Glass

The Rise and Fall of Vitraria
Landscape Sculptor Costas Varotsos Clare Belfrage’s Crossed Lines

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The Natural

Massive monumental glass works that interact with the rugged natural landscape are part of a singular quest for connection by Greek artist Costas Varotsos.

BY RANDY B. HECHT

There’s a certain irony in the tale of a sculptor who builds his work into the natural environment and at the same time must circumvent the unnatural environment in which his country has become stuck. Costas Varotsos has mastered the art of persuading us that nature intended to have layers of green glass rise up between the ridges in a mountain range, or take on the shape of a poplar standing in a grove alongside real trees. But like everyone who lives in or near Athens, he’s also become adept at practicing the art of logistical subterfuge—a survival skill in contemporary Greece. The way it all works can offer unexpected insights to a visitor to the country.

Varotsos lives on Aegina, a small Saronic island that you reach on most days by taking a 75-minute ferry or 40-minute hydrofoil ride from the Athenian port of Piraeus, which itself is accessible by metro from the city center. So when he called me the day before our interview to say that his assistant would meet me at my hotel and escort me to the port, I thought he was being overly chivalrous. Despite my protests that it wasn’t necessary, he insisted. It wasn’t until we set out the next morning that I understood what had happened: anger over the economy had sparked a wildcat strike that left the ferry and hydrofoil services sidelined for the day.

Intrepid owners of small craft had seized the opportunity to provide alternative means of transport at triple the normal cost of passage. But first you had to find them. Through a port teeming with ferries, yachts, and cruise ships, the assistant, an aspiring film director named Gerasimos, drove us from one possible spot to another, each time racing out of the car to seek advice from anyone who might have inside information on the right place to go. The third time was the charm, and an hour or so later, I stepped out of a fishing boat to find the sculptor waiting for me on the Aegina dock.

Sea and space

The mad dash to get there brings to mind Dromeas, the iconic Varotsos sculpture known in English as Runner, which has had two lives. The original sculpture, which stood at eight meters, was created in 1988 and stationed in Omonia Square but had to be removed when the city began construction of a metro station there. Varotsos recreated the work at its current location adjacent to a large hotel a few blocks from Syntagma Square, home to the Greek Parliament and frequent political protests. Composed of iron and jagged-edged sheets of translucent green glass stacked 12 meters high, the work conveys a feeling of action, speed, and transience, particularly when viewed beneath an illuminated night sky. At once racing and motionless, Dromeas is an urban everyman.

Varotsos built his home on the island so that he could—even literally and figuratively, personally and artistically—rise above it all. Although he maintains a residence in Athens, teaches in the city, and sends his daughter to school there, his home is perched high in Aegina’s mountains, close to nature and far from the metropolis and the mayhem. The living area is walled in by floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides that make the interior and exterior spaces nearly indistinguishable, just as his outdoor sculptures fit like camouflage into their landscapes.
He designed the house and grounds with his artistic aims in mind, and considers the nearly panoramic view of the mountains and sea essential to inspiring his work, although he does the actual creation in a basement studio cut off from those visual stimuli. When I observe that he absorbs upstairs and creates downstairs, he laughs and says, “You understand.”

That blank canvas of a studio may also help him to develop visions for works that are exhibited in museums or galleries rather than outdoors. He thinks of those indoor spaces as laboratories: “When I am in nature, or when I am in an under-dimension, I don’t do experiments. I live. I am alive. But when I am inside the private space, in a gallery or a museum, I have the opportunity to play, to make experiments.”

It’s like nature is the experiment, I venture, so you and your work must fit in with the nature experiment.

“Exactly,” he says. “So you are part of this. When you are in a white box, you need an experiment. You work with your mind. And I enjoy this also.”

But he prefers creating works for outdoor spaces. Nature has been a kind of living companion for him since childhood. He has, in particular, “a huge relationship with the sea” that has “an autobiographic dimension.” And he considers it essential “to be connected with the natural process, to understand the time and the space of nature, and to feel that you are part of this.”

**Work in progress**

The one note of discord in his home environment is struck, paradoxically, by those of his own works on view amid the olive trees and hilly slopes that surround the home. They weren’t created for the property, and it was only at his assistants’ insistence that they were installed. The owner doesn’t like seeing them there. “My work makes me anxious,” he says, laughing, “because when I see my work, I want to touch it and change it.” In the artist’s eyes, the art is never finished.
Among the works under development in his studio is a piece that is an outgrowth of a 2012 sculpture called L’Approdo: Opera all’Umanità (The Landing: A Work Dedicated to Migrating Humanity). Varotsos was commissioned to create the initial sculpture in honor of the 83 Albanians who lost their lives when their ship, the Koter / Rodis, collided with the Italian naval vessel Shiloo on March 28, 1997. The shipwreck was transported to a concrete platform and transformed by Varotsos into a memorial to the dead. The ship’s propeller was later offered to Varotsos, among other works, by the Italian government. Varotsos was commissioned to create the initial sculpture in honor of the 83 Albanians who lost their lives when their ship, the Koter / Rodis, collided with the Italian naval vessel Shiloo on March 28, 1997. The shipwreck was transported to a concrete platform and transformed by Varotsos into a memorial to the dead. The ship’s propeller was later offered to Varotsos, among other works, by the Italian government.

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before them, most people say it makes them feel how insignificant they are. But isn’t the opposite also true? If you are part of that community...

“You are very important,” he says, laughing.

“You are part of that whole sky,” I say, “and that’s how significant you are.”

“Exactly.”

The conversation’s philosophical turn leaves me wondering whether, as an artist, he is more driven to convey insignificance or significance. Or does he try to convey both: that we are completely insignificant, but we are part of the totality of the significance?

He responds that the beauty of life is that it is composed of different and sometimes contrasting moments, but that there is a line that connects everything. “This line is the desire, no? That drives you. All the rest can be positive, negative, but the important is to have this line, to focus on this line,” he says. “I think I find this line. If not, it’s difficult to do art. If you work with these forces of art and you don’t have your line, it could be really dangerous. In real art, I mean, not decoration.”

Does that mean, then, that art is capable of capturing the adrenaline rush we can get in a sailboat or hot air balloon? Can an artist recreate that?

“It’s not exactly adrenaline,” he says. “It’s a feeling that touches all the senses. You don’t know from where this pleasure is. This is the goal if you don’t have this, you don’t have a piece of art.”

Brooklyn-based freelance writer and Urban Glass student RANDY B. HECHT covers cross-border arts, culture, and business topics for media and corporate clients in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Her publication credits include National Geographic Traveler and Smithsonian magazine.