



'Blood of Adonis (death and rebirth)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2018

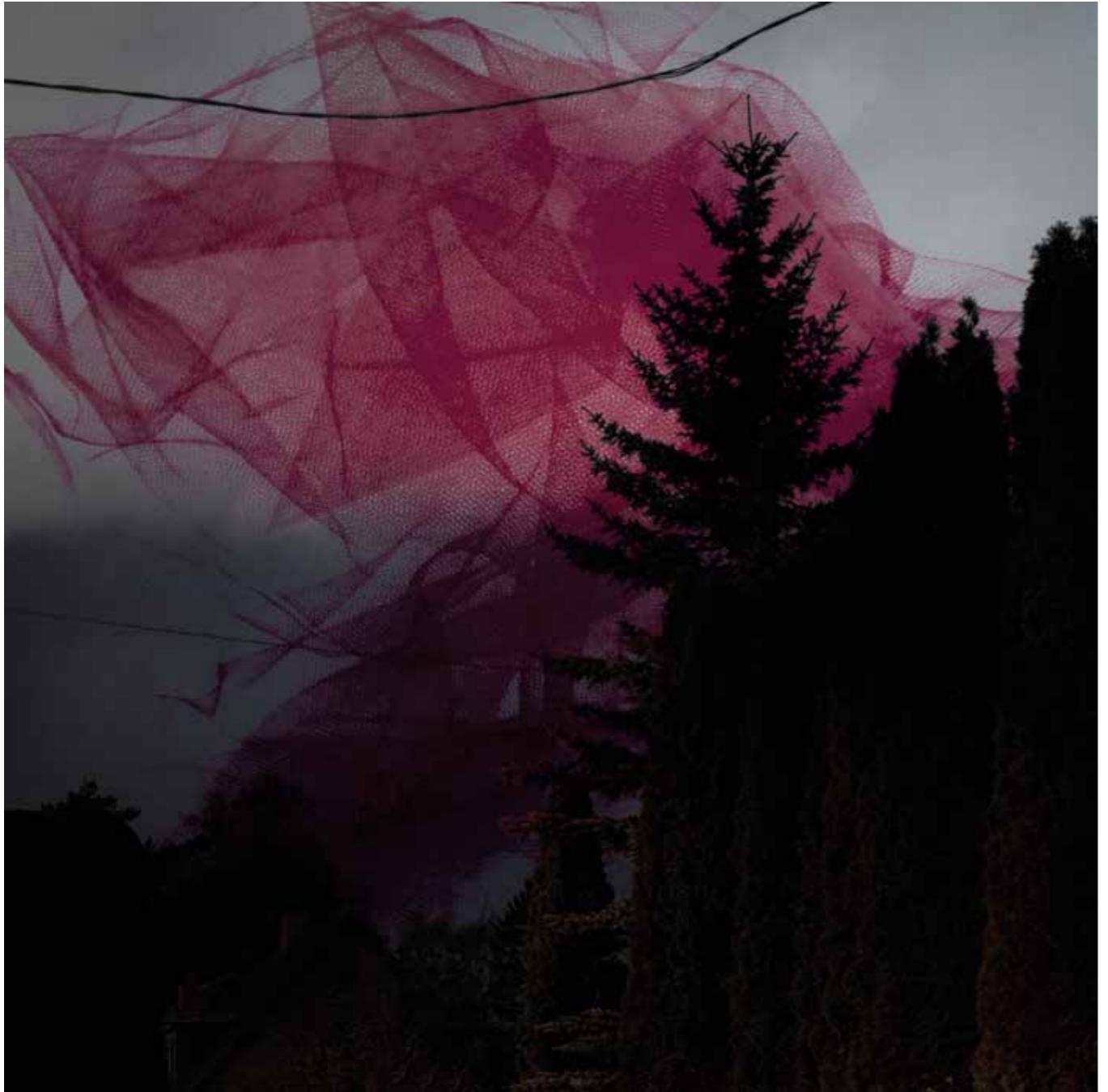


'Moirologia (fate songs)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2018

THE SHAPE OF LOSS

The death of a loved one sparked a journey home – and an exploration of traditional Greek mourning – for RPS Postgraduate Bursary winner Ioanna Sakellaraki

WORDS: GEMMA PADLEY



'Penthos (deep sorrow)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2018

AFTER HER FATHER died three years ago, Ioanna Sakellaraki returned to her Greek homeland after a decade away. So began the difficult process of reconnecting with her family and country.

'Mourning is well framed within Greek culture,' says Sakellaraki. 'There are specific things you have to do as an individual and as a community. There is the idea of respect and honour, and pride, which were things I was aware of but hadn't been part of.'

During this time, she says, she began a

project about her perception of Greece through the idea of loss. 'I'd wanted to make a body of work about my country for a long time. While I'd been away my photography was focused on space, memory and territory, which could take me within very different landscapes. Really, I was constructing a more fictional aspect of landscape.'

While creating this project, Aidos – which looked at the mourning of her mother within the cultural context and religious idea of grief – Sakellaraki applied for and won the 2018 RPS Postgraduate Bursary, leading her to make *The truth is in the soil*.

I wanted to move forward from the



'Kerostasia (weighing of death)', analogue medium format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2018

personal story of loss [and] start to speak about death within the community,' says the photographer, who is studying for a master's at the Royal College of Art in London. She began to document the last community of professional mourners in Mani, the central peninsula in southern Greece. The mourners, usually women, chant and lament in keeping with what is an ancient tradition. Sakellaraki was aware of the practice but only when it happened at her father's funeral did it really hit home.

'It was uncomfortable for me in the sense there was this whole discourse about how grief is something that some cultures exteriorise or communicate in

certain ways,' she says. 'It's something that links back to ancient grieving traditions and Greek tragedies – the words in the poems, the rhythm. The language is an important feature. It's an actual performance that expresses pain in a very obvious way. In many different cultures death is celebrated as the life a person has lived, but within this context death is really about the idea of expressing loss with body and mind as much as possible.'

In Greek culture, she adds, mourning is something that is not forgotten. It's a state of being or process 'that is reworked and projected back through culture', sometimes months or years •

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'Polyhymnia (sacred hymn)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2018

• later. 'You come back and you revisit, so this idea of the memory being constructed in a certain way, that death is something you're reminded of and you honour it and behave in a certain way towards it, [interested me].'

Photography is in many ways the perfect medium through which to explore the notion of memory, loss, absence and death, given its ability to play with our perceptions of time.

Sakellaraki is particularly interested in how the photographic image 'affirms things in their disappearance'. She talks about a 'certain sort of absence in the image' – how a presence is lost in the split second a photograph is captured.

'That's what a photograph reminds itself of – something that's already lost,' says Sakellaraki. 'Through this work I was trying to make a constant connection between these ideas of time, space and memory, and how they are interlinked with this idea of mourning.'

The images are in one sense 'a contemplation between landscape and time', and Sakellaraki was interested in 'mourning as an extension of the body, space and mind'. Ultimately, her aim was to make 'a body of work that can create an interesting discourse that is more universal around the idea of death'.

The project also allowed Sakellaraki to work with her photographs as



'Stygere (hateful)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2019

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malleable material. She uses medium-format film and has done for a long time, she says, but the new element in her practice is how she then works with the images afterwards, digitally.

'The idea of the layers and aesthetic links back to what I'm trying to say when I speak about memory as being reprojected and reworked to a point it becomes a fiction – something you try to remember and in a way construct,' she explains. 'My relationship to and my thoughts around photography are very important in this body of work – this ongoing discussion around the image itself [is key].'

Sakellaraki began *The truth is in the*

soil in summer 2018, returning around Christmas that year, and again the following February and summer. Between trips she would return to the UK with material, and work with her images before heading off again.

Three images from the project feature in the Society's IPE 162 exhibition, which is on show at RPS House from February 15 to March 22, before touring.

Research was a major part of Sakellaraki's process – finding out about the region, exploring ideas of loss and death within literature and photography, and working out how she could bring her ideas to fruition. She wanted to find ways to speak about •



'Nyx (the night)', analogue medium-format film negative, scanned and post-edited digitally, *The truth is in the soil*, 2019

APPLY FOR THE RPS POSTGRADUATE BURSARY 2020

The RPS offers an annual bursary of £3,500 in support of a postgraduate student. Applications are invited from postgraduate students who are on courses in – or undertaking research into – photography. Applicants can apply at any stage of their studies but must demonstrate a specific outcome for their proposed project.

For this bursary, photography is interpreted in its widest sense to include digital and traditional photographic media, the art and science of photography and image-based written work.

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• the women in different ways – by showing their backs and creating silhouettes, for example. She also found herself working with the textures of the landscape, and fabric became an important element, in part inspired by the heavy textiles with which the women drape themselves.

At its core the project involved bringing together landscape and the figure. She used some of the portraits she had made to construct new images. Sakellaraki embraced the abstract side of photography, in keeping with her intangible subject matter. She was interested in how the women themselves become space – in terms of the photographic image, but also how they embody the space of mourning and the space that is the landscape.

'How do you speak about a ritual without showing it? How do you speak about death? It's already such an abstract idea,' she says. 'Photography

has for so long been used as a form of proof to reality, [but] how can it be used as an artform to question reality?'

'The pairing of reality and imagination is what I'm speaking about,' she adds. 'My work is always inspired by reality, but there is that point in the work where the reality has been exhausted.'

'I see death as a cultural enigma that can bring forth many questions in terms of truth about life, origin and what we are destined as creatures to do. It's an idea of transformation also [and is linked to] ideas of unity and belonging.'

The project is ongoing – Sakellaraki hopes the work will be published in book form this year. 'The RPS Postgraduate Bursary has helped a lot in terms of developing the work, but I will continue with it,' she says. 'There is so much more to explore.'

Visit ioannasakellaraki.com
and rps.org/IPE162

INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION 162

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