

ALEXANDRA CHRISTOU

The Gravity of Desire

March 12, 2026 - May 9, 2026

Exhibition opening: Thursday 12 March 2026, 7- 9pm

Alexandra Christou's (1950-2009) paintings insist on presence: the presence of women who desire, women who wait, women who work, women who take up space. Bringing together two bodies of work from the late 1980s and 1990s, this exhibition at The Breeder reveals an artist committed to making visible what is so often marginalised — female sexuality and the lived realities of women.

The exhibition unfolds across two interrelated chapters. On one level are Christou's erotic paintings and drawings of the mid-1990s. On another are portraits of sex workers and women she encountered in her neighbourhood, around the centre of Athens — figures standing outside hotels, sitting beneath exposed lightbulbs, leaning against cars, talking, smoking, waiting.

The erotic works are remarkable for their directness. In paintings such as *Untitled (In Love under shower)* (1996) and *Untitled (In Love Holding on)* (1996), bodies press into one another with urgency and reciprocity. The compositions are spare, often set against raw linen; the line is economical yet assured. Christou does not aestheticise desire into fantasy. Instead, she renders it physical — weighty limbs, grasping hands, flushed skin. A marginal note on one of her drawings reads: "I wanted to remember, but the body came first." The body, in her work, is not a symbol but a fact — the site where memory, instinct and encounter converge.

Crucially, these scenes articulate female desire from within. Throughout art history, erotic imagery has overwhelmingly been constructed through a male gaze. Christou's lovers are not posed for consumption; they are absorbed in each other. The woman is not spectacle but participant, agent, desiring subject. At a time when few women artists depicted female sexual appetite without allegory or disguise, Christou approached it with candour and empathy.

Even when myth surfaces, as in *Untitled (Mythology Leda with the swan)* (1992), the emphasis is not on theatrical drama but corporeal ambiguity. The myth is reclaimed as an intimate encounter, stripped of grandeur and returned to the body.

In her work, intimacy becomes a process without reference, entirely entrusted to the pictorial space; in the street scenes, the female bodies almost completely displace the external space. If the erotic works assert female desire, the portraits of women on the streets claim space for female existence in the public sphere. These portraits depict

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women — many of them sex workers — whom Christou encountered in central Athens: in front of hotels, wandering the streets, lingering near telephones and doorways.

Christou does not moralise. She does not dramatise their vulnerability nor romanticise their hardship. Instead, she places them at the centre of the canvas and allows them to occupy it fully. A hand on a hip, a cigarette mid-gesture, a sideways glance — these become gestures of autonomy.

The scale of the paintings grants these women a visibility rarely afforded to them in life. To paint them is to acknowledge their labour, their endurance, their presence in the fabric of the city. A note from around 1995 reads: “I don't just want to see what's there. I want to see what happens when no one is looking anymore.” This desire to see beyond surfaces — to witness what unfolds outside sanctioned visibility — underpins both bodies of work. Whether lovers entwined or women waiting beneath a streetlight, Christou paints moments that occur beyond spectacle.

Writer Hartmut Wickert has described Christou's approach as a form of “secondary authorship”-the artist does not dominate the image, but allows it to emerge through her, giving intensity to her protagonists. They feel immediate and real, yet they resist easy interpretation. The paintings feel encountered rather than staged.

Seen together, the two bodies of work expand one another. Desire and survival, intimacy and transaction, private embrace and public waiting are not opposites but contiguous conditions. The same searching contour lines and condensed physicality shape both the lover and the woman on the street. Christou's female perspective lies precisely in this refusal to divide women into categories — respectable and fallen, intimate and public, mythic and ordinary.

Her paintings neither provoke nor preach. They insist. They insist that women desire. They insist that women endure. They insist that women, in all their complexity, are worthy of being seen — and remembered.

Alexandra Christou (1950-2009) was a self-taught Greek artist. Born in Athens, she left Greece in the late 60's to travel and pursue her artistic dream in the United States, studying ceramics at the East Tennessee State University (ETSU), before moving to Australia and Germany.

After several years abroad, she returned to Greece with her daughter, where her independent painting practice took shape between Athens and the Aegean island of Astypalaia. Working primarily during the mid 1980s and 1990s, Christou developed a raw, direct figurative language shaped by her lived experience, the Athenian underground scene, and her international influences. During her lifetime, she exhibited her work only sparingly in Greece and remained largely unrecognized.

Her biography resists fixed timelines, just as her lines slip away from the strict confines of her surfaces. Following her death in Athens in 2009, her oeuvre has been rediscovered only recently. Her work was included in the group exhibition *Public Secrets*, curated by Milovan Farronato, at The Breeder, Athens (2025). In 2026, Sadie Coles HQ, London, presented a solo exhibition of her work titled *Taverna*.