

THE 31st GREEK FESTIVAL OF SYDNEY PRESENTS

“SELLING AN AMERICAN DREAM: AUSTRALIA’S GREEK CAFÉ”: AN EXHIBITION BY EFFY ALEXAKIS AND LEONARD JANISZEWSKI

COLLECTING ...MEMORIES

For thirty years, Effy Alexakis and Leonard Janiszewski, photographer and historian respectively, have been tracing the history of Greek presence in Australia. Running at Macquarie University in conjunction with the 31st Greek Festival of Sydney, their “Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café” exhibition focuses on the effect our Hellenic forefathers unwittingly had on the shape of modern Australian culture.

WORDS BY SAVVAS LIMNATITIS

Hands up who knew that a large portion of all those American elements that have been ingrained in Australian pop culture, are a by-product of the influence Greeks had on the development of Australia?

As Effie Alexaki and Leonard Janiszewski, photographer and historian respectively, explain «Greek cafés in Australia were a ‘Trojan Horse’ for the Americanisation of the eating, social and cultural habits of Australians from the very start of the Twentieth Century. They introduced American commercial food-catering ideas, technology and products and influenced the development of cinema, popular music and even architecture along American lines. The Greek café ‘transformed’ Australian popular culture».

For 30 years now, the pair has been traversing not only across Australia but also overseas searching for answers to a question they asked themselves all those years ago when still in university: how much have Greeks contributed to Australian culture?

Back then thanks to the exuberance of youth, they truly believed that within a couple of years their question would have been answered once and for all. But as youth often does, they got it wrong! Thirty years later they are still searching feverishly, this time not exactly for clues but pieces of the puzzle that is Greek-Australian history.

GREEKS AS... INNOVATORS

When were the seeds for this on-going work first planted?

EFFIE ALEXAKIS: In the early 80s I was doing a post graduate diploma in photography. I was photographic a lot of Greek influenced things and people seemed interested at the time. Unfortunately my father passed away in 83 which was a huge shock and had a huge impact on all the family. He was very young and never went back to Greece, as he had come over as part of the migrant assistance scheme. I wanted to find out more about other Greek migrants, plus at the same time I had met Leonard at university. He was studying Australian History and was doing the Greek goldmine issue. So we decided to combine our skills and then in 87 we spend

INFO

DATE: Wednesday 20th March -Wednesday 1st May
TIME: 10am - 5pm weekdays; open on some Saturdays see Macquarie University Art Gallery for details
VENUE: Macquarie University Art Gallery, Building E11A, North Ryde, NSW, 2109
ENTRY COST: Free Entry
CONTACT: Leonard Janiszewski, Modern History/Art Gallery, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, NSW 2109
Tel.: 02 9850 6886/7437; **Mobile:** 0448 876 626
LANGUAGE: English

6 months travelling around Australia looking for the Hellenic presence around the country. That’s what really started it. b

When you started, were you aware that this was going to be a life long journey or did you think you would have spent a couple of years and get it over and done with?

E.A. When you are young you think you can do everything. We didn’t expect it to be so long. But people have been so welcoming, we have really enjoyed doing it and we get a lot of it. When you are young you think “OK, I’m going to do a book”. But then you realize you can’t put a book together from nothing.

I presumed one story led to other sub stories behind it.

E.A. Exactly. This exhibition is only the tip of the iceberg. When we were selecting the images we had thousands of them to choose from. When we were undertaking the field trips we never had time to go through everything. You photograph it, fill it away hoping we will have time to sort them out later on. So we have a huge recourse there to keep us going for another ten years.

Has the researched finished or is it still a work in progress?

E.A. There are still lots of stories to be uncovered.

LEONARD JANISZEWSKI: It’s not just the cafes. What we have done so far is only part of it. When we first started we were looking at the Greek presence (in Australia). In terms of



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Paragon Café proprietor, Barbara Archives; Astoria Café interior, Hunter Street, Newcastle, NSW; Black & White 4d. Milk Bar – interior, Martin Place, Sydney, NSW; Alexakis and Leonard Janiszewski, Curators of the nationally Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives

Australia history there was a divide with the focus being mainly on British Australian history. There was a component which they refer to it as the “other”, from those of non-British background as well as indigenous Australians. We wanted to integrate that “other” aspect – in this case the Greek aspect – into the mainstream. What we tried to do is find out not only the differences, but also what the contributions have been. We were looking at Greeks from their earlier presence from the 1810’s right through today, not only within Australia, but also internationally. We have travelled globally to try and find the knock on effects of Greek Australians within this country; some have re-migrated back to Greece or other areas of the Greek diaspora from which they came.

What was the main focus of your work in its earlier stages?

L.J. What we tried to do first is break down the stereotype of Greek Australians. And that’s when we developed the exhibition “In their own image”, because that image had been imposed upon Greek Australians. Images such as women in national dress, women in black, Greek as simply fish-and-chips shop or café proprietors

when they were far from that. That is just one aspect of their presence in Australia for 200 odd years. Now we are focusing on the café, asking why is the café so important. It’s important because it was part of the Americanization of Australia since these ideas had come from the USA, through Greeks that had either been there or had relative there. It’s part of the diaspora process and it affected Australian culture in a very large way.

In what way was that influence expressed?

L.J. It wasn’t only about eating, but also how you eat, who you eat with, the type of technology that was used to produce the food products. It was the type of commercialization, the association with cinema and music. The Greeks brought jukeboxes in Australia. Greeks owned cinemas as well as cafes, and they were marrying those things together: a marriage of fantasy and food. The Greek cafes were powerhouses of change within Australian society, a fact that has not been recognized. Why was the Greek as fish-and-chips shop owner so pronounced? Because that was the image mostly associated with Greeks with Australian society. What they didn’t know is that the Greek café