

Ithaca

Christopher Aque
Alekos Fassianos
Luigi Ghirri
Jessie Stevenson
George Tourkovasilis

16th November 2023 – 27th January 2024

*As you set out bound for Ithaca,
hope that the journey is a long one,
full of adventures, full of learning.*

Herald St is delighted to announce *Ithaca*, featuring paintings and photographs by Christopher Aque, Alekos Fassianos, Luigi Ghirri, Jessie Stevenson, and George Tourkovasilis. Taking place in the gallery's Museum St premises, the exhibition stems from C. P. Cavafy's 1911 poem of the same name, a verse suffused with heady and emotive experiences of journeys, homecomings, myths, and wonder. The enduring atmospheres and lessons of this beloved poem resonate in the vivid and intimate works by these international artists active from the mid-twentieth century to today.

*Of the Laestrygonians and Cyclopes,
of wrathful Poseidon have no fear,
you'll never meet suchlike on your journey,
if your thoughts remain lofty, if noble
sentiments grip your body and spirit.*

Cavafy's presence in modern Greece cannot be overstated, and his influence is palpable in a number of paintings on canvas and paper by Alekos Fassianos. In his vibrant and multifaceted output, the artist mythologised the quotidian, taking the ancient gods and Byzantine icons of his childhood and imbuing café goers, cyclists, and flâneurs with the same reverence. Fassianos lived in Paris for a period of time from the 1960s and travelled extensively, yet Athens always remained close in his mind: 'The legend of my neighbourhood will follow me everywhere, like Cavafy's city... I suggest to all Greeks that they read the *Odyssey* two or three times as if it were the gospel.' In pieces such as *τό τοπίο του* (Son paysage), he embraces the idea of *ο φερων την πολη*, which loosely translates to 'he who brings his home wherever he goes'. Another prevalent theme in Fassianos's work is the dreamer, with memories of their homelands floating behind their gazing faces and bodies. Throughout his career he illustrated multiple publications authored by Cavafy, including French and Italian translations on display in the exhibition.

*You'll never encounter raging Poseidon,
Laestrygonians and Cyclopes,
unless you bear them in your soul,
unless your soul sets them before you.*

Jessie Stevenson's abstracted landscape paintings are borne from a sublime return to nature upon moving to her familial home in North Norfolk during the pandemic. Following a childhood living in Istanbul, Moscow, Cairo, Geneva, and Guangzhou, she was struck by the sharp nostalgia of the wild growths and marshlands she encountered. Stevenson draws from canonical sources including Wordsworth's poetry, Goya's mordant etchings, and Twombly's turbulent gestures to inform the materials and movement in her layered canvases. She is increasingly studying the coastline, transmuting the energy of blinding reflections, shifting climes, and rolling storms. *Ithaca* also includes a sketchbook of 'colour beginnings' which root her practice, saturated with fluid experiences and ghost-lines of instinctive mark-making.

*Hope that the journey is a long one.
That the summer morns be many
when with what delight, what joy
you enter harbours hitherto unseen;*

Luigi Ghirri's photographs are soaked in the hazy light of an endless summer. The artist rarely travelled far from Emilia-Romagna, finding 'new landscapes' in the everyday realities close to home. *Ithaca* includes works from two series, *Italia allati* and *Paesaggio Italiano*. In the former (a palindromic play on words), Ghirri constructed scenes which lie in contrast to the postcard-perfect sites

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found in guidebooks and travel posters, framing urban palimpsests such as pedestrian signs and advertisement panels to form compositions which sit closer to his 'territorial identity'. Of Paesaggio Italiano, he described a 'sentimental geography': 'I have viewed these places with a gaze full of affection and love, in an attempt to perceive a simple and astonished feeling of belonging'. Anchored in the deeply familiar landscapes of his surroundings, Ghirri dedicated his work to capturing the real world, and in the process exposing the limits of our individual perceptions which render such a dream impossible.

*that you stop in the Phoenician markets,
and acquire fine merchandise,
nacre and coral, amber and ebony,
and all kinds of heady perfumes,
as many heady perfumes as you can;*

Christopher Aque's carefully encased photographs show skylines rising out of overgrown parks, flowers tended by his partner, and the closeness of strangers on public transport. His practice embodies the eros which seeps, like leaves growing through cracks in pavements, in anonymous and sterile civic structures. Each work is meticulously printed using gum-bichromate, a labour of love resulting in softly blurred images composed of watercolour pigments. Part of this process involves exposure to germicidal UV-C lights, which can also be found in hospitals and were used in sanitation programmes during the pandemic. Living in the urban mass of New York, Aque draws us into the pockets of intimacy and tensions of desire encountered at home and on everyday journeys.

*Always keep Ithaca in mind.
To arrive there is your destination.
But in no way rush the voyage.*

Like Fassianos, George Tourkopoulos moved to Paris in the late 1960s to escape the oppressive Greek junta, and the two became close friends. Though he credited his photographic education to the American and wider European influence found in the French capital, he returned to Greece in 1976 and prolifically recorded the emerging subcultures of the subsequent decades until his death in 2021. His portraits included in *Ithaca* depict young men prior to fulfilling their required military service, basking in the last rays of their youth and filled with an anti-Odyssean anguish to delay their adulthood. One photograph shows an unnamed friend pressing a cat to her cheek and smiling with familiar affection; a vernacular and homely snapshot, with a studied attention to light and framing. Intimate in size as well as in subject, the images Tourkopoulos left behind hold a particular moment in time and simultaneously exude an enduring timelessness.

*Ithaca gave you the wonderful voyage.
Without her you would not have set out on your way.
Yet she has nothing more to give you.*

*And though you may find her wanting, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Wise as you've become, with such experience,
Already you'll have understood what these Ithacas mean.*

Text by Émilie Streiff

Extracts from C. P. Cavafy, *Ithaca* (1911)
Quotations from Alekos Fassianos courtesy of Viktoria Fassianou
Quotations from Luigi Ghirri, *Luigi Ghirri: The Complete Essays 1973–1991*, MACK (2021)