

*We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss,
and we call the luminous interval life.*

- Nikos Kazantzakis.
The Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises (1960).

When Sonia Payes first titled her exhibition/installation 'luminous interval' she had no idea that the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao was about to stage an exhibition by the same title (*The Luminous Interval: The D. Daskalopoulos Collection*, April 12-September 11, 2011). When I met up with her to discuss this catalogue essay she asked me if I thought it was inappropriate for her to retain her title given that such a major museum had used it already. Being a critical gambler, I suggested she tweak her title a bit – thus she came up with 'luminous interlude', which is, I think, slightly more poetic.

Anyway, the Guggenheim appropriated its title from the Greek author and poet, Nikos Kazantzakis, to give authenticity to the collection of works from the D. Daskalopoulos Collection. The museum wanted a voice of authority near the source, so to speak, and they used the writer fairly superficially. Most people know him as the author of *Zorba the Greek* but he was an existentialist of some note who famously missed out on the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 by one vote (Albert Camus was the winner). What's interesting about Kazantzakis now is the way in which his work surfaces in our own postsecular times as an artist who spoke passionately about spirituality but from a position informed by materialism (Marx, Engels, Nietzsche and, with little surprise, Bergson, were amongst his mentors) and the Classics (he famously re-wrote the story of Oedipus in his epic poem *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, 1938). On the Guggenheim Museum's web page they say that the writer: "envisioned life as a 'luminous interval' during which decomposition and decay are necessary prerequisites to creation and renewal". This doesn't make a lot of sense in terms of the artworks they have on exhibition.

But what has this got to do with Sonia Payes installation? She thought up her title well before the Guggenheim harnessed Kazantzakis to their cause. I think it's a kind of happenstance, a useful coincidence. Sometimes things happen in tandem, people have the same idea at the same time. The invention of photography was like this – we can't really say who invented photography, people were experimenting with the same idea at the same time, or thereabouts. That one was institutionalised before the other is just politics, and that's always controversial. What this leads us to is that ideas ferment, they are out there waiting to be brought to life.

Sonia Payes's exhibition/installation is like this. It was an idea waiting to happen, waiting to have a home: in Fehily Contemporary in Melbourne, in the Guggenheim Bilbao in Northern Spain. The Guggenheim has simply, and perhaps inappropriately, harnessed Kazantzakis to their exhibition. It is a mainstream modernist/postmodernist exhibition driven by rationality and object aesthetics with some postmodern irony but certainly with little postsecular ethics.

The postsecular turn problematises the objective aesthetics of modernism driven by Kant and bastardised by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, among others. It also challenges the postmodern seduction of surface, its irony and its design aesthetic, it questions the artist's role in society and destabilises the postmodernist's adherence to a semiotic analysis of signs. The postsecular, itself problematic, opens up a dialogue about ethics and it does so in recognition of the Other; it asks how can spirituality matter in a world now in collision, a world where secular Judeo-Christian humanitarianism grapples to restabilise itself in relation to Islam. Can we envisage a common humanity? If so, how? If not why? And, most importantly, if we cannot, what will be the outcomes for the future? [i]

This discourse is waged against the backdrop of a scientific rationalism which can reconstruct the gnome, make human life outside the womb and progress cyborg realities. It is waged against a science at war with itself and at war with politicians who refuse to listen to the evidence on global warming simply because their own constituents won't vote for them if they do. A science and a political arena which is, in most respects, out of ethical control.

*What can an artist do? Can the voice of art, of poetry,
interrupt this tyrannical ignorance, this deafening silence?*

Sonia Payes enters this tremulous terrain shot through with politics, science and belief to present some photographs. On some level these photographs represent landscapes, indeed they were taken in the field, shot on trips to Papua New Guinea, 2009 and New Zealand in 2008. Some of the monochromatic images have been taken from the air; others are up-close and personal, more like an insect's view of the world. But all of them present an eerie and mysterious quality as if they have been manipulated in some way but really all we have is an occasional rotation, which puts the viewer slightly off balance and disrupts the conventions of the horizon line. Given that there is no manipulation (except in the four photographs mounted to acrylic) we might be tempted to think that the mystery is in the landscape itself: that awe inspiring place which has seduced and terrified the Western witness for centuries, the place where the human figure is dwarfed by the impending power of the natural universe. There is a sense of the wonders of the Romantic tradition in these pictures. Casper David Friedrich's tiny figures in melancholy and sublime locations could well be lurking somewhere in these mountain ranges. But Sonia Payes presents her photographs as part of a large installation where several approaches to nature and the position of human life within it have been explored.

She speaks passionately about the synergies between the human body and the land, she explores different spiritual beliefs – she cites Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva as a way of trying to understand the destruction and creation myths, she draws on her own belief systems, the zodiac, the Chinese systems that teach about energy flows, the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But Payes pulls back from a spiritual reading in some respects, she falls back on the mysterious via surrealism, she inserts the uncanny – here she does manipulate the colour photographs. She draws on Magritte and others to reinstate a materialist irony and a psychoanalytic conundrum. There seem to be three phases of this installation: the monochromatic landscapes, mysterious and sublime; the surrealist manipulations of similar landscapes and 'the head' in a microwave oven which to me is a kind of postmodern irreverence inserted into a meditation on time and becoming, time and its psychopathology.

[i] See Rosi Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society* (2008), vol. 25(6): 1-24.