

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Yablonsky, Linda, "Greek Mythology," Artforum.com, June 23, 2009

Greek Mythology

ATHENS 06.23.09



Left: Collector Dakis Joannou. Right: A view of the performance for *Blood of Two*. (Except where noted, all photos: Linda Yablonsky)

SOME PEOPLE HAVE MONEY AND NO TASTE. Greek collector Dakis Joannou has both and knows how to share the wealth. Last week he and his wife, Lietta, played host to scores of art pilgrims arriving in Athens for four days of events that culminated in a happening staged by Matthew Barney on the island of Hydra, involving a collaboration with Elizabeth Peyton, a herd of goats, a sacrificial shark, and all the natural beauty anyone could ever want.

Joannou's program got its start in Athens, with the opening of "A Guest + A Host = A Ghost," an exhibition that New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni culled from the inventory of the Deste Foundation, where the bulk of the construction tycoon's provocative collection resides in white-box splendor. Stationing themselves just inside Deste's door, built to resemble a cargo hold, the Joannous shook the hands and kissed the cheeks of nearly two hundred guests arriving from Venice, Basel, and a disco-feverish gay-pride march that had taken place downtown the previous afternoon, following a preview of the second Athens Biennale.

The Deste reception—technically for artists in the show like Andro Wekua and Maurizio Cattelan—was surprisingly low-key for a gathering that brought together Tate director Nicholas Serota, the New Museum's Lisa Phillips, and MoMA's Kathy Halbreich with dealers Barbara Gladstone, Jeffrey Deitch, Anton Kern, and Eva Presenhuber, not to mention auction-house rivals Amy Cappellazzo and Tobias Meyer. Curators and consultants Christian Rattemeyer, Aphrodite Gonou, Mark Fletcher, and Kim Heirston were on hand, too, as were Peyton's exes Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tony Just, who showed up to support her participation, as did Gavin Brown gallerymates Rob Pruitt and Jonathan Horowitz. Ashley Bickerton and the team of Tim Noble and Sue Webster came for the hell of it. And why not? Onetime-only experiences like these are theater, not life, and therefore both elevating and desirable.

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Left: Artist Matthew Barney. Right: Artist Andro Wekua with dealer Barbara Gladstone.

"I don't know which is more fascinating, Wekua or his work," said Bickerton, making his first acquaintance with both. "I could wake up to this piece every day of my life and still love it," enthused dealer Javier Peres about Wekua's motorized wax sculpture of a half-dressed schoolboy missing its genitals. Peres, along with a number of other galleries, was participating in ReMap 2, a smart, eclectic, independently organized flowering of exhibitions and events taking place in the decrepit Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio district of Athens, better known for its brothels and drug trade. Naturally, artists now live there, too.

The brainchild of developer Iason Tsakonas, ReMap 2 was among the most engaging projects of the week. Though the cab driver who took me there with architect Miggi Hood told us to be sure we got out of there before dark—the "immigrants," as he put it, were dangerous—our walk down its villagelike alleys and into exhibitions in abandoned buildings with director Effie Komninou reminded me of the first Gramercy Art Fair, the forerunner to the Armory Show in the then-shabby Gramercy Hotel, and the East Village in the '80s—and so felt more like home than anything else we did. Artist-altered bicycles were available for tooling around the exhibitions, which included an outdoor screening room. Photojournalist Ramzi Haidar's work with Palestinian refugee children had a terrific, roll-up-the-gates installation at Zakira Gallery's space in a vacant apartment building. Johann König introduced Polish conceptualist Alicja Kwade, London's Ibid Projects had two floors of edgy sculpture and painting, and the Breeder, one of two well-established galleries in the area (Rebecca Camhi is the other), was showing work by New Yorker Lizzi Bougatsos.

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Left: Dealer Jeffrey Deitch with collector David Tieger. Right: Dealer Javier Peres.

In fact, it's hard to say what the biggest draw was: Joannou, the confluence of art events in Athens, or the Barney-Peyton combo. Collector Jean-Pierre Lehmann had high praise for Joannou, who tends to favor work in any medium that probes the darker reaches of the human psyche. "Dakis is the best private collector I know," Lehmann said. "He leaves people like Pinault in the dust." Judging from the presence of connoisseurs like Marion Lambert, Panos and Sandra Marinopoulos, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Andy Stillpass, Laura Skoler, David Tieger, Julia Stosc hek, and the entire Rubell family of Miami, I don't think anyone there would have argued. Certainly not the three fashionable sisters from Bahrain who traveled with ten large suitcases, the better to change their fantastic flounces and five-inch heels three times a day.

Piling into waiting taxis, the caravan moved from the opening at Deste to dinner at the Joannou residence in the Athenian hills. No one was discreet about prowling through the house to check out the art. Dealer Carol Greene, dressed in nearly the same blue suit as Charles Ray's *Woman*, posed for pictures with the giant figure. It was startling to enter under Cattelan's stuffed horse, and fascinating to see that artist's barefoot JFK lying in state in a home where it was impossible not to sit on a fabulous example of '60s Italian furniture, which the Joannous also collect. "Never leave me alone in this house," MoMA curator Klaus Biesenbach warned. "I would just want to steal everything."

He would need a container ship. Instead, shuttle buses came next morning to take the group, still recovering from a night of flowing ouzo and dancing before Jeff Koons's red *Balloon Dog*, to the Museum of Cycladic Art, to see an exhibition by six finalists for the Deste Prize, awarded every two years to an emerging Greek artist. This was less tedious than it sounds. With half the institution located in a nineteenth-century mansion—one of the few buildings left in Athens that is not made of indecorous concrete—the show had pleasant surprises for everyone. Afterward, those who didn't need an injection of caffeine from the museum café were in for an even bigger surprise: the finest collection of Cycladic figures in the world and, weirdly, a Thomas Struth show selected by the artist.

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Left: MoMA curator Klaus Biesenbach with MoMA associate director Kathy Halbreich. Right: Athens Biennial cocurator Cay Sophie Rabinowitz with artist Kalup Linzy.

From there it was off to the biennial, titled "Heaven," actually six discrete exhibitions of international art by as many curators installed in a Kafkaesque maze of a building that had been built for the 2004 Olympics. It was hot and airless in this wasteland, and many in the company wandered out of Cay Sophie Rabinowitz's section to a café serving iced-coffee frappes. "This is a lot more interesting than the Deste Foundation show," said one curator, who gave the thumbs-up to "Hotel Paradies," a section of the biennial organized by Athens-based Nadja Argyropoulou.

Joannou's largesse grew supreme on Hydra, where the group grew to over three hundred (not counting the island's population of stray cats) for a dinner honoring Barney and Peyton in an open-air taverna. The two artists sat with Joannou, Tiravanija at another table with consultant Doris Robbs, and Tobias Meyer at a table way in the back with his London associate Oliver Barker. David Tieger offered the evening's only toast—to Joannou—with a quote from Carly Simon: "Dakis, nobody does it better." Big applause. There was no discussion of what would transpire the next day, which required the assembled party to rise before dawn for the 6 AM start of the Barney-Peyton show, *Blood of Two*. "Only Matthew could get the art world up at 5 AM," said Deitch, shaking his head.

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Left: Artist Juergen Teller and dealer Sadie Coles. (Photo: David Velasco) Right: Artist Elizabeth Peyton.

Unable to contain their excitement, dealer Max Wigram, Noble, and Bickerton spent the rest of the night in the Pirate Bar on the harbor and were still swigging beers or gin and tonics when the rest of us reached a rocky point above a cove, about a twenty-minute walk from the main port of Hydra, where the performance was to begin. And there we sat, watching the sun rise over the lapis-blue Aegean and waiting. For a time, the only action came from those jostling for position on a stone wall above a ravine sloping down to the sea. Finally, a boat pulled into the cove, and a couple divers went into the water. "They're going to bring it up now," said Gavin Brown director Corinna Durland, declining to say what "it" might be. "It's been down there for two months." After an indeterminate pause, we could see one diver pulling on a rope attached to a winch on the boat.

This went on for quite a while. Eventually, what looked like a table emerged from the water and was placed on the boat, which then put into shore. Ten Greek laborers in T-shirts and jeans roped the table—actually a bronze display case weighing 750 pounds—as if it were a calf and lifted it onto land, hauling it up a zigzagging stone staircase to the road. Watching them struggle to lift this piece of Barneymania up the slope was almost painful, though the sight kept Juergen Teller glued to his camera. Whenever the ropes slipped out of the men's hands or one lost his footing, it was clear that the process could crush them. Suddenly, a herd of goats and a few lambs appeared on the road, their bells tinkling, and the whole scene began to feel like an outtake from a Bresson movie.

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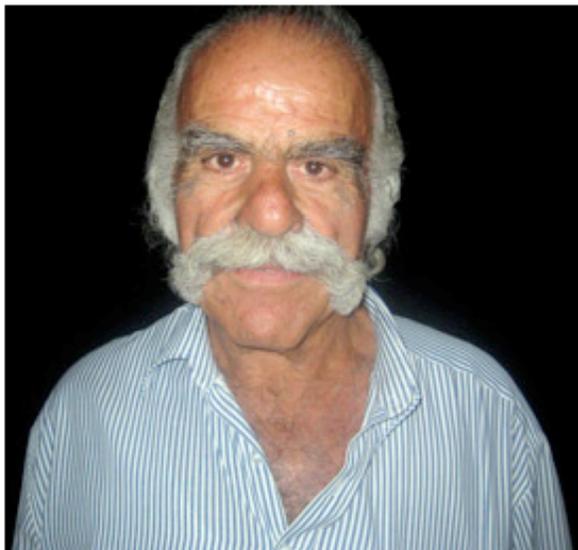
Left: A view of the performance for *Blood of Two*. Right: Dealer Carole Greene and artist Rob Pruitt.

Then the pallbearers—it was difficult to think of the laborers as anything else—reached the road and placed Barney's bier on a donkey cart. By this time, we could see five framed drawings under the glass top of the vitrine, which had taken on water. Two of the men appeared carrying a smallish dead shark (a dogfish) and placed it on top. Everyone with a camera closed in on the cart, now hitched to a donkey, and accompanied it in a funeral procession along the coastline toward what was once the island's slaughterhouse, but is now a Deste Foundation project space, dodging animal droppings all the way. "This road is a perfect metaphor for life," Gioni commented. "It's steep and full of shit."

Inside the slaughterhouse, on a promontory over the sea, a framed still life by Barney and a drawing by Peyton were hanging in former stalls. In the main room, where there was space for only about fifty witnesses, three of the men worked to get the glass top off the bier. At one point, Peyton craned her neck to check out the drawings in their watery case. "They're still there," she whispered to Barney. "The cat looks good." At last, we could hear water rushing out of the vitrine and down the blood drain to the sea, and the men lifted the glass. Barney looked at his watch. "Just about two hours," he said to Peyton. "Not bad. After all, there's a limit to how long you can ask people to wait." Coming from the king of slow, this seemed even more astonishing than the event.

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Left: Lefteris Arapoyiannis. Right: The opening of the vitrine.

With the glass removed, the drawings became more legible as they dried. By evening, when Joannou's organization set a single long table for three hundred in the road above the slaughterhouse, they took on a beautiful glow. Dinner went on for a few hours as the shark roasted on a spit till the flesh fell from its bones. "OK, when I count three, everyone clap," said Gioni. And when we did, the applause moved up and down the table in waves, though no one knew exactly what they were appreciating. It was everything, really. The art, the spectacular sunset, the food, Joannou, and, at least for some of us, our transformation from jaded personalities into humble acolytes. Next year, the slaughterhouse commission will go to another artist, most likely Cattelan. Whoever it is will have a hard act to follow.

A couple days later, walking along the road I passed a large woman with an extraordinary face, a dark mustache, and unruly gray hair. "Are you going to the exhibition?" she asked. I nodded. "That's good," she said. "I think it is very good."

— Linda Yablonsky