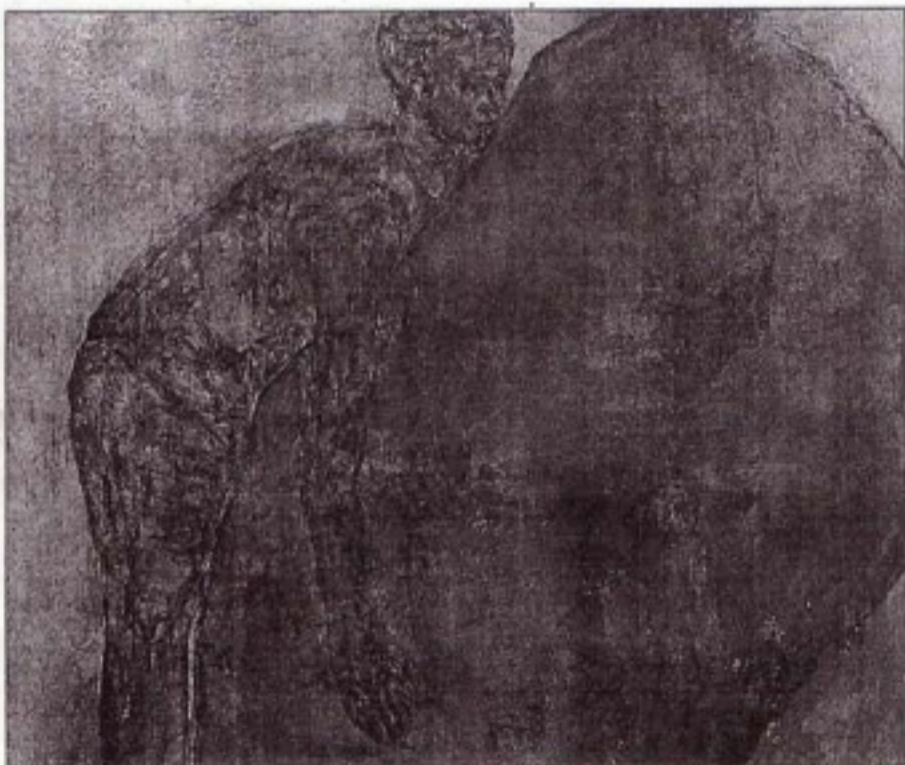
In the early 20th century, synaesthetic research had a profound impact on artists, especially in Germany and Russia. Based on the general premise of how one type of stimulation could evoke the sensation of another, synaesthesia entered visual aesthetics turning, in the most typical examples, the perception of colors into sounds.

Although no longer current, this notion of simultaneous sensations sparked off by a single stimulus could be said to have some affinity with a notion that has grown popular over the past year, that broadly termed as a "holistic" experience.

Having such an experience, means, for example, that a picture is not just a visual stimulus but something that also evokes sound, scent and other sensations unrelated to sight. This multifold experience is what American artist Christina Mamakos has intended to create through her innovative and imaginative solo exhibition at a disused building in the old district of Metaxourgeio in Athens.

Despite the eccentric choice of location, the exhibition does not use it to make a statement, neither is the locale meant as an attack on conventional manners or venues of display. To do so would have bordered on a clichéd anachronism; in the counterculture spirit of the 1960s, showing art in strange places was cutting-edge but since then, the notion has been used to the point of exhaustion, often resulting in an arty rather than an anti-art effect.

In Mamakos's project, finding an alternative context for art was not a goal in itself and somehow the viewer senses this as he makes his way through the three-storied, labyrinthine interior of the build-



'Man with Stone' (left), ink and pigment on canvas, and 'Boulder Series 6' (right), ink, pigment and paper on canvas. Almost two meters high and wide, both paintings are part of Christina Mamakos's solo exhibition 'Galini 2002' at a disused building in the Metaxourgeio area.

ing. Despite the unusual setting, Mamakos has created an effect that is neither contrived nor staged, something that is usually lacking in projects that use unlikely locations as an exhibition site. This is partly owed to the fact that the works shown are paintings instead of site-specific installations. It is almost as if one enters an abandoned domestic environment in which, almost by magic, one finds large, beautiful paintings on the walls.

A well-trained artist educated first at Harvard and then at Oxford, Mamakos has painted with skill a set of visually compelling abstract paintings. Set against the run-down interior of the building, the effect is an interesting juxtaposition, although one feels that the works could stand equally well on their own or in any other setting.

For the artist, however, the loca-

tion itself is important in providing the intended effect. This explains why she has put so much effort, not only into finding a suitable location, but also into fixing it up to accommodate her art.

Mamakos's search for the building and the story behind it are in fact inseparable aspects of the project. Located on the same corner as the old silk factory from which Metaxourgeio derives its name, the building stood abandoned for 25 years. Built in 1900, the building was originally a private home and, at some point, is said to have been the home of the writer Costas Tachtsis. It was then used as clinic and then converted into a hotel and brothel; "Galini" — the sign on the door — is a remnant of the building in its years as a hotel.

When Mamakos located the building, it was in a decrepit state.

For more than two months, she worked at cleaning it up while also scavenging up old furniture and light fixtures from the flea market to place in the rooms.

The result appears effortless, almost natural. Similarly, the effect of urban decay and the feeling of sadness that the exhibition conveys is unfeigned and pure. Urban melancholy and lost decadence are the prevalent moods here but there is no subtext of nostalgia or eeriness.

Strangely enough, the paintings have nothing to do with an urban environment. They were all painted on the island of Mykonos, where Mamakos has been living for the past year and a half. They are inspired by the Cycladic island's arid landscape and are about how shadow and light fall on the island's rock formations. Capturing the idea of

transparent volume is how the artist describes her work.

All in large dimensions, earthy colors and of abstract compositions, Mamakos's paintings address the forces and sublimity of nature. Seen against an urban setting, the paintings are a reminder of how life continues in cycles and through the layers of time. There is something melancholy but reassuring about this thought — maybe something peaceful as well. "Galini 2002," which is both the name of the former hotel where the exhibit is being shown and the title of Mamakos's series of work, aptly puts across this sense of wistful tranquility.

The "Galini 2002" exhibit is located at the corner of 38 Leonidou and Giatrakou streets, Metaxourgeio, Athens. Until Christmas Day. Open 12-7 p.m.