

TAYMOUR GRAHNE GALLERY

Rania Bellou

the story, like all stories, is incomplete

Curated by Vali Mahlouji

10 January – 20 February 2015

Opening: 10 January, 6 – 8 PM



New York, New York – Taymour Grahne Gallery is pleased to present ***the story, like all stories, is incomplete***, a multi-media exhibition of new work by Greek-born, London-based artist Rania Bellou. Curated by Vali Mahlouji, the exhibition centers around a found diary, dating back to 1940 and belonging to New York resident Margaret Becker. Reconstructing Margaret's moments into her own, while visualizing and layering time, Bellou brings the diary to life in her most recent drawings accompanied by a projection, animation and a hand-stitched book of drawings.

The Essay by Vali Mahlouji:

With the devoted meticulousness and determined rigor of a biographer, Rania Bellou investigates and chronicles the details of a life. Whose life? In the present exhibition, it is that of a certain Mrs. Margaret Becker, resident of New York, circa 1940. The central personage and present protagonist of Bellou's expansive work was a regular US citizen and a past resident of a small in the state of New York. Bellou picked up Becker's unremarkable diary dated 1940 during a regular scouting expedition through second hand markets in London. Such found personal objects – literary or pictorial – have formed the bedrock of much of Bellou's continuous imaginative epistolary and biographical adventures to date. Obsessively centering her creative practice on other people's, random people's, memories and recollections Bellou has created extraordinarily delicate and yet powerful bodies of work.

Rania Bellou's voyeuristic tenacity drives her foraging through pages of diaries, prying through personal albums and cross-referencing found historical photographs that may hold clues. Such intimate objects are usually the only

remains of a past life. Therefore, no imperfect or rudimentary detail may suffer obsolescence. Bare hints dropped here and there and whispers where nothing is said or heard are extracted and imagined by Bellou to trace the whole boundary and circumstance of a subject's life. She conducts her research with the necessary unease and sometimes nauseating interventionism that the job demands in pursuit of all materials personal and historical in order to construct a life story. Mrs. Margaret Becker was 32 years of age when she wrote the diary. She was married to Stillman Becker who was four years her senior. She and Stillman shared a house with Margaret's mother and her two unmarried sisters. Stillman died prematurely from illness in 1949 while still in his forties. Margaret's sisters never got married. Both sisters died more or less young. Margaret died at the age of 80 after living her entire life at the same address. She bore no children. By the end of the process Bellou knows all that there is to know about this life story. She is privy to its moments of banality or significance, its secrets and its prides, more than anyone but the intimate circles who shared them with the subject. Without concealing hints of nostalgia and melancholy, which are inevitable qualities of existing near a person who exists no longer, Bellou then sets herself on the task of recreating the world of the protagonist, visualizing the events, characters and moments of this life story. She reconstructs these moments and brings them to life in series of meticulous and remarkably technically refined drawings, usually accompanied by narrations.

The randomness of the subject to the artist's own subjectivities and circumstance safely distances Bellou from content, factual or emotive, and serves to emphasize a biographers' objectivity whose first duty it is to plod in the indelible path of truth. The distancing is fundamental to any understanding of Bellou's practice. As any history is not exactly a past but a story of a past, the tracing and retelling of a life story is inevitably a selective narrative. And Bellou is fully in charge of this selectivity, which she cunningly exploits while superimposing and interweaving her own and others' narratives. The artist allows her imaginative fantasizing to fluidly permeate every scene and float through the reconstructed stories of others' lives. Bellou's very personal and own deep-seated experiences or sublimated existential anxieties are discharged through the interventionist displacements. This in turn underpins the viewer's own not just voyeuristic curiosity but desire for projection. Here lies the key to Bellou's pictorial story-telling work - the degree to which this implacable projective identification is at play either at a given moment or across the various interrelated iterations within the exhibition.

The exhibition ***the story, like all stories, is incomplete*** consists of six elements: a large book of drawings; a related projection; a set of framed drawings; a further set of large format drawings; the original diary appropriated through layers of drawings; and an animation recording Bellou's invasive drawing process over the pages of the diary.

The found diary, the central object, which is presented on a pedestal, is a non-descript brown leather-bound pocket-sized hardback object of no special distinction. The handwriting is now illegible and embedded under the furious successive layers of pencil marks. It once recorded daily activities between 1 January – 29 December 1940. The entries always started with the weather: a beautiful day; a nice day; a cloudy and windy day. They recorded Margaret's time of waking, her daily and repeating mundane chores and the time of Margaret's retirement to bed each night. Others mentioned were members of Margaret's immediate family, which consisted of her husband, her two unmarried sisters and her parents all of whom lived together under the same roof with Margaret. Recovered from amongst the pages were also two loose newspaper clippings from the same year and a postcard addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Stillman Becker and signed mother. The postcard was stamped: Delanson 27 Dec 1940 5:00 pm. There were no entries describing personal thoughts or feelings, no moments of introspection, no epiphanies, desires,

or regrets. Remarkably, the internal life of Margaret Becker as reflected in her diary, was voiceless and her external reality remained dully uneventful and quite unmoved by and oblivious to the state of affairs in wartime 1940.

The animation, which is projected next to the diary begins with the figure of a woman walking across the pages of the diary. She is Bellou's Mrs. Becker who paces forward across the open pages of the diary such that she only steps out of the frame at the end of the first sequence, exactly when the last page of the diary has been turned. The animation then flows into a new sequence showing warplanes flying overhead as the protagonist paces across the pages. And so a third sequence follows in which explosions appear all around the oblivious walking figure of Mrs. Becker. As Bellou's drawing builds up in graphite density, the scenes get darker and the pages get blacker. In the final sequences Mrs. Becker is only visible in traces while the world around her has been swallowed into darkness. What are left are dispersed occasional bursts of light overhead emanating from the force of the explosions. In a frustrating reaction to the drab personality of the protagonist and the banality of her life – potentially of any life – Bellou's pencils work and rework the pages of the diary and activate them into a frenzy that ultimately obliterates each original page and the handwriting, the subject's only means of existence. Bellou's contemptuous violation first animates the found object, but ultimately in a final act of protest obliterates it page by page through successive applications of drawing.

Across the room the artist presents a large hand-stitched book of drawings entitled *Threading Dreams through an Embroidered Past*. The book is composed of one hundred individual drawings on sheets of translucent handmade *gampi* paper. The layered drawings create multiple compositions that inter-permeate. The protagonist is always visible although she does not appear in every drawing. The hardness of the *gampi* paper affords Bellou the use of a broad graphite grading scale and the application of hard pencil markings, which remove fibre as they deposit colour. The translucency allows the artist to sculpt with light. The formal qualities of the realistic drawings are rigorously sophisticated. As the viewer leafs through the visual diary, characters and settings appear and disappear through a lyrically nostalgic fog. Scenes compose and decompose. In a departure from truth, Bellou imaginatively imposes fantasized scripts along with invented events and characters beyond the original story. The artist invents scenes and manufactures events, characters and relations, which could have happened but in actuality had not happened. The new elements are referenced from unrelated photographic sources, which correlate with the era but are factually outside of Margaret Becker's diary. This way the artist as author relieves her protagonist from the repetitively monotonous loops of her insular life. But she also allows her own personal feelings and memories to intrude and inform the fictional narratives, in a defiant act of addressing the protagonist's, or her own, powerlessness in the face of reality. By inventing events Bellou is also commenting on our inherent desire to rewrite our stories.

A video projected on the wall in front shows the pages of *Threading Dreams through an Embroidered Past* slowly being turned by a pale and androgynously sinuous hand. A voiceover narrates the scripts that Bellou has intermittently annotated at the bottom of the pages in her book. The time-based medium may suggest a linear narrative. Bellou, however, carefully avoids narratives progressing in time. The hand paging through the visual diary emphasizes instead the fluid relationship between the frames. Elements surface and float away, scenes slide through one another and compositions incrementally form, shift and decompose. The imaginary photographic tableaux are in constant flux. The action of the hand is slow, rhythmic and ritualistic. The continual flow renders the onlooker an involuntary passive voyeur. There is no choice but to observe the animated compositions revealing and removing the protagonist from Bellou's fantasized realities. The larger than life dimensions of the projection serve to enhance the ritual and to emphasize the monumental effort invested technically in the production of the original

book of drawings.

Complimenting the book of drawings and its projection are series of framed drawings created on layers of Japanese *kozo* paper entitled *Confession of Stolen Kisses*. Each layer depicts a partial scene and collectively they complete a tableau in superimposition. These still frame works provide an alternative glimpse into Bellou's world of otherwise fluid and inconstant pictorial narratives and hierarchies. In each of these still frames, the artist offers a fixed still staged tableau and here she always distinguishes the protagonist in the foreground whether in solitude or within a crowd. Here Bellou imposes authority, which she has relatively relinquished in the book. While the central character floats through the shifting scenes in the book, as well as the projection of the book, Bellou's omnipresent Mrs. Becker always assumes prominence in these fixed tableaux. The large format framed drawings are entitled *Turning a Hundred Ways Around*. These are the done on the largest size of *kozo* paper available and by virtue of their dimensions they allow Bellou to create her drawings with even more detailed texture and nuanced subtlety.

As an artist of floating worlds, dreamers and seekers, Rania Bellou continually operates in a zone of imaginary complicity with random characters from a real past. In her current exhibition ***the story, like all stories, is incomplete*** an unremarkable handwriting of a very average citizen from a bygone era and a distant land has inspired various powerfully empathetic, nostalgic, violent and destructive responses which Rania Bellou has subtly directed into her bodies of artwork. Ultimately, in the guise of a biographical process, any autobiographical undercurrents remain carefully displaced through time, characterization, layering of images, and foggy revelations that obscure as much as they reveal.

© Vali Mahlouji - January 2015

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About the Artist

Rania Bellou lives and works in London. She received her master's in Scenography from the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London. Her recent solo exhibitions include: Action Field Kodra, Thessaloniki; Kalfayan Galleries, Athens (2014); Europe House, London (2012). Recent group shows include: Centre for Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki (2014); National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (2013); III Moscow Biennale for Young Artists (2012); Ex-Teresa Museum of Contemporary Art, Mexico City; National School for the Arts, Mexico City (2011); II Moscow International Biennale for Young Art; LUCCADigitalPHOTOFest, Lucca, Italy; Skironio Museum Polychronopoulos, Greece (2010). Rania Bellou is represented by Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki.

About the Curator

Vali Mahlouji is a London-based curator, writer and translator, currently independent curatorial adviser to the British Museum on its modern/ contemporary Iranian collections. His recent curatorial work included guest curator at Foam, Amsterdam (*Kaveh Golestan – The Citadel*) and co-curator at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome (*Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014*).

Recent publications have appeared in Encyclopædia Iranica; Asia Society Museum; Abraaj Group Art Prize; Darat al Funun; Sharjah Biennial; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Delfina Foundation; the London Middle East

TAYMOUR GRAHNE GALLERY

Institute; City University of New York; *The Guardian*. His book, *Perspectives on the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis*, by Black Dog Publishing is due in 2015.

His research platform **ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FINAL DECADE** engages in curatorial and educational programmes, events and publications with the aim of raising awareness about contested areas within arts and culture that have remained obscure, under-exposed, over-looked or in some cases destroyed. The first phase of this research has produced to exhibitions shown at the Musee d'Art Moderne and MAXXI entitled, *Restaging the Contested Space of the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis (1967-77)* *Recreating Shahr-e No* which centres around Kaveh Golestan's photographs entitled *Prostitutes (1975-77)*.

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About Taymour Grahne Gallery

Reflecting the art world's increasingly global reality, Taymour Grahne Gallery aims to showcase and highlight artists from around the world, including the Middle East, Africa, South East Asia, South America and their diasporas. The gallery's mission is to create a global space for the arts in the heart of New York City.

Located in the heart of Tribeca, the gallery is easily accessible from the A, C, E and 1 trains, and is situated in a landmarked 4,000 square foot space.

Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm.

(Image: *Turning a Hundred Times Around II*, 2014, pencil on kozo paper, 50 3/8h x 94 1/2w x 2 3/4d in / 128h x 240w x 2 3/4d cm. Courtesy Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki.)

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Join the conversation on social media platforms by linking to @TaymourGrahne and using the hashtag #RaniaBellou