

## 31st GREEK FESTIVAL OF SYDNEY



«It is maturity, but it's also

GEORGE RAFTOPOULOS

## ART

## is a mistress that always calls you back

He might be a well-known name in Australian art circles with his work already included in the HSC high school syllabus. He might have started making waves in New York and Singapore where his art has received glowing reviews and a few sales to boot. But while exhibitions at both the Hellenic and Benaki museums (in Melbourne and Athens respectively) are already on the cards, George Raftopoulos remains largely unknown within the wider Greek Australian community. He is working hard at changing that though, most evident by his contribution to the Hellenic Lyceum's "Nurturing Hellenic Heritage the Australian Way" exhibition.

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During the early stages of an article, when thoughts slowly begin to take shape and form, it's obligatory for a writer to put on a parent's cape, take words by the hand and assure safety for the first tentative steps before real business is dealt with. Anything will do really: an elaboration on the interviewees' attire, a description of the surroundings, a funny thing that happened on the way to the forum, something or another that will ease the reader into the final explosion of ideas, thoughts, expressions and literal imaginary that follow.

Allow me though, to bend the rules slightly, and instead of an intro offer a confession: George Raftopoulos and I have been very good friends for years. I have watched the fusion of the anger and day-dreaming of youth erupt in a cascade of colour and harsh splashes of paint. I was there when the ever present melancholy of art struggled to remain hidden well below the surface, only to unwillingly present itself in all its glory, the almost monochrome creations doing very little in the way of hiding what was blatantly obvious: an artist struggling with his inner demons. Finally, after a short break in our friendship, Raftopoulos globe-trotting in search of a place in the sun, myself back in the land of my birth, I have witnessed a sense of maturity—even a hint of calmness and inner peace—dominating proceedings.

But the more things seem to change, the more they remain the same. Take Raftopoulos's Hellenistic leanings: sometimes more prominent, at others wallowing in the shadows, the Greek influences that have been passed down from generation to generation, are always present, not only lending the man his signature, but also elevating his art to a higher plane, one only occupied by those torn between two



identities. In this case the Hellenism of his ancestry and his Australian upbringing.

So where does that leave me? I have to admit that throughout the many years I have been a paid writer, whenever the notion of dedicating a few lines to my good friends passed my mind, I have always refrained, afraid that my natural fondness for the man will not only compromise journalistic integrity, but also cloud my sense of judgment. But with his appearance in front of a strictly Greek audience (as part of the Hellenic Lyceum's "Nurturing Hellenic Heritage the Australian Way" exhibition, currently held at NSW Parliament House on Macquarie Street), cheap excuses have to be set aside and the job needs to be dealt. So I hereby declare that I have done my best to reign in my fondness for the man, and instead of writing about George the friend, concentrate more on presenting Raftopoulos the artist.

*This is the first time you are taking part in a Greek*

*Australian exhibition. Why haven't you taken the plunge before and what made you change your mind this time?*

I wish I could answer that question. But the truth is I really don't know. I think I have done a 180 degree turn. This year I said to my wife that it's the year of the Greeks. For some reason, the connection to Greece is becoming more apparent to me. It's also synonymous with the work I am doing: it's very figurative and very mythologically driven. Maybe it's the cosmos. I wish I could explain it. In the past, people have asked whether I would take part in the Greek Festival. And the answer was always no, as I never really had the interest in getting involved in that regard. Maybe something has shifted and it's time for me to give something back. And I love giving back. My work is part of the high school syllabus for the HSC and I get invited by a lot of schools to go and lecture about my art. Telling children about what I do, why and how I do it, is the biggest buzz for me. Also I have been doing this for 20 years,

and what I have noticed is kids want to go to art school. To art school, it was forbidden. I am now accepted by this country when I was frowned upon. ball game.

*So how did the exhibition*

Well, it sort of comes off the top. I did last year in Sydney, with an exhibition in Melbourne which was going to travel to the Benaki Museum there and Chicago utilizing Greek mythology—my concern of mine and has always been and the works I have created. I was invited by the Hellenic Lyceum, excited because they are celebrating their contribution to Australia. I took that on board and decided