

# TO BHMA

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## Barcelona's Sagrada Familia Nears Completion, Inflames Tourism Backlash

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Margherita Stancati

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BARCELONA—One of the world's most famous construction sites, the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia, is finally nearing completion after 144 years of work. Not everyone here is celebrating.

The Sagrada Familia is the magnum opus of the brilliant Catalan architect and designer Antoni Gaudi, who died 100 years ago and whose sinuous and eccentric buildings are synonymous with Barcelona. But today, the most visited tourist attraction in Spain has become a symbol of Europe's overtourism problem.

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## The World's Surprising Economic Success Story: North Korea

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Dasl Yoon and Timothy W. Martin

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After more than 100 visits to North Korea, Rowan Beard had come to expect long waits for a taxi under the Kim Jong Un regime. But on a recent visit to Pyongyang—his first in years—a vehicle arrived within minutes.

His North Korean interpreter had whipped out a smartphone, opened an app called "Samhung" and hailed a ride with a service akin to Uber. The two tracked the taxi's movements in real-time.

"This was all totally new," said Beard, an Australian tour operator. "My mind was blown."

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A couple, identified as seniors, is trying to use a smartphone to submit their tax returns.

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# Greece's Digital Leap Leaving Seniors in Limbo

By Maria Paravantes

John searched for his bank booklet in the drawer where he had always kept his official documents, carefully arranged so nothing would ever get lost. He got

dressed, picked up his cane, and made his way slowly to the local branch of his bank. When he arrived, the doors were closed. A younger man waiting outside asked if he had an appointment.

An appointment? Moments later, a bank employee opened the door

and repeated the question. No appointment, no entry. Baffled, John walked away realizing that, for the first time in 60 years, he no longer had immediate access to his own bank account. His experience is one shared by many older people in Greece, who have

suddenly found themselves locked out of life.

### From paper to passwords

Greece's push to modernize its public administration began more than a decade ago, but progress accelerated dramatically

during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lockdowns forced the government to rapidly expand the digital infrastructure for banking, healthcare, education, prescriptions, tax returns, pensions, and public services.

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The Dungeon Master marks the next move on a fantasy battlemap, surrounded by miniatures and terrain pieces.

TO BHMA International edition

# How D&D is Building Community in Greece

By Angelos Gassenschmidt

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is the most well-known tabletop role-playing game.

Its basic premise is that a group of people meet together, in-person or remotely, to create a shared story by taking on the roles of fictional characters.

A member of the group

takes on the role of Dungeon Master (DM), or narrator, who guides the story, while the players control their own characters. Dice rolls introduce an element of chance and randomness to their decisions and to their adventures as a whole.

The DM also controls all the characters the players interact with.

To get a deeper sense of the game and its culture, TO BHMA International

*Edition* interviewed Dimitris Ballios, the founder of Exodus Games, one of Greece's first venues built specifically as a shared space for D&D and tabletop role playing game communities.

We discuss the nature of the game, how it can act as a generational bridge and offer Greece a multifaceted hobby to create creative spaces of community.

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One with the future

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Frustrated locals have often staged protests around it, sometimes squirting tourists with water guns.

“The ambition of Gaudí was to write the Bible in stone,” said Gijs van Hensbergen, author of a biography of the Catalan architect. “He never ever could have predicted this.”

On a recent visit, it was hard to decide what was more surreal: the carved statues of snails, chameleons and turtles that decorate the church’s exterior or the circuslike scene around it. A brass band played lively jazz, while a man made giant bubbles with a pair of sticks and clowns sold balloon animals. A tourist from Kazakhstan filmed an Instagram video of herself dancing with the church as a backdrop. She hoped it would help with clicks. “It’s a very popular place,” she said.

The private religious foundation that manages the Sagrada Família has taken some steps to mitigate the chaos. Tickets must be purchased online for specific time slots, the number of simultaneous visitors is capped at 1,500 and a daily morning “quiet hour” was recently introduced to facilitate prayer and contemplation.

But on top of the five million people a year who buy tickets to enter the church, millions more visitors come to mill about outside it—and the foundation says there’s little it can do about it.

#### A stone forest

Visitors from around the world are drawn to the scale and strangeness of the basilica. The ornate exterior, with its tapering towers and multiple facades, has an almost organic quality.

Elaborate sculptures depict the life of Jesus from his birth to his crucifixion. Quirky details are embedded throughout, including a statue of an anarchist holding a hand grenade, a reference to the political violence of Gaudí’s lifetime. Shafts of wheat, different varieties of grapes, and colorful baskets of figs, pomegranates and other fruit sit atop spires and other structures.

Inside, the central nave

# Barcelona’s Sagrada Família Nears Completion—and Inflames a Tourism Backlash

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Pope Leo’s visit this week marked a milestone for an architectural wonder whose wild popularity grates on some locals



Gaudí’s designs have been realized in intricate detail, from the columns of the central nave to the stained-glass windows and the ceiling of the central dome.



Visitors rest on the pews at the Sagrada Família.

is an engineering wonder that resembles a stone forest. Long before computers, Gaudí used complex geometry and physical models to design leaning, treelike columns that branch out to support the vaulted ceiling and towers. The space is filled with rainbow-colored light that streams through the stained-glass windows.

The architects working to complete Gaudí’s vision have used computer modeling to test the stability of his geometric designs—and have found that Gaudí knew exactly what he was doing.

“He achieved these organic shapes, which are very characteristic of his architecture, but using very strict rules,” said Mauricio Cortés, an architect who has been working on completing the church for the past two decades.

Leo’s predecessor, Pope Francis, last year put Gaudí on the path to sainthood, a multistage process that depends on the Catholic Church confirming claims of miracles. It is an important recognition of Gaudí’s architectural talent and the religious devotion that inspired the Sagrada Família.

#### Still unfinished

Gaudí knew he wouldn’t live to see the completion of the Sagrada Família. Work began in 1882 and has taken so long because of the church’s extreme complexity, reliance on private funding and repeated interruptions by history.

Most of Gaudí’s original plaster models and plans were destroyed in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, leaving his successors to

piece together what they could and fill in the gaps.

Money has long been a problem. The original idea was to fund the Sagrada Família through donations by people atoning for their sins. Eventually, ticket sales became more important, especially after the 1992 Olympic Games put Barcelona on the global tourist map.

Work is now funded almost entirely by ticket sales, making it a tourist attraction that tourists are literally paying to build.

Although Leo’s visit will mark the completion of the central structure—it is now the tallest church in the world—finishing all of the details will take many more years. The biggest missing piece is the church’s main entrance, known as the Glory Facade, which Gaudí envisaged at the top of a monumental staircase.

When he originally planned the church, the site was on the outskirts of Barcelona, surrounded by grazing goats. The expanding city has long since swallowed the area. Building the grand staircase today would require the demolition of hundreds of apartments and stores.

One of those apartments belongs to Salvador Barroso and his family. He represents a group of residents potentially affected by the expansion, and estimates the demolition would displace some 3,000 people.

The Sagrada Família’s foundation is pushing for Gaudí’s vision to be realized in full. Barroso argues the project should stick to its current perimeter. “They should stay in their home and I will stay in mine,” he said. The decision is up to Barcelona’s local government.

Barroso walks past the Sagrada Família every day, but he has never set foot inside it. He dismissively compares the building to a mona de Pascua, an Easter cake decorated with colorful sprinkles. “We have a theme park called Sagrada Família, and it is dedicated uniquely and exclusively to tourism,” he said.

Silvia Gil, who grew up in the neighborhood, says it used to be a thriving commercial district with stores selling everything from fresh vegetables to children’s clothes. Now, stores cater almost only to tourists, selling souvenirs, snacks and soft drinks. Many apartments have been converted to short-term tourist rentals.

Gil blames unbridled tourism, not the church itself. The Sagrada Família overwhelms her with emotion whenever she visits, she said. “Every time I go in I say wow! The colors, the light—it’s incredible,” she said. “It’s all worth it.”

**The architects working to complete Gaudí’s vision have used computer modeling to test the stability of his geometric designs—and have found that Gaudí knew exactly what he was doing.**

**The Sagrada Família’s foundation is pushing for Gaudí’s vision to be realized in full. Barroso argues the project should stick to its current perimeter. The decision is up to Barcelona’s local government.**

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North Korea is the world's most unlikely growth story. Its economy is flourishing in ways not seen in years, aided by arms sales and troop deployments to Russia, supplies and financing from China, and the ability to flout international sanctions to import more energy, components and materials. Chinese leader Xi Jinping traveled to North Korea this week for his first foreign trip of the year.

The Kim regime slammed its borders shut during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has since reopened to only a select few outsiders, including Russian and Western travelers and diplomats. Those visitors describe a North Korea unrecognizable from the past, especially its capital, Pyongyang, where Kim and the country's elite live.

Restaurants there serve up brick-oven pizza and chicken wings. Diners can pay through a mobile QR-code system. Chinese electric vehicles whiz through the streets. Pyongyang has new pet stores, an internet-gaming cafe and car dealerships selling BMWs.

Kim has initiated a nationwide construction boom. Last year, North Korea built 10,000 new homes in Pyongyang—more than either Los Angeles or Chicago.

Kim, for his part, has urged North Koreans to focus on building a self-reliant economy. The regime doesn't release official economic data, tightly controls information and orchestrates what visitors can see.

Outside the capital city, North Korea remains poor, with nearly half of its 26 million residents malnourished, according to a U.N. report. Its yearly gross domestic product is less than 1% of the U.S. total. The country is one of the world's worst violators of human rights, where distributing a South Korean drama can be punishable by death.

South Korean think tank reports, with titles like "Sanctions Don't Show in Satellite Imagery," point to evidence that North Korea's claimed economic progress isn't mere propaganda. Vessel activity has surged at North Korea's oil-storage facilities, which are being expanded. Many parking lots are more packed. North Korea now shines roughly three times as bright at night as it did five years ago, according to another report.

Beard, the Australian tour operator, hadn't visited since before the pandemic. On his recent trip, he asked to have dinner at Pyongyang's best restaurant. He and four others were taken to a skybridge connecting two high-rise apartment complexes. The restaurant, more than 100 feet above Pyongyang's streets, had glass floors. Their meal consisted of traditional Korean cold noodles, sushi, pizza and drinks.

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The Hwasong district of Pyongyang.

Arms sales to Russia and goods from China provide boost, despite sanctions; 'the regime is wealthier than ever'



ROMAN BEARD/WSJ

## The World's Most Surprising Economic Success Story Is...North Korea

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

"The bill only came down to \$150," he recalled.

### Foreign friends

North Korea didn't turn around its economy by itself. The Kim regime fortified its energy supply and access to construction materials by sending munitions and more than 15,000 troops to the Russian front lines in the Ukraine war. About one-third of those soldiers were killed or injured. The arms sales have netted Pyongyang billions of dollars, according to estimates by the Institute for National Security Strategy, or INSS, a Seoul-based think tank affiliated with South Korea's spy agency.

Monthly trade with China just hit an eight-year high, with a variety of Chinese consumer brands touting business in North Korea despite such sales violating sanctions. The proliferation of tech gadgets, which have ushered in a North Korean digital economy, relies heavily on Chinese components.

Many of Kim's army of cyber thieves live in China, where they can more freely connect to the internet and operate without fear of arrest by outside authorities. Raids of cryptocoins alone have generated billions of dollars in funds for the regime, according to nations and cybersecurity groups monitoring Pyongyang's activities.

Both Beijing and Moscow, which have veto power at the U.N., have reiterated their calls to relax sanctions on Pyongyang. Kim is expanding his network of potential friends, attending a Chinese military parade for the first time last fall, along with more than two dozen other foreign leaders.

In March, he hosted Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko in Pyongyang, where the two nations signed a friendship treaty. "We need each other," Lukashenko said.

Kim's nuclear program thus far has proven to be a deterrent against military at-

tacks or attempts to forcibly unseat him from power, enabling him to shift his focus to the economy. The economic progress dims hope for a nuclear deal with the U.S., since Washington has often dangled sanctions relief or economic incentives to get Pyongyang to freeze, halt or relinquish its nuclear program.

North Korea's economic standing is the strongest since Kim assumed power nearly 15 years ago, and likely exceeds any point during the tenure of his father, Kim Jong Il, who ruled from 1994 until his 2011 death, said Stephan Haggard, of the University of California, San Diego, a researcher of North Korea's economy for decades. "This is an incredible accomplishment for a country that is this poor," said Haggard, noting that Kim benefited from some luck, too.

George Devedlaka, a British content creator, seized one of the rare opportunities for Westerners to enter North Korea when he signed up to run a 10-K in April 2025 in conjunction with the Pyongyang International Marathon. During his run, he said, he was taken aback by sights such as a North Korean raising a poodle's paw to wave at runners. Many North Koreans, he said, were recording the runners with smartphones. "They were

on their phones a lot," he said.

Domestic production of cellphones hits half a million devices a year, according to Russian tour agency Vostok Intur.

### 'Wealthier than ever'

Just five years ago, North Korea, and seemingly Kim himself, appeared to be on the ropes. Fear of Covid triggered border closures that caused a plunge in trade with China, North Korea's main benefactor. Energy shortages caused coal mines to halt production. Basic food items such as vegetable oil and sugar became scarce on store shelves, Moscow's then ambassador to Pyongyang told Russian state media in 2021.

Kim made a rare admission that the country's economic policies had failed, acknowledging widespread food shortages and shedding tears in public. He lost considerable weight. "Almost all sectors fell a long way short," he said in early 2021.

The economic slump began to reverse after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which North Korea publicly endorsed.

More than a year into the war, North Korea became a munitions supplier to Moscow, generating more than \$10 billion from the summer

of 2023 to the end of last year, according to INSS, the think tank—a big boost to an economy with an estimated GDP of about \$27 billion.

In 2023, Kim made his first overseas trip after Covid, to Russia's Far East to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. The following year, Putin visited Pyongyang, where the two leaders signed a mutual defense pact.

That set the legal framework for North Korea's troop deployment to fight alongside Russia, which brought in more than half a billion dollars, according to INSS. Most payments will come in the form of sensitive military technology, weapons parts or other materials, the think tank estimates.

North Korea's new warships and drones resemble Russian designs, weapons experts say. Moscow has already sent air defenses to Pyongyang, according to South Korean officials.

The deeper relationship with Russia is the biggest gain North Korea could have wanted, especially the "free advertising" afforded to the Kim regime's weapons and fighters active on the Ukraine war battlefields, said Jung H. Pak, who was a senior official handling North Korean issues during the Biden administration. "The regime is wealthier than ever," she said.

Russian military know-how has enabled Kim to shift more resources to bread-and-butter areas. North Korea's pre-Covid economy had increasingly centered on black markets selling goods smuggled from China or under-the-table local goods—and with it the rise of a "donju" merchant class who made their wealth outside state control.

Kim has asserted more centralized control during the rebound years, demanding state-manufactured goods appear on shelves and expanding market surveillance.

Over the past year, North

Korea has completed major construction projects that had stalled for years, including Pyongyang's largest hospital, a greenhouse complex bigger than New York's Central Park and a new beach-resort compound.

The regime is expanding state-run shops and pharmacies to replace black market activity, and new factories in rural areas are producing state jobs for traders who previously engaged in smuggling, said Lee Sang-yong, a researcher who has a network of sources inside the Kim regime.

"Some of the funds that the Kim regime made through selling weapons and hacking are trickling down to the residents," said Lee, who heads a data-research center owned by DailyNK, an online publication.

### Fancy cars

Austrian filmmaker Brigitte Weich hadn't visited North Korea since 2018 before arriving at the Pyongyang International Film Festival last fall. The first thing she noticed was busier streets. Electric vehicles and imported cars were abundant, she said, and more locals appeared to own cars.

Driving is now so widespread that state-run television recently aired a two-part segment about updates to traffic laws. Among the revisions: new bans on jaywalking, walking pets without a leash and smoking while driving.

In April, Kim toured a new neighborhood of residential skyscrapers in the "Hwasong" district, which shares a name with North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. A pair of 40-story residential towers was painted red to resemble missiles. Earlier this year, families of North Korean soldiers killed in Russia were given apartments in the district.

Chinese exchange students have provided glimpses on social media of life in Pyongyang, including photos of department stores featuring cosmetics with Chanel's logo and sunglasses with Ray-Ban's.

In May, North Korea held its first full-scale Spring International Trade Fair since the pandemic. More than 290 companies attended, including ones from Russia, China, Mongolia, Switzerland and Thailand.

Zoe Stephens, a British citizen, has led groups to North Korea as a tour guide. Before the pandemic, she recalled, all payments were in cash. Visiting Pyongyang last year, she saw more locals buying with their smartphones. There are apps to order food, basic staples, even prescription medications.

"They were using delivery services, cash-payment apps you can pay through your phone," she said.



ROMAN BEARD/WSJ

A car dealership in the capital city. Electric vehicles and imported cars are abundant on Pyongyang's streets.

# Greece's Digital Leap Leaving Seniors in Limbo

As Greece's lauded digital transformation accelerates, new questions about inclusion are emerging. *TO BHMA International Edition* speaks with Digital Governance Minister Dimitris Papastergiou and Social Cohesion and Family Affairs Minister Domna Michailidou about making sure no one is left behind



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Systems that would normally take years to implement were rolled out in months, making Greece one of Europe's fastest public-sector digital reformers.

In this rush toward modernization, however, an uncomfortable reality emerged: thousands of older Greeks are simply not prepared for the new digital world.

"From the very beginning, we made a clear political choice: the digital transformation should include all citizens, without exclusions," Digital Governance and Artificial Intelligence Minister Dimitris Papastergiou tells *TO BHMA International Edition*.

Papastergiou points to services such as electronic prescriptions, the MyHealth app, and digital sports tickets as examples of how technology has improved efficiency and everyday convenience. He says usability, regardless of age or digital skills, is a top priority.

For younger, tech-savvy Greeks, the changes have been liberating. No more endless queues. Banking, certificates, and prescriptions can now be handled through smartphones in minutes.

But for many older

Greeks, the shift has been far more difficult. Many seniors, particularly in rural villages and isolated islands, either lack digital skills or do not own smartphones at all. Others fear online fraud, scams, and privacy breaches.

"The inability to access the digital environment can become an obstacle to autonomy, service access, and social participation," Minister for Social Cohesion and Family Affairs Domna Mi-

chailidou tells *TO BHMA International Edition*. "We treat digital exclusion as a modern form of social vulnerability."

### The cost of convenience

Earlier this year, the Social Cohesion and Family Affairs Ministry launched "Oloi Digital" ("Everyone Goes Digital"), a free digital literacy program offering 70 hours of hands-on training for citizens over 65

and people with disabilities.

"Participants learn things that are directly related to their daily lives: how to make digital appointments and electronic transactions, communicate safely, and navigate the internet with greater confidence," Michailidou explains.

However, she goes on to note that digital empowerment cannot be limited to a short theoretical seminar. "For seniors unfamiliar with

technology, practical guidance, repetition, and trust are essential."

The lessons take place at "Digital Empowerment Hubs", which have been set up in KAPI (Greece's state-run day centers for the elderly), Friendship Clubs, and other municipal venues. This too plays an important role in building trust, she adds.

### Lost in transition

In countries like the Unit-

ed States, the move toward digital consumer and public services unfolded gradually over a period of roughly 20 years, or a generation. In Greece, the brunt of this transformation occurred almost three decades later over a period of just five years. In this time, bank tellers began to disappear, in their place automatic teller machines were installed, bank branches were shut down, and most banking services went online.

Exacerbating the situation, the lack of in-person customer service has intensified feelings of exclusion among older citizens.

At 67, Christina, a former pharmaceutical executive with a master's degree, admits she struggles to keep up.

"Even I can't always understand how to use the new technologies, especially for things like banking or pension applications," she says.

She has no social media accounts by choice and only uses Viber. "That's more than enough for me." Christina has no children to assist her, and worries about losing her independence.

"If you want to remain independent today, you either need someone to do these things for you, or you slowly drop out of society,"



she says. “Even booking a theater ticket or calling a taxi now requires digital literacy.”

“Our generation went from physical telephones to FaceTime in one lifetime,” she adds. “It’s simply too much to absorb.”

**Smartphone fears**

Although 95% of the population in Greece uses a smartphone, according to the International Telecommunication Union, data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) shows that older demographics, particularly those aged 65 and above, still rely heavily on traditional mobile phones with physical keypads. Many say touchscreens feel confusing and intimidating. Others fear mistakes that can lead to scams, privacy breaches, and banking fraud.

The issue takes on even greater urgency in the light of the country’s demographics. Greece has one of the oldest populations in Europe, with roughly 23% of its citizens aged 65 or older—around 2.4 million people. This means that ensuring access to essential services is crucial.

**In limbo**

“I still request paper prescriptions,” says 78-year-old Yiota. “I don’t understand this paperless prescription system. I want to see what the doctor prescribes and hand it to the pharmacist.”

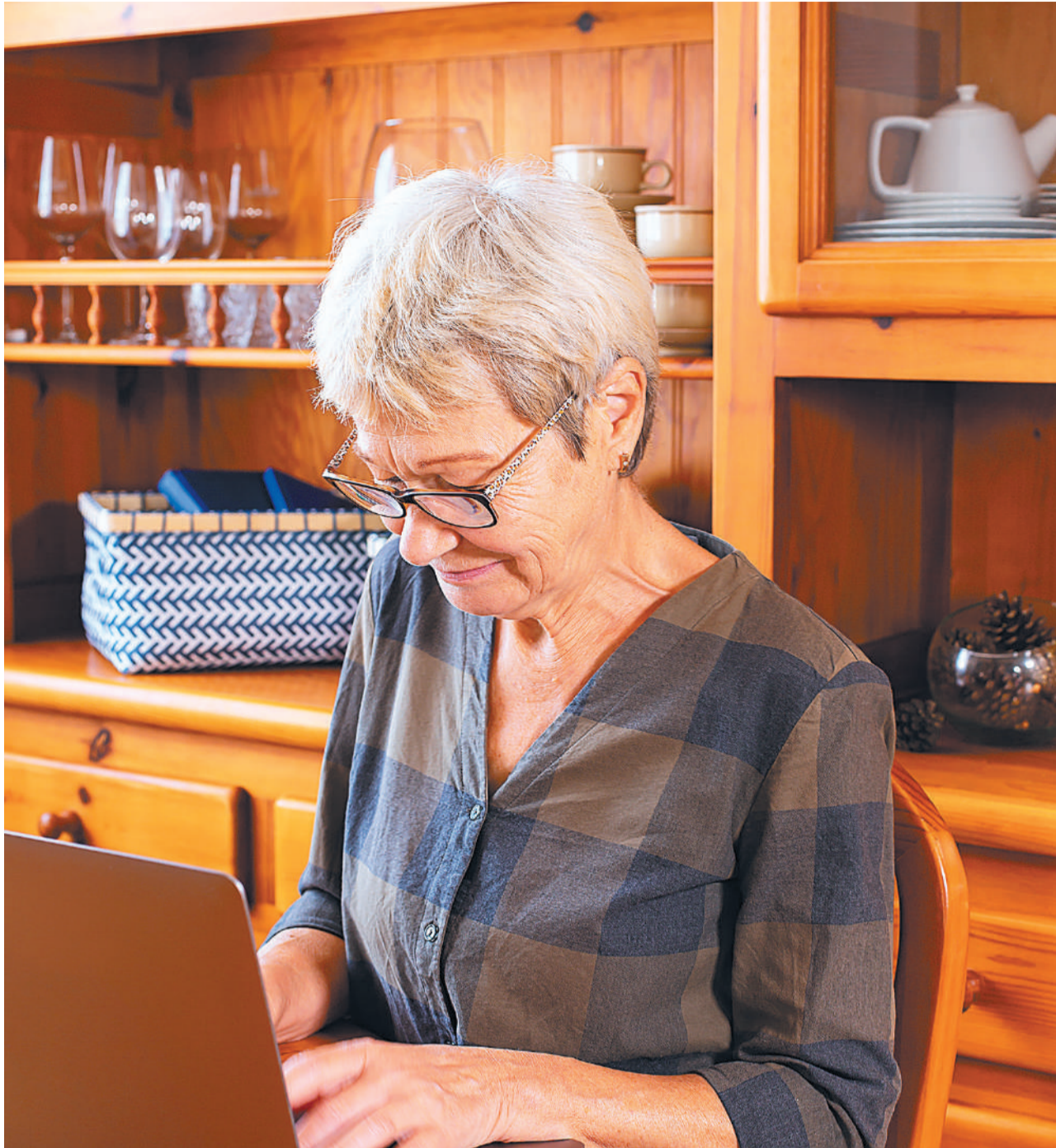
Still, despite her mother’s resistance, her daughter registered her on Greece’s electronic prescription platform, one of the country’s earliest digital healthcare reforms aimed at reducing misuse and streamlining medical records.

“I don’t understand it,” Yiota says. “Everything goes through my daughter now, which means double the trouble.”

Paul, 86, is very frustrated with the digital transition. He feels he is becoming a burden on his son and grandchildren. “In order to get the best deal for my electricity program, I had to understand the plans on offer. To do that, I had to set up an account with the provider. I don’t have the patience or know-how to do this, so I asked my grandson for help. I’ve ended up feeling ashamed and left out,” he says.

“If I didn’t have them, I don’t know what I would have done. Everyone says things are easier now, but to me everything feels more and more incomprehensible.”

Stergiou argues that “digital transformation is not just about technology. It’s an ongoing process aimed at building citizens’



trust, simplifying procedures, and improving everyday life, but it takes time.”

As an example, he points to the digital ticket app in the Gov.gr Wallet. “At first, some were quick to say, ‘There’s no way grandparents will be able to use this,’” he says. “Now, those same people see their grandparents in the stands using it to attend matches safely.”

**By proxy**

Across Greece, many older citizens now rely on so-called proxy users— children, neighbors, municipal employees, or even local cafe owners—to complete online tasks on their behalf. In villages and on small islands, local

coffee shops often function as informal digital help desks.

“We recognize that the digital transition needs human support,” Michailidou says. “When citizens seek help issuing a document, using e-prescriptions, or completing a digital procedure, they are not simply requesting technical assistance. They are seeking access to a

service, a benefit, or a right.”

When many older people have difficulty using a digital service, the first person they turn to is often not a technician, but a person they trust, she adds.

To ensure broad access to digital services, Papastergiou says Citizen Service Centers (KEPs) are being strengthened so they can continue serving as physical

one-stop hubs for the public.

“Physical presence and support remain essential, especially for those who need guidance,” he says. “That is how we ensure the transition happens on terms of equality and safety.”

**Left out or moving forward?**

Not all seniors view the digital transition negatively.

Nikos, 70, a retired bank employee, says digitization has improved everyday life.

“It was difficult at first, as all new things are,” he says. “But now I feel relieved not having to stand in endless lines.” He points to easier access to pension records, tax forms, and social security documentation. “I still have cardboard cards with stamps from my working years.”

Many like Nikos have made a conscious decision to adapt instead of being left out.

To ease the transition, government officials say efforts are underway to simplify sign-in procedures, improve accessibility standards, expand rural support services, and preserve alternative service channels for vulnerable groups.

Still, questions remain.

What happens when citizens cannot navigate the system? What are the consequences of missed digital deadlines, delayed healthcare access, or misunderstood online procedures?

Michailidou acknowledges that digital education alone is not always enough.

“For some people, especially those living alone or facing cognitive difficulties, more personalized support is necessary,” she says. “This is where consistent, face-to-face support from social services and community care structures is needed. The program acts as a support tool, helping more citizens gain autonomy in their digital transactions.”

The next time John visits the bank, he will have hopefully learned how to book an appointment. And he may be lucky enough to have someone on hand to show him which button to press or where to enter the code. But for many older Greeks, the deeper fear is not learning a new technology. It is the humbling realization that the world around them is no longer designed with them in mind.

One thing is certain: Greece’s digital revolution has made everyday life easier for millions of people. But as the country races toward a fully online future, it also faces a difficult question: how do you modernize a society without leaving part of it behind?



**‘The digital transformation should include all citizens, without exclusions.’**

**Dimitris Papastergiou,**  
Digital Governance  
and Artificial  
Intelligence  
Minister

**‘For seniors unfamiliar with technology, practical guidance, repetition, and trust are essential!’**

**Domna Michailidou,**  
Minister for Social  
Cohesion and Family  
Affairs

# D&D is Building A Community in Greece

Dimitris Ballios, founder of Exodus Games, believes that storytelling through roleplaying can build community and spark a more hopeful imagination

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**What drew you into this world? Can you tell us a bit about your background?**

I've always loved fantasy—as a kid I used to set up whole battles with my toys. But I only entered the world of D&D and roleplaying games recently, through a friend. The problem was I had nobody to play with. When I moved to Athens, a friend ran a single session for us and I was hooked. A whole new world unfurled in front of me—but then he didn't have the time to keep running it.

Then the pandemic hit. I desperately wanted to play, yet had no group, and nobody to run it. So I started running the game myself.

We built three or four different groups and played almost every day. Back then we were all at home on our PCs in the afternoons. It only grew from there.

When the opportunity came to set up a proper game space, I took all components I'd accumulated at home—books, miniatures, dice, etc.—and set it all up here. I brought in other Dungeon masters too, and now we've built a space with three rooms, where what I used to do in my living room with my cats interrupting us, we now do with people uninterrupted. A small community is growing and I love it.

**And this space you've built—that's Exodus Games? Can you tell us about it?**

Exodus Games, yes. I opened it in 2023. The original idea was to take what I'd been building slowly in my living room and give other people the chance to do the same.

It's a space created specifically to play D&D. The rooms were designed from the start to be soundproof—so the person shouting at the next table doesn't disturb you, and you can shout at yours. Because things can get intense in a roleplaying game.

We provide everything you need: miniatures, maps, playlists, images, everything. And plenty of space—a big table is essential.

I must say though, that

the miniatures, the music, the ambience, the lighting, the maps—all of that just adds to the game. You can have a wonderful time with a great group of people, just playing with napkins and sunflower seeds instead of miniatures. If you're with people you enjoy, you'll have a good time in any context. What this space does is give people who don't already have that group—like I didn't—the chance to build one.

At Exodus Games, we also place a strong emphasis on inclusivity—welcoming people from any background or identity. The old image of the hobby was a bunch of weird guys in a basement with beards. Today, almost every table at Exodus has at least one woman. And that makes me genuinely happy.

**Beyond the space itself, you've also created your own setting, your own world let's say, based on real history. Can you tell us about that?**

Most D&D settings are medieval fantasy, heavily inspired by J. R. R. Tolkien.

I wanted to tell my stories in a world I knew well and because of my political history background that world happened to be our real one.

From childhood, whenever I read history, I'd visualize it in my mind. And often, those images would take on a life of their own and you'd start imagining the people you were reading about actually speaking.

It's a short road from that to wondering what it would be like if those people had magic, if there were monsters in their world. That's how a whole fantasy world begins to take shape. The world stays our own, Earth, but it's an alternate universe, one might say.

**Your world spans stories in Medieval Macedonia, Ottoman-era Preveza, Medieval Lebanon, and fascinatingly, early modern India, China, and Indonesia. Can you tell us more?**

My family is from Macedonia, so for that particular story I was inspired by stories

from the folklore and real history of the area. I mixed them together, and set it around 1400, after the Ottoman conquest of Macedonia.

It's a fantasy story about ten villages cut off because zombies have appeared in the region—no one can enter or leave.

And it becomes intensely political very quickly. Even though you have ten villages of five hundred people each, the question of who holds power and who's exploiting the situation becomes absolutely central.

I also have another story set just before the Third Crusade, where players can meet Richard the Lionheart and Saladin and all the big names of history at the time.

The heroes don't have to engage with the actual history—it unfolds in the background and shapes what they see in front of them.

**So the players move freely within that historical framework?**

Exactly. I tell them: look, this may not be historically accurate, but nothing stops us from doing it. The people who lived eight hundred years ago aren't going to rise from their graves to tell us off.

You can lean heavily into "what ifs"—what would have happened if the message had reached the front earlier, what if the battle had gone the other way.

**Do you think those 'what ifs' create a deeper interest in history—not necessarily as an academic discipline, but as a creative form of expression?**

Quite possibly. They go a long way toward helping us question the way history is taught to us in school. Living through a story is a much more immediate way to engage with what actually happened.

I often see real excitement in players when we finish a story and I tell them: the choices you made—that's actually what happened in real history. You made the same decisions as the real people who were in your position. And I watch them light up.

For me, what's fundamental to how history should



A metal dice set rests in its Dragon Shield tray behind the Dungeon Master screen, ready to decide the fate of the party.



A player repositions their character's miniature among the trees of a lush forest battlemap, bringing the encounter to life.



Banker's lamps cast a warm glow over the table of one of Exodus Games' dedicated game rooms, set and ready for adventure.

be taught is learning from the past, from its mistakes and its achievements—so we don't repeat them today.

**Can we look at the DM's role? What does it actually take to run a game well?**

The most useful advice I've ever received, and always pass on, is: don't go overboard. You can spend hours building a thousand details nobody will ever ask about. What's the river called, why it got that name, how it flows, what happened there a thousand years ago.

The truth is, a DM spends maybe thirty percent of their time preparing. The other seventy is improvisation—responding to what the players do that you didn't plan for, what they ask, where they go.

And those unexpected questions are actually what build the world. Just the other day, a player asked: the gold coins our characters are carrying—whose face is on them? Which is a question that unlocks so much. Which kingdom is this? Where are the coins minted? What's gold worth here?

You as a DM might say "I don't have the answer right now, but I'll have it next week". So gradually, the world builds itself. The more players engage with the world through their characters, the richer it becomes. In turn, they feel it too—that the world is more real, more alive and intriguing.

**How would you describe the players' role?**

Players are essentially improvising. The DM's privilege is

knowing where the story goes next, knowing what the adversaries are doing behind the scenes. Players don't know that. They can only guess.

I think what draws so many people to the game is that it can be creative without requiring any prior knowledge, any preparation, or any particular skill.

You, for example. You're tall, but in-game you could play a pixie: a tiny fairy who speaks in a high pitch and casts spells. You can do that, and you'll convince all of us, because we're all roleplaying. You're expressing yourself creatively within that fictional realm.

**Is that creative freedom central to being a player?**

The character you play is created by you. They came from your mind.

So as time passes, and you play and inhabit said character, they become a part

of you. Every Thursday, you slip into this particular dwarf, are devoted to this particular god, who has become so deeply ingrained in the story that they may have children by now.

So if the DM tells you that one of your character's closest friends dies right in front of you—you'll very likely cry, because it feels real. It genuinely moves you.

**With so much room for creativity and personalization, how do you create an environment where you can bring people from different generations to the same table?**

Age and life experience don't really matter because what the other players are actually encountering for most of the game is your character, not you as a person.

Your character might be a thirty-year-old playing a

sixty-year-old, and vice-versa. You embody that character and behave as they would.

I find that older players tap into their youth, while younger players step into more mature roles. Both sides have something to learn from each other, and the game is a way for them to come closer.

Later in life, younger people will need to work alongside people with different perspectives. Through D&D, you can cultivate empathy.

This empathy can also drive human connection for those who might struggle with opening up. Often people come who don't feel socially comfortable, but they come because they sense the game can give them the chance to open up.

You see it happen slowly over sessions: someone who in the first weeks was not making eye contact, not

speaking—a few months later they've become the center of the fun.

That's when you truly understand what it is that the game gave them.

A safe space where they won't feel judged. Because that's exactly what the game itself is—a safe space.

**Do you think D&D could ever go mainstream in Greek society?**

I'd love it to. But it's not just D&D, the game where we gather and tell stories, but also the many related activities that bring life to the community: 3D printing, miniature painting, map-making, and character drawings, even scented candles that might suit a particular setting.

There are many layers to building the game, and in Greece we have a very strong community with very talented creators.

If you go on YouTube

you'll find beautiful D&D stories. "All Against Darkness" is a wonderful series. Most recently, I Syntrofia (the fellowship) has had enormous success. So, I think we have some genuinely excellent creators.

I'd love this to be the next wave of artists—the way we once had actors or singers or lyricists or poets who defined a generation in Greece. It would be nice if one day we could say that we were there when things changed. When roleplaying games started to be recognized as a genuine artistic expression.

**Now for something a little abstract. Do you think D&D as a hobby offers something that's missing from the collective consciousness of Greece?**

I think it can offer the ability to envision a different, better, more hopeful world. Which is what we do as characters when we play. We actively fight to achieve something better within the world of the game.

But in our real lives, many people have stopped envisioning a better world.

What the game can offer is this: No matter how many challenges a character faces, there's always the possibility to achieve something better.

That hope builds slowly and gets stronger with time, similar to how a small stone, rolling downhill, becomes an avalanche. If that stone can be the die you roll at the table, and the feeling it gives you when your character achieves something—I hope that's the stone that starts the avalanche.



The DM marks the target as a player opens their hand to reveal the roll — the outcome hanging in the air between them.

# Marina Karella: From Tsarouchis and Callas to the 'Metaphysics' Of Painting

By Panos Kougias

At home where the walls were never left bare. A mother who brought the young Panayiotis Tetsis into the family fold. Yannis Tsarouchis and Maria Callas with the theater of Ancient Epidaurus as a backdrop, and later the indelible stamp of Alexander Iolas. These are but a few of the elements that compose one of the most captivating and exceptionally rare portraits in contemporary Greek painting.

We are, of course, talking about Marina Karella, whose artistic journey was sculpted alongside great masters, backstage, in ateliers and pivotal cities—from Athens and Paris to New York—which served as immersive, lived experiences rather than mere geographical destinations. Beginning with the otherworldly silence of her “white paintings” and her enigmatic draped sculptures, Marina Karella evolved into one of the most significant representatives of magical realism. Today, amidst ceramics that test the limits of the kiln and flowers that outgrow reality in their scale, her painting remains faithful to a profound constant: the mystery of existence, where nothing stays the same, yet everything is transmuted into poetry.

Prompted by her exhibition “Le Passage”, she revisits this journey with no desire to recapitulate. Instead, she turns memory into living, malleable matter, composing an entirely new artistic proposition on the cusp between the visible and the invisible, the earthly and the transcendent. Perhaps it is here, in this constant shift toward the unknown, that the most consistent thread running through her career lies: a form of painting that attempts not to interpret or confine the world, but rather to keep it open and available, with a way of seeing that is different each time.

**Your relationship with Panayiotis Tetsis began very early on in your life. How did you meet him, and what do you remember from those early years?**

My mother had met him and very much liked what he was doing. He was an extremely young painter back then, still at the very start of his journey. She had asked him to paint a few things for our house, and that is how I met him too. I may have been one of his first

students. I was very young, and he taught me the fundamentals. How to look, how to measure, how to draw. All those things that seem difficult at first, and whose importance a young person doesn't immediately grasp. It was my first serious encounter with painting. We lost touch for a while after that, because I went abroad, too, but it was a lifelong bond. He wasn't just a teacher. He was someone who left an indelible mark on how I looked—and still look—at art.

**Tell us about your first steps.**

I've always painting, for as long as I can remember. I'd painted on all the walls of our house. My father never said a word. I still remember the wall next to our telephone, which I'd covered in my drawings. Back then, telephones were mounted on the wall, and I'd painted the entire space around ours. When I was around fifteen, my older brother showed some of my work to Tsarouchis to see if I had talent. He looked at my drawings and suggested I might pursue set and costume design. At the time, I could never have imagined how deeply that would influence me.

Working alongside Tsarouchis, I came to understand what an artistic life truly means. It was an environment brimming with creativity. There were people from the worlds of theater, dance, and music; young people with ideas, passion, and curiosity. I saw a world I had never known existed. And, I must say, that world captivated me—utterly. It was the first time I felt I belonged somewhere. That this was the space I wanted to inhabit.

I worked in the theater quite a bit. I designed sets and costumes and had so many unforgettable experiences. I still remember the first time I got paid for my work. I was just nineteen years old. I had taken on the costumes for a play, and my fee was five hundred drachmas. With that money back then, you could buy two pairs of shoes. It wasn't the amount that mattered. It was the feeling of earning money from my work for the very first time.

I was incredibly proud. It was through Tsarouchis that the collaboration with Callas at Epidaurus came about; I was his assistant. I attended every single rehearsal. All of them. For *Medea*, for *Norma*. For a young person, it was a staggering experience. You were constantly listening, watching,

Marina Karella with Peggy Zouboulaki, at her exhibition 'Le Passage'.



PANOLIS PHOTO

learning. Opera had already been a part of my life, from a very young age. My brother loved music deeply, and it was through him that I started listening to opera. Later, seeing Callas up close, it was as if an entire world I

had previously known only through records had sprung to life right before my eyes. I will never forget her first major appearance in Greece. The crowd went wild. It is one of those moments you never forget.

**Another important milestone was your meeting with Alexander Iolas.**

Iolas had a spectacular eye. When he walked into my atelier, it was as if a gust of creativity had swept into the room. He might tell you a piece was terrible and ask you to turn it to face the wall. And then, immediately afterwards, say another piece was “divine, divine, divine.” He knew how to shake you up. The important thing, though, is that in the end, you could see that he was never wrong. It is invaluable for an artist to encounter someone who sees with such striking clarity.

**Your new exhibition is entitled “Le Passage”. The passage: What does this mean to you?**

Life itself is a passage. And if life is a passage, then let us sow flowers along its passing. That's a phrase that encapsulates my entire thought process around this exhibition, and it moves me deeply. Perhaps because flowers have been present in my work for years. Enormous cyclamens, flowers larger than a human being, plants that seem to possess a life of their own. For

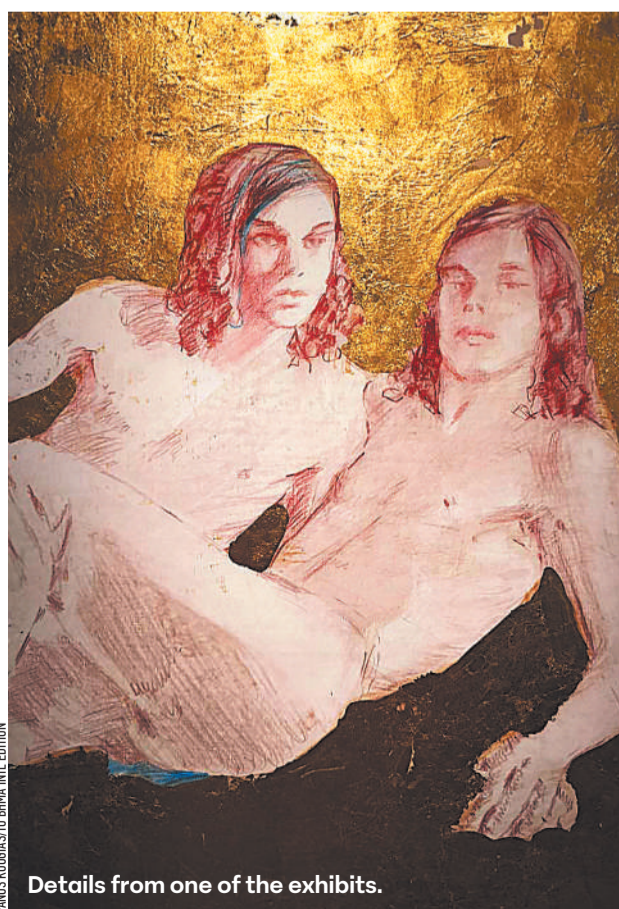
me, flowers are not decorative elements. They are connected to life, to death and continuity; to the idea that everything is in a state of transformation.

**In the exhibition, we see paintings, ceramics, and sculptures. Are you interested in the constant pursuit of new mediums?**

Very much so. When I work with a material for a long time, at a certain point I feel I have reached the absolute limit of where it can take me. Then, I look for something new. I might transition from oil to watercolor, from painting to ceramics. Lately, I have been particularly interested in ceramics, because pottery always harbors an element of surprise. You never know exactly what will happen when it comes out of the kiln. I like to surprise myself. When that happens, I feel I have taken another step forward. I believe that every artist actually has one central idea, which they express in many different ways. Someone once asked me what mine was. I answered immediately that it was to do with the afterlife. This subject preoccupies me greatly. That which exists beyond what we see. What follows. It is something that permeates all my work, even when it is not immediately apparent.

**Looking at your exhibition, I get the sense that you have confronted the viewer with a world that is familiar, yet simultaneously transformed.**

Yes, because I start from reality, but I do not stay there. I am interested in what lies behind what we see. Realism concerns the visible. I am interested in the invisible. I don't know what it is. I am searching for it. Perhaps that is why I paint. If you look at something from one side, it is different than if you look at it from another. There are many truths, many doors. I try to open them, one by one. This moves me deeply. The feeling that you can go further. When I look at a painting, I do not want it to end where the canvas ends. I want there to be a road that continues. To be able to breathe. Perhaps this is because I am a very claustrophobic person. I cannot stand enclosed spaces, and I cannot stand closed-off artworks, either. I want the viewer to feel that they can travel beyond what they see. That there is a continuation.



Details from one of the exhibits.

PANOS KOUGIAS/TO BHMA INTL EDITION