

CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU, by Valérie Knoll for Artforum International

"Act I: The Departure," as this show was titled, brought together four recent works by Cypriot artist Christodoulos Panayiotou under the aegis of the Lausanne art festival Les Urbaines. Inspired by anthropology, Panayiotou often casts himself in the role of a scientist doing field studies, in order to shed light on the manifestations and myths of "cultural performances" such as rituals and festivals. In the silent color video "Untitled", 2008, a palimpsest of shots of various firework displays from an undifferentiated spectacle. Fireworks – a popular allegory for the "theatrum mundi" ever since the Baroque – imply a variety of cultural and historical metaphors and frequently appear in Panayiotou's oeuvre as a motif. Much like Freud's model of memory as a "mystic writing pad", on which traces of previous inscriptions are preserved as illegal impressions, this work captures the visibility of explosions that have long since faded away, revealing a profound melancholy.

Seen together with the work "Guysgocrazy", 2007, a looped double-channel projection, the fireworks of "Untitled" also refer to the sexual and orgiastic as a form of pop-culture symbolism (one that was used in Hollywood films as a recognized code for sexual climax, in a manner unobjectionable to censors). Appropriately, Guysgocrazy is a Czech production company for porno films that specializes in staging huge orgies. Panayiotou filmed the empty se before and after one of those shoots, showing a stage with disco pools and an inflatable pool – and then its postshoot, with countless banana peels and paper cups strewn about. A soundtrack of men exulting under the shower and a small-format framed photograph of the actors posing mounted beside the projection replace what is absent here – the straightforward manifestations of corporeality in the film.

For the eighty-part slide projection "Wonder Land", 2008, Panayiotou sifted through archival images of the carnival in Limassol, the second-largest city in Cyprus, discovering that for years no subversive and traditional masquerades based on costumes taken from Disney films have played a dominant role, completely obscuring the carnival's original character. Taking his cues from Mikhail Bakhtin, who saw in the carnival a temporary transcendence of taboos and utopian self-assertion in the face of repressive structure, Panayiotou here presents a collection of images that bear witness to the island's problematic psyche, shaped by ancient conflicts over both territory and identity, even as a part of its population anesthetized itself by means of escapism and role-playing. Their unheard ribald laughter prompted by the decontextualized fictions of absurd benign cartoon characters like Pinocchio and 101 Dalmatians, is (unconsciously) indicative of a more widespread sense of helplessness.

Untitled (Act III: The Glorious Return), 2008, in tandem with the exhibition's title, "Act I: The Departure", served to wryly indicate a dramaturgical narration via only prologue and epilogue, much as in "Guysgocrazy". The installation, part of a trilogy that is only ever presented one piece at a time, consists of a historical theater set acquired from an archive and shown lying, folded, on the floor. Its motif of a tromp l'oeil theater curtain framing the bow of a ship coming into port is here only visible in an accompanying photograph that shows the stage set installed in a theater. Like Panayiotou's other work, the installation uses its iconology of interstitial space to compel the viewer to engage in dialectic reflection.

Valérie Knoll (translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss)