

Apodemy

On the night that she won the 2013 Lumen Prize, Katerina Athanasopoulou talked to CCQ about her prize winning work. Interview and portrait: Ric Bower

Artist/film maker, Katerina Athanasopoulou settled in the UK after completing an MA at the RCA. She won the 2013 Lumen Prize with Apodemy, a bewitching animation which realises an urban imaginarium populated by skeletal buildings and gravity defying, half-finished road schemes. The work, which was commissioned by the Onassis Cultural Centre in Thessalonica, explores the pressing issues of emigration and economic struggle in contemporary Greece.

Katerina Athanasopoulou: Onassis Cultural Centre asked me to pitch an idea on the theme of emigration and the economic crisis. I kept returning to the idea of migratory birds. Plato used a birdcage as a metaphor for the soul and, since the work was going to be sited in The Plato Academy Park where Plato supposedly actually taught, it felt appropriate to utilise it as a metaphor. Migratory birds still feel the urge to travel even when they are confined within a cage; they shuffle and turn, trying to prepare for a journey that will never happen. I turned the idea of the cage inside out; my birds are indeed captive, but they are captive from their own volition; they circle the cage from the outside. My cage is a trolley bus, the same kind of vehicle that I used to travel in when I was young, before Athens was in the trouble that it is now. Greece has become a place where lots and lots of buildings are left half-finished and abandoned... visually, they give the appearance of being giant concrete cages. I left Greece 13 years ago, when there were happier times. Emigration is something that is no longer happening in positive circumstances; more and more young people are leaving because there is just no work. Emigration was once a romantic idea, but is now an unfortunate by-product of harsh economic realities. The word

'apodemy' is taken from the Greek word for emigration, but it can also mean dying. In the 19th century, there was a whole genre of apodemic writing.

Ric Bower: You've chosen to allow the very three dimensional motif of the cage to be ultimately manifest on a two dimensional screen. Why did you think that a film might be the best way of representing your ideas, rather than through, perhaps, a process of installation?

KA: I modelled the city first, creating this dystopia of buildings and broken bridges, and it was

only after that that I created the trolley bus and put the birds around it. Once I had made the city, I could then travel inside it, filming as if it was a real set. From day one, this was very much about the journey the bus would take, so creating this world in 3D was the only way that I could take

someone with me on that journey.

RB: I think we are still uncertain how best to consume digitally-originated art. Do you have preferences as to how your work should be experienced? And, as it's a short film, your work is particularly portable and can be viewed in circumstances which you have no control over. How do you feel about that?

KA: I'm delighted about it. Apodemy is on Vimeo and it has become a Vimeo staff pick, so it has been seen by over 50,000 people so far. I've had people from all over the world giving me feedback and I have been able to converse with them. I could never have done that without digital technology.

RB: Did that influence the process of making the work?

KA: Not directly, no, but I love this way of working; I love the intensity of the experimentation that digital engenders. It's a never-ending world of

trying and then failing, and then failing even better.

RB: How do you see your practice developing from here?

KA: I have a couple of projects that I'm writing at the moment and I would also really like to continue working within the genre of short film, but I would really also like to work in the realm of animation installation, so I see my work going in both directions: both in the direction of what might traditionally be known as fine art and also, in the direction of filmmaking. This is why animation

really is the perfect art form for me. My work has been shown at a number of short film festivals. Only ten years ago, the majority of festivals would not even accept digital films. In many ways, working digitally allows me to have complete control over the images that I produce, which is far closer to the way that a traditional artist, rather than a filmmaker,

would work. On the other hand, the way that I work is highly experimental, trying different things and seeing what happens. Working digitally means that I can work wherever and whenever, sometimes with very limited means, so I don't need huge budgets to create films. That's really what has kept me going in the end.

RB: It must be very liberating.

KA: It is.

*You can see Apodemy and other films by Katerina Athanasopoulou on Vimeo www.vimeo.com/katerinath
Or visit www.lumenprize.com*

Images on following two spreads: Apodemy, film stills, Katerina Athanasopoulou

“...migratory birds still feel the urge to travel, even when they are confined within a cage; they shuffle and turn, trying to prepare for a journey that will never happen.”





