

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Michael Landy's new work is a portrait of Athens, using impressions crowd-sourced from its inhabitants. Alistair Sooke visits the city to witness its reinvention.

Earlier this year, the British artist Michael Landy was dining outside at a restaurant in the Athens neighbourhood of Exarcheia – where the streets, home to anarchists, are thick with graffiti – when he was tear-gassed. “One moment, I was enjoying some vegetarian food,” he recalls. “The next, there were all these guys with masks and wheelie bins, and a riot was taking place. It came out of nowhere.”

Concerned and confused, Landy and his companions jumped up and tried to flee; in their haste, they forgot to settle the bill. “But the streets were barricaded,” he continues, “and then the police started tear-gassing everybody. I couldn't see anything for five minutes. Tear gas affects your throat as well: you find it hard to breathe.”

Athens is slightly lawless, but that's one of the nicest things about it – Michael Landy

It sounds frightening – yet, when we speak by phone, Landy is at an airport, waiting to board a flight back to the city. He laughs. “Yeah, Athens is slightly lawless. But that's one of the nicest things about it. It's a really exciting place.” Since February, Landy has been spending time in the Greek capital to oversee his ongoing exhibition, *Breaking News – Athens*. This is being staged at the Diplarios School, a former vocational school in the city's centre, by the non-profit organisation Neon.

For the duration of the show, Landy is inviting the Greek public to submit images that encapsulate their experiences within the city via Neon's website, almost a decade on from the beginning of Greece's government debt crisis.

The images can be of anything: graffiti, street signs, bank logos, newspaper headlines, ancient artworks, coins. Landy then turns those that catch his eye into striking, blue-and-white oil-stick drawings, with the help of eight assistants – all, themselves, young artists, who dress in blue boiler suits, and work in an on-site studio.

Around 400 drawings have been produced so far. Stylistically consistent, they vary greatly in scale, and are arranged, under Landy's direction, in shifting configurations throughout one floor of the empty Diplarios School.

Out of the ruins

The installation will continue to evolve until the end of the exhibition in June, creating a fragmentary, composite portrait of a complex culture. Following bankruptcy and protracted austerity measures, Greece remains down on its luck – its unemployment rate, the highest in the Eurozone, remains stubbornly above 20 per cent.

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Athenians send images of the city to Michael Landy, and he and his assistants transform them into striking, blue-and-white oil-stick drawings (Credit: Stefanos Giannoulis/Neon)

Among the drawings, there are maps of two islands, Lesbos and Chios, which, in recent years, have borne the brunt of the influx of migrants and refugees. Elsewhere, there's a reproduction of the suicide note of Dimitris Christoulas, a Greek pensioner who shot himself in Athens's Syntagma Square five years ago.

But Athens is also resilient – and, characteristically for Landy, there are witty juxtapositions in the exhibition, such as a sign reading “Grexit” – the name given to the suggestion that Greece should leave the Eurozone – positioned above a doorway.

This is a show with a lot of frustration, but also humour – Elina Kountouri

“This is a show with a lot of frustration and anxiety,” explains Elina Kountouri, Neon’s director. “The Athenian people are very connected with politics and social issues, and everybody has an opinion. But there is also humour, and this is what gives me hope – because optimism comes through humour. When you lose your sense of humour, that’s when everything collapses.”

Having spent several weeks in the city, engaging with Athenians, Landy agrees. “Seven or eight years into the Greek crisis,” he says, “there doesn’t seem to be any end to it, and people are disenchanted with politics. But there’s also a lot of energy.”

He pauses. “When you look out of the windows of the Diplarios School, you see all these dilapidated buildings.” Many of them, empty and derelict, are plastered with signs spelling out a single word: Enoikiazetai (for rent). “Even the school is dilapidated: paint is peeling, bits of plaster are falling off the ceiling,” he says. When I visited recently, Kountouri told me that the Diplarios – which looks impressive from the street, but, she says, is “rotten” within – is “representative of Athens”, which is why she chose it as the venue for Landy’s exhibition.

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The drawings are arranged, under Landy's direction, throughout one floor of the empty Diplarion School (Credit: Stefanos Giannoulis/Neon)



Elina Kountouri says the Diplarion School is "representative of Athens": impressive from the outside but "rotten" within (Credit: Stefanos Giannoulis/Neon)

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Poor but sexy

Yet, for Landy, the down-at-heel qualities of Athens are, paradoxically, what make the city so exciting. “In many ways, Athens reminds me of London 30, 40 years ago,” he says. “There are lots of empty buildings, and artists love empty industrial spaces, because they offer cheap central studios with potential exhibition spaces.”

As he traversed the city with his assistants, he noticed that they kept on bumping into people they knew. “In that sense, it’s quite small,” he tells me, “and I really like that. There’s a good atmosphere – it’s buzzy. I didn’t know until I’d arrived that all these younger foreign artists have been moving in, saying, ‘Athens is the new Berlin.’” This is a reference to the vibrant contemporary art scene that emerged in the German capital during the ‘90s, when rents were still low. “There is a hype around Athens, it’s true,” says Kountouri. “Athens is sexy now.”



Several large-scale works are staged throughout the city for Documenta 14, including Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama’s Check Point Prosfygika in Syntagma Square (Credit: Getty)

The artist George Drivas, who will represent Greece at this year’s Venice Biennale, agrees. “You could say that a movement has emerged in Athens in recent years,” he tells me over a drink on a hotel roof terrace. “Everybody says that Athens is the new Berlin. Well, actually, I was in Berlin during the ‘90s – I lived there for 10 years.” So, does he think that the comparison is fair? “Yes,” he replies. “In Berlin, in the ‘90s, there was this movement of small artist-run spaces, and now, in Athens, a lot of small artist spaces have emerged.”

During my time in the city, I visited one of them: 3 137, a studio and gallery space, run since 2012 by three young Greek artists, who organise four exhibitions a year, as well as a programme of talks, presentations, screenings, and performances. Drivas explains: “There is a lot of independent artistic production like that.”

For Drivas, the terrible state of the Greek economy has, strangely enough, fostered the emergence of a thriving artistic scene. In Athens, private foundations such as Neon, which strives to stimulate contemporary culture, are rare. “There are no funds, no commissions, no collectors, nothing,” Drivas explains. His friend Orestis Andreadakis, curator of this year’s Greek Pavilion in Venice, chips in: “People in Greece are quite sceptical about modern art.” He points at the Parthenon, visible over Drivas’s shoulder, in the setting sun: “Art, for many Greeks, is still that.” “But,” Drivas continues, “the classic reaction of a creative person, when there is no money” is just to do whatever they want, he says.

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Drivas is, of course, referring to Greek artists. But the presence of younger international artists – lured by the prospect of cheap rents, good weather, and a lively local scene, which encourages a sense of community and the exchange of ideas – is also contributing to Athens's cultural renaissance.



Rebecca Belmore's marble tent, symbolising the refugee crisis in Greece, overlooks the Parthenon in Athens (Credit: Getty)

Moreover, the unprecedented decision to let Athens host part of the current, 14th iteration of Documenta, the essential, five-yearly exhibition of international contemporary art, has set the seal on the idea that the Greek capital has emerged from the peripheries as a new art centre. Traditionally, Documenta, which was founded in 1955 and, since the '70s, has occurred in the German city of Kassel. This year, for the first time, it has been split across two cities – and part one opened at a range of Athenian venues last month.

The arrival of Documenta 14 in Athens has not been without controversy: earlier this year, for instance, Apollo art magazine invited two writers to debate the issues involved, under the headline, “Is Documenta exploiting the economic crisis in Athens?” Katerina Koskina, director of Athens' National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), which is hosting an exhibition organised by Documenta, supported it. The art critic and curator Iliana Fokianaki, meanwhile, argued that “Documenta 14 exploits crisis as cultural capital” – a charge rejected by Documenta's artistic director, Adam Szymczyk.

Whatever your view – and several young Greek artists whom I spoke to in Athens feel conflicted about what they perceive as the ‘colonial’ attitudes of the exhibition's organisers towards the city's creative sector – there is no question that the presence of Documenta has put Athens, ineradicably, on the map, as far as the international art world is concerned.

Perhaps, then, it's time to stop saying that Athens is the new Berlin, and instead follow the lead of one Greek graffiti writer, who recently scrawled the following slogan in the city's streets: “Athens is the new Athens”. Well said.

Alastair Sooke is art critic and columnist of the Daily Telegraph.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170509-can-athens-become-europes-new-arts-capital>