

Altered Sites

Cris Gianakos has been returning to Greece for over thirty years. For the past fifteen years, he has been collecting photographs and postcards of ancient Greek sites and altering them, often by superimposing various geometric forms over portions of the image. Recently, he began to research the idea more seriously, searching through books on Greek archaeology and sculpture and intuitively responding to views in which he sensed the underlying geometry.

Using his chosen images as raw material, he then analyzed them and isolated those best suited for his purpose.

As a Greek American who closely identifies with his heritage and as a sculptor with a longtime commitment to geometric form and to site pieces, Gianakos has always had a deep communion with the ancient places he has experienced. It is how these sites appear now that fascinates him, how they have eroded over the centuries until they have come to resemble minimal contemporary sculpture and installations. Gianakos has always been sympathetic in his approach to his sites; he always restores and never dismantles or destroys them. Speaking about the Mycenaean tomb of Agamemnon, he told me, «I've been in the space several times. I love the sparseness and the beehive, but it was imposing to me and I wanted to work with that dynamic. It's really beautiful, and something kept pushing me to put something in it that would be sympathetic to the inside and work together with it. I don't want to obliterate. I'm altering, not appropriating. I'm re-evolving the site and bringing it up to date».

There are many overlapping levels of meaning going on in these works. Connections between ancient and contemporary art are made visual; the geometric underpinnings of ancient art works are literally brought to the surface through Gianakos' additions. One could say that these modified visions are a conversation with the ancients, a collaboration through time, affectionate dialogues that are directly related to Gianakos' usual methodology of working closely with other people on his large site sculptures. Of the anonymous architects and sculptors, Gianakos says, «I am sure they saw the pure geometry before they rendered their finished works. They started with a block of stone, with the actual geometry right in front of them, and they shaped it and formed it. I always had a theory that those artists liked the original pure and simple state. Because they were doing them as public works, they had to follow taste and decorate them. But they were architects, not decorators».

In the present, the site is free of artificial overlay, distilled to a more essential state of being. The gaps are wonderful. Every little fragment has its own life and mathematics. Inside a chunk of column is a little square where the pieces fit in. Gianakos is erasing the superfluous, recontextualizing, energizing the sites. They are no longer relics; by their reshaping, they are made more consonant with the spirit of their original creators. The separation between archaeology and contemporary art blurs, and the cyclical forces of decay and rebirth that permeate life and art are clarified. Gianakos: «It neutralizes the fix that it was 600 B.C. and it's frozen in time».

In 1801, Lord Elgin removed one of the caryatids from the Erechtheion. It was later replaced by a cast. Instead of substituting a fake for the missing pieces, Gianakos uses a golden rectangle of corten steel or an equilateral triangle or pristine black cube or an abstracted post and lintel form. And these shapes are definitely more congenial with the sites, less sacrilegious than replicas and certainly more fitting to communicate the conjunction of Greece's great achievements with the present. There is something magical about the way an equilateral triangle fits into the Theater at Epidauros, about the way the post and lintel (looking a lot like the pi sign) transforms the Temple of Poseidon at Paestum, and about the way a straight line rests along the edge of the temple and the mountainous site at Sunium. Two strategically placed equilateral triangles point out the proportions underlying the form of a classical Greek torso of a boy in one of two sculptures picked by Gianakos to exemplify the possibilities in such works of art. He has added monumental rectangular barriers to Samaria Gorge and the Corinth Canal, natural sites that might have occurred anywhere and are here rendered in the acidic hues of color xerography.

The graphic visualizations are made three dimensional through the six-by-six-foot geometric interpretation of the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis that is the centerpiece of Gianakos' installation. Out of the walls of the cubic interior juts a golden rectangle of blue, floating diagonally as a metaphor for the grace, mystery, and enduring significance of the geometry that inspired the ancients as well as artists of subsequent times until the present. Artists of the generation immediately preceding Gianakos conceived their works with this geometry in mind, Tony Smith, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, for example. Gianakos has found a unique way to express his accord through his very personally felt discourse with Greece's treasures.

The viewers of these works cannot help but feel, I think, a reaction that is anything but neutral. Whether it is positive or negative depends in large part on one's own connections with the sites. Looking at Gianakos' alteration of the Theater and Temple of Apollo at Delphi has changed my perception of the navel of the ancient world considerably. Delphi is a place to which I have returned many times; it is central to my own personal sense of peace and harmony. I will never be able to see it again as it was before the prospect of the permutation implied by Gianakos. For me, it has been a place that holds implications of new life, and now a specific way to push that possibility closer to actuality has been realized.

Every time I am in Athens, I go to visit a little Byzantine chapel located a few blocks from Mitropolis. It rests slightly below street level, underneath the steel columns of a contemporary office building, amidst the clatter of Athens commerce. The modernist building was constructed around the chapel in order to preserve the old and accommodate the new. Its exterior is in a rather battered condition. But, when you go inside, time melts away, and as you light your candles in the presence of the icons, you realize that this tiny chapel is still holding its own. Its existence on the site is, of course, purely a practical solution, but there is something about it that from now on will always remind me of Cris Gianakos' altered sites.

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