

Finding a language – and a home – in the medium of photography

Solo photography exhibition on the work of Iran-born, US-based performance artist Aphrodite Desiree Navab at R53

BY ALEXANDRA KOROENIDIS

To have lived in three different countries is likely to give a person greater understanding of other cultures and make them more accepting of cultural differences. But it may also instill a feeling of alienation and create an unstable identity. Or, to put it another way, it may make them both strong and vulnerable.

Both aspects come through in the work of Aphrodite Desiree Navab, an Iranian artist who lives in New York. "She Speaks Greek Farsi," her solo photography exhibition at the experimental architectural research space R53 in Athens, indicates how her diverse cultural background has defined both her art and her identity.

Navab was born in Iran to an Iranian father and a Greek mother who had met in New York. She lived in Iran until she was 8 but spent summers in Greece, where she took refuge along with her mother and three siblings when the Iranian Revolution broke out in 1979. When her father was allowed to leave Iran, the family moved to the United States. The transition from one culture to another became the principal concept of her work. Her art became her home, her tool for negotiating her identity and delving into the connections and conflicts of the three different cultures that she came to know.

"She Speaks Greek Farsi" is intended "as a meeting point of two cultures." Farsi is the Persian language spoken in Iran, while the expression to speak "Greek farsi" means – in Greek – to speak Greek fluently. "The word in Greek must be a borrowing from Persia. It was a surprise to me how two cultures that were enemies in antiquity could pay compliments to one another. It was also an opportunity to find how antagonistic cultures can relate to one another," according to Navab, who added that this is also meant as a reference to US-Iran relations.

The body and, in this particular series, language are her tools. Navab chose 15 words that convey concepts that transcend cultural specificity but at the same time carry meanings to which a migrant artist is particularly sensitive: place, family, birth, love, friend, language, memory, home, life, body, history, self, person, land, world. A performance-based artist, Navab wrote those words in Greek and in Persian on her abdomen. The exhibition presents the photographs of this nonpublic performance, all of which are images of the words on her naked body. (None of her performances are addressed to an audience but are held privately.)

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Propaganda tool

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Art is for Navab a symbol of stability, the home, so to speak, of an artist who has experienced transition throughout her life.

"I created my place through visual art, through symbolically making a space to hold my past, present and future experiences... My friends and my photographs become my nomadic homes. I make a home with them," she notes.

The body is a means of expression on which she can rely. It is also used as metaphor for how experiences are embodied and leave physical imprints that one carries in life.

Navab places personal experiences within a broader social and political context. In her work, the personal and the political are viewed as inseparable. "From the personal, we can move to the interpersonal and universal," she says.

Portraying this meeting point between the private and the public is how, according to Navab, the images appear like graffiti when seen from a relative distance but, when seen from close up, their personal nature and the presence of the body becomes apparent.

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A NEW VENUE

Located in the heart of the Plaka area and housed in a building dating from the early 1950s, the architectural research space R53 is a new venue established by ICC Athens (ICCA), a nonprofit organization founded in 2002 and focusing on architectural research and design management. R53's research program includes lectures, educational programs and art events and exhibitions related to the use and design of architecture. The notion of place, one of the key concepts in Navab's work, was seen as relevant to architecture and is expanded in a set of parallel events held on the occasion of the exhibition.



Artist Aphrodite Desiree Navab's exhibition at R53 runs to October 10.

arts and environmental studies at Harvard, says that when she arrived in the United States, she found that the mass media portrayed the Iranian people as being without laws, history or civilization. "I went to Harvard to find a language through which to investigate and challenge stereotypes. I found it through photography," she says.

In some ways, her work is close to that of another Iranian woman, the acclaimed video and film artist Shirin Neshat. Both artists live in New York and spent the early part of their lives in Iran. (Neshat lived in Iran until she went to university.) Therefore, it may well be that their work offers a romanticized, distanced view of Iran and that it is partly in response to the Western conception of their home country.

"It is a diaspora point of view. The consciousness is a double one," says Navab. "In cultural studies, they speak of how memory and history are always in dialogue with the first home. Each of the 15 concepts that I address in this particular work become a problem and redefined when you are forced to leave home. For example, in the States, I would sometimes deny my Iranian provenance and say that I am Greek. Now I can say that I am from all three countries."

"She Speaks Greek Farsi" raises those complex issues of memory and belonging while also underlining an ongoing political and cultural conflict.

At R53 (4-6 Mnisicleous, Plaka, tel 210.323.5400) through October 10. Open Tuesdays through Fridays 5-9 p.m.