

HARIS EPAMINONDA

Oxford, at Modern Art Oxford

Review by Katherine Rundell
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Shot in Cyprus on 16mm film, Haris Epaminonda's *Chapters* (2013) is divided into four hour-long sections projected simultaneously, each on a separate screen. The installation, Epaminonda has said, can be thought of as an object that continuously moves, a sculpture that has no fixed form. With an archaic mise-en-scène that recalls the Renaissance-inflected style of Pasolini's *Trilogy of Life* and Parajanov's *Color of Pomegranates*, Epaminonda's work abandons conventional narrative to showcase human beauty, erotic desire and the stark loveliness of white light in a hot country.

Chapters has a prevailing dreamlike quality, in part because it eschews obvious logic and linearity. Mysterious figures appear suddenly: two geishas walk down a dirt path by the sea; a bald man painted white and dressed in gold sits cross-legged in a spare interior. Unexplained rituals are enacted with cryptic precision. A black woman paints herself with white stripes; men assemble and then dismantle the framework of a house in the desert.

There are also several scenes of children dressed in white running across a field. These seemingly playful images are intercut with shots of the shining sea. If executed in a slightly different manner, these scenes could appear to speak in the cheap vernacular of advertising and travel guides. But they are saved from banality by the harshness of the scorching light in Epaminonda's native Cyprus, and by the skillfulness of her compositions, which simultaneously evoke and evade cliché. On closer inspection, the field is uneven and barren, the children wear heavy shoes, and they do not smile.

The influence of the Renaissance is everywhere. Epaminonda cites Fra Angelico as a touchstone, and echoes of the quattrocento artist's work are visible in the gold, orange and ultramarine

palette. Epaminonda's set pieces evoke the iconography of Renaissance paintings: empty arches, golden vases, exotic birds, donkeys. Just as Fra Angelico used empty space to give visual form to the mystery of faith, Epaminonda intersperses scenes of colorfully dressed men and women with shots of desolate landscapes, as if to acknowledge the presence of things unspoken and ineffable. The hand gestures of her actors are reminiscent of the careful gestural language of biblical figures in 15th-century frescoes.

The work is elegiac in tone, a hymn to a past of wide spaces, sparse populations and lost traditions. References to death are plentiful. In one scene a man dressed all in black observes another who digs a hole amid heavy piles of stones that resemble cairns and tombs. The dour visuals are offset, however, by the percussion-heavy musical score composed for the film by Kelly Jayne Jones and Pascal Nichols. Their music rustles and sounds alive.

The impossibility of seeing all four screens at once—each was partially enclosed by dividing walls in the darkened gallery—meant there was no single version of the exhibition, and the absence of narrative precluded any quick summing up. But there is a sense of longing on display in Epaminonda's work that supersedes trite exoticism.

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