

Artemis Potamianou

«Your history, it's not my story»

Beautiful...as the accidental encounter,
on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella
Les Chants de Maldoror, Isidore Ducasse¹

Artemis Potamianou composes an environmental narrative on the female condition which unfolds in space and time. The defiance of social and artistic structures that characterizes her entire oeuvre continues to concern her as the exhibition title, “Your history, it’s not my story” denotes.

The installation of a swing, immobilized in space, welcomes visitors providing them with the facts from the very beginning. The swing is accompanied by a carpet with the phrase “all in all” and a luminous industrial sign depicting the word “dream.” The concept of confinement evoked here is combined with the artist’s written information referring to the totality of female conditions, which she juxtaposes with the idea of the as yet unrealized dream of freedom and true equality.

The central exhibition area is metaphorically transformed into a cage that houses elaborate bird-cages which, in turn, host smaller cages. These images within the image, realities within reality, establish consecutive artificial worlds and layers of confinement. Sporadically placed iron railings, like fences or obstacles, reinforce the feeling of enclosure evoked by the “white cube.” The cages, cells of imprisonment, reminding of Michel Foucault’s *Panopticon*, function like items of division. They differentiate the inner from the outer field, trap viewers in the void intermediary gallery space while, at the same time, delineating labyrinthian routes of escape. The shadows cast on the floor and walls contribute to a sense of disorientation, transforming the entire perception of the show into a psychological experience.

The strenuous manual wooden and thin metal rod constructions are inspired by elaborate bird-cages of by-gone eras that often faithfully reproduce actual buildings and mansions.-Following the same line of thought, Potamianou deconstructs and then reconstructs existing buildings from the history of architecture in order to build new ornithological dwellings with dispersed historical references. Due to their very structure, these original architectural models lend themselves to scrutiny. Placed on small vintage domestic tables that raise them close to the viewers’ eye level, thus

¹ Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870) was better known under the pseudonym Comte de Lautréamont. His only works, *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*, greatly influenced modern literature and the visual arts, particularly the Surrealists and the Situationists.

facilitating vision, the cages blend with the support element, forming a unified aesthetic unit.

The nucleus of this central area is a custom-made six-sided construction, inspired by parrot cages. The work refers to the cabinets of curiosities as well as to Potamianou's installation *Utopia, you were always in my mind* (2011). As precursors of museums, the cabinets of curiosities –originally entire rooms, later simple furniture pieces– showcased and protected rare collections of bizarre exhibits that *curieux* (curious) enthusiasts collected obsessively. Potamianou's sculptural cabinet forms part of a larger cabinet of curiosities which is no other than the gallery space itself. Its shelves host disordered assemblages made out of female heads in different sizes. Copies of shattered ancient Greek sculptures, fragments of older works by the artist, are imprisoned in silk fishing nets. The work underlines the passage of time – in relation to the changes of roles that society imposes upon women– and reminds viewers of the futile, ephemeral human existence, functioning as a contemporary *vanitas*.

In paintings by old masters depicting cages and pet birds, the female iconography prevails, directly identifying the beautiful exotic birds with the fragile gender of women and with a peaceful domestic life. Potamianou suggests a reality different to the one portrayed in these idyllic scenes; a reality defying the social stereotypes that compose the classical mythology of women.

Appropriating the manly role of the *curieux*², she infuses it with her own female substance. After extensive research she collects various objects from a plethora of different sources, choosing items directly associated with the female world. An antique children's game, a pair of a girl's velvet shoes, miniature doll's house furniture pieces from different epochs, dried butterflies as symbols of the psyche, artificial trees, keys, a ballet dancer sculpture by Degas, standing clocks, hourglasses, metronomes, and revolutionary literary masterpieces that question women's status-quo. In these dwellings, void of birds, Potamianou creates microcosms, three dimensional still-lives. The cages are transformed into Lilliputian theatrical scenes. Projections of women's conscious and unconscious. Files of archetypal memory.

The enclosed compositions narrate stories about the tender childhood years, marriage, motherhood, the private sphere as a nucleus of activity, portraying women's traditional daily-life as a confined life. Gradual cinematographic perception of images and comparative vision are-automatically activated, provoking analogies and correlations. In this environment, spectators become themselves collectors of new experiences related to the world and history of women, auditors of silent confessions of soundless subversive dreams.

² The collection of rare species and objects, usually in relation with an interest in science, was associated with men.

A radically different female condition, recounted with humor by Potamianou, shakes the hierarchical structures of patriarchal society. The work is in direct dialogue with Man Ray's *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* –the simulacrum of which was included in Potamianou's *Second Papers* (2006)– and Ducasse's famous phrase cited at the beginning of this text.³ Here, the sewing machine/the female element –in this case, her grand-mother's old Singer machine with the worn-out fabric crystallized in time– is stripped bare of Man Ray's oppressive cover. Ray's blanket is here tightly wrapped around the umbrella which is nailed to the cage. The male phallic symbol has magically sprung from Ducasse's verses and entered into the artistic composition. Potamianou displaces the enigma and the sense of mystery raised by Man Ray to the opposite sphere, the public male domain.

The cages, like human houses, are twofold symbols. Depending on the viewers' perspective, they are either prisons, shelters- or both. They are spaces of enclosure but also of protection, composing suffocating locations of confinement or places of tranquility that provide isolation and safety from the cruel outer world. The installation's overall title *Which side are you on?* poses precisely this question. Addressed to both genders, the question stimulates thought, initiating a voyage into the depths of consciousness as well as the field of ethics.

One more environmental cabinet of curiosities is installed in a separate room of the gallery space, hosting the last chapter of Potamianou's feminist story. The environment converses with two top literary works of the 19th century: *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (The Unknown Masterpiece) by Honoré de Balzac –whence the installation's title– and Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. In the former, the painter Frenhofer, in his attempt to reach perfection and the absolute beauty of the ideal woman, is led to destroy his foremost masterpiece. In the latter, the beautiful hedonist Dorian, himself one of the *curieux*, remains eternally young since time and his sins are magically projected upon his portrait, rather than himself, gradually turning it into a monster.

Potamianou creates an unorthodox, ephemeral mural painting. Due to its repetitive iconography, the mural attests to domestic wall tapestries in tune with female aesthetics. She paints on ocean blue painted walls, using a stencil that she herself has designed, a composition appropriating other artists' works as well as decorative floral motifs. Here, Bansky's *Girl with Balloon* coexists with Degas' ballet dancers, Botticelli's Venuses, Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and the portrait of Whistler's mother. A small panorama of earthly and mythical women, of different ages and in different roles, is perpetually repeated to form a whole. The mural functions like a discreet substratum, discovered by viewers on a second level while inspecting the paintings of mysterious and uncanny female portraits.

³ Man Ray's work is inspired by Isidore Ducasse's specific phrase. *Man Ray, L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/man-ray-lenigme-disidore-ducasse-t07957> (accessed on 20/11/2018).

Potamianou once again selects female figures from well-known paintings by Goya, Da Vinci, Vermeer, Cranach, Christus, Freud and others. She edits these initial images with the use of a computer, eliminating the color and selectively lighting up the mouth and hands, the most expressive areas, preserving however, their female identity. The result is printed on canvas, wrapped in transparencies and fastened with rope like the sheaf hiding Man Ray's sewing machine.

The imprisoned women flood the room's entrance, functioning like an occult introduction to Potamianou's last chapter. They compose the *materia prima* of her alchemical experiments from which emerge the genetically modified fragments of art history. Fragments that also inhabit this cabinet of curiosities.

Applying the same logic as with the cages, -in what consists of the artist's usual artistic practice- Potamianou appropriates artistic masterpieces; she deconstructs them on her own dissecting table and then reconstructs them anew. She pastes collage elements of physiognomic details deriving from well-known portraits of men on the original/printed female portraits. By covering the female with male characteristics in layers, ensuring the manual intervention is apparent, she creates new absurd realities: strange hybrids, which are neither traditional hermaphrodites nor purely alchemical beings.⁴ Potamianou's unusual androgynous figures, the result of blending female and male elements in a single palimpsest, are presented in elaborate intricate gold frames, as is the due to all grand masterpieces.

The figures under their diaphanous burden that maintain their female identity are juxtaposed with their free, dizygotic twin sisters, the visages of which have been altered, distorted and hardened in their attempt to survive in a male-dominated world.

The archetypal alchemical androgynous being, a coincidence of opposites (coincidentia oppositorum), signifies in Carl Gustav Jung's writings the self's wholeness, achieved through the process of individuation. Potamianou's androgynous being recounts a different existential condition. It expresses intense anxiety and agony, negating every sense of internal tranquility. In her story, women are called upon to transcend their very nature in order to function in the public sphere. The attempt to overturn social balance and the traditional order of things inevitably leads to "hubris." It is "hubris" that is inscribed as a malformation on the female faces, like Dorian's sins and time on his repulsive portrait.

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⁴ The hermaphrodite beings have two genders whereas the archetypal alchemical androgynous beings or Rebis have both a masculine and female head in one body of an unidentified gender.

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