



Comings and Goings
(2019) Monoprint,
900 x 640 mm

Thorny Truths

Simon Martin, Director of Pallant House Gallery, on **Sophie Charalambous**, who won the Jerwood Printmaking Today Prize for her monoprint *Comings and Goings*

Sophie Charalambous would not immediately define herself as a 'printmaker'. Over the last few years she has built a reputation for distinctive draughtsmanship in her drawings and watercolour paintings, which led her to win the Sunday Times Watercolour Prize in 2019. Yet this year she was awarded the prestigious 2020 Jerwood Printmaking Today Prize for one of her first prints: *Comings and Goings*, 2019. The chair of the panel, printmaker Anne Desmet RA, commented: 'The scale of this monoprint was highly ambitious for a relative newcomer to printmaking. This, coupled with its spontaneous energy and the theatricality of its composition, made it stand out for the panel.'

Like much of Sophie's work, *Comings and Goings* draws on her Mediterranean heritage, whether the distinctive vegetation or the complexities of social and political history. There is a nostalgic quality to her work, that suggests an artist reaching back to connect with and understand her roots. Sophie was born in London to Anglo-Greek Cypriot parents in 1974: the year that the conflict broke out between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Her father's family were refugees from near Famagusta; his former village is now an uninhabited ghost town. The island remains divided today, with the 'Green Line' maintained by the United Nations, and this situation has increasingly emerged as a theme in Sophie's work. *Comings and Goings* depicts a crowd in the Cypriot village of Peristerona, west of Nicosia. Historically, it was a mixed village with Turkish and Greek inhabitants, and in her print both the distinctive form of the Byzantine church of St Barnabas and Hilarion and the minaret of the adjacent mosque can be seen side-by-side. The choice of subject matter is no accident for the artist.



Sophie goes to Cyprus every year to visit her family, taking khadi paper sketchbooks to draw. She has produced ambitious watercolours inspired by these trips, featuring Mediterranean plants such as *Sykia* (fig trees) and *Papoutsosiko* (prickly pears). She describes the latter as 'a motif, they're everywhere in Cyprus, almost like weeds, but such sculptural plants. Tonally they are so interesting, they do different things in changing light.' There's something about her composition and handling of landscape that recalls certain Modern British artists: early Lucian Freud and John Craxton in particular, who travelled together to Greece in the late 1940s and were struck by the light and vegetation.

Above *Man Seated Under a Prickly Pear* (2020)
Monoprint, 700 x 630 mm

Below Sophie Charalambous in her studio.
Photo: Simon Martin



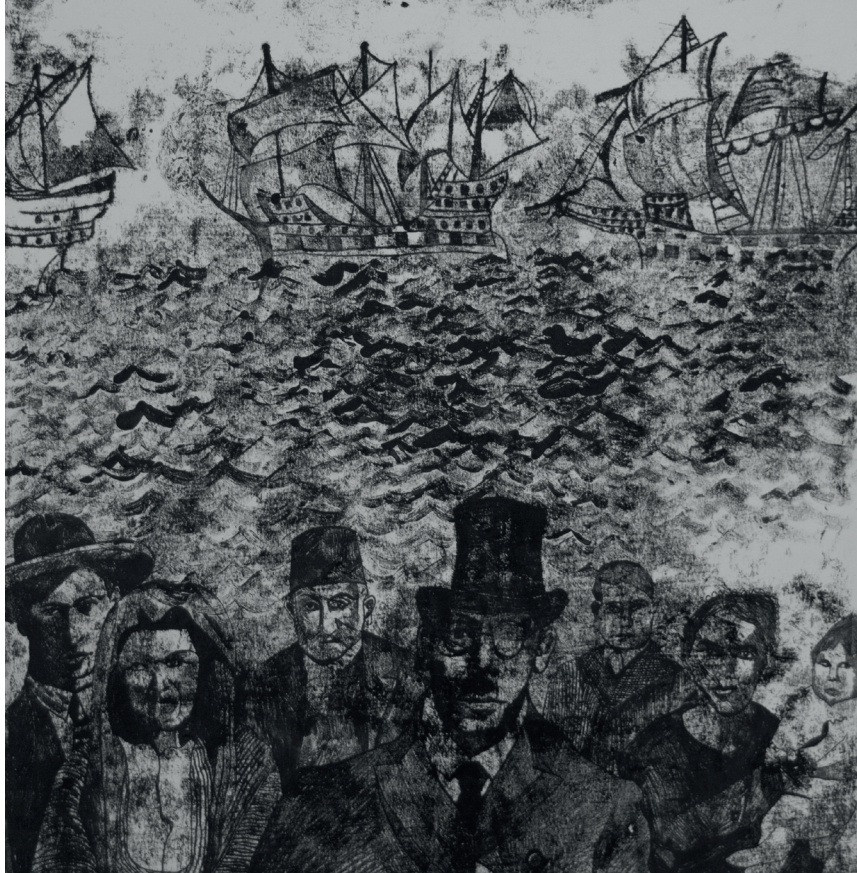
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Speaking of Freud, she observes that:

‘when you see his process you can really see what he is interested in.’

It’s a comment that is equally true of her work. She speaks of the importance of ‘not overworking, of leaving spaces’, commenting that, ‘those negative spaces are suggestive.’

Sophie worked as a set designer for five years after studying on the Motley Theatre Design Course and during that time she worked on a production for the Soho Theatre featuring masks inspired by Freud’s painting *The Refugees* (1940–41), and these now hang in her studio in Hackney. The studied naivety of some of her faces connect back to these masks, but also to the other British artists that Sophie mentions such as Christopher Wood, John Minton, Edward Burra and David Hockney, all of whom designed for the stage, and in each case there is a playfulness in their handling of the human figure, even when dealing with darker sides of humanity. While some of her figures are drawn from life, Sophie notes how working from memory can lead to a helpful distortion. She also finds source material for her characters in old books about Cyprus, family photographs, found pictures and postcards and folk art. Sometimes she will cut out drawings of these figures to use as stencils, playing around with her images and compositions. She is particularly interested in the tradition of shadow theatre in Greece and Cyprus – and puppets such as ‘Karaghiozis’, a comic character from the village. She describes him as ‘a sort of dishonest trickster – the everyman of Greece and Cyprus.’ Her approach to spatial arrangement reflects her desire to ‘create a world’ with scenographic architecture framing the human activity in her metaphorical stage. Her work is suggestive of cityscapes in Early Italian painting, and so it is interesting to hear how some years after her foundation at Bourneville College of Art and her undergraduate art degree at the University of Brighton, Sophie had taken night classes at the Royal Drawing School and subsequently a postgraduate course, where she particularly appreciated the tutorship of Timothy Hyman, an expert in early Sienese and Medieval painting.



Arrival (2019) Monoprint, 580 x 350 mm

Sophie started making prints whilst on a trip to Cyprus. She took a linocut course with an artist called Hambis Tsangeris, who has created the Hambis Printmaking Museum in Nicosia. He in turn had studied under the politically engaged Greek engraver Tassos Alevizos. Every summer Hambis travels around the Cypriot villages with his printing press running workshops. Since Sophie ‘happened to be in the place’ she took part and it reignited her interest in printmaking, she started to experiment with the press. Although she has made a few editioned etchings with aquatint, she is not interested in the repetition of edition-making. Instead, she enjoys the uniqueness of monoprinting, describing the process as ‘essentially drawings in a different form... an extension of drawing but with different qualities.’ She works on glass or Perspex, using Caligo relief inks. For Sophie, ‘The monoprint is about the marks; the textures – the surprise of what you get. There’s always an element of surprise, as in all printmaking. Monoprinting serves the work – it’s about accidental results.’ But she observes how there were quite a few failures before she was happy with the final version of *Comings and Goings*. The graphic quality of the ink, and how it takes to the surface of the paper adds an opacity to the image, heightening the feeling of the distance of time and emotion.

In other works, such as *Man Seated Under a Prickly Pear* (2019) and *Between the Bars* (2019), Sophie has used the structure of a wire fence to play with ideas of containment, surface and depth. Sophie observes how she likes exploring the ‘idea of fences’ in her work and the differing scale: ‘Something that you look through that creates divisions. Print is a good medium for that subject as it’s so graphic.’ Narratives about migration, about leaving, or separation are common in her work. She is acutely conscious of the wire fences that run through the centre of the island and speaks of ‘walking along the line in Nicosia – you turn the corner and are at a dead-end with a wire. You could journey through the city like that. Just one street back from high streets with modern shops are buildings left as they were in 1974 – bombed out.’

For Sophie there is a conversation between watercolour and monoprint, and she feels she is ‘working things out with printing.’ She is determined to push the medium, using collage, as she feels that print can be experimental – elements can be cut up and reused, unlike watercolour which is more fixed. But for Sophie there are still barriers to be overcome. She observes that ‘the public have preconceptions about print – that it is a lesser thing, even though monoprints are essentially unique.’

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