

ARTS

When the personal meets the political

A contemporary art exhibition that explores the connection between the choice of the individual and the action of the many

BY ALEXANDRA KORDXENIDIS

"The personal is political," a motto used in feminist art of the 1970s, is a concept revisited by two young curators – Areti Leopoulou and Thodoris Markoglou – who have put together "Personal-Political" an exhibition included in the Thessaloniki Biennale's parallel program. The exhibition, which runs to October 23 and presents works by 37 artists, matches the political subtext of the title "Praxis: Art in Uncertain Times" for this year's biennale, which was organized by the Thessaloniki State Museum of Contemporary Art and came to a close last week.

One quite interesting aspect of the exhibition is the inclusion of works by a generation of "avant-garde" artists who made their mark in the 1960s and 70s, at a time that art had a pronounced political orientation. Vlassis Kaniaris, Nikos Kessanlis, Thodoros, Dimitris Alithinos and Leda Papaconstantinou – all represented in the exhibition – are among those who addressed political and social issues in their work.

By incorporating their work into the exhibition, the curators wish to emphasize to a younger generation the continuity of ideas. Markoglou says that in the 1980s and for a part of the 90s, the political content in art waned but that it has picked up again. He also explains that their intention as curators was to show how fresh and contemporary the work of the artists of an older generation feels today. The older works are juxtaposed with newer ones in ways that show connections and similarities. The "Pressed Cotton" installation by Nikos Kessanlis, for example (the work is a wooden press with a piece of fabric in between it), has been placed next to drawings by young artist Dimitris Baboulis and a "sculpture" of a huge human jaw mounted topped off by a human-like form. All three works relate, in one way or another, to the crushing effect of power structures.



Sophia Tsamouti's 'Destroy,' acrylic on canvas, 2009.

Curator's note

Contemporary art takes a different, more personal approach to the political

Throughout the display, the political is used in a very broad sense. It is meant as a critical stance in life rather than as direct political action. Family ties, friendships, ecological awareness or everyday personal choices are seen as political.

Both curators believe that last December's riots in the center of Athens showed a political awareness and a desire for change. Art is made part of the picture. However, Leopoulou says that compared to the art of the past, contemporary art takes a different, more personal approach to the political. In a world that prioritizes individuality, the political has acquired a more fluid and broad-ranging meaning. The political has become "biopolitical," she says. The idea is to show how the personal encompasses the political – how, in other words, personal, everyday choices influence our stance in a larger reality. The instal-

lation by Klitsa Antoniou shows this combination of the personal and the political. Bowls of red fluid have been positioned on a white sofa. Behind it a video shows a woman vacuuming with a machine that resembles a mine detector. A domestic environment finds a parallel with a minefield.

In theory, the curatorial statement sounds interesting. But art exhibitors focused on political matters have shown that, in practice, not many artists are able to probe into political matters in depth and with insight. Moreover, to widen the meaning of the political to such an extent may weaken the focus and aim of the political.

The exhibition is an occasion to ponder such issues. It is also an opportunity to view works by some emerging artists, among them Myrto Apostolidou, Theofanis Nouskas, Vassilis Hatzopoulos and Sofia Tsamouti.

Much of the work is fresh and interesting – the works by the artists who are part of a Thessaloniki-based group by the name "Northern Folk Artists" among them. Aiki Panagiotopoulou's drawings combine finesse with a threatening mood. Maria Zervou's paintings contain imaginative, contrasting elements and the photographs of Myrto Apostolidou that resemble paintings.

The more historical works endow the exhibition with a certain weight. Among these, the work of Thodoros serves as the beginning and the end of the exhibition. An interactive installation in which visitors are asked to fill out a questionnaire, it questions the role of art and artists. It sends a message to the viewer that he should be critically aware when viewing art, to take, so to speak, a political approach to art.

"Personal-Political" at the State Museum of Contemporary Art (Warehouse B1, Old Port, Thessaloniki, tel 2310.589.140, www.greekstatemuseum.com) through October 23.



'Untitled,' oil on canvas, 2009 by Konstantina Gagani (top), and 'Arnold the Robot,' collage, 2009, by Alexandros Simopoulos (above). Both artists are members of the Northern Folk Artists group.



'Praxis II,' an installation from 2003 by Pavlos Nikolakopoulos.



Maria Zervou's 'Order No 2,' pencil and watercolors on paper, 2009.