

Exploring Cyprus's unseen underbelly through art

 www.huckmag.com/article/exploring-cyprus-unseen-underbelly-through-art

Isaac Muk 15/08/2024

The Cyprus Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale interrogates the country's position as an antenna island, looking at the realities for residents past and present.

In 2019, US-based media organisation *Forbes* published [an investigation](#) that at first sight, was filled with salacious potential. Headlined 'A Multimillionaire Surveillance Dealer Steps Out Of The Shadows... And His \$9 Million WhatsApp Hacking Van', it follows an Israeli intelligence operative working out of a Bond-esque van who deals in the global spyware trade, and whose technology can decode and read supposedly encrypted messages.

But it was the article's very first line that struck a group of Cypriot artists. "On a wildflower-lined gravel track off a quiet thoroughfare in Larnaca, Cyprus, Tal Dillian is ensconced in a blacked-out truck," it reads. The tranquil wording spoke to outside perceptions of the eastern Mediterranean island, yet also the fact that once the film is peeled back, there is plenty lurking beneath its sun-soaked surface.

"It's interesting to see [with] Cyprus being historically used as a quiet thoroughfare, from which all of these shady operations and business done behind smokescreens," says Marina Ashioti, an artist from the [Endrosia Collective](#), who along with the [Lower Levant Company](#) and artist filmmaker [Haig Aivazian](#), created and curated the Cyprus Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale.

That first line would inform [the exhibition's](#) name, *On a wildflower-lined gravel track off a quiet thoroughfare...* "[Cyprus] has existed as a tax haven. There was a big scandal a few years ago, called the [Golden Passport Scandal](#), where you would need to invest a certain amount and that would grant you citizenship," she continues. "And there's a lot of covertness there in general, geographically and geopolitically – it's still used as an antenna island."

Interrogating those covert forces – exploring the unseen – formed the basis for the exhibition's key theme: ghosting. A relatively new term used mostly in dating contexts, where one person completely shuts off communication and completely disappears, the group explore the ever-changing understanding of ghosts and spirits within the information era.

The pavilion's opening room takes viewers into the reception headquarters of a parafictional agency called Forever Informed, before taking them past immersive works including morse code messages, high-frequency, throbbing sound emissions and an installation named SOUND, which is inspired by a secret military base codenamed '[Sounder](#)' in Cyprus, used by the British to spy on the Middle East. "The exhibition has this agency, then you go through the thoroughfare and become in tune with different sounds," explains Andreas Andronikou, also of the Endrosia Collective. "And then when you enter the SOUND you have this confrontation. What we want people to experience is the feeling that things are not what they seem."

Many of the pieces blend earthy materials, such as terracotta and concrete, with sound and light technologies, zeroing in on the dichotomy between nature and the plugged-in nature of our modern day lives. "We were interested in the idea of ghosting as new technologies [emerge], and that was our starting point," says Emiddio Vasquez of the Lower Levant Company. "This came from observations – things like ghost kitchens, people ghosting each other – this new language, and we were also interested in looking at something situated in Cyprus's reality."

Situated southeast of Europe and west of Lebanon and Syria, and north of Egypt, the island has faced cycles of disputes and colonisation over the past centuries. For many years Cyprus was part of the Ottoman Empire, before coming under British rule in 1878. After a fight for liberation began in the 1950s, Cyprus officially became a republic in 1960, but violence between its Greek and [Turkish](#) populations – backed by coups and invasions from Greece and [Turkey](#) – has seen the island split to this day.

"Being an independent state and government came at a heavy price, so it's about trying to demystify and refocus these assumed things that are embedded in the Constitution of the country itself," says Vasquez. "Of course there's the invasion history, and since 1974 Cyprus has been divided and that is an embedded trauma that people have learnt how to live with, but we're slowly starting to confront it in a different way."

"Cyprus is a country that is haunted by its history in many ways, and with the idea of ghosts, the idea of being haunted by your history is something we wanted to look at" he continues. "The deeper we looked at certain subjects, the more it reveals – everything gets sedimented."

[On a wildflower-lined gravel track off a quiet thoroughfare... is on view at the Cyprus Pavilion, Venice Biennale until November 24, 2024](#)