

## BURNING ISSUES - MERIMBULA

Until only a few years ago, climate change was regarded by many as an isolated phenomenon, removed from social and political circumstances. In the spring of 2021, *TIME* magazine pointed out the shift in attitude concerning the impact of the environmental crisis, emphatically stating that ‘climate is everything.’ The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that our troubled planet is small, after all, that we form part of a strong yet vulnerable network where everything interacts with and affects everything else. Some spoke of the end of globalisation; others used the term ‘climatisation’ to describe the process by which climate change transforms society. Expected to be the biggest issue in the decades to come, climatisation dictates a change in the way we think. Everything will have to change dramatically in the light of the climate crisis, which, as *TIME* editors say, is now widespread and affects many aspects of social life – economy, public health, racial justice, housing policy, labour/productivity, food and consumption, crime, migration and ultimately politics. To be precise, the challenge of climate change will – if it hasn’t already – become a major political issue. Meanwhile, one word constantly crops up in this debate – *intersections* between climate and the pressing socio-political issues of our time.

Danae Stratou’s exhibition *Burning Issues | Merimbula* examines these topical intersections, stressing the implications of climate change for our lives. As the title suggests, the exhibition consists of two parts, functioning as a diptych, in painting terms. Symbolically dealing with burning issues, such as those mentioned above, the first part comprises a 3.5 by 1 m. landscape video projection of sheets of paper burning in very slow motion. It is a composition of nine flaming pieces of paper that together compose a ‘landscape.’ Before this landscape of reverie and hypnotic beauty, certain thoughts by Gaston Bachelard spring to mind: ‘... all that changes quickly is explained by fire’ / ‘Fire is ... a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything’ / ‘Fire is more a *social* than a *natural* reality.’<sup>1</sup>

The second part of the exhibition comprises an installation inspired by the rainforests near Merimbula, in New South Wales, Australia, which the artist visited in 2010. To communicate the experience of this enchanting forest, much of which burned in the devastating bushfires of 2019–20, Stratou used some one hundred photos she took to envelop the venue in a 33m.-long installation. This photographic evocation of the forest is accompanied by the intoxicating chirping of native birds, of the species known as bellbirds, which the artist recorded in the field. At the same time, the fragrance of fresh soil spread out on the floor arouses the sense of smell, creating an immersive environment. With the help of lighting designed to evoke the alternation of day and night, visitors travel back in time to a paradise lost – a landscape of exotic beauty that can now only be regarded as mythical.

Similarly to other works by Danae Stratou, this project is anthropocentric and cross-cultural. The journey lies at the heart of this project. Were it not for the journey – which feeds many of the artist’s works – this exhibition would never have been realised. Stratou has worked extensively in nature and with land. From an early age, she yearned to travel around the globe and understand different lifestyles.

'Australia's nature is incredible – so different from anything I've ever seen on this planet. From animal species that do not exist anywhere else to rare tree species. Nature there is spectacular, more dominant than culture on this continent. The trees and vegetation looked like nothing I had ever seen before – that's why I took these photographs and made these field recordings. It's my own way of understanding a place,' the artist notes.

Back in 2010, Stratou had no idea that the experience of that journey would morph into an art piece. Ten years later, 'Merimbula' joined 'Burning Issues,' which derived from an unrealised project involving paper, justice and prisons. 'This was after the 2012 Syntagma Square events, the fires in the city, when it became clear that society had begun to revolt against this situation, the economic crises. What could I do to reflect on what's going on using paper? That's when I conceived the idea of sheets of paper burning, at a very slow pace, symbolically conveying the current events, the street fires during protests in Athens, which were unprecedented things for us. This piece was a commentary on that situation, the social upheaval, the slow-burning flame. That was my original concept.'

The *Burning Issues | Merimbula* 'diptych' at the Arts Centre brings to mind communicating vessels, separated by an intermediate space that provides necessary distance – breathing space – so that visitors can process what they see and establish correspondences with the history of the building (a place of torture during the seven-year dictatorship of 1967–74 and a monument to the symbolic and moral aspects of resistance) and with the surrounding area, Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park), where the venue is located. Essentially, *Merimbula* serves as a prime example of the pressing issues raised by Stratou. Although the bushfire-damaged Merimbula rainforest makes her example globally relevant, it also brings to mind similar tragedies in Greece, such as the devastating fires in northern Evia, at the foot of Mount Parnitha and in Mati, Attica, to mention only the most recent ones. Implicitly, at least, Stratou's exhibition is a critique of the indifference and negligence of the administrations, suggesting the need for resistance and protest, but also for urgent measures to deal with the climate crisis. 'Of course there is criticism, but I am also interested in how awareness can be raised even on the physical plane through the language of art, which is not always purely cerebral,' the artist points out. This was a project of considerable urgency – on the one hand due to the issues it raises (the human-environment interaction, the interdependence of the natural and the human) and on the other because it highlights the social purpose of art. According to Stratou, 'the artist's job is to listen to society and the historical moment in which we live and bring to light what is already there but is not visible or is ignored. In my generation, we sought to tell a big truth, hence the scale of our works. I've always focused on the forest, not just the tree. Maybe that's typical of the way I perceive the world and how I feel that it's important to show things. It's as if I observed the big picture from above and comment on it.'

The picture commented on in *Burning Issues | Merimbula* is indeed tragic. Viewers are urged to reflect on this transformed drama, but they won't feel disconcerted. The thought that the ancient forest will be reborn over time is comforting. Contemplating the burning paper evokes the game of life and death – a theme that is constantly present in Stratou's mind. But life first, then death. Because, to recall

the philosopher's words, just like a beautiful forest, 'fire and heat ... have been for us the occasion for unforgettable memories, simple and decisive personal experiences.'

**Christoforos Marinos**

Art historian

OPANDA curator of exhibitions and  
events

Translated by Dimitris Saltabassis

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Alan C.M. Ross (trans.), Beacon Press, 1964.