

venia bechraki

Photography

Venia Bechraki is a painter, photographer and video artist. Her work is based on performance art and investigates themes of gender, identity, private and public. In her self-portrait photographs the artist casts herself as protagonist in imaginary scripts and publicly performs private rituals and traditional female roles-often in exaggerated form. She stages paradox scenes into public spaces which reverse stereotypical imagery resulting from advertising, films and the visual art tradition putting into question the female identity in a humorous manner.

At once the author of the image and the object of viewing, Bechraki makes an ironic commentary of certain consumer and domestic patterns of behavior. She uses photography to construct imaginary, at times surrealist, environments that make reference to everyday life. Images that at first sight appear to be documenting a mundane reality, centering on the figure of a woman, the artist herself, challenge conventional restrictions and social taboos. Following in the footsteps of women performance artists of the 80s, who consistently probed the boundaries between various manifestations of mass culture in art and lived experience, Bechraki investigates throughout her work identity issues, the relationship between the public and the private, the real and the fictitious space.

Shifting between the art of performance, photography, the composition of classical painting and a cinematic representation of reality, Venia Bechraki creates pictures that merge theatrical performances (tableaux-vivant) with a documentarian view, exploring the fine line between autobiography and fiction.



## BIO

Born in Athens, Greece. Venia Bechrakis studied painting at the Athens School of Fine Arts. She won the Onassis Foundation Scholarship in 2000 and continued her studies at the New York University (MFA-Master in Fine Arts) in photography and video art. She received the Gerondelis Foundation Grand in 2001 and the Jack Goodman Award for Art & Technology, in 2002.

Venia Bechraki has presented her work in solo exhibitions in Greece and abroad: “Off-Target”, Salon De Bricolage, Athens (2014), “La Grece In&Out: Autoportraits”, Galerie Basia Embiricos, Paris (2010), “Restricted Area”, Zoumboulakis Galleries, Athens (2010), "Strange Weathers", Melenia Art Gallery, Bucharest, Romania (2009), "Urban Dwellings”, Zina Athanassiadou Gallery, Thessaloniki (2008), “Within-Without”, Zoumboulakis Galleries, Athens (2006), Real Art Ways, Connecticut, USA, granted by the National Endowment for the Arts (2003).

She has exhibited internationally in major international group shows, such as: “Creatures of a day”, ART ATHINA- Athens International Artfair (2015), “Final Destination” Eleftherios Venizelos Airport Athens (2015), “Staging the Domestic”, The Hospital Club, London (2014), “Open 15-Flags”, Lido Venice (2012), “Autoportraits Fictions”, Espace Galerie des Femmes, Paris, “OpenXII” Lido Venice (2009), "Face to Faces", 2nd Biennial of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki, Greece (2009), "Art Athina 2009", Zina Athanasiadou Gallery & Gallery Basia Embiricos, Athens, Greece, “Art Photo Expo Miami”, Zone D and Galerie Basia Embiricos, Miami Art Basel, Miami, USA (2008), “Material Links”, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Shanghai, China (2008), “The Water”, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki, Greece (2008), “Heterotopias”, 1st Biennial of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece (2007), “The Chronicle of the Absurd“, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki, Greece (2007), ‘Bodyconnections’, La Maison de la Photographie, Tachkent, Uzbekistan (2007), Art Athina- International Artfair” Athens (2004), “11<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean” Athens (2003), “MFA Exhibition” Washington Square Galleries, New York (2003), “The Jack Goodman Award Show “ Rosenberg Gallery, New York (2002), ”Deconstruction” Angel Orenanz Foundation for the Arts, New York (2002)., a.o.

Venia Bechraki lives and works in Athens.

# within-without







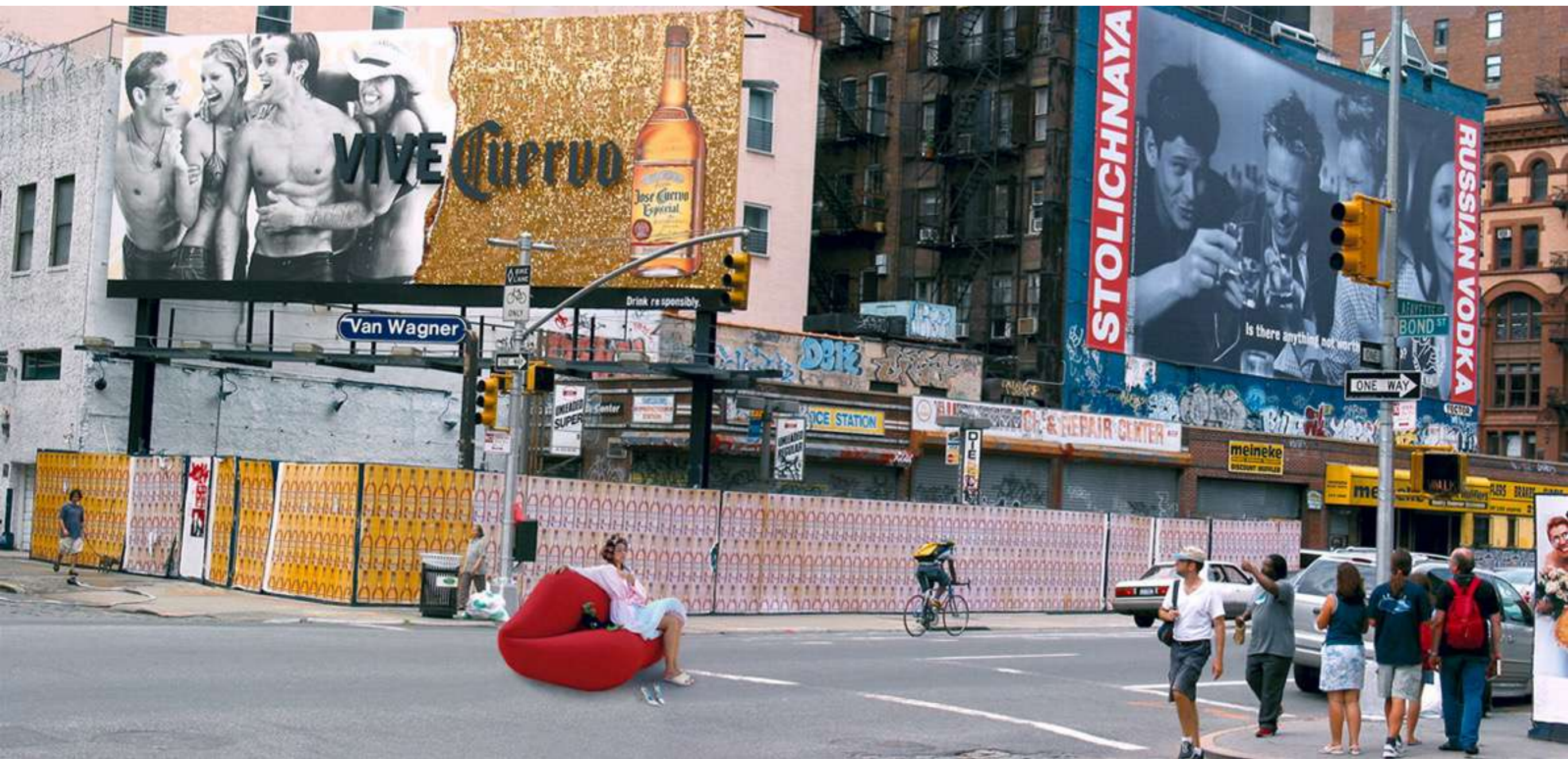


parking /80x170cm / c-print / ed.5













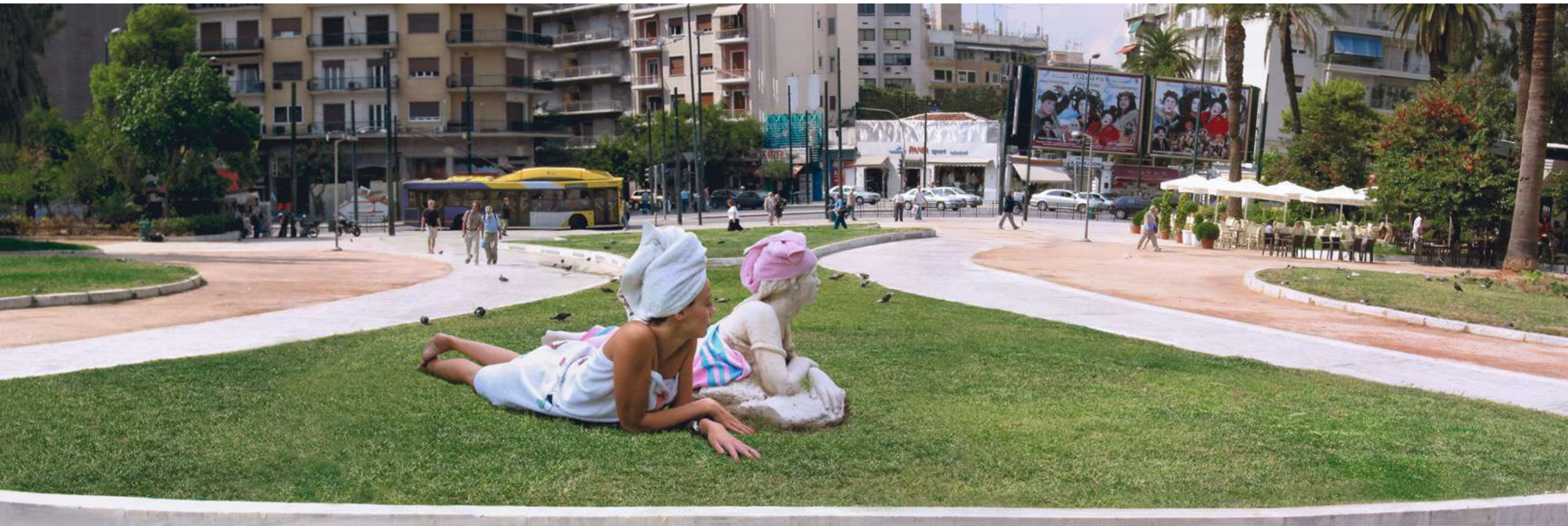




high fry monument / 70x100cm / c-print / ed.5











the kiss II  
/ 70x100cm / c-print / ed.5



the kiss III  
/ 70x100cm / c-print / ed.5

# restricted area

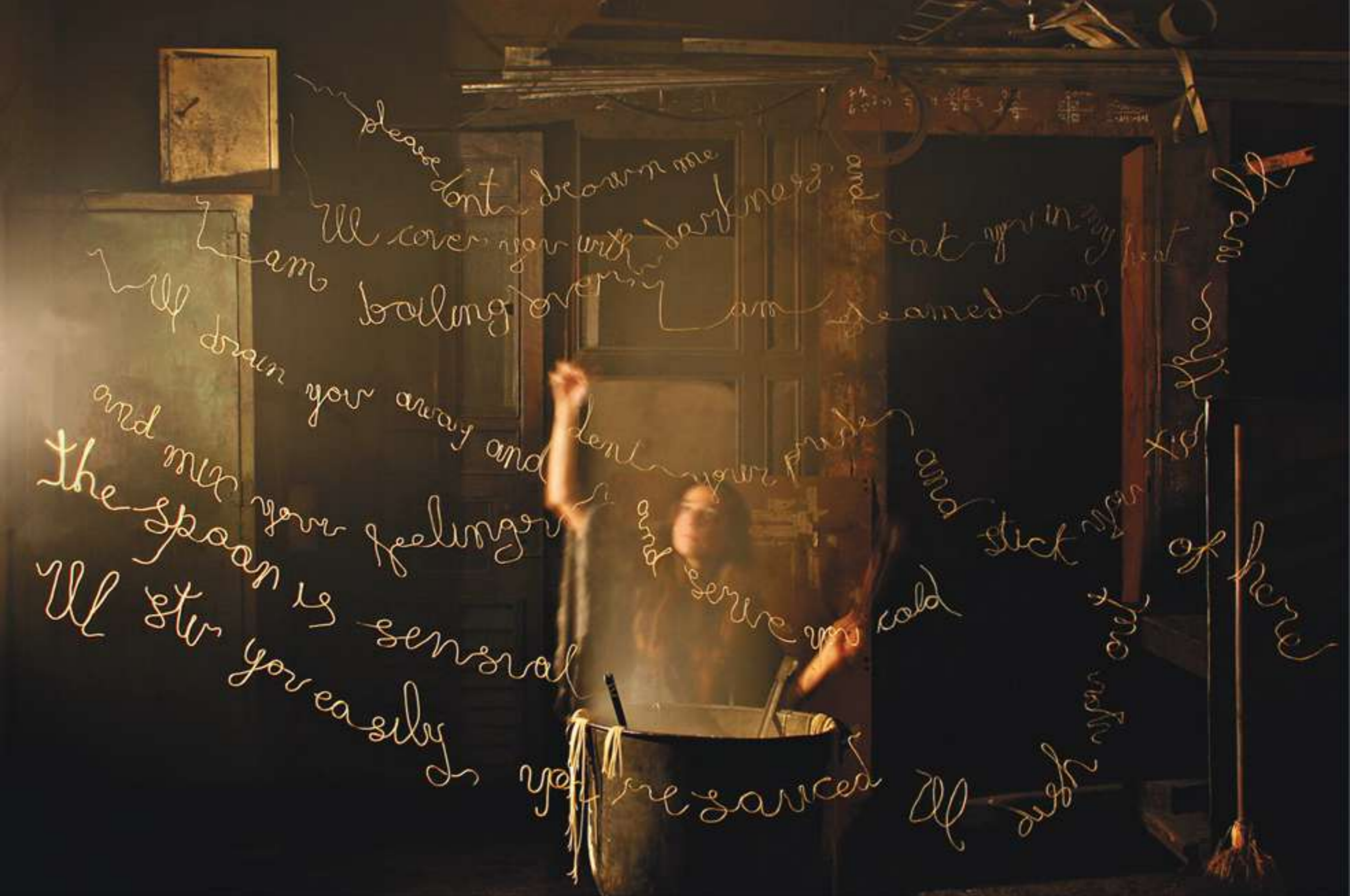




bouncing balls / 100x140cm / c-print / ed.5















COMUNICĂ  
NELIMITIT

în rețea

cu abonament  
COSMOTEL  
FULL OPTION

FRUMU

COSMOTEL

Alături de tine







floating / 100x140cm / c-print / ed.5

'Who can tell,

whether the “body” sinks or floats...'

“A body floating in water and a flag sinking among banknotes compose a dynamic image that appears to unfold in slow motion. Although the photographic lens is the medium used here, the composition does not seem to be motionless, a quality typical of Bechrakis' work which always appears to elude the lens' capacity to freeze the moment. Venia Bechrakis' images are the product of staged narratives combining dynamic symbolism and realistic representation.

The buoyant body gives no signs of life or death. We 'see' it – not momentarily, but through time – as either relaxed and happily floating or drifting lifeless, given over to the water's buoyancy. The water is a symbol of life and awareness, the flag one of national identity, and money an emblem of power, and perhaps the end in itself in contemporary societies. And yet the artist lets both those latter symbols to sink, while the body remains afloat. Vision and promise, truth and the lie coexist in this aquatic landscape. The work is a proposal for a redefinition of contemporary human existence through a liberating state-of-being.” - Christos Savvidis, Curator of Greek Participation in Open#15

Floating is Venia Bechrakis' presentation at the Open#15 International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations which bears the general title 'Flags' and brings together a number of major international artists such as Yoko Ono and Lim Dong-Lak.

Open #15 is a parallel event to the Mostra (Venice's 69th International Film Festival) and that of the 13th Venice Biennale of Architecture in Venice.

# off target





## Where is my home?

By Yorgos Tzirtzilakis

Over the past years, a younger generation of artists has demonstrated a rekindled interest in the city and the home. And though it is a known fact that art's early twentieth century avant-garde plunged head on into the 'religious intoxication of the big city', in our days such references tend to take on a more personal quality; they are less strident; and the metaphors are sophisticated and paradoxical. Today's new art may be following and perhaps completing a turn signaled by the decade of the 20s, and, later on, the 60s, yet it differs in terms of mood and spirit: nihilism and a self-reflexive formalism have been replaced by a new sensibility favoring subtle acts of signification, by an attraction to the city as mediator in interpersonal relations and by the embodied anthropogeography of dwelling. It is in terms of this trend that we may define Venia Bechrakis' photographs.

To start with, I shall focus on three qualities that seem specific to her work and are readily identifiable: *First*, the female quality of her photographic self-portraits, which is the result of an ironic commentary of certain consumer and domestic patterns of behavior. *Second*, an act of reversal that turns the *inside* into the *outside*: 'The road becomes a home for the wanderer (flâneur),' wrote Walter Benjamin, 'who feels at home amidst the façades of buildings, as the bourgeois does inside his four walls'. And, *third*, the fact that these 'extimacies'\* are not always the result of digital manipulation of the image, but also the result of specific physical action carried out in either public or domestic space.

As Edward Soja observes, 'in socially produced space, spatiality may be defined by the physical space of the material world and by the mental space of the intellect and of representation, each of which is used and integrated in the construction of spatiality, but cannot be thought as its equivalent.' (*Postmodern Geographies*)

In any case, both the documentation of a direct physical action in space and the manipulation by means of Photoshop of a series of displacements and paradoxes, take here the place of collage in order to place the self-documented body in a different context. This observation leads us to infer the following: what actually marks these self-portraits is the quality of heterogeneity and of a non-organic type of representation.

Rosalind Krauss maintained that the aim of collage was to place emphasis 'on the gap between one fragment of reality and another' (*Amour Fou. Photography and Surrealism*). If the realist organic work of art attempted to reconcile the natural world with culture, then the non-organic quality of collage simply plays with reality's fascinating heterogeneity. I am not at all sure that we have to be skeptical of the fact that the methods of the avant-garde have lost their former, 'heroic' character to become the property of mass culture. Besides, the city itself, much like the contemporary dwelling, is no longer a harmonious thing, subject to complete control.

New technologies of the image contribute to a reality of reciprocal overlapping: architecture seems to be enhancing its artistic character, as art practices increasingly seem to be borrowing elements from architecture; the epicenter being always none other than the adventure of perception, the vertigo of the gaze. Today, the 'quality' of the city, as much as that of the home, does not only depend on the needs they necessarily serve, but also on the power of the imagination. And that was already sensed by German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel as early as in 1834, when he designed Otto's pharaonic palace on the Acropolis of Athens without in fact ever having stepped foot in Greece. Here then is an early instance of *non lieu* apotheosis, a notion to which all seem to refer today. But we can go ever further back, if you will, to El Greco's magnificent misrepresentation of Toledo (1595-1600), in which he arbitrarily shifted the location of the river and the belfry, changing the place of buildings.

What is more important today, though, is the ability of contemporary art to transform the most commonplace, mundane thing into something special. All readings of the city and the dwelling are by necessity a misreading. The only possible interpretation is a misinterpretation. The 'new alliance' between art practices and perceptions of space has first and foremost to do with the function of the image. "This seeking for *my* home (...) it eateth *me* up', Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: 'Where is *my* home? For it do I ask and seek, and have sought, but have not found it.' It is a question still relevant today; a question that somehow seems to resound through Venia Bechrakis' photographs...

\* Extimacy: English rendition of a neologism coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, namely *extimité* [from the prefix 'ex' (*exterieur*) and the French word *intimite* (intimacy)].

Yorgos Tzirtzilakis / Program consultant for the DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art / Curator and Commissioner of the Greek Participation in the 52nd International Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia/ Co-curator of the Greek participation in the 5th Biennale of Architecture in Venice/ Editor in Chief of The Art Magazine /Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture University of Thessaly, Greece/ Editor of various monographs, special issues and critical essays in numerous exhibition catalogues, books and magazines.

## **“Have you ever seen a gun wound that does not bleed?”**

By Christos Savvidis & Lydia Chatziakovou

In Haruki Murakami's novel “Sputnik Sweetheart”, Sumire is trapped in a world between reality and non-reality. She has been led there due to her inability to fulfill the demands that she has chosen for herself, as well as those of others. Something similar seems to affect the heroine in the photos by Venia Bechrakis, where the artist herself is portrayed in a constant search of identity.

However, in Bechrakis' narrative, one does not encounter an involuntary escape from reality, rather a clear statement of her own choices. Dressed in khaki and with a helmet on, the artist-heroine chooses her armature –a vacuum cleaner and a shotgun, as symbols of power and leverage– that even though initially pictured as equals, at the end the vacuum cleaner prevails and is left standing. Allusion to the desire for peaceful and bloodless resolution of any conflict. In any case, the artist-heroine remains in the picture only as dreamy memory.

Memory or fantasy?

Bright, happy colors, familiar, everyday activities are combined with chickens/grenades, ladles/revolvers, carrots/cartridges... With humoristic and ironic attitude, the images refer to posters-calls for action addressed to American housewives during World War II and bearing slogans such as “Make yours a victory home”, as well as to consumer ads of the '50s and '60s, such as the one that inspired Richard Hamilton's seminal work “Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?” (1956), but also to feminist dictates of the '70s for women's emancipation.

What could all this mean, seen through the lens of a contemporary globalized reality?

How has the role of women evolved in the post-feminist era?

According to Germaine Greer, modern woman has been castrated, in order to follow the feminist stereotypes of the glamorous and super-merial woman expected to be everything to all men and nothing to herself. It is through others – whether men or women– that meaning is attributed to women's emancipation. Women's battle to exist as independent beings is self-negated when accompanied by the desire for coexistence of the glamorous fantasy and the reality of the everyday.

Such postmodern feminist manifestos are introduced in Bechrakis' pop attitude. However, instead of criticizing them, the artist chooses to comment and finally refute them through play and humor. Housewife, warrior, career woman, *femme fatale*, super hero... the artist depicts, often in the same photo, the multiple possibilities that become intermingled and equally eliminated, one by the other, through the element of exaggeration.

Even though Bechrakis' heroine is always portrayed in action, ready to fight, her attitude is anything but aggressive and dark. On the contrary, it is positive, happy, humoristic and playful. The feminist battle against stereotypes and *cliché* female roles is transformed into play, in which the initially fragile female characters adopt behaviours similar to those of superheroes, in order to fight against stereotypes and conquer their own identity. Even though such battle could lead to self-entrapment in a place between fantasy and reality –reminiscent of the situation experienced by Sumire– the artist-heroine chooses play, irony and exaggeration, in order to subvert and cast out stereotypes, in order not to be trapped.

To sup up, Venia Bechrakis creates images affected by pop culture aesthetics and borrows elements from the mythology of superheroes, as built through cinema, music videos, advertising and video games. She takes things one step further, in order to comment on western –namely northern american– stereotypes, combining those elements with the aesthetics of Japanese comics.

The artist acts within the contemporary urban environment, where she directs herself, giving emphasis on the performative dimension of her work – practice which refers to early feminist art in the beginning of the '70s.

The urban environments selected by the artist as set for her actions are often spaces-passages which highlight the works' exaggerated aesthetics and subversive quality. Often bearing intense signs of corruption and memories of different time periods, these spaces underline the fragility of human existence, in relation to that of superheroes in the virtual world of spectacle and advertisement.

Venia Bechrakis does not wish to give answers. On the contrary, she uses the image to pose questions and to evoke associations with widely known representations and subvert them through play and exaggeration. The result is a post-feminist art where, in contrast to classic feminist works, the images are overtly open and active, free from deep female sensitivity or from the desire for men's punishment or even for women's self-punishment. The artist uses female roles' *cliché* representations –whether these are in favour of women's emancipation, or capitalize on it in order to impose consumer desires– to depict a beautiful, brightly impressive world, where some questions might already have been answered or have become obsolete, and where everything is, finally, possible.

Of course, according to Alain Badiou's 15 Theses on Contemporary Art, when everything is possible, then everything is also impossible. The possibility not for everything but for something, the proposition for a specific alternative choice, is the power of contemporary art and Venia Bechrakis asks us to look at ourselves with leniency and to consider a new possibility for ourselves, beyond gender, to choose our own scenario. This is the truth of contemporary art.

A truth that needs to exist beyond violence, war, financial crisis... The message is clear: the red and white ribbon of restriction becomes a toy and a medium of escape. The “Restricted Area” opens up new routes.

Memory or fantasy? Memory that surpasses feminist echoes, but also fantasy for liberation from all kinds of restrictions and demands – posed not only by ourselves, but also by others, even maybe by art.

*Christos Savvidis is the founding director of ArtBOX.gr | Creative Arts Management, Co-Director of Arts Management of the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, and Artistic Director of the Museum's Project Space with Lydia Chatziakovou. He has been the Artistic Director of large-scale events such as: Art Athina - Athens international art fair, XV Biennale de la Mediterranee in Thessaloniki and has curated the "Moscow Poetry Club / Making Words", at the 53rd Venice Biennale "Making Worlds"; and the Greek participations in BIDA - International Biennial of Sports in Contemporary Art, Spain.*

What can we make of self-portraits in odd places that juxtapose ironic vignettes mocking our contemporary urban lives with everyday chores and mundane routines? In this series of new works, Becharkis, a native of Athens, Greece who studied at New York University, sheds light on our complicated lives and shows us our current environment in which we are constantly bombarded with images.

Whether in a grocery store, the airport, the subway or on a Manhattan street, the artist's portraits remind us of women's work and that ever-tenuous balance between one's private and public life. Always seeking out and representing duality, Becharkis offers composed theatrical performances using a documentary style of photography that investigates the spaces between autobiography and fiction, performance and reality, perhaps reflecting her own national bifurcation between Greece and New York.

Becharkis's photography is a culmination of multiple techniques influenced by cinema. The long, narrow format is elongated to capture the duality of combined images. She creates fantastical sentences, stringing the viewer along with multiple ironies, and a tantalizing sense of humor emerges as the scenes become even more real. Fascinated with the artist becoming herself an art object, she stages various events that normally don't occur within public/private locales, prompting the viewer to ask, "Is this true or false?" The merging of images such as a portrait of the artist sitting in her living room, fruit in hand, (as though she needs to make a selection between apples and oranges) contrasts with an image from a local grocery store that highlights the orderliness of a mundane minimalist display of stacked fruit in the store's aisles.

Other images include the artist in a bathing suit, lounging with a drink in hand in an empty parking lot covered in snow. She is surrounded by two advertisements of famous people toasting with Sky vodka. All three are holding cocktail glasses, totally unaware of their surroundings. It's almost as if she was reporting the weather for the evening news, live from her lounge chair: "today's weather, it is snowing out." Some of the most contemplative images are from a series of portraits where she portrays herself doing everyday household chores, taking a bubble bath or washing the floor, contrasted with shots of an anonymous subway platform. With these, she creates unusual ambiguities of the kind that resonate throughout New York City.

Airports and subway stations, although basic transportation hubs for any major city, can also be scary, daunting locations in which normal routines can be irrevocably altered. Anxiety surrounding robberies and terrorist attacks can permeate these dark and gloomy sites. Becharkis' images draw attention to how one navigates through such an urban terrain, alluding sometimes in obvious ways to these potential crimes, while at other times subtly allowing the viewer to reconsider what public space is.

In a typical arrangement, Becharki combines three frames that merge into a panoramic overview, overtly toying with the viewer's perception and gaze. Whether artificial or natural environments, she sometimes shoots through various glasses creating reflections that cause us to speculate on who the spectator is: the viewer, the setting, or the artist?

Holly Block

*Holly Block is the executive director of Art in General, a leading nonprofit arts organization located in New York City. She has been the curator and organizer of numerous contemporary art exhibitions and projects and is the author and editor of ART CUBA: The New Generation (2001), a book on contemporary art from Cuba published by Harry N. Abrams.*

## ***Undermining the Evident***

By Marina Fokides

The image of a young woman, seen from behind, leaning against a glass window that seems to be protecting some rare tropical garden brings to mind a number of hypothetical scenarios. On the other side of the glass there is a small crowd of people among which an elderly couple, stares with wonder at the curious exhibits. These separate worlds on either side of the window appear to be wholly disconnected from each other, though events taking place therein seem to be occurring simultaneously. Although transparent, the glass that stands between the two worlds gives the impression of a distinct yet impenetrable psychographic boundary between different realities. But then again, maybe not! It all depends on yet another factor, which comes to complete this play of multiple viewpoints that Venia Bechrakis orchestrates in her work *The Garden* (2004): it's the gaze of each one of us upon this particular image.

The subject or the object of viewing? Voyeur, or observer? Artist, or the audience of art? – the role of the artist is determined by the viewer and it is through these parallel readings of the image that the nature of her work may be determined. Bechrakis uses photography to construct imaginary, at times surrealist, environments that make reference to everyday life. Images that at first sight appear to be documenting a mundane reality, centering on the figure of a woman – the artist herself – challenge conventional restrictions, social taboo and what we tend to take for granted. Following in the footsteps of women performance artists of the 80s, who consistently probed the boundaries between various manifestations of mass culture in art and lived experience, Bechrakis investigates throughout her work gender and identity issues, the relationship between the public and the private, the space of the fictitious (in its cinematic version) as a space of real experience and a revision of the simulacra of advertising, which renders the viewer indispensable to the fulfillment of plot.

Merging various techniques borrowed from the cinema, advertising photography and the visual art tradition, Bechrakis creates a series of odd landscapes, a universe of oxymora and paradoxes that captivate the viewer. In these unorthodox situations that Bechrakis stages, she is at once the author of the image and the object of viewing. Whether waiting for the frog to turn into a prince on a metro platform, or enjoying a cocktail while she lounges, swimsuit on, in the middle of snowy Manhattan in front of the billboard add of some exotic drink, or hanging her laundry to dry along some urban avenue. The essence of her work lies as much in the final result – a frozen moment in time that is at once part of tangible reality and the realm of the imaginary, as determined both by the artist and the viewer – as in the creative process, which is a special private ritual in itself. Either through digital manipulation of her images, or through real action where she publicly performs the most private of routines (often in exaggerated form), the artist casts herself as protagonist in imaginary scripts staged basically as a means of personal feedback. The ultimate goal of this practice is not only to show the attractive aspect of everyday reality as it appears in the fictional worlds of advertising and cinema, but also to comment on the manipulative power of the image in contemporary culture. Although her works often have a sort of tongue-in-cheek, kitsch quality, they are not exclusively meant to entertain; they rather seem to focus with a sense of urgency on the mundane, the restrictions of daily experience and the stereotypical model of women's life.

Shifting between the art of performance, photography in its emancipated form, the composition of classical painting and a cinematic representation of reality, Bechrakis' creates works that go beyond the narrow limitations of traditional photography and reinvent the photographic image as a field of psychoanalytic investigation. Her way of treating photography explores the fine line between truth and the lie. By undermining the evident, she allows the viewer to become aware of the deception and to decide for themselves whether they want to be deceived or not.

*Marina Fokides is the Founding and Artistic Director of Kunsthalle Athena, Commissioner and Curator of the Greek Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennial, and Curator of the 1st Tirana Biennial. She has also curated numerous exhibitions such as: Open Form, at Art Athina- Athens international art fair (2013), Midsummer Nights Dream, at Remap2, (Her)(His)tory, at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, Anathena, at DESTE Foundation; and has written essays for Frieze, Art-Agenda, Artinfo, Flash Art, Manifesta Journal a.o.*

# Τέχνη χωρίς σύνορα

Τρεις νέοι και δημιουργικοί εκφραστές της ελληνικής εξωστρέφειας μιλούν για τη δυναμική πορεία τους.

ΑΠΟ ΤΗ ΣΕΜΙΝΑ ΣΑΡΑΝΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ /  
BY SEMINA SARANTOPOULOU  
ΦΩΤΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ: XXXXXX / PHOTOS: XXXX

## ART WITHOUT FRONTIERS

Three creative, successful young Greeks speak to Blue about their dynamic career paths.



### ΒΕΝΙΑ ΜΠΕΧΡΑΚΗ:

«Ελλάς σημαίνει φως - ο ήλιος του τόπου μας είναι γενεσιουργός δύναμη»

Απόφοιτος της Σχολής Καλών Τεχνών και του NYU, η υποτροφία που κέρδισε από το National Endowments of the Arts της εξασφάλισε μια ατομική έκθεση στο Κονέκτικατ, που την έκανε γνωστή στο ευρύ κοινό. Βραβεύτηκε με το Jack Goodman Award στη Νέα Υόρκη και το 2009 συμμετείχε στη διεθνή έκθεση της Βενετίας OPENXII στο ιστορικό Hotel Des Bains του Βιοκόντι. Το πολυπολιτισμικό μωσαϊκό που συνθέτει τη Νέα Υόρκη είναι για εκείνη «ένας ξέφρενος ιστός, ένα έργο τέχνης που αναπνέει», όμως η πατρίδα έχει μοναδική θέση στην καρδιά της, αφού «Ελλάς σημαίνει φως - ο ήλιος του τόπου μας είναι γενεσιουργός δύναμη». Άλλωστε στα έργα της υπάρχουν επιρροές από ελληνικούς μύθους - η γυναίκα συχνά εμφανίζεται σαν θεότητα ή ηρωίδα αρχαίας τραγωδίας. Μότο ζωής της: «Τα πάντα ρει. Οι εποχές αλλάζουν κι εγώ φαντάζομαι τον εαυτό μου στο μέλλον δέκα φορές πιο δημιουργικό». Το έργο της «Floating», που παρουσιάστηκε πέρυσι στο πλαίσιο της διεθνούς διοργάνωσης OPEN Lido#15, αφορά σε ένα σώμα που επιπλέει χωρίς κανείς να μπορεί να προσδιορίσει την τύχη του. Το νερό συμβολίζει τη ζωή, η σημαία προσδιορίζει την εθνική μας ταυτότητα και το χρέμα τον αυτοσκοπό. Μια πρόταση επαναπροσδιορισμού μας στη σύγχρονη κοινωνία της 34χρονης εικαστικού; «Η σημαία και τα χρέματα βυθίζονται, ενώ το σώμα παραμένει στην επιφάνεια».

### VENIA BECHRAKIS

"The sunshine in our country is such a forceful powerpower".

A graduate of the Athens School of Fine Arts and NYU, Venia Bechrakis was awarded the 2002 Jack Goodman Award and she participated in the OPEN 12 International Exhibition at the historic Hotel Des Bains in Venice in 2009. The multicultural mosaic that is New York is "a delirious web, a breathing work of art" but the homeland holds a special place in her heart given that "Hellas means light - the sunshine in our country is such a forceful power". Her work is influenced by Greek myths, with the female figure often making an appearance as a goddess or heroine from an ancient Greek tragedy. Her life motto is: "Everything flows." "Times change and I imagine myself ten times more creative in the future".

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET  
HARTFORD CT 06106  
860 232 1006  
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by, Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



REAL ART WAYS founded in 1975 is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Mopping, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003 (detail)

# Venia Bechrakis



**REAL  
ART WAYS**



Subway, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003

## Venia Bechrakis

By Holly Block

Venia Bechrakis's exhibition at Real Art Ways includes a new series of digitally-enhanced photographs entitled *Within and Without* (2003), as part of a series of emerging artist's exhibitions called *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*.

What can we make of self-portraits in odd places that juxtapose ironic vignettes mocking our contemporary urban lives with everyday chores and mundane routines? In this series of new works, Bechrakis, a native of Athens, Greece who studied at New York University, sheds light on our complicated lives and shows us our current environment in which we are constantly bombarded with images.

Whether in a grocery store, the airport, the subway or on a Manhattan street, the artist's portraits remind us of women's work and that ever-tenuous balance between one's private and public life. Always seeking out and representing duality, Bechrakis offers composed theatrical performances using a documentary style of photography that investigates the spaces between autobiography and fiction, performance and reality, perhaps reflecting her own national bifurcation between Greece and New York.

Bechrakis's photography is a culmination of multiple techniques influenced by cinema. The long, narrow format is elongated to capture the duality of combined images. She creates fantastical sentences, stringing the viewer along with multiple ironies, and a tantalizing sense of humor emerges as the scenes become even more real. Fascinated with the artist becoming herself an art object, she stages various events that normally don't occur within public/private locales, prompting the viewer to ask, "Is this true or false?" The merging of images such as a portrait of the artist sitting in her living room, fruit in hand, (as though she needs to make a selection between apples and oranges) contrasts with an image from a local grocery store that highlights the orderliness of a mundane minimalist display of stacked fruit in the store's aisles.

Other images include the artist in a bathing suit, lounging with a drink in hand in an empty parking lot covered in snow. She is surrounded by two advertisements of famous people toasting with Skyy vodka. All three are holding cocktail glasses, totally unaware of their surroundings. It's almost as if she was reporting the weather for the evening news, live from her

Venia Bechrakis was born in Athens in 1974. She has studied painting in the Fine Arts School of Athens and received a scholarship from the Alexander Onassis Public Benefit Foundation for MFA studies at New York University. Along with the Alexander Onassis Foundation Scholarship in 2000, Bechrakis has received the Jack Goodman Award for Art and Technology in 2002 and a Gerondelis Foundation Grant in 2001.

Bechrakis has exhibited her work internationally, in venues including the Art Athina—International Artfair, Athens 2004, the "11th Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean," Athens 2003, DNA Gallery, Provincetown Massachusetts 2003, "The Jack Goodman Award Show," Rosenberg Gallery, New York 2002, and "Deconstruction," Angel Orenanz Foundation for the Arts New York 2002. Her work is installed in the Eleftherios Venizelos New Airport of Athens. *Within/Without* is Bechrakis' first solo exhibition. She lives and works in New York and Athens.

lounge chair: "today's weather, it is snowing out." Some of the most contemplative images are from a series of portraits where she portrays herself doing everyday household chores, taking a bubble bath or washing the floor, contrasted with shots of an anonymous subway platform. With these, she creates unusual ambiguities of the kind that resonate throughout New York City.

Airports and subway stations, although basic transportation hubs for any major city, can also be scary, daunting locations in which normal routines can be irrevocably altered. Anxiety surrounding robberies and terrorist attacks can permeate these dark and gloomy sites. Bechrakis' images draw attention to how one navigates through such an urban terrain, alluding sometimes in obvious ways to these potential crimes, while at other times subtly allowing the viewer to reconsider what public space is.

In a typical arrangement, Bechrakis combines three frames that merge into a panoramic overview, overtly toying with the viewer's perception and gaze. Whether artificial or natural environments, she sometimes shoots through various glasses creating reflections that cause us to speculate on who the spectator is: the viewer, the setting, or the artist?

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## Venia Bechrakis

By Paul Evans

There is a stunning scene in the 1978 movie *The Eyes of Laura Mars* where a mysterious and very fashionable photographer, played by Faye Dunaway, orchestrates detailed tableaux of super-models in the midst of violent altercations right smack dab in the middle of New York's Columbus Circle. What's so memorable about this scene lies in its theatricality. New York is the stage and, for a brief moment, we forget we are watching a silly B-movie, disguised as a high end vehicle for a then box office queen. What we *do* witness is just how a city can act as a muse. In this work of ridiculous fiction, New York City is not just the locale; it is a living and breathing character. From that scene of fighting fashionistas to Dunaway running down cobblestoned Green Street in stiletto boots, car chases in Hell's Kitchen to abandoned warehouses on the Hudson, every scene speaks of a lost time, when New York looked run-down but Studio 54 reigned and anything seemed possible.



Parking, digital photograph, 20 x 60"

When first viewing the work of Venia Bechrakis, I was immediately reminded of *The Eyes of Laura Mars*. But where Laura Mars used her images for pure spectacle and titillation, Bechrakis is working with a different intention. It should be said that the artist does incorporate New York in her work. Or, I should say, the artist places herself in very public spaces, performing various private tasks or rituals via digital photography and creates personal yet epic dioramas that offer much more than what is initially seen.

For instance, in "Subway", the artist places herself, laying on a futon, at the bottom of the stairwell in the Houston/Lafayette subway station. With a devil-may-care stare, the artist is confronting the viewer, as if to say, "I'm staying right here. Deal with it". The same confrontation goes for the poor straphangers. Is the artist asking us to slow down? Does she want us to join her? The scenario would seem to put her in a vulnerable place, but one gets the

feeling that she is quite safe in her sanctum. No harm will come to her. It seems she is blatantly ignoring Petula Clark's song "Don't Sleep in the Subway", but Petula Clark never lived in the East Village. Behind the surface silliness, the real question is, where will our young dreamer go? Brooklyn? Uptown/Queens? Or will she stay in the once hub of the art world, now a shopping Mecca for the rich and fabulous where young artists can no longer afford to live or work.

In each composed and meticulously thought out photograph, the element of time is always present. A beginning, middle and end can be successfully mapped out here. The photos *seem* right but the scenario will change. Snow will melt, rush hour will occur, tourists will invade, terror alerts can bring it all to a grinding halt. But it will all start over. New York will continue to thrive and always seem like it's *not* quite right. It is a place that seems like fiction. Bechrakis' images are quite possible yet feel slightly off-kilter. In reality, these scenarios can certainly occur but will anyone take the time to look? These works are about us and somewhere in all of the confusion and chaos, a lone voice is trying to make sense of it all. Venia Bechrakis is raising her voice.

*Paul Evans, a painter and video artist, trained at the School of Visual Arts and writes frequently about contemporary art. He currently resides in Los Angeles.*

Grocery, digital photograph, 20 x 60"



links:

<http://www.zinaathanassiadou.com/pr-behraki-gr.htm>

<https://issuu.com/danoucat/docs/restrictedarea>