

For Immediate Release

POLYS PESLIKAS
And leaned shoulder against the window

Opening on May 31, 2023, 6-9 pm

May 31-July 14, 2023

Hours: We 4-8pm, Sa 12-4pm
and by appointment

Polys Peslikas revisits a series of early films and photographs he made around two different people in two different locations: Andrei in Limassol, and Emmanuel in Montpellier.

The exhibition at Radio Athènes opens concurrently with "This delusive sentiment" at Arch, which contains new paintings, and extensive material from the artist's archive.

"And leaned shoulder against the window" is the result of conversations we have had this past year with Polys Peslikas and art theorist Elena Parpa. Her text "Notes on Andrei Catalin (2010-11) and My Garden / Emmmanuel (1993-2023)" was written on this occasion.

The exhibition is accompanied by four limited editions available for sale, selected by the artist especially for Radio Athènes, as well as a conversation between Polys Peslikas and Helena Papadopoulou on artworks setting a scene, cinematic and art historical references.

**Elena Parpa is a writer, curator and educator. She holds a PhD from the Department of Art History, Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research considers the way notions of landscape interact with the themes of identity, memory, gender, and climate change in contemporary art. She has curated several exhibitions, including *How to Make a Garden* (2012), *Exercises in Orientation* (2013/15) and *Planetes* (2017). Her essays have appeared in journals and exhibition catalogues, including the 'Daybook' of *documenta 14* (2017), and in the edited collections *Marianna Christofides: Days in Between* (Hatje Cantz 2021), *Contemporary Art in Cyprus: Politics, Identity and Culture Across Borders* (Bloomsbury 2021), and *Colonial Cyprus: A Cultural History, 1878-1960* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming). She is the author of *Next Spring: Athens, June 18* (Atlas Projectos, 2018), edited by Laura Preston.*

***Polys Peslikas (b. 1973, CY) is a painter based in London. He is interested in the constructed narratives of image and desire, and in notions of the physical in the history of western art.*

Emmanuel and Andrei

A conversation between Polys Peslikas and
Helena Papadopoulos



Cyprus in Venice Pavilion, 2017 (photo by HP).

Helena Papadopoulos: I think I met you for the first time at the Cyprus Pavillion in Venice, in 2017. You were representing Cyprus, and the pavilion was curated by Jan Verwoert. It was one of the most articulate and fresh participations that year, a real discovery for me. I was impressed by the works, the way they were presented, the exhibition design with benches by Michael Anastassiades, the spirit in which other artists were invited to converse with your paintings, and *Umm Kulthum faints on stage*, the book that accompanied the exhibition. That's where I was introduced to Neoterismoï Toumazou (a collective of artists Maria Toumazou, Marina Xenofontos, Orestis Lazouras), artist writer Mirene Arsenios, and ceramicist Valentinos Charalambous. This conversation with other artists, and formats within a solo show seems to be another expression of your relationship to materials, people, and the history of art.

Your influences, and references—literary, mythological, art historical—are not just footnotes.

Polys Peslikas: As a teenager I was always fascinated by this enigmatic work by Gustave Courbet, the scale, and this idea of the crowd around the artist who nevertheless stays focused and dedicated to his landscape painting. It took me years to decode this ability of an artwork, its power to allow for parallel universes to coexist and generate further possibilities.



Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, 1854-5, oil on canvas, 361 x 598 cm, (Musée d'Orsay).

Desire

I am a person who has the continuous desire to observe, to explore notions of creativity, someone who wants to understand how the building of narratives and abstractions works. This immediately implies that desire becomes the material with which I explore and experience the everyday. So, what happened in the Venice Biennale was an attempt to activate the above.

HP: I would like to know a bit more about *Volks*, the exhibition space you used to run in Nicosia, before making London your base. Jan Verwoert has said something about you that I still remember: "He knows what it means to pursue your own practice while setting the scene for others to appear."

PP: *Volks*

Volks was a space given to me by a very good friend Alexandros Diogenous, when I was looking for a venue to have a solo show in 2014. After the end of the show, with his permission and support, I opened the space to artists from different backgrounds to use as a temporary studio of 600 sqm or as an exhibition / performance space. I had no control or say over what was happening after the invitation. That was the interesting part actually.

Jan's phrase: "He knows what it means to pursue your own practice while setting the scene for others to appear."

I will add that one interesting place to have a conversation, is in front of an artwork.

Two examples:



1. Pier Paolo Pasolini in the role of Giotto in his film *The Decameron* (1971). In the final scene in which he has completed his fresco that illustrates episodes of the film, the artist marvels over his work and says to himself "Why complete a work when it is so much better just to dream it?"



2. People acting / performing in a museum space. Jean Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (1964), a scene in which Franz, Arthur, and Odile attempt to break the world record by running through the Louvre. The scene is repeated in Bernardo Bertolucci's film *The Dreamers* (2003).

The artwork is a backdrop for things to happen.

INSERT
Saint Sebastian
July 2020
London



Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, *Saint Sebastian*, c.1486-8, oil on wood, 103.2 x 40.6 cm (National Gallery, London).

SEBASTIANE

I pushed the thin board canvas against the blue wall to be sure it would hold strong.

At the National Gallery I stopped in front of a very simple painting of Saint Sebastian. The description next to the work says: "A pale young man stands inside a stone niche, almost naked and seemingly unaware of the arrows in his arm and leg. This is Saint Sebastian, a Roman soldier who secretly converted to Christianity." I loved the word "unaware" in the caption. No physical pain. The idea of pain is only visual, we see the pain. He neither sees, nor feels it. He is just there on display.

The most striking part of the work is the lower part of the legs, from the knees to the toes. They seem unfinished, a simple first layer of paint, a pale ochre yellow.

The absence of volume creates a sense of no distance between Sebastian, his feelings, and the back wall. Everything is on display, at the same level. He is just paint on paint.

The body stands inside that shallow niche and a smooth grey shadow falls on the curved wall, shaping the depth of the alcove. A few centimetres of distance stand between Saint Sebastian and the wall surface. Sebastian jumped in that niche and struck a pose; the artist gave him all the directions. How to display himself.

HP: One of my favorite places in the world is the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Whenever I visit their temporary exhibitions, I always stop in front of a work by Puvis de Chavannes in their permanent collection. It moves me in a strange way that has mostly to do with my nostalgia for the excitement of discovery during the first years I studied art history. I associate his muted colours and oneiric murals with some of your works.

PP: Puvis de Chavannes together with Fernand Khnopff are early influences in my work. I found out about them through a book on impressionism in which they were referred to as precursors to the post-impressionists. I encountered the actual works years later when I was a student in France in the early 90s.

The fresco like surfaces was the model I was after, to find a formula for my own textures. An abstract queer melancholia was the attraction. The mythological elements and the freedom to put together pointless compositions making no sense was inspiring -the idea of a set. But the most important thing for me was the fact that both were depicting mostly outdoor scenes; in reality though, they were theatrical studio compositions with extra personal drama. In the years that followed many others were added to my list, weirdly, Khnopff is making a comeback.

HP: Your exhibition with a series of new works on canvas, watercolours and various materials you use in your studio as references—books, postcards, snapshots—opens at Arch, the same day as our show here at Radio Athènes. At Arch you are showing mostly works realized in the last year, whereas here you are returning to work you made between 2011-12 in Cyprus, and work you made while you were living in France in the early 1990s. And of course, at Radio, it is altogether different: photographic works and videos.

PP: Last November I started working on new oil paintings for Arch, I felt I needed to continue the works I presented at the ICA, Milan (2022). At the same time, I was exploring my image collection which includes approximately 10,000 images —printed

material from magazines, books, newspapers that I have been amassing since the early 90s (the first image I remember consciously putting aside was from Vogue magazine, in 1984). I will display a very tiny part of the collection.



Jean Genet, *Un Chant d'Amour*, 1950, 26 min, film still.

HP: When we started talking about details for the exhibition here, we set up a WhatsApp group: you, me and art historian, curator Elena Parpa who is contributing a text that accompanies the show. Elena is one of your most constant interlocutors and a close friend, right? She named our group “Radio Catalin” as the initial idea was to present an updated version of your photographic archive of more than 12,000 images, around a single person, Andrei Catalin. Later, as you were going through your archive you discovered an even earlier body of work that had another young man as its protagonist, Emmanuel. When you shared the first images with the group, I thought of Jean Genet’s 1950 short film *Un Chant d’Amour*. The barriers that augment desire, the flowers—these impossibly beautiful hydrangeas in two of the photos we are showing.

PP: Genet’s film I know only through some stills in a magazine art review. I had read *Our Lady of the Flowers* in Greek, published by Εξάντας (Exantas) in 1976. I had to cover the book with craft paper because I was reading it during my military service and I was feeling it was revealing too much, and I was afraid of bullying. In a seminar organized by the Department of Fine Arts of the Cyprus University of Technology in the context of the research programme *Queer Arts of the Eastern Mediterranean*, I participated with a phone video of my hand uncovering the book.

Andrei

At Radio Athènes, I will show the books with images of Andrei taken between 2010-11. The full project includes 12.000 digital images, of which 1.200 ended up in the 5 volumes on view.

Emmanuel

It was my first video in 1993, with a mini-VHS camera. I wanted to make a video of me giving Emmanuel a set of directions to follow and perform. At the same time, I started taking black and white photos with a Lubitel 166 Universal LOMO- Soviet Medium Format 6x6. Rollei Copy TLR Camera, Universal Soviet lomography TLR.



The film roll had 12 exposures.

These are the garden photos we are showing.

My desire was to document the garden of my house in Montpellier from late afternoon to evening. There were long sessions with a tripod. It was the documentation of the space in which I filmed Emmanuel.

Documentation of the room followed. Views from inside out, and then reflections on the windows of the room from the outside.

An interesting element was the conflict of artificial light and darkness towards the end of the sessions. It was most probably May or April (the trees had blossomed).

Notes on *And leaned shoulder against the window*

Elena Parpa

Andrei Catalin (2010-2011)

The initial idea when putting together Polys Peslikas's exhibition at Radio Athènes was to revisit the impressive volume of 12 000 digital photos taken between 2010 and 2011, when he spent almost a year photographing Andrei Catalin, a Romanian immigrant and amateur footballer. The project is underscored by excess, the kind that makes us think of the surplus of images in the current state of photographic production in which photographs no longer mediate the world but obscure it. It is also conceptually linked to the argument of identity as fluctuating, unfixed and therefore as resisting consolidation in representation. There is no single definitive shot that could encapsulate who Andrei Catalin is, seems to be the suggestion, hence the dispersal of his portrait into thousands of frames. But there is more to the project than a conscious experimentation with a traditional art genre (portraiture) in the context of a particular medium (photography) with the intention of artistically negotiating a notion (identity). We cannot ignore how this overwhelming number of photographs revolve around a nexus of thoughts and ideas on desire, queerness, masculinity, intimacy, vulnerability, media-induced stereotypes, otherness, and how a portrait may include hints of a self-portrait. They also communicate the kind of sensibility that traverses Polys's work. I will explain.

Ysterografo

Polys is a painter who came of age under the postmodern tendency for interdisciplinarity in art. This is reflected in his pursuit of a practice with painting at its centre yet open to different media—such as drawing, watercolour, stencils, video, and photography—in conversation with other practices—including curating—, very often on the basis of collaborations with others, testified more resolutely in his participation at the Venice Biennale in 2017, when he represented Cyprus and invited other artists to join him as guests to his exhibition. The first time he used photography was as a student at the École des Beaux Arts of Montpellier in the mid-1990s, when interdisciplinarity had already permeated art school curricula. *My garden* (1993/2023), today on display at Radio Athènes, is a selection of photographs which he took for his photography class using black and white film and a 6x6 format camera he borrowed from his photography teacher. His subject deviated from the era's conceptualism giving preference to people and things he felt close to—his room, the garden outside his house, his

friend Manu. He dealt with it by playing around with the medium, exploring the limits of its formal properties, which is sensed in the intentional overexposure of the film in certain takes, in the inclination towards off-centre compositions, peculiar crops, and blurred surfaces. Here is the use of the accident as aesthetic strategy that informs the sensibility of his work since then as is the interest in a medium's capacity for intimate observation.

His more concentrated engagement with photography occurred between 2007 and 2011 when he was collaborating with *Ysterografo*, the arts and culture publication circulated on Sundays with the Cypriot newspaper *Phileleftheros*. His assignments involved photoshoots, which he carried out with a bold attitude to picture-making that incorporated the aesthetics of the snapshot and the non-staged with a propensity towards the multiple over the unique and the blurred over the 'perfectly' sharp. Going back to that work with the benefit of hindsight, there are many indications as to how his photography was feeling the edges of a space that can be identified as queer. It challenged, for one, heteronormative conventions and social conformity—concentrating on alternative family ties, marginal ways of living, and people on the fringes of society—conversing as such with prevalent perceptions of queer space as a space of “deviant” desires, not necessarily sexual, which describe a world with an oblique angle to that which is given.¹

Polys's adoption of an oblique angle at *Ysterografo* necessitated as well the use of photography contra its power to transform ordinary people into commercial idols by approaching his subjects with a kind of intuitive immediacy that oscillated between attraction and alienation, intimacy and distance very much in the vein of those photographs from his art student years. It was an approach with affinities to other artists working with photography at the time and sharing similar preoccupations—Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson, Collier Schorr, Socratis Socratous, Spyros Staveris are some of the names that come to mind—, especially in relation to the medium's capacity for acute observation, emotional connection but also for generative ambiguity. It was during this period that he began work on *Andrei Catelin*.

Portrait/Self-portrait

Andrei worked in the bar below Polys's apartment in the centre of Limassol. Handsome and athletic, he fulfilled, at least in appearances, the cliché of the virile man of idealized masculinity celebrated by the media. Polys's choice to ask him to model for him is telling of the stereotypes he was inclined to succumb to and subvert, especially in relation to

¹ I'm here referring to Sara Ahmed's understanding of queer space as articulated in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

conventional understandings of the strong and proportioned male body as the ostensible site of heterosexual manhood and homoerotic desire.

They would meet regularly for shootings at various locations—at the beach, the football pitch, at archaeological sites, such as Curium, in the apartments of friends. There is a constant oscillation between interior and exterior spaces in the photographs and the sense that the exploration of Limassol's cityscape (and of the Cypriot landscape in general) was a central quest. There was no predetermined plan or set up that defined the outcome of their encounters although when going through the material retrospectively it is possible to deduce the directorial instructions from the part of the artist—open your mouth, smile, pose, do nothing. It is also possible to recognise instances in which Andrei is completely impervious to them, taking complete control of his image and of the picture's outcome. Within the context of their informal pact for regular meetings, the conventional hierarchical balance between artist and model was under full negotiation, inviting the consideration of how a portrait executed under these conditions is based on the collapse of the distance between them to the extent that it also becomes a self-portrait.

I think of this in relation to those photographs where one can trace Polys's presence: his shadow on the wall, his fingerprints on the computer screen, his hand intentionally obstructing the view from the camera lens. There is a hand also present in the *My Garden* series from 1993 reaching out towards a painting—incidentally a portrait. Is it meant as a cameo appearance, as a poetic metaphor on the desire to touch, to really touch something and get to own it and possess it? Or is it about making us aware that there is always an unbridgeable distance separating the observer from the observed, *us* from the rest of the world?

How to make a garden

Of the vast material that emerged from Polys's meeting sessions with Andrei, one thousand and five hundred photos were chosen and organised on the basis of intuitive associations to be included in five artist books, which are today on display at Radio Athènes. They were initially presented in the group exhibition *How to make a garden*, which I curated in 2012 in thinking with the work of contemporary artists on the politics and poetics of gardens. The exhibition was hosted at the Nicosia Municipal Garden in a space initially conceived in the 1960s as a glasshouse for exotic plants by architect Neoptolemos Michaelides, a key exponent of post-war modern architecture in Cyprus, who designed it raised on a slab of concrete and with a large glass façade that blurred the inside with the outside. The five artist-books were presented under the title *Andrei Catelin*, alluding to their function as portraiture, albeit in its

expanded sense. They were displayed on a table overlooking the garden, the frame of their pages corresponding with the frame of the large window, their content (the product of repeated sessions of observation and exchange of gazes in interiors) speaking to perceptions of modern architecture as a ‘viewing mechanism’, where the inside and the outside, the observer and the observed, become convoluted. More than this, the books’ principal focus on an immigrant man, portrayed in a sensual manner, evoked the past and present of the Nicosia Municipal Garden as a cruising area and a meeting point for those on the margins of patriarchal order (migrant labour workers, women, children, the queer community).

Manu/Old selves

The idea to revisit *Andrei Catelin* for Radio Athènes led in the end to a deeper dive into Polys’s work. The *My Garden* series surfaced together with the four videos of his friend Manu made using a mini-VHS camera, in which the artist’s hands appear again in front of the lens, creating another kind of frame from that of the camera. This “unearthing” of sorts reminded me of a quote I noted down from *Index Cards* (2020), the book by Canadian artist and photographer Moyra Davey², which we read almost simultaneously with Polys when in lockdown: ‘Dipping into the archive is always an interesting, if sometimes unsettling, proposition. It often begins with anxiety, with the fear that the thing you want won’t surface. But ultimately the process is little like tapping into the unconscious, and can bring with it the ambivalent gratification of rediscovering forgotten selves.’

I’m thinking that Polys’s retrospective move at Radio Athènes is not only about rediscovering ‘forgotten selves.’ It is about the realisation too that these selves are somehow always present and generative (of new selves and work). This is sensed in his solo exhibition, which runs concurrently at Arch, especially in the decision to present a selection of images from the repository of material that he has been amassing and forever arranging and rearranging since his student years. Any visit to Polys’s studio will make visible the threads that exist between the content of this archive and the paintings in progress and how his work is in fact defined by these retrospective routes around images, ideas, old selves, old works as they are digested into something new. I would identify this as one of the defining aspects of his sensibility as an artist.

² This text emulates, wittingly or unwittingly, Daveys’ method of writing in snippets, although it was also devised as a response to ‘Notes’, the column I kept at *Ysterografo*, during the same period that Polys was working for the magazine.

Sensibility

But what is ‘sensibility’ really? Susan Sontag, the writer Polys’s generation (and mine) of artists grew up reading and thinking with, believes it indefinable. She writes in 1964: ‘A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.’ I subscribe to Sontag’s view of sensibility as essentially ungraspable, but I am looking for instances in the history of the term, when the attempt to handle or mold it into systems of thought elicits insights as to the qualities that radiate from the work of artists, such as Polys.

In aesthetics theory, sensibility has been explained as ‘perceptual awareness’ and ‘educated sensation’ defined by various factors (gender, class, ethnicity, education), which is useful if the question is how sensory experiences are also socio-politically contingent. This relates to discussions on contemporary art, in which sensibility surfaces as raced or gendered, generating interesting thoughts on those attributes in the work of artists that are seen as communicating a sense of blackness, femininity or queerness. The consideration of what constitutes a queer sensibility in art became relevant, initially in the US, at the height of the AIDS epidemic when the term queer was re-appropriated as a position of critique and political action. At the time, queer sensibility was negotiated as pertaining to personal experience of homosexuality, as promoting an anti-assimilationist and activist position of self-determination, which interrogated monolithic understandings of identity and institutional conceptions of art by employing aesthetic strategies derived from Fluxus, punk and the women’s art movement that embraced parody, excess, ephemerality, and gendered readings of form and colour. Sensibilities, however, are mutable. They fluctuate across space and time. The western-centred queer understanding of sensibility of the late 1980s has now evolved to exist in multiplicity, in relation to perceptions of queerness in non-western political, religious, and national contexts and in complex intersection with mainstream art practices.

We could think of how Polys’s work is leaning against this current, expanded conception of queer sensibility but it will require one more attempt to reflect the contours of what he does and how. His painting, for example, orbits traditional genres (the male nude, the portrait, the still-life) at the same time that it gravitates towards typically homoerotic themes (the man in uniform, the satyr, the erectile phallus). These he approaches with a strong interest in the history of art, especially painting, and with reference to the “greats” of the western canon of his received art education. It is a lesson he has since decentred by conscientiously turning to women artists (to Marlene Dumas and Rosemary Trockell repeatedly), and to examples of artists from the supposed periphery—to the Greek painter Yannis Tsarouchis (especially), to

the Cypriot painter Andreas Karayian (obsessively)—in the search for aesthetic articulations of (queer) desire. Film is also a central source in this quest—he often cites Pasolini and Fassbinder as influences—as is the mediated image of our time, photographs and printed matter culled from various sources. This material is kept in his ever-evolving image-bank that points to the conundrum of the painterly, the photographic and the mass-cultural in his work. Arranged on the basis of an intuitive process, it functions as a repository of subjects but also of patterns, textures, and tonal values. I think of the sensuous washes of his brushwork as emulation of the murkiness of the technologically produced surface on the canvas, although I am aware that the liquid layers of paint are a metaphorical reference to bodily fluids—spit, sweat, sperm, tears—and part of his conscious attempt to debunk the significance of skill in painting and deviate from the demand for a highly finished result. This is evident across his work, not only his painting, but also his photographs in exhibition at Radio Athènes, where we can sense his intention to expose what he calls ‘the life of the studio’, involving us in the process of their making. As such, they are invitations for intimate looking. We are let in, allowed to get close to works that are in themselves products of intimate observation of spaces—the garden, the house, the room, the bed, the body, the face—of intimacy.

Do all these conjure a queer sensibility in Polys’s work? They could if by the term ‘queer’ we mean all those things that Polys does—decentering, exposing, debunking, deviating or digesting the old to make something new. But I’m staying with Sontag’s suggestion: sensibilities are ineffable.