

Herstory: Deanna Maganias

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Phone conversations: New York City/Athens – Glasgow

Present: Frances Robertson and Deanna Maganias

For my contact with artist Deanna Maganias, the usual format of a physical sitting is re-formatted to spoken word, with Deanna currently based in Italy: travelling back and forth from Greece due to exhibition commitments. Therefore for these conversations Deanna and myself have opportunity to talk independently and juggle the joys of time zone confusion.

Deanna is a fellow artist and friend of Sharon Thomas who has lived all her life between the United States and Greece, and latterly also in Italy, which is where Sharon and Deanna met as artists in Rome. A sculptor, Deanna has exhibited widely internationally with pieces of her work included in many collections and public spaces. A recent example of this was the important commission in Greece that Deanna successfully bid for which was the creation of a National memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust that was unveiled in Athens in May 2010.

With Deanna being connected to so many countries I ask Deanna where she spent her childhood and gained her education? Deanna explains that she grew up the United States in Virginia near to Washington DC; and then in her teenage years went on to study for her Undergraduate Fine Art degree first at the Rhode Island school of Design, New York, later to graduate from Cooper Union, New York City. But equally, Deanna describes that Greece was where she has also spent much of her time from earliest childhood. For Deanna the landscape and the sea had a huge influence on her and the work that she makes for as long as she can remember. Later impressions of her visits to Greece also include memories of the architecture of modern Athens and the feel of what it was like to inhabit these modernist concrete blocks at the height of summer, which goes on to influence and inspire the art that she makes.

In respect to the work that Deanna makes as a sculptor I ask Deanna to elaborate on these points to describe her practice and field a little further. Deanna explains that the work she makes is very much about expressing ideas of nostalgia and space through both 2D and 3D work. In her mind: spaces in both her lived memories of the intense summer heat of city buildings (which is when she was usually there) combined with the constant and pressing weight of history in Athens: the way in which the past saturates the fabric and experience of the everyday, are great influences on the work that she makes. This topic leads on to discussion of influences and ideas that propel Deanna and the work that she is inspired to make. Unexpectedly Deanna notes her appreciation of British novelist: Lawrence Durrell (b1912-d1990) who she believes captures this feeling of place and time in the writings that he makes, which as she has already underlined is a key preoccupation within in her art practice. IN particular with Durrell, she feels that his writings possess a sense of loss: of missed greatness and a melancholy in the remnants of a grander past, all facets that she finds inspirational.

More personally Deanna cites an Athenian uncle, a practising poet during her upbringing who acted as an intermediary to an alternative way of thinking for her from an early age. For Deanna therefore the Greek influence was 'less about sculpture and more about ideas as expressed in literature and out of urban adventures: wandering the city and going to every kind of bar with my uncle, drinking and exploring some very unlikely places for a teen-ager'. And although her experiences back in the United States were very different, she still remained absorbed in feeling out a specific sense of place wherever she was, and in building these impressions through imagination and reflection- into the finished art works that she makes.

At home in Virginia as a young girl, Deanna continues: she had a great deal of freedom to wander in the forest around her home, where her imagination could freely develop and senses ripen. In addition to this hands-on childhood, as a late starter in terms of reading, many of the stories in her mind developed from a mix of personal fantasy and the direct interaction that she had with nature. This home grown education twinned with her fascination with spatial exploration of the environment around her led very naturally to an artist's practice, where exploration, construction and exhibition are key components

Growing up, Deanna was very influenced as an artist by the east wing of the National Gallery in Washington—this is an I.M. Pei building that always seemed empty in the 1970s—and she loved the way it felt like a sacred soaring space. Out of the work on show there she absorbed the collection of colour field paintings by American artists such as Barnett Newman (b1905-d1970) and Clyfford Still (b1904-d1980), the work of Joan Miro (b1893-d1983) and the Japanese rock garden in the courtyard. Yet it was also the the interior world of literature that captured Deanna's imagination: Deanna remarks how she was inspired by JG Ballard's (b1930- d2009) sensual mental landscapes, and by William Faulkner (b1897-1962), whose work has shown her how it is possible to try and capture the most elusive memories. It is these successful artists' devices that inspire Deanna to 'try and express—to put my finger on— fragments of memory and to distill them somehow into concrete form'.

Deanna began her studies at the Rhode island School of Design, which was a great experience, in part because her fellow students were a fantastic and creative group, but also because Roni Horn was a professor there, who she found an inspiring influence on account of her insistence on paring the expression of ideas down to essentials. This clearing-away process was continued further when Deanna spent time studying at the Cooper Union in New York City. Hans Haacke was teaching there at the time and he had a huge influence through his application of a methodological way of objectifying inspiration, instilling a sometimes 'terrifying' discipline and abhorrence for the self-indulgence that Deanna claims had been rampant in her earlier student work.

Greece is of course home of the heroic nude, I wonder how Deanna responds to this heritage and to this environment, and whether the concept of 'femaleness' is present in her work.

Deanna explains that early on, when she was a student of art, the notion of "femaleness" was more of an anxiety in relation to work, however, the ideas of what is female and male have evolved so much in the last couple of decades that it is not something that Deanna has thought about in a long time. Yet Deanna admits that the value of the feminist movement in the 70's cannot be underestimated: it left an inheritance that has allowed her the chance of not having to THINK of herself as a female artist, which would have been impossible ten or fifteen years before her education. In short, Deanna concedes that her avoidance of the feminine question was a luxury and a great indication of the success of the feminist movement; she doesn't think she could exist as an artist if it had not been some of those GREAT ladies, like Adrian Piper and Carolee Schneemann.

Deanna now lives and works for much of the time near Rome, and one recent work the video/ construction, 'Getting to St Peter'(2006) was about the power of religion; the power of people's faith and the human energy that goes into places, a combination of creative, spiritual, or superstitious forces that are then absorbed by things and sites. The video/ construction 'Getting to St Peter' was developed from the site of the basilica of St. Peter's in Rome, being a place that has inspired awe through so many hundreds of years- and today the way people flock there- it really is a very overwhelming place. This awe has been very carefully orchestrated through time and it is multifaceted of course- an intellectual one and on the other hand, an awe that comes from manipulation of power through faith and fear.

Of course, Deanna recognizes that expressions of power, faith and vanity have produced great masterpieces of art- humanity is in these enormous works- and she was so stunned by the overwhelming nature of St. Peter's. Her own work has thus grown out of struggling to manifest a

subjective, humble approach to that monumental place into a sculpture and the construction/ video was a result of that conflict. Deanna has taken a subjective approach (video montage and sculpture) to rethinking the masterpiece of Michael Angelo's dome of St. Peter's- a quintessential Renaissance space of logic and order- with the result that the balanced spaces are transformed by her into a fractured irrational place that represents the kind of fear and claustrophobia that religious doctrine inspires- so the logical architecture becomes a nightmare of circular labyrinths from which there is only repetition and offers no exit. The piece was composed of two plaster white egg-shaped volumes, with an indented mask pierced with two eye-holes in order to look within at a video-loop. One egg contained a video of the inner surface of the dome of the Vatican basilica taken from the oculus of the crypt, where Pope John Paul II is buried, located directly beneath the dome. The second video, viewable from an uncomfortable kneeling position, records the real-time ascent and descent of the internal circular staircase to the crypt, where we follow the camera's progress up or down stairs, or along dimly-lit corridors, where a multiplicity of close-up moving shots of the surfaces of walls and floor surfaces disrupts any overall structural view of a whole space.

Deanna's most recent work: The Holocaust memorial in Athens, responds to this weight of the past already noted. Designing the monument Deanna was very keen to incorporate the site in the conceptual bedrock of the sculpture so that the reference to the ancient burial site of Keramikos was a fundamental element in the design. The form of the monument, like a compass, indicates the cities of Greece whose Jewish populations were taken to be exterminated during World War II, but also relates to notions of direction and of geography in Athens itself as the site of the memorial is very close to the ancient entrance to the city of Athens.

I wonder how the work process on the memorial and being a woman affected negotiations with the commissioners or stone workers at the quarry during construction. Initially Deanna finds this hard to answer because in recalling the process, she was so obsessed with making the monument and the garden grounds conform to the original conception of the design, that she didn't have any energy to think about how she was being perceived as a woman sculptor. It is hard for any sculptor especially working in the public sphere to get everything right- all the details perfect in spite of the compromises people demand of you along the way. That being said she suspects that INITIALLY it was more difficult to command authority as a woman sculptor. Deanna notes that respect was something she had to earn on site, as opposed to being given it automatically as a the successful designer of the monument. Looking at a video of herself working on the site after the opening of the monument, Deanna realised she had developed a kind of "macho walk, which she admits perhaps was an unconscious device to assert and commend those around her, which she had not spotted till then!

But an overwhelming belief for Deanna, as a practicing female artist is that respect is earned, from both men and women. For Deanna the real challenge in terms of asserting respect and authority as a woman in the arts is the necessity to create and make, and in doing so allow the work itself do the talking.

Frances Robertson, 2011
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