

The sensuality of Papakonstantinou

The Epikendro Gallery confronts reality and modern feminist thought with the aid of an exhibition focused on the harem

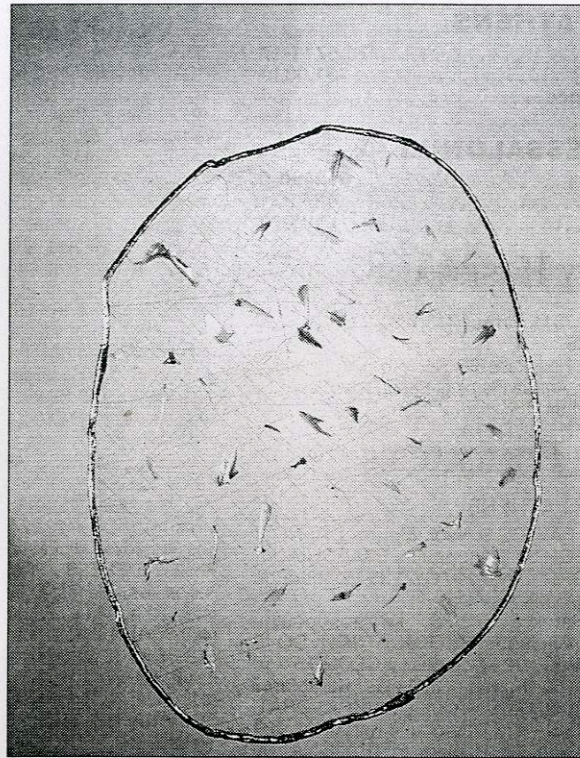
By Alexandra Koroxenidis

At a time guided by political correctness, the art establishment seems more than ever tolerant of art produced by minorities, yet feminist art seems to have lost some of its edge. The assertiveness of feminist art in the Seventies has now been replaced by a less polemical stance which, by no means indicative of resignation, is more of a sign of how former conquests have opened the way for new artistic directions.

The ways in which women artists who were quite concerned with feminist issues in the past now channel their thoughts in a more introspective and "feminine" kind of art becomes evident through the work of Leda Papakonstantinou, one of the first Greek artist-performers and an acclaimed one, whose work has become mainly connected with a feminist slant.

Currently on view at the Epikendro Gallery, her solo exhibition that bears the title "Meli" - meaning bodily members - is an installation that is built around the concept of a harem, invoking an atmosphere of subtle eroticism and female sensuality.

Soft-spoken, but highly



Web-like structures of gold and fishbones reveal the sensuality of Leda's work on the harem.

focused, Papakonstantinou seems to radiate the same kind of warm and nurturing character that her works convey. While her works are sensual and suggestively erotic, they do, nonetheless, confront reality and current feminist themes. The result is a carefully balanced

exhibit, which, although soothing to the senses and easy on the eye, is also forceful, varied, and multi-layered in the messages that it channels. "I am not interested in making an academic analysis of what a harem is and what its social connotations are. I use the idea of

the harem as an allusion, and am more interested in narrating personal stories. I was overtaken with the thought of how women survive in a harem, and I imagined them making certain objects which, although not utilitarian, are part of a creative expression that helps them survive and come to terms with their memories," says Papakonstantinou. Mined from female experience, these are clearly works whose emphasis is more emotive than cerebral.

The idea for the particular exhibit gradually took shape, as one thought instinctively led to another. Initially, Papakonstantinou was working with large pieces of wood that she fashioned in sculpture evocative of bodily forms. A narrative built around a harem was then created, and the rest of the works which make up the installation followed. The artist painted the abstract wooden section in gold, and had them hanging or lying languidly on two velvet mattresses, one colored candy pink color and another of a deep purple hue. The most blatant part of the exhibit, these works are counterbalanced by a number of web-like structures that are almost feathery and frail, and that appear to hang in mid-air.

In another section, Papa-

konstantinou has mounted a number of wooden panels that are covered by pink velvet and diaphanous white lace (both distantly evocative of the Pattern and Decoration Movement from the late Seventies) to frame lighted, close-up pictures of the artist's hands.

An example of how the artist likes to work in layers, making suggestive rather than direct statements, the panels are, like the rest of the works, spiced with an intended element of kitsch as a cultural and social reference.

"There are layers in my work because I want to show that nothing is absolutely obvious and clear. Ambivalence and secrecy is part of our life, it is related to our relationships, and of course to art, which has many levels of perusal and interpretation. There is also a sense of self-mockery incorporated in my work, but like everything else, it is indirect and allusive," she says.

Rather than make crude or accusatory statements, Papakonstantinou treats the issue of eroticism with carefulness and respect; instead of defending the social status of women and condemning a male-dominated society, she claims the strong independent position of women

through gentler pathways.

"I support the dignity of eroticism. I do not see why other people should turn these things into something crude and pornographic," she insists.

Systematically involved in women's issues, Papakonstantinou was one of the first Greek artists to treat such issues in the post-junta period when she returned from graduate studies in England. Having settled in Spetses at the time, she collaborated with local housewives to produce art with a feminist content, and continued the practice of performance art that she had begun in the U.K. Given the fact that at the time Greece was still recovering from the restrictions imposed by the junta and the traumas of the civil war, such work seemed daring and, at times, somewhat misplaced.

"Feminism never really caught on in Greece; the problems existed, but the priorities rested elsewhere," says Papakonstantinou. Two decades later, her concerns are just as strong, but also more easily recognizable for what they really are.

Works of Leda Papakonstantinou. Opens tonight at the Epikendro Gallery, 10 Armodiou, Central Market, tel 331.2187. To February 20.