ΣΥΝΕΝΤΕΥΞΗ
Ο Davide Balula φέρνει τα μάρμαρα της Ακρόπολης στις αίθουσες μιας γκαλερί
Ο Πορτογάλος καλλιτέχνης εμπνέεται από τις βάλτες του στην Αθήνα και τον Πικάνσι για το έργο του που εκτίθεται στη γκαλερί Gagosian.

ΠΕΙΡΑΜΑΤΙΚΗ
Διάδρομος: Ισίως το έργο του Davide Balula είναι αυτό το δείγμα της συνύπαρξης των πολιτισμών. Η Χαλκίδα, η θεσπιστική πόλη των ελληνικών καλλιτέχνων, και η Ρόμα, η καλλιτεχνική κοινότητα της Πόλης, είναι δύο θέσεις που ζουν κοντά μαζί, αλλά είναι δύο που διαφέρουν βαθιά. Η διάδρομος της ολόκληρης γκαλερίς είναι ένας διάδρομος από την Χαλκίδα στην Πόλη, από την Ελληνική στη Ρώμη. Εκεί όπου τα μάρμαρα της Ακρόπολης συναντούν τους Ρώμεοι.

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Davide Balula brings the Acropolis marbles inside an art gallery

The Portuguese artist was inspired by walking around Athens, as well as by architect Pikionis, in order to create the works of art exhibited in Gagosian Athens.

Christos Paradis

The bookcase is completely hidden behind a snow-white wall, the herringbone-patterned parquet floor is partly replaced with sections of white drywall, and Gagosian gallery’s space at the ground floor of 3 Merlin street looks smaller. Born in Portugal and brought up in France, artist Davide Balula has created an in-situ installation inspired by his walks around Athens, especially along the famous pathways through the Acropolis, designed by the acclaimed Greek architect Dimitri Pikionis. His exhibition opening also included a performance: among his works and interventions on the gallery’s floor and walls, two men were dancing zeibekiko with no music.

What did you know about Athens and Greek culture before your first visit here? Did your first impressions meet your expectations?

I had never been to Greece before that show. I have a couple of Greek friends who have shared their experience with me and I was very curious to visit the country. But to be honest, maybe more than Sappho’s fragmented words or Heraclitus and his friends, my main interest in Greece before coming here was with the food. Once I arrived, I was definitively not disappointed. I eventually understood what a caper was. I mean a good one! Which has no comparison with the many bad preserved ones I had in the past.

As an artist who uses many different mediums, why did you choose marble for your Greek show? In what ways is it related to the city? And what made you “intervene” in the gallery’s space? Aside to the fact you wanted to make an in-situ exhibition, are there elements that intrigued you in the Kolonaki apartment where Gagosian Gallery is located in Athens? Would an old neoclassical style house have been closer to what you had in mind?

I tend to always react to space and context and try to keep some flexibility at the moment of the install so that we have room to adjust accordingly. This is probably what makes me look at local materials and habits, so I naturally try to also tap into that. I suppose I also like to have an excuse to meet new people – and what a better experience than working with them to really get to know them? Ok, maybe having a lot of drinks and dancing can help too, I guess. But I am not sure I can do that every day of the week. So I suppose I try to combine it all and be productive. Leftovers, loose particles, residues, debris, dust – they have always been of great interest to me because of their cohabiting existence with development. I visited the Acropolis and got very excited about the path leading to it, the steps polished by the visitors and the approach of Pikionis, the architect whom I didn’t know before. Marble can turn into the thinnest dust in the
air. It becomes so light that it constantly floats around. So much so that you end up washing some of it from the surface of your own skin at the end of the day. Speaking of showers, I actually wanted to intervene on the bathtub of the apartment-looking gallery, but that might have been too confusing for the show as a whole. Anyways, maybe a neoclassical style house would have led me to something else, I don’t know.

**Did your Portuguese background help you recognize familiar elements in our everyday reality and contemporary culture? Are there things that relate the Portuguese and the Greeks? Or is it your French identity that helped you reveal characteristics of contemporary Greece?**

I do believe that Greece and Portugal have a lot in common and I suppose I am sensitive to that. I also live in a different country than France or Portugal, which also makes me a “multiple individual” with multiple identities. That probably makes me think about language, culture and habits in a more conscious way. Greek heritage is universal. It is a fascinating point of view from the earth. It can be very rooted. Consider the fragmentation of the land into islands, the harshness of the soil and the gravity of its rocks. Even on top of the hills, the constructions show gravity. Marble can be very heavy, it’s true. It might impress and leave marks of its impression. It might not be blown in the wind as a block or a large stone. But marble dust is marble too and it is interesting to witness a mass of lightness reveal that even heavy weight is not much more of a “forever”.

**By decomposing a space, as you did in your show in Athens, it is as if you wanted to “manipulate” life and the city. As if you preferred to comment on something already existing rather than creating something from scratch. Of course, this is always the case when an artist chooses to create an in-situ installation. In what ways are architecture and the city or nature present in your art?**

I do see things in motion, I don’t believe in “from scratch”. It’s true. I am a pragmatist who believes in interdependence and cohabitation. The scale and organization of a room, a building, a city, a continent, a solar system etc., of all moving things even on a molecular level, are very much related to where you are looking from. So, of course, nature and the way we work around it as groups of humans, needs to be considered in various motions, speeds and scales, probably more often than we think. More than ever, I believe that we are developing an understanding of scale and pace in a fast-growing way. But we still have big issues with privacy as we are attempting to think globally.

**By using marble, it is as if you wanted to connect the past of Athens with its present. Is there a link between the two? The fact that at the opening of the exhibition two men performed zeibekiko, a dance that goes back many centuries, was it your way of connecting the past with the present?**

Past and present, yes, and future too! Zeibekiko is amazing. I could go on and on about it. That dance piece is really what complements the whole installation. It is the human side of things. The emotional input into matter, into space and signs. It is intimacy. It is traditional but improvised. It is publicly man-ly, but genderless-ly voluptuous once performed.
Why is dualism a crucial element in your work? Where does it derive from?

No idea. Maybe the fact that we think “from” our own body and that each object of thought is related to another. I don’t necessarily define it as dualism per se, but I guess I am interested in that coexistence, that space, that possible connection, that tension in between.

Decay is so present in the two marble pieces in your show in Athens. It almost determines the fact that the show doesn’t have a title! What is your relationship with time as a concept in your work?

Time! Ha! Well, should I go on endlessly about it, or should I use the subject of time to end this interview instead?