

Dispatch from Leros: An Island of Outcasts

An exhibition organized by arts foundation Perasma adds to the wealth of cultural offerings in the Dodecanese this summer



BY CHLOE STEAD IN OPINION | 22 AUG 24



There are 227 inhabited Grecian islands and, if my inbox is anything to go by, at least half of them have, at one time or another, been used as the glamorous backdrop for an exhibition organized by an art foundation. The most famous of these idyllic holiday-destinations-cum-art hotspots is almost certainly Hydra, where billionaire collector Dakis Joannou hosts an annual event at Deste Foundation, but there are countless other examples, from Samos and Anafi to Chios and Spetses.

In a crowded arts calendar, the appeal is obvious: who among us would turn down an invitation to visit an exhibition in paradise? Well, not me, that's for sure. No sooner had I received the press email for 'All Things Become Islands Before My Senses' – the second show organized by Istanbul-based cultural foundation Perasma on Leros island, co-curated this year by Burcu Fikretoglu and Gizem Naz Kudunoglu – than my flight was booked.



For all its natural beauty and quaint Greek charm, however, Leros has an ugly past. Often referred to as the 'island of outcasts', it housed political prisoners during the Greek junta (1967–74) and, subsequently, a notorious psychiatric hospital, which was shut down in the early 1990s after a horrific photograph of naked and traumatized patients made the front page of *The Observer* in 1989. Since 2016, the area around the hospital has been designated a 'hotspot' for refugees and asylum-seekers, as part of an approach by the Greek government that has regularly been labelled dangerous and inhumane by human-rights charities.

Of the 17 artists whose work is on display across six venues, an extract from Goshka Macuga's *Crithoni's Paradise Hotel* (2024) comes closest to addressing this dark history and contentious present. In the exhibition materials it's referred to as a 'horror film', which, given its six-minute runtime feels a bit generous, but it did succeed in creeping me out. Shot in the titular hotel and featuring actors from a local theatre group, *Crithoni's Paradise Hotel* shows a woman reading an article out loud in faltering English to a rather strict-looking man who constantly corrects her. Details such as the man's knee-high leather boots and the heavy-duty torch he uses to illuminate the woman's reading material suggest he might be both teacher and jailer.



Goshka Macuga, *Crithoni's Paradise Hotel*, 2024, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Although not produced specifically for the show, there is a similar level of claustrophobia on display in a series of monoprints by Laura Footes, also shown in the Perasma Space, located in a crumbling neoclassical villa in Agia Marina. Particularly striking is *Now I let you go* (2023), which depicts a blood-red Edvard Munch-esque figure ripping open their chest under a full moon. The Margate-based artist has a studio at the Tracey Emin Foundation and, looking at these works, I couldn't help but think of Emin's own printmaking practice. For instance, there is a similar emotional rawness at play in *Now I let you go*, which refers to Footes's colectomy, and Emin's *Ripped Up* (1995), one of a number of prints she made in the aftermath of an unsuccessful abortion. In works such as Footes's *It Waits for Me* (2024), a wooden bedframe abandoned in a forest, there is also an overwhelming sense of loneliness, which, given the exhibition's title and the artist's use of deep-blue ink, sets up a relation between chronic illness and being adrift at sea.



'All Things Become Islands Before My Senses', 2024, exhibition view. Courtesy: Perasma; Photograph: Daniel Covadlo

Other works are much lighter in tone. Margate-based artist Lindsey Mendick gleefully told me during the exhibition's opening weekend that her ambitious vases, which feature vulva-like mussels and flowers, were about getting fingered on the beach (*I think about you more than I should* and *I wish you know how much I love you*, both 2024). Another light-hearted response to exhibiting on a Greek island comes from Maryam Turkey. The result of her recent residency on Leros, 'Cat-Oikos Collection' (2024) is a series of boxy, painted sculptures installed in the villa garden, intended as seats for humans and sun shelters for the island's many stray cats.

Elsewhere, images of the sea abound, from Nermin Er's ink-on-paper drawing *A Gaze Towards the Shore III* (2024) to Paweł Althamer's ceramic sculpture *Fool's Boat* (2024), which accompanies his boat-making workshop for refugee children at the nearby Nautical Club of Leros.



The old barracks at Xerokampos, 2024. Courtesy: Perasma; photograph: Yigorgos

The curators' claim of showing work across six locations is a slight misnomer, given that one venue, the old barracks at Xerokampos, sits atop a nosebleed-inducing hill that can only be accessed with an SUV. Featuring only a couple of works – a painting by Necla Rüzgar and a film by William Kentridge (*Yörünge (Orbit)*, 2024, and *Shadow Procession*, 1999) – the inclusion of the abandoned structure felt more like a gimmick than an attempt to take on the history of this important landmark – a remnant of the Italian and German occupation of the Dodecanese during World War II. Although it was worth the journey up there just to see a series of frescos made by the German soldier Otto Meister. Painted to raise morale, these oddly humanizing comic offerings feature things the soldiers most missed: buxom women and cuts of meat.



Leros cinema, 2024. Courtesy: Perasma; photograph: Yigorgos Mavropoulos

The old barracks are not the only architectural throwback to the island's time under colonial rule, however. In the city of Lakki, there are a handful of striking examples of fascist-era Italian rationalist buildings – including a school, a cinema and a market – that feature on many an architecture blog. On the last day of my visit, members of the press could watch preview of a public performance that Cevdet Ereğ was set to give in the indoor courtyard of the school (*SSS-Shore Scene Soundtrack*, 2006–ongoing). Running his hands in sweeping motions over pieces of rough, grey carpet attached to boards normally used for hanging notices, the artist invited us to listen to the noise his movements made. If you closed your eyes, it sounded just like waves crashing ashore. In an exhibition packed with figurative references to the sea, this more abstract evocation of the show's island context felt like the perfect final note.

'All Things Become Islands Before My Senses' is on view at various locations on Leros until 8 September



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