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TO LIFE!

Featured / What Makes It Great? / March 19, 2019

By Suzanne Révy

Here in New England, we remain in the grey raw grip of winter, but there is an antidote to be found at the Leica Gallery in Boston. Entering the gallery, the viewer is greeted with a palette of whites and warm colors made under the temperate sun above the Greek islands in Stella Johnson's joyful ode to familial connection and reconnection in "Zoi" currently on view through April 21st, 2019.

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"The Laundry" Crete, Greece, 2008 by Stella Johnson from the series Zoi (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery)

There is a broad history of documentary photography made with small cameras that concerns itself with the human condition. Johnson has long worked in this rich tradition, and has mastered what Cartier-Bresson described as the "decisive moment." John Szarkowski wrote, "Immobilizing these thin slices of time has been a source of continuing fascination for the photographer. And while

pursuing this experiment he discovered something else: he discovered that there was a pleasure and a beauty in this fragmenting of time." Szarkowski goes on to suggest that the moment need not be a dramatic climax, but a visual one. Johnson's pictures are at once layered and fragmented. Gesture and shadows, line, form and light envelope each moment to suggest the rhythms and relationships of a tight knit community. Her striking use of frame and scale create visual tensions between pathos and humor within many images, bringing a soulful sense to the places she photographs.



"The Engagement Party" Anogia, Crete by Stella Johnson from the series Zoi. (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery)

"Zoi," pronounced zoh-ee, is Greek for life, and in her statement, Johnson describes a visit to her grandparents birthplace on the island of Lesbos when she was still a teenager. This place resonated for her. For decades, she traveled to places like Mexico, Nicaragua and Cameroon where she interacted with and photographed people living in remote villages with few resources. Beginning in 2007, she connected the pattern of working in such places with the attachment she formed at seventeen to her ancestors' rural, pre-industrial village in Greece. And after decades of photographing around the world, she was ready to explore her own familial roots. For the past ten years or so, she returned each summer to photograph communities in Crete and on the island of Lesbos where multiple generations work and play together. As young children grew up and the gardens and landscapes shifted from year to year, Johnson came to understand her own identity as the descendant of immigrants through her pictures.

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"After the Earthquake" Mytilene, Lesvos, Greece, 2018 by Stella Johnson from the series Zoi. (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery).

"Zoi" is not only an antidote for the winter blues, it is a refreshing counterpoint to the current rhetoric surrounding immigrant communities in the United States. A young girl blowing a bubble, teenagers ready to go swimming or the sun drenched land and surrounding sea all serve to humanize a place and the people who live there. Images of those working in the fields, cooking meals and celebrating reveal the sensual nature of living close to the land, and as a viewer, I am tempted and hungry to be entwined in this world. Without being overly sentimental, Johnson deftly shares her sense of joy when she is among her extended family. By embracing her heritage and exposing us to these communities who welcome strangers despite suffering under the strain of frequent economic hardships, Johnson challenges us to reject the insidious undertones that have been directed at immigrants and refugees here. She brings a hopeful message from Crete and the small island of Lesvos.

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"Konstantinos Vovos" Ancient Antissa, Lesvos, Greece, 2017 (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery)



"Before the Daily Swim" Mytilene, Lesvos, Greece, 2018 by Stella Johnson from the series Zoi. (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery)



Featured Image: "Recreation: Roula" Mytilene, Lesvos, Greece, 2018 by Stella Johnson from the series Zoi. (Courtesy of the artist and Leica Gallery)

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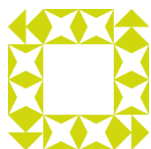


SUZANNE REVY

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TONY ATTARDO on March 19, 2019

Thanks again for another well written and enjoyable post.

REPLY



PETER SCHRAGER on March 19, 2019

Enjoying the blog immensely!!
Keep up the good work

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