

'I want the show to reflect the essence of what it means to be Greek in Australia today. Through my black and white photographs of Greek cultural life and colour portraits of young Greek-Australians, I hope to invoke questions of identity and integration.'

Georgia Metaxas

Aged twenty-one, George Ambelas arrived in Melbourne in 1997. His face stares directly at the viewer with an assured gaze: 'I feel more Greek in Australia than I ever did in Greece. I am a double wog.'² What clues are there as to the character, personality, social standing, relationships, profession, age, gender of the portrait subject? Photographed at close range, we can discern two gold necklaces with religious motifs against a scarlet t-shirt. There are limited accoutrements except the conspicuous reminder of religious iconography and faith: a gleaming cross sits above another insignia given to George by his father when he came to visit Australia. Georgia Metaxas has captured her subject with a serious yet confident demeanour. Looming larger than life, he appears as a three-quarter portrait set against a grey, studio backdrop.

Saturated colour and tight framing ensure Metaxas' seven young adults are watchful guardians, carefully placed alongside photo essays of cultural rituals. A conversation unfolds between youth culture and the migratory experience further accentuated by quotes from each sitter. Revealing the longing, confusion and upheaval embedded in migration and biculturalism, Liza Papadopoulos is: 'Searching to find Greek memories in Australia I find myself chasing Greek expressions, people and place more so than I ever did in Greece.' Her dislocation becomes palpable.³

A suite of silver gelatin prints punctuates these bold portraits. A small image of an elderly man proudly wears a giant cross. His face is riddled with anguished exhaustion having completed the annual swimming ritual at Station Pier. On the first Sunday of every year, thousands of Greek-Australians congregate in Port Melbourne, the original point of arrival for many migrants. Commemorating the baptism of Christ, a cross is blessed by the bishop and then thrown into the waters. White doves are released as the male participants race to claim the cross that will bring good health to the lucky winner.

Metaxas has taken her camera outdoors as social and cultural rituals are played out before her lens. Like an interloper or bystander, her detached yet jubilant form of cultural reportage is rendered as photo essays.

Three photographic suites visually portray heritage, recording and narrating events in the Greek community such as Station Pier Blessing of the Waters Ceremony, Greek Easter and the Cyprus March and Candlelight Vigil. We bear witness to peaceful protests laden with sorrow, religious rituals and ecstatic ceremonies. With the largest Greek population outside Greece, Melbourne becomes the stage for public gatherings. Metaxas takes us on a dramatic journey that charts some of the calendar of rituals within her community.

We are reminded of David Moore's quintessential image of migration – European Migrants Arriving in Sydney (1966). Moore depicts migrants viewing their new country with trepidation and hope. Clearly, boats, water, journeys, travel and displacement are part of the migrant experience. ⁴ Metaxas has an astute capacity to distil frenetic events into a series of poetic images: community gatherings become nostalgic and revealing. Her objective distance provides more than a documentary record of events. Oblivious to the photographer's presence, she observes crowds with empathy thereby preserving her distinctive heritage.

IKONA skilfully conflates documentary and photojournalism with contemporary portraiture. Through style and technique, Metaxas' large-scale colour portraits of young adults portray an assured attitude. The black and white essays, however, are like a photographic archive providing an ongoing conversation with deeply embedded traditions from a distant homeland. With poetic sensitivity, Metaxas narrates stories of displacement and the Diaspora, celebrating the mixed emotions of belonging.

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1.

Correspondence with the author, February 2006.

2.

George Ambelas quoted in IKONA: Photographs – Georgia Metaxas, exhibition catalogue, Manningham Gallery, Melbourne, 2004.

3.

For an historical discussion of migratory journeys see *Exiles and Emigrants: Epic Journeys to Australia in the Victorian Era*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2005.

4.

For an anthology on the contribution of European emigrants see *The Europeans: Émigré artists in Australia 1930-1960*, edited by Roger Butler, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1997, in particular Helen Ennis, 'Blue Hydrangeas: Four émigré photographers', pp. 102-118.