

THE ROOT OF IT ALL

Representing both humble beginnings and the support structure for complex ecosystems, roots are at the very heart of our world. Sustaining, nurturing and expansive, they provide the very basis for life, for connecting with the land and providing a home and refuge. They also represent the symbolic give and take between humans and nature, particularly as we try to navigate our way through an environment increasingly disrupted by our own activity and in need of replenishment and restoration.

In this section of *Canvas*, we look at how artists explore the concept of roots and rootedness. Whether as a source of food, the basis for cementing identity and sense of place, the inspiration for artistic assessment of the past or the means to create new landscapes and communities in the future, the physical and metaphorical value of roots fascinates and compels.





Jumana Manna. *Sketch and Bread*. 2021. Installation view of the eighth Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Byzantine Culture. Photography by Stefanos Tsakiris. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens gallery, London

AFTER THE ANTHROPOCENE

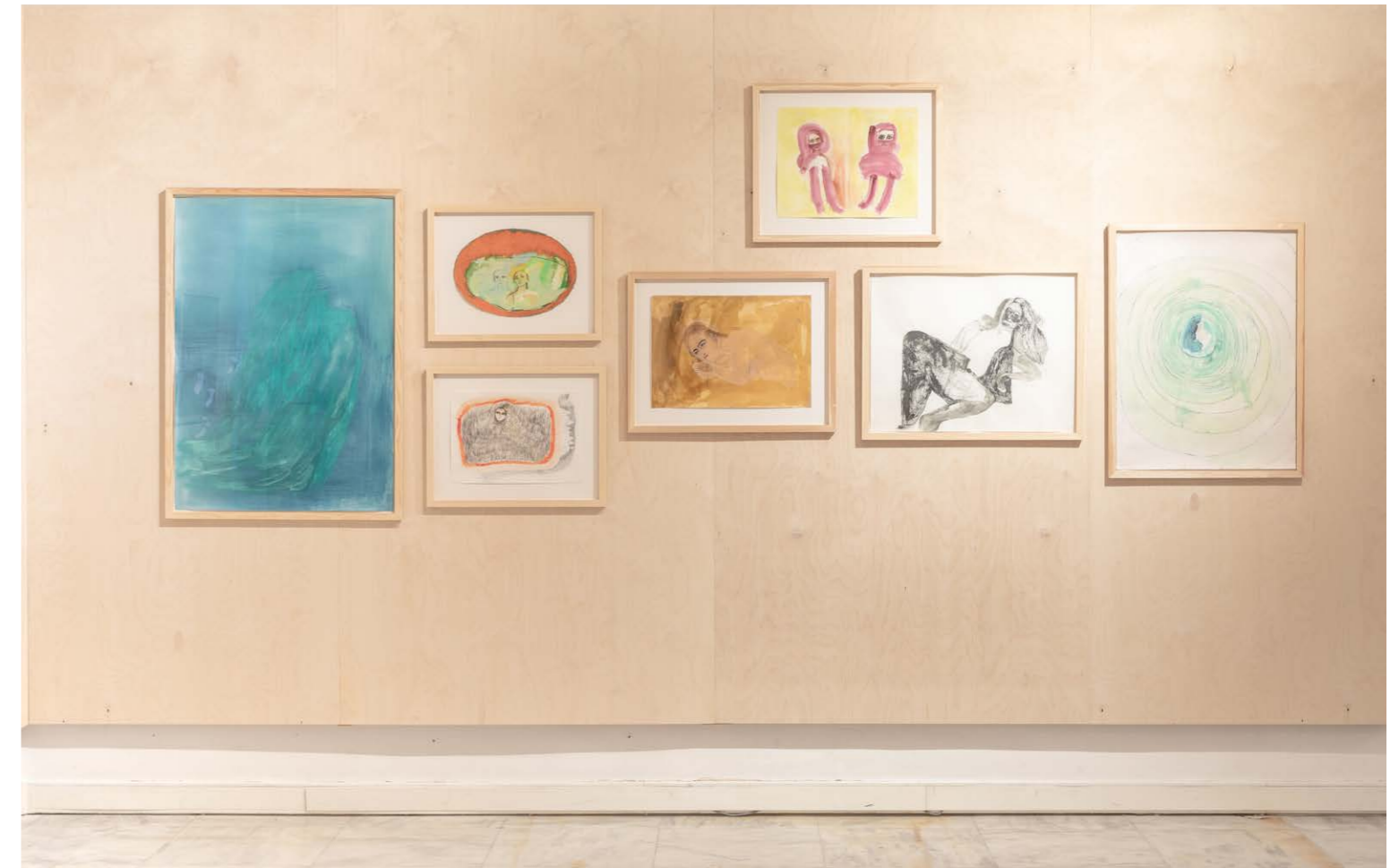
The eighth edition of the **Thessaloniki Biennale** brings together artworks that look beyond eco-pessimism and embrace a spirit of communion and groundedness in the face of the climate crisis.

Words by Elise Morton

The climate emergency. Disenfranchisement. A seemingly unending cycle of refugee crises. With such issues serving as a prominent thematic thread, you might expect the eighth Thessaloniki Biennale to have been a gloomy affair. Under the headline of 'Geocultura' – evoking a lost thread between land and culture – these points of reflection, conversely, invited an at once realistic and optimistic reassessment of our connection to the world around us.

The show's main exhibition, *Being as Communion*, honoured those communities struggling against alienation from the land,

while eschewing a simplistic call to simply "reconnect with nature". Instead, the show's 28 artists and artist collectives elicited an altogether more expansive understanding of our place in the world, time and space. A focus on works that "reflect critically on shared resources, forms of care and multiple forms of communion with the more than human, the living, the dead, and those to come," main exhibition curator Maria-Thalia Carras told *Canvas*, serves to foster "ways of creatively moving forward, despite, or exactly because of these crises". While undoubtedly characterised by a spirit of



Jumana Emil Abboud. *The Water from Your Eye*. 2016–18. Mixed media on paper. Installation view of the eighth Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art at the MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art. Photography by Konstantinos Tsakalidis. Image courtesy of the artist

optimism, *Being as Communion* did not balk at real-life crises and conflicts, particularly in relation to land, resources, ownership and empowerment.

A steep, out-of-breath climb through Thessaloniki's Ano Poli (upper city) to reach the Eptapyrgio, the Byzantine- and Ottoman-era fortress that crowns the city, is a pale reflection of another, far more tortuous journey. Greek artist Paky Vlassopoulou's installation *I Have Seen the Moon Rise on Both the Left and Right Side of the Sky* (2023) inhabited one of the fortress's towers and prison structures, inviting meditation on utility, survival, incarceration and, particularly, these themes in the experience of refugees. The search for safety – and, in the process, the uprooting from one's land – often gives way to a toxic rootedness: an entrapment and incarceration, born of physical barriers (holding centres and refugee camps one is forbidden to leave) or social alienation. Taking visual cues from US prisons, Vlassopoulou used plasterboards, writing on walls and utilitarian objects to foster a sense of disorientation and the struggle for survival.

Participating artists from the Middle East and Arab world, Carras believes, have a particular "understanding of the failures of the nation state to provide a coherent and fully encapsulating answer to the way in which communities gather and landscapes evolve". While the expulsion of Palestinians from ancestral lands at the hands of the

Israeli state is well documented, a quieter estrangement is also at play. Over the biennale's opening weekend, and in collaboration with the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival, artist Jumana Manna (whose installation *Sketch and Bread* (2021) also formed part of *Being as Communion*) presented her film *Foragers* (2022), which takes viewers through the rich landscapes of the Golan Heights, Galilee and Jerusalem to go foraging for herbs. Perhaps less violent than the destruction of homes, Israeli protection laws forbidding the picking of these tradition-rich plants nonetheless further alienate Palestinians from their land and turn herb-pickers into ecological criminals. While such prohibitions are countered by a determination, resilience and sense of joy in the land, rule-breakers are forced into court and faced with large fines, while the Israeli state is elevated to both gatekeeper and protector.

If Manna's *Foragers* spoke to a forced alienation from the land and the produce it bears, Turkish artist Aslı Çavuşoğlu's *Pink as a Cabbage/Green as an Onion/Blue as an Orange* (2020) presented something of a fightback: an immensely practical return to the human-land connection, via a retaking of the reins in the face of destructive industrial agricultural practices.

Palestinian artist Jumana Emil Abboud also suggested resilience in the face of ecological oppression. Her series of drawings,

Jumana Manna. *Sketch and Bread*. 2021. Installation view of the eighth Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Byzantine Culture. Photography by Stefanos Tsakiris. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens gallery, London



Aslı Çavuşoğlu. *Pink as a Cabbage/Green as an Onion/Blue as an Orange*. 2020. Installation view of the eighth Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art at the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation. Photography by Konstantinos Tsakalidis. Image courtesy of the artist, KADIST collection and Ayse Umur collection

The Water from Your Eye (2016–22), showed the gentle power of women who are protectors of long-disappeared Palestinian water sources, their strength born not of overbearing physical power but of words filled with love and respect. “Stories are gathered, contained, cared for by generations of women who become protectors of water sources and the myths that spring from them,” says Carras. The key to communion, it was suggested, is the understanding that we exist within a dynamic network – not only with other humans, the land and animals, but also with our ancestors, descendants and realms beyond the material.

Offering a personal vision of alienation and exile, Egyptian artist Ahmed Morsi’s surreal painting *Blackbird II* (2007) featured anthropomorphic figures at once unsettling and pointing towards a potentially hopeful dream-like world. A potential dialogue between historical and contemporary rituals was animated meanwhile by the quilted sculptures and video work *Home Noosphericus-a path for a new being* (2023) of Athens-born Angelo Plessas. Exhibited amidst artefacts at the Museum of Byzantine Culture, the visual vocabulary of the internet and paganism were combined to interrogate the connectivity of our real, material existence and our digital lives.

Turkish visual artist Cevdet Erek brought an equally expanded notion of connectedness into a distinctly local context. His *In Thessaloniki’s two courtyards* (2023) comprised two column-esque

sculptural interventions in two courtyards: one at the city’s Byzantine Museum and the other at the neighbouring Archaeological Museum. Each featured elements from diverse periods of the city’s architecture – featuring marble, wood and cement – and evoked Thessaloniki’s tumultuous history under the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Their placement within two historical museums, says Carras, served to “disrupt national narratives and imply a more complicated co-existence with a straitlaced interpretation of the past.” Erek’s forms stretched too through space, with the shared architectural vocabulary of the two lonely columns creating an imaginary connection, the structures sounding a forlorn plea to be united. “An entity,” the artist explains, “is shaped not only by its close surroundings, but by its inheritance from afar.”

Spread over ten sites – ranging from the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art to the late Ottoman-era Yeni Mosque, each emblematic of a period of Thessaloniki’s history – the exhibition itself embodied the multi-layered city and a spirit of co-existence and collaboration. “*Being as Communion* is a walk through the city, hand in hand with its ghosts,” Carras reflects. In its polyphony of voices and evocation of people and periods long past, the biennale inspired a multiplicity of meanings, resisting firm root in the here and now. After all, with infinite possible meanings come boundless possibilities for the future. ■