

FEBRUARY 3, 2021

Q&A with Iliodora Margellos



On the Artist

Where are you currently based?

I'm currently based in Athens. I recently moved back and have based my family here - my elder daughter has recently started primary school. I grew up in Geneva, Switzerland, and I went to the states for my studies but I spent 6 years of my childhood in Athens before going to university. Now I have come back to raise a family.

What's led you to being an artist?

Well I was a late bloomer because it started towards the end of high school with the encouragement of teachers who spotted some talent. Until then I was geared towards medicine and I was training to study pre-med at Yale, but I added a double major with art last minute. As soon as I set foot on campus I realised that doing both of those majors was not a realistic goal for the next four years of university. I chose to focus on art and became certain that I would follow it as a career in the future. My work often comes from parts of the human body because I find its functions fascinating and incredibly complex. I do still get inspired for my titles and the processes I use from anatomy.

How would you describe your practice?

Every material that I insert into my work has a long history. The materials are often upcycled and so contain a personal memory that I don't necessarily share when I present my work, but they have a meaning that affects the way I make my work. It is a meditative process and inserting all of these meaningful materials adds to the final result for the viewer although they might not know where each thing is from. For example, I will take a bracelet and re-use the beads in an embroidery; I will remember that it is a bracelet that I found in a flea market in Edinburgh when I was fifteen and I still have it. That's one example, but there's a biography that each medium has.

I currently work from home, and as I have a newborn I am maximising the hours I have between looking after my child, and I do have a study and a regular schedule every day. I've been working outside because natural light is very important to me. That's why I like working in Athens, because here you get beautiful, clear light in winter and in summer. Outdoor lighting works really well with embroidery and I continue working until night time because that lets me see what's going to show up on the photographs. I work daytime and nighttime so that I can see what gets highlighted and what gets lost with the embroidery.

What are your inspirations?

They happen to mostly be women, but not because I only admire women, there are men as well. I really appreciate the work of Louise Bourgeois who worked a lot on her trauma and took a psychological approach. I'm also doing psychoanalysis because it helps my work, so I relate to her in that sense. We met when I went to her house a year before she passed away for her salon. It was the last one she did, so I had the opportunity to present my work there and have a dialogue with her. There's been a connection being in her space.

I appreciate Sheila Hicks a lot, we have a similar approach to the medium we like to use which is yarn. I also appreciate the work of Jenny Holzer, the directness of it although it is a completely different approach as it's conceptual, and Sarah Sze because of how she makes these incredible hand crafted installations with a lot of detail.



Louise Bourgeois at Her Salon (2008), Keith Mayerson

“That’s why I like working in Athens, because in Athens you get beautiful, clear light in winter and in summer.

Outdoor lighting works really well with embroidery, and I continue until night time because that lets me see what’s going to show on the photograph”

On Athens

How do you know Athens?

I grew up in Athens partly because my adoptive parents are Greek. We have returned to Greece so it's familiar as a childhood memory and now as a present life experience with children; I've experienced it in different phases of my life.

Before moving to Athens I used to spend all of my summers at my grandmother's house on the island of Kefalonia. I would spend almost three months there, gardening, going to the sea, and doing a lot of embroidery in the afternoon. My grandmother would spend her quiet time in the afternoon embroidering rather than napping, and I would sit next to her and that's how I learnt to embroider. In a way, I've always embroidered, I just hadn't labelled it as art. It was always there, it just wasn't labelled as being an artist.

Have you seen it change?

Huge changes, because I've happened to be there during big breaking events. I experienced the change to Euro from the Drachma in 2000. Athens also evolved a lot after the Olympics in 2004, it changed the city and you had the sense that it was becoming more international, for example with a new airport, before that we had one which looked like an island airport. After that there was big political upheaval with the left party and there were lots of protests in the streets, I happened to live in the city and was surrounded by the tear gas that was coming from the square. Then, we had the bankruptcy and the change to a radical left.

I think Athens is incredibly resilient because somehow, somehow, even with all these challenges, people still keep going and find a way to redefine themselves and adjust to the changes. Dio Horia, the gallery that I am currently with, has changed space three times in the last year as it adapted to each lockdown. It was very impressive how they quickly adjusted to the new needs. Other galleries I hear are looking for spaces to remodel so that they can get through this uncertain phase of opening and closing. Without openings the gallery space is a warehouse.

What are some of the contrasts in the city?

This is something that is really interesting to me as someone who has lived elsewhere. I used to be a philhellene, a lover of all things greeks, while living abroad because for me Greece was associated with my summer experience as a child. Once I moved here I stopped paying attention as much to all of the monuments, because when you live with them you rarely go by yourself whereas when you travel as an expat you look at it differently.

I think we take for granted the impressive presence of the past that is among the modern buildings in Athens. I guess even if you're not consciously thinking about it just driving through the city affects you. When you drive back home you see the Parthenon or the Kallimarmaro stadium and you take it for granted. But it's there and it certainly affects your psyche in daily life, it's reassuring to have elements of the past in your present; it's grounding.

If you had to describe Athens' spirit in a few adjectives what would they be?

I would say vibrant for sure. Without being able to put the feeling into words, but there is a vibrancy. Nostalgic, which might be a little heavy as a word but there is a weight of nostalgia in Greece. All the traumas as well have been incorporated and turned into a positive, I'm not only talking about antiquity but also the heroes of the Greek-Turkish war - having their statues as well juxtaposed with the ancient ruins. There are lots of different memories that bring sadness, but they're still venerated in the spirit of the city. And also resilience. I would use these words to describe Athens.

Any upcoming projects to promote?

I am currently working on an ambitious installation called 'Bedroom Situation (Up In The Air)' that will open as a solo exhibition at Dio Horia Athens. I'm re-creating a room with different elements, including a lot of embroideries on different textures of course and it's research on sleep. The commission I'm doing for RUYA MAPS is part of this overall theme I'm working on at the moment and it can be incorporated into the room through a series of talismanic eyes. I was very inspired by Michel Foucault's text on other spaces, especially the last paragraph on heterotopias - how a floating boat is the perfect heterotopia - and that relates a lot to Greece.

That's why I'm using elements such as mirrors, which is an element which I haven't yet worked with, there is an irony of situation with a mirror because you're there but you're not there. I'm also incorporating sound, which is a new thing for me, the white noise which I've been putting on to get my baby to sleep. I want it to be a holistic experience.



Portrait of Iliodora Margellos

“I think Athens is incredibly resilient because somehow, somehow even with all these challenges, people still keep going and find a way to redefine themselves and adjust to the changes”