

ARTIST PROFILE

Mata Soti

How did you become involved in the Hellenic Lyceum's «Nurturing Hellenic Heritage the Australian Way» exhibition?

I became a member of the Lyceum three years ago and am now on the Arts subcommittee with Maritsa Micos-Dragonas. My mother, Sophia, has been a committee member for almost ten years and I was always encouraged by all the hard work and dedication they put into the charity work and fund raising events. Being an artist and jewellery designer I also appreciated what the Lyceum has done for the cultural and creative aspect of the Hellenic community in Sydney. So when our president Kathy Liogos- Stojanovic suggested an art exhibition I was very excited to be given the chance to participate and even more happy to be a part of the exhibition.

What influenced your decision to accept the invitation?

I have been an artist/designer for more than twenty years and I've always been extremely proud of my Hellenic heritage. Even when I lived in New York City for 13 years I found myself drawn to other Greeks there working in the art/fashion fields. Being a part of something that celebrates the dynamic Hellenic spirit was a no-brainer for me. I think as an artist we struggle so much but you just have to trust and let go and let other people see and decide for themselves.

Was the artwork you are exhibiting especially designed for this event or is it on-going work?

The pieces I'm showing are an overall on-going body of work that encapsulates some of the more defining moments of my career. I originally went to art school to become a painter-i still paint a little- even though back then it was not something that a Greek girl did. I didn't choose the regular route of marriage and kids and a mortgage. I instead wanted to further challenge myself and indeed I felt that it was my duty in which to do so. My grandfather challenged himself when he went to Ellis Island in the 1900's and lived in the U.S. for 18 years. Just like my parents and thousands of others emigrated to Australia seeking a better way of life for themselves and their future families. But they never forget where they came from and so now I'm sure they are all proud that we are still anchored to our Hellenic roots.

How did Hellenic culture and/or history influence your work?

One of my earliest memories is standing with my mum and grandmother at the front of the Church aisle and staring at the Icons for the whole time because I was too young to understand what the priest was saying. I think I stared at the Icon of Mary and Jesus for hours and hours, as I grew up the mystery of the Icons and the style of painting -all the fine gold and silver leaf work- done in the Byzantium style became ingrained in my very being. Later when I went to study at

COFA, I chose to continue with painting but then I switched to metalsmithing after a trip to Greece and Italy that left an indelible mark on my psyche. I visited Olympia, the site of the Delphic oracle, Mycenae and also the tombs of Vergina. These are ancient monuments of the Golden age of Greece and it was a moving experience to witness these first hand and appreciate their beauty and history.

Another major inspiration to me not only as an artist but also as a person, was my uncle Dimitris Iatropoulos, the Athenian bases poet and columnist for esteemed papers such as Ethnos Newspaper. He was best known providing lyrics for artists such as Giorgos Dalaras, Yiannis Parios, Rita Sakelariou and more.

How are these influences projected in your work?

Like most Greeks, I search for meaning in my life and art. Going back to Greece for any Greek- Australian is almost like a rite of passage for us. Yes..we visit the relatives and go to the Parthenon. But it doesn't stop there- it's the ancient past that sits alongside the modern present that we can relate to. For me seeing the ancient patinated bronzes in the Athens metro reminds me of our ever changing world and our struggle to survive and evolve. I've worked with bronze and I've used chemical processes to achieve the green patina of my «Three Bells» which was a direct reaction to the decayed but beautiful pieces at the Archaeological Museum in Athens. Metalsmithing/jewellery enabled me to directly tap into this ancient world and it is manifest in my pieces which I hope will last as long as some of these ancient treasures. I aim to bring a little bit of my heritage into my work - with a modern twist.

A Greek-Australian artist: a blessing or a hurdle in getting recognized by the art community?

When I first attend COFA in 1985 there were only a handful of Greek-Aussies. I was chosen to attend based on my portfolio of work which I had been



putting together since I first started with some oils- on -canvas from age 10. I am driven by an innate desire to create and this desire is influenced and encouraged by my Greek family and friends. As far as the art community is concerned I've never been discriminated against simply for being Greek- Australian. I'm equally proud to be Australian as I am to be Greek. It's this duality that makes us strive harder for perfection and it's this dynamic that makes us better artists in the end.

Once upon not so long ago, the term«Greek-Australian» artists carried a certain stigma. What issues did you have to overcome on a personal basis?

Growing up it was a challenge for sure but as soon as you become an artist there are moments that test your strength that I think most artists can relate to. For example, we would go to Greek Orthodox Church on Sunday and singing «Agios Theos» whilst crossing ourselves one way and the next day at school we would sing Hail Mary and God save the Queen and cross ourselves the other way. At the time we just thought it was funny, strange etc. It just became yet another aspect of our crazy

lives living in two worlds that are possibly only now beginning to merge gracefully.

Have you got any projects in the pipeline?

I'm always working on something...my art is my life's work and vice versa. I must say though that I'm even more inspired since the exhibition and I'm sure there will be another one soon.

Finally, a message to the Greek Australian community.

My message to the Greek community is simple: support our artists/designers/filmmakers/architects! Whether they are first year students or 20 year veterans like myself I feel it is essential that we all get behind these creative voices and recreate a new Golden age of Greek/Hellenic art and culture that will span another 3 thousand years. I am so proud to be a member of the Hellenic Lyceum that owns a massive collection of Greek national costumes and jewellery which we hope one day will be housed in it's own museum. This is vital for the preservation of these costumes and together we can achieve our goal.