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## **George Petrides: *Hellenic Heads***

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*By S. David*





George Petrides, *Heroines of 1821*, 2022. Mixed media, 33 x 22 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**On View**

## **Embassy of Greece in the US**

May 9 – June 10, 2022

Washington, DC

In the West, the notion of “Greekness” has long been contested in ambiguous and paradoxical racial terms. This is particularly so in societies touched by the vestiges of the British imperial project, whose

cultural arbiters continue to demonstrate (read: the British Museum, with its expropriated Parthenon Marbles) an intense preoccupation with a historicized and Orientalized Greece. Thus perceived, members of the Greek diaspora are coded as paragons of whiteness—that is, until they aren't—when the complexities of cultural, linguistic, and historical difference appear to get in the way.

The Greek American sculptor George Petrides seems well aware of these kinds of world- and identity-flattening perceptions and, in his exhibition *Hellenic Heads*—currently on display at the Embassy of Greece in Washington, DC—he appears to most deftly navigate exonymic presumptions of “dual loyalty.” Petrides’s sculpture thus exists within a wider rubric of art addressing co-descent and transnationality. Uniquely, though, his sculptures also function along the more pointed tangents of cultural exchange. In other words, these *Hellenic Heads* do work at the crossings of artful diplomacy and a seemingly self-guided ancestral tourism.

That said, Petrides—who was born in Athens and has spent half his life in New York City—makes clear on the record that he has always been invested in his roots: his grandmother escaped the burning of Smyrna in 1922, and his parents survived the 1940s Nazi occupation of Greece, along with the civil war that followed. In this vein, Petrides’s work, at its most interesting, references and revisits episodes in Greek history beyond the certainty of “mere” antiquity.

The acutely-titled *Life During Wartime* (2022), for instance, is a sculptural self-portrait invoking the spirit and hard-won daily life of the Greek civilian circa mid-twentieth century. Lay conversations about Greek art inevitably circuit a classical ideal that indexes Greece as a monolithic foundation of Western culture. While Petrides’s sculptures pay clear homage to this formal classical model—as well as to its neoclassical acolytes, like Rodin—the artist uses them as simple starting points for a broader conceptual dialogue between himself and history. (While they are different mediums, the relentless expression and elongated figuration in *Wartime* nonetheless call to mind the painterly technique of the Mannerist El Greco.)

And so, naturally, *Wartime* possesses no archaic smile. Worked through a highly original and sequenced creative process—one that combines both digital 3D printing technologies and traditional handiwork—

Petrides's sculptures bear a kind of stoic neutrality. It is one that allows chronologies to be transposed rather than simply revealed, even amid conceptual drama. In this case, *Wartime* serves as a poignant reminder that structures bleed: what is now modern Greece has been subject to varying hegemonies since the end of antiquity. These imperial conflicts and exchanges saw their ultimate culmination in Greece's War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire, which witnessed the (re)birth of a consolidated national identity.

Thus meeting modernity, Petrides's other sculptures are ironically laconic in every sense. *Heroines of 1821* (2022) scans as a panegyric to a plural and equal Greek society; it is a gesture that is at once hopeful and romantic as it is deliberate. A bust sculpted from a live model (Petrides's fiancée), *Heroines* feels written almost for the part, evoking something closer to *eleutheria*. Like most of the other *Heads*, Petrides's *Heroines* stakes a grounded political neutrality, one that carefully avoids political—but not civic—reference. (While name-checking most of Greece's history, the exhibition seems to steer clear of potentially sensitive territory, like the 1967–74 Regime of the Colonels, along with the restoration of democracy, the *Metapolitefsi*.)

The arts have always played a salient role in the broader currents of soft power, and it is clear that such programmatic choices are made in an effort of maintaining a kind of apoliticism in the face of wider Hellenic interests. But history is always political; it is the written word made flesh. This year marks the centennial of the Greek genocide, one of many such atrocities at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. This moment deserves recognition as commemoration of revolt against empire.

In this way, there is something almost deconstructive, even decolonial, about *Hellenic Heads*. As pointed as these other mentioned historical absences may be, they bring a subtle discontinuity that actually helps further animate the sculpture work. The sculptures themselves, as formal and referential as they are, are cautiously celebratory. And while the Greeks have now—in the words of Noel Ignatiev, “become white”—it should be remembered that the ancient Greeks themselves saw their culture as only one end of the linguistic, rather than racial, spectrum.

## **Contributor**

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