

Stathis Orphanos

"My Passport to Life Has Been My Camera"

By ATHAN KARRAS

"Greece is an oddity as a nation; because it is so many things to so many people all over the world who have adopted and live its extraordinary culture. I have mixed emotions about Greece and despite some misgivings . . . I'm drawn to it like a magnet; I can't stay away." Stathis Orphanos often feels much more "Greek" than the Greeks. Through frequent trips to his ancestral land, Orphanos has kept a vigilant focus on what it means to him to be Greek.



Claire Bloom

As an artist's artist he recently released a monumental publication—a phenomenal collector's book—detailing the work of celebrated Greek artist Yannis Tsarouchis.

His Greek parents settled in North Carolina after arriving from the island of Samos. Orphanos was born in America and from the age of eight, he would spend summers on his ancestral island of Samos and winters in Connecticut where he was raised. Having learned Greek at an early age, his English took the back seat when he was young. Now,

he struggles with Modern Greek on his visits but he warns his friends and relatives to be careful for he understands more than meets the eye. After spending six years at Cheshire Academy Preparatory School in Connecticut and a short stint at Denison University in Ohio, his Greek endowed artistic temperament led him to feel he had enough of academics and so he decided to leave college and visit a friend in California whose mother was a top Hollywood press agent. The very first phone call he answered at his friend's home was from Joan Crawford. This immediately opened his eyes to another world and he knew that Los Angeles was the place to be.

When he was a boy, he toyed with inexpensive Brownie cameras and at the age of fifteen, his father bought him a Rolleiflex. Quickly he discovered the wonderment of photography and explored the notion of shooting with the available light and not against it. It's hard for him to say which came first, becoming a publisher or a photographer. His love for books and thrift-shop bargains brought him in contact with noted bookseller Peggy Christian who was responsible in opening the world of letters. This eventually led him to partner with publisher Ralph Sylvester and they created a rare book publishing company Sylvester & Orphanos, which opened its doors to many notable writers. It was their dear friend Peggy Christian who one day casually suggested, "Since you both love books so much, why you don't just go ahead and do special edition books of well-known writers?" She recommended they do a book on Christopher Isherwood's just completed autobiography but they had no idea how to go about getting started. Quickly she replied, "Jean Cocteau was never a 'filmmaker' and today his films are classics; you just jump in and do it." They offered Christopher Isherwood a limited edition of one hundred books for his forthcoming autobiography. The special edition of Christopher and His Kind was bound in Indian raw silk with artist Don Bachardy providing portraits of

Isherwood as illustrations. It was received with enthusiasm and their new special editions publishing business was



Ezons



Alekos Fassianos

launched.

Next was a book by Joyce Carol Oates, one of America's most prolific writers of whom it was said, writes so much one would have to drive a stake through her heart to stop her from writing. Even then, she would probably take the stake out and go on writing another novel with her own blood! Joyce Carol Oates had been a patron of Sylvester & Orphanos ordering rare books from them. Orphanos wrote and asked if she would consider allowing them to publish one of her books and she agreed. She was one of the first writers ever to give the unknown publishers a manuscript. The signed limited edition of three-hundred copies was hand printed on Heidelberg presses using very fine paper bound in Belgium linen. Afterward, she wrote telling them, "Sentimental Education is the best piece of sustained writing I've done, or will ever do. So it's a delight to see the beautiful job you've done with it . . ." Such heartfelt responses encouraged them to continue publishing collector's books.

Orphanos tried a stint as a writer by taking a course with instructor D. Parker at a local college and it wasn't until after a while that he realized his teacher was the Dorothy Parker. After showing some of his works to her, she encouraged him to write a novel. When he later showed her some of his experimental photographs, she said, "You'll have to choose, honey, between photography and writing." His ever evolving work with publishing and not being able to

keep his hands off those lenses, led him to put writing on the back burner.

Sylvester & Orphanos set off to tackle an essay by Gore Vidal, *Sex Is Politics and Vice Versa*. It was a very important work for Vidal; the hard back was done in a lavish binding that was red, white, and blue with gold-stamped initials. When Vidal saw it he drawled, "How patriotic." There were three hundred of these books. The publishers were now rolling along preparing a Graham Greene book, which eventually evolved into printing three of his works. They distinguished themselves by publishing works of notable writers such as John Cheever's *The Leaves*, the *Lion-Fish*, and the *Bear and Tennessee Williams' It Happened the Day the Sun Rose*. A selective choice of authors and painstaking detail in the crafting of each book resulted in a body of fine signed limited editions.

They extended their creative standards with each succeeding book into a publishing firm of international acclaim through careful reading of the texts combined with thematic design elements for the covers and bindings. William Styron's *Shadrach*, a story about the passing away of a close friend, featured the title in subtle lettering reminiscent of a headstone, while the cover design for Donald Barthelme's *The Emerald*, used a faceted emerald green stamping against a black op-art background.

Their books extended to poets such as James Merrill's collection titled *Samos*, who wrote that he was, "quite bug-eyed." The book's "splendor" had impressed him: "My taste, whatever that is—or was—runs to the serviceable and compact; but what you've produced simply rises above & beyond such humdrum standards into a dream world of gorgeousness. Thank you!" They applied their high standards in publishing to plays by James Purdy, to Philip Roth's novel *Novotny's Pain* and to Paul Bowles' *In the Red Room*. Bowles was simply astounded by the publication saying, "a delight to the eye and hand, a proof that the making of fine books is still within the realm of the possible."

Orphanos utilized his passion for black-and-white photography and began selecting his subjects carefully by first photographing the authors and personalities of the books being published. While his early portraits began with friends posed in intricate compositions, his later work became simplified with an emphasis on the effects of natural light. He was reluctant to photograph celebrities until he was confident that his artistry would outweigh the caché of a famous face. He had known Christopher Isherwood

for many years before he was sure that his approach would be different from previous portraits of the author. Today, he has photographed over one hundred authors. His first photography exhibit in San Diego resulted in extensive coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*.

His second exhibit was sponsored by the famous photographer Shirley Burden, a great-grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt and



Julie Harris

former Chairman of the Department of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The aging Burden, disabled by an accident and unable to do photography in the way he liked, was so enthralled with Orphanos's work that he offered to turn his lavish photo studio and lab over to him, but Orphanos declined for he felt he couldn't work in this way. He next exhibited in a group show with notable photographers Avedon, Irving Penn, and Bruce Weber. Orphanos concentrated on photographing well-known authors whose faces were relatively unknown and it was a challenge to photograph them in a way that brought out their soulful qualities. He most enjoys photographing subjects with the available natural light. When he is forced to use a lamp, he directs the light on the wall rather than directly on his subject. In comparing his photography with other greats, he considers his work to be aligned with such masters as Steichen, famous for his masterful photos of Isadora Duncan in Greece, and he very much admires the work of Avedon and Cecil Beaton.

After viewing one of his exhibits, actress Mamie Van Doren came into the gallery and asked if Orphanos would

consider photographing her, saying she hasn't had a decent photo session in years. She was the last of the great Hollywood blonde bombshells, Jayne Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe had passed away, and the resulting photo by Orphanos became famous. She lived near the gallery where Orphanos was exhibiting and invited him to her home located above a beauty parlor. Arriving with a friend to help him, Orphanos found the door was left open and he called out, "We're here." A tiny voice replied, "Come in make yourselves at home, I'll be down in a minute." Five minutes later, was the ra-ta-ta-ta-tat of high-heel stilettos down the hall. There was a big skylight with the light coming down in a hazy shaft and when van Doran reached it, she paused; Orphanos realized the light was good and he could use it. She was wearing hardly anything, her big breasts almost exposed, hair, eyes—all intact. She was into her sixties and knew exactly what to do. It was a great session and there are excellent photographs to prove it. Van Doren was so enthused, she offered to pose in the nude; it was historic!

Orphanos approaches his subjects in a manner similar to the acclaimed Greek painter Tsarouchis who always sought to paint unknown subjects immortalizing them on canvas. Orphanos finds not knowing what is going to happen in a photograph exciting, and even though his subject might be famous for his or her work, photographing them is like meeting them for the very first time. He never knows what the light is going to be like or how they are going to react. When photographing Gore Vidal—an elegant and rather aristocratic imposing figure—he felt very nervous behind the camera because Vidal was glowering over him. The photographer suggested they try some shots in the outside light, remarking about some umbrellas on top of the hill resembling a Madonna and Vidal turned to him and said, "Me, a Madonna?" This humorous moment broke the ice and greatly affected the shoot.

He was again struck by nerves during a hectic photo session with famous movie director George Cukor. When Orphanos appeared clumsy, the famous director quipped, "You're very shrewd, pretending not to know what you're doing, so we can help you." Relaxed, unguarded moments often yield the best images, which is just the first step of his art. Orphanos also likes manipulating the image in the darkroom, superimposing one image on another background, or stripping away the background, or blurring the edges in order

to focus on the subject's eyes. Whenever possible, natural light is paramount. He photographed painter David Hockney on a bleak day with minimal available light and had incredible results. His photographs are art pieces and he carefully selects the subjects he will photograph.

Often, the portraits are used on back covers of books he publishes and periodically someone who may have known the person he has photographed will request a copy. Orphanos does not do commercial art, nor take photos on commission. Recently, a library requested a photo of a well known African-American author John A. Williams, whom Orphanos had photographed. When they asked how many poses he had, and he said eight, the library requested all eight and paid handsomely for them, but it was a totally unsolicited sale. Orphanos believes there is a world of magic for anyone engaged in doing personal photography. "My photography is concentrated on the human portrait, and I call them Life Masks. I learned very early to use a black background in doing black and white photography because then the faces glow; if I put a white background behind them then their faces appear dull and also the white background creates problems in the dark room."

On one of his trips to Egypt he wanted to photograph Naguib Mahfouz, a Nobel Prize winner for literature, who is regarded as important to Egypt as the pyramids. He agreed to sit for Orphanos and they went to his office at the El Aram newspaper. "He allowed me, a perfect stranger, to photograph him in a room all alone without any fear, even though there had been many threats on his life due to his liberal views favoring peace with Israel." That evening after the photo session, Mahfouz visited his regular café for tea where an assailant drove a knife into his throat, which practically killed him. This is why Orphanos believes, "My camera is my passport."



Christopher Isherwood



Michael Cacoyiannis

After publishing a book on James Merrill, who lived in Greece for at least half of every year, Orphanos began photographing certain outstanding Greek personalities—singers, composers, writers, and painters. His first contact with Melina Mercouri was a curious event. He was visiting New York with a friend and went to the Broadway musical *Ilya Darling* starring Mercouri. They wanted to congratulate her after the show but couldn't find parking so his friend, a brash New Yorker, just parked his car right in Schubert Alley, taking the chance the car would be towed. Mercouri came out the stage door incandescent in a white-leather pant suit. This was at the height of her glamorous career, so they could only stop and stare as she passed right by them followed by a big burly guy, who must have been a body guard, for this was during the colonels' coup dictatorship in Greece and there were death threats against Mercouri due to her strong outspoken position and daily demonstrations in front of the UN against the dictatorship. As she hurried by, she turned and waved her hand saying, "ela." Momentarily they thought she was beckoning them but of course, it was the big burly guy she was signaling.

She walked through the after-theater crowds fearlessly as they applauded her; it was as if she walked through the parting of the Red Sea. Waving her hand again with "ela!" she proceeded over to 8th Avenue heading for Downey's Steak House, an after theatre rendezvous spot among Broadway performers. She swept into the restaurant greeting other cast members. Orphanos and his friend followed her and stood watching from the other end of the restaurant when

Mercouri turned, saw them, and (much to their embarrassment) blew them a kiss. Years later, as Minister of Culture in Greece, she was instrumental in helping Orphanos put together the recently-released lavish publication on the life and paintings of Greek artist Yannis Tsarouchis.

Orphanos was first introduced to the work of the Tsarouchis while photographing George Cukor at his home. He owned several of his paintings and suggested that since Orphanos was Greek, he should do an art book on Tsarouchis. At the time, they had been discussing Tennessee Williams who also owned Tsarouchis' works, as did William Inge and Elia Kazan. Orphanos found Williams to be difficult and eccentric to work with when they published his work and so Orphanos passed up an opportunity to photograph Williams after hearing stories floating around about how Williams would agree to a photo session in his home and suddenly snap, knocking a camera from the photographer's hands.



Graham Greene

The first time Sylvester & Orphanos considered using color in a publication was at the request of John Updike who wanted a book of his essays to be illustrated with color plates. They had never done anything in color so far and it occurred to Orphanos to suggest to his partner that if they were considering doing a color illustrated book, why they don't then consider doing a book on Tsarouchis as George Cukor suggested. Orphanos contacted Melina Mercouri with his proposal and she immediately contacted Tsarouchis to set up a meeting at the artist's studio in Maroussi. When they arrived, there was a loud banging on the studio door. A woman rushed in, emphatically opened a little black bag, pulled out a hypodermic needle, jabbed it into Tsarouchis' arm, pulled out the needle, packed up, and made a swift exit. Seeing their startled expressions,

Tsarouchis explained that it was a "fashionable way" to contain his diabetes.

Working out the details for this publication took many chaotic meetings in Mercouri's office with their attorney Demetri Tsitouras handling all the legal aspects of the book. Orphanos wanted to photograph her, and she would constantly say, "Please, no photos eimai terras." (I look like a freak) or, "No, no, no, please I am very tired today." One day Orphanos gave her an autographed copy of one of his Graham Greene publications within which he wrote, "To the Divinity of the new Greece, the Goddess Mercouri." She looked at the book and smirked, "Goddess! Divinity! Alright, we do photos now."

She pulled a brush out of her handbag, gave her hair a couple of strokes, and applied lipstick without a mirror before striking a pose with a tough expression on her face. Orphanos still has this harsh photo, in which she looks tired. She immediately recognized he was not pleased, so she turned and said, "Oh! You want Melina?" she moved by the window and suddenly all the toughness disappeared. That's how he got the now-famous photo; she instantly looked almost twenty years younger compared to the first pose. When he reproduced it, Orphanos removed all the trappings of her office from the background and replaced them with an image of the Elgin Marbles, which she was so adamant about being returned to Greece. When he first showed the finished portrait to Mercouri she was puzzled until her friend and confidant Despo exclaimed, "Melina, it's a montage!" Recently, he felt so wounded at the Athens airport when, while waiting for a departure, he browsed at a music stand and asked for a CD of a live performance of Melina Mercouri's at the Herodus Atticus Theater. The young lady behind the counter snapped at him, "Only you Greek Americans are fascinated with Melina!"

Orphanos has photographed many outstanding Greek personalities most of which he likes to call the "Great Greeks:" Cacoyannis, Fassianos, Jules



Costa Gavras

Dassin, Achilles Droungas, Costa Gavras, Nikos Ghika, Theodorakis, Xarhakos, and Elytis who was said to be a difficult person but instead turned out to be very sweet and gentle. Elytis agreed to take part in the Tsarouchis book along with so many others. Orphanos also photographed famous Greek Americans: an absolutely stunning ballerina Helene Alexopoulos—the last of the great Balanchine creations—in Athens

with her children, and the famous fashion designer James Galanos. Sadly one "great" he wanted to photograph, Irene Papas, declined. Despite her many movie roles, she hates to be photographed.

To plan the book on Tsarouchis, Orphanos went back to Maroussi to meet the artist. When he arrived, Tsarouchis was not well and asked Orphanos to accompany him to the nearest pharmacy down the street. In Greece you can go to a local pharmacy to get a shot. This was an ongoing affair with Tsarouchis and his diabetes. He was dressed in a white hat and a white suit; one could have easily imagined him being Matisse. Maroussi was in upheaval, it was being transformed from a suburb into multiple housing apartments and construction was going on all around. On the way to the pharmacy, young construction workers hailed them; Tsarouchis, one of the most important artists in Greece, was a celebrity. It was summertime, all these young men were working shirtless, and one could easily imagine many of them as subjects in the legendary paintings of Tsarouchis. Orphanos regretted that he didn't have his camera along to capture the moment.

Tsarouchis chose the art he wanted to be in the book and they considered having Melina Mercouri, the Minister of Culture, do the introduction together with an American counterpart James Merrill, who used to spend a lot of time in Greece. Before long, they had twenty five major international artists including Henri Cartie-Bresson, David Hockney, Sir Stephen Spender, and John Updike willing to write pieces, essays, and impressions of Tsarouchis' art. In

the end, all twenty five artists personally autographed each of the 424 copies of the limited edition by hand and then, the plates were burned. Miletus Publishers of Greece agreed to print the book bilingually, which was hand printed on Heidelberg presses using very fine paper. It was a phenomenal undertaking when you think about it, especially since they started the book in a heated political year and half of the Greek artists belonged to opposite political camps. Somehow it didn't seem to bother anyone; they all came together recognizing that Tsarouchis was a major artist. To get the right person, the great art, and to have done this in Greece was a major accomplishment. It took several years but Sylvester & Orphanos are very happy it is finally done, resulting in a book which in itself is a museum piece. Elytis said, "Only a Greek American would be foolish enough to try such a thing, no Greek in Greece would do it, no Greek would ever have the kind of concentration to get it done."

Upon completion of the Tsarouchis book, there was a big reception at the Benaki Museum in Athens on Dec 15, 2004, with director Mr. Delovorias officiating. It was an emotional event for Orphanos. Although he felt compelled to publish this work, it did turn out to be a much bigger project than they ever thought originally but if one thinks too much about such things, nothing ever gets done. It turned out to be a costly book but it was never about making money. At the conclusion of the ceremony, Dimitris Tsitouras announced that Miletus Publishing was going to commission three photography books by Stathis Orphanos. One already in the works is a book on the famous Greek



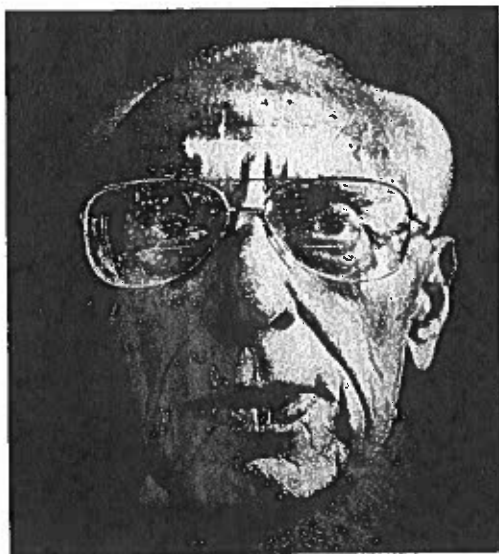
Melina Mercouri

poet Cavafy based a new translation of his poems by Sherrard and Keeley combined with photography by Orphanos, this theme was the subject of recent exhibits, which were received with acclaim. Another—with permission from the Greek Government—will feature photographs of the famous Evzone palace guards. This will be an interesting project, for these famed warriors have been serving as a true signature of Greek manliness and their historic pleated-skirt costume has become a symbol for Greece. And the last will be a coffee-table book simply called Stathis. "Like Yanni?" he asked, "No," Tsitouras answered, "like Cher!"

Born in the US of Greek parentage, Orphanos always felt very Greek and often had discussions about this with artist friends, especially with Xaharkos, whose music is much appreciated in America. Like many Greek Americans, Orphanos had an ancestral home in Greece and that gave him an opportunity to travel there often. He felt very fortunate that his mother kept her ties with Greece spending six months in Samos and six months in Connecticut each year. Up until recently, Orphanos never had any problems while visiting Greece. Thanks to a clever uncle, his mother knew to buy the family property from relatives for a pittance making him the sole heir so that other relatives could not lay claim to the land after her death. Now it appears that the Greek government wants to take a piece of it to build a marina. One of their claims is that this section of land, when inherited back in

1912, was under water and therefore belonged to the government. But in researching, he discovered a postcard from that same site postmarked 1905 which clearly shows everything was the same as it appears and exists today. He has now been in litigation with the government for fifteen years and most people say he won't win. The government has fenced off this piece of land and at the moment it is neither his nor theirs. Orphanos feels as if they are treating him like an Amerikanaki who doesn't know any better.

When he recently arrived in Samos, he discovered a traveling circus on his property. They told him that the government had given them permission but as a way of demonstrating his rights, he insisted that the circus pay rent, which the government eventually allowed him to collect. Officials in Samos have congratulated him on his fine work on the Tsarouchis book but all he wants is his land back. This experience left him with a slightly bitter taste and even though his bonds go back to the age of eight, he feels it may be time to cut the umbilical cord. Greece has changed, which is to be expected, but it's hitting him hard. Now however, with work to be done on the Evzone book and since Greece joined the European Union, he feels a need to return to Samos—drawn to it like a magnet. It was his feeling that the Tsarouchis book would be the end of his limited editions for a while. But life is not a plan of endings, only of beginnings, and things progressing. They still have a rare book business, Sylvester & Orphanos, and he will be continuing with his photography.



George Cukor