

»Urban Secret Garden – why the night« (the essay), Lia Nalbantidou (2013)

»Urban Secret Garden« is a photography project in progress. Shooting started in 2010, as an improvisation of an aimless walk. Urban Secret Garden-Why the Night (2013) is the first attempt to edit the photographs into a series. A photobook Dummy was the result of that effort and in April 2013, the Dummy got shortlisted for the 6th International Dummy Award in Kassel, Germany.

-Not so sure how it all started.

There was a necessity to get into photographing without any preconceived concept. The condition was new and not so uncomplicated. I had to find that time slot when I wasn't needed anywhere else and when both the light and the mind-set were right.

-How about 4.30-7.00a.m.?

By seeking the dawn-walk motifs throughout the city, I discovered freedom in the hours before conscious light. I was there when darkness turned into light with a sharp noise; there when morning birdsong collided with last night's laughter; there when the mesmerizing buzz of automobiles drowned the sound of the flash light. Floral patterns joggling with ancient ruins, car lights beamed down central avenues, construction sites laid silently with distant buildings at sleep - a kite, a plastic bag, a pole, white chairs, shiny balloons, amputee trees - all entwined into a body of photographs to create a secret urban garden.

The photographic reconstruction of my home city into a garden was not at first clear. In the early stages of shooting, I found myself chasing after the floral fabric motifs of my childhood. I grew up in the women's prêt à porter family business, established in the 70's. Perhaps the imprinted floral patterns of the readymade dresses have imposed their alluring shapes onto my memory cells. Walking about in the dark sites of the city I was looking for floral organic shapes under the trees or against the well-groomed fences.

Before I knew it, my dawn walks turning into nocturnal walks became a weekly ritual. With time, I left the patterns behind me to focus on the cityscape. There, I discovered the city rather than my projection on it.

Thessaloniki is a middle-class, medium-sized city, with many layers of history. The city's urban scape is a "mix-and-match" of eras and styles. Proudly restored ancient ruins, Byzantine churches and the city's walls, stand by fine examples of Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles, deteriorating 50's and 60's apartment buildings or expensively constructed contemporaries. In the last 20 years the city has lost its industries and hundreds of businesses, that once created fortunes and thousands of job opportunities. Currently, few industries are left alive. Since 2008, the city has experienced a major economical and social crisis.

During my night walks, I tend to draw a personal city map. My landmarks are quite different from those of the official city history. I come across abandoned buildings and large-scale warehouses, small-scale hovels and construction sites, vacant parking lots, closed down enterprises - all human wounds. Athens has about 20.000 homeless people. No numbers on Thessaloniki's homeless are readily available. In winter 2014, many people make their homes in abandoned buildings.

My photographs attempt to weave a assemblage of symbols, redefining the public space by occupying it " tactlessly". The stroll is uncertain, so am I. Current history is under construction.