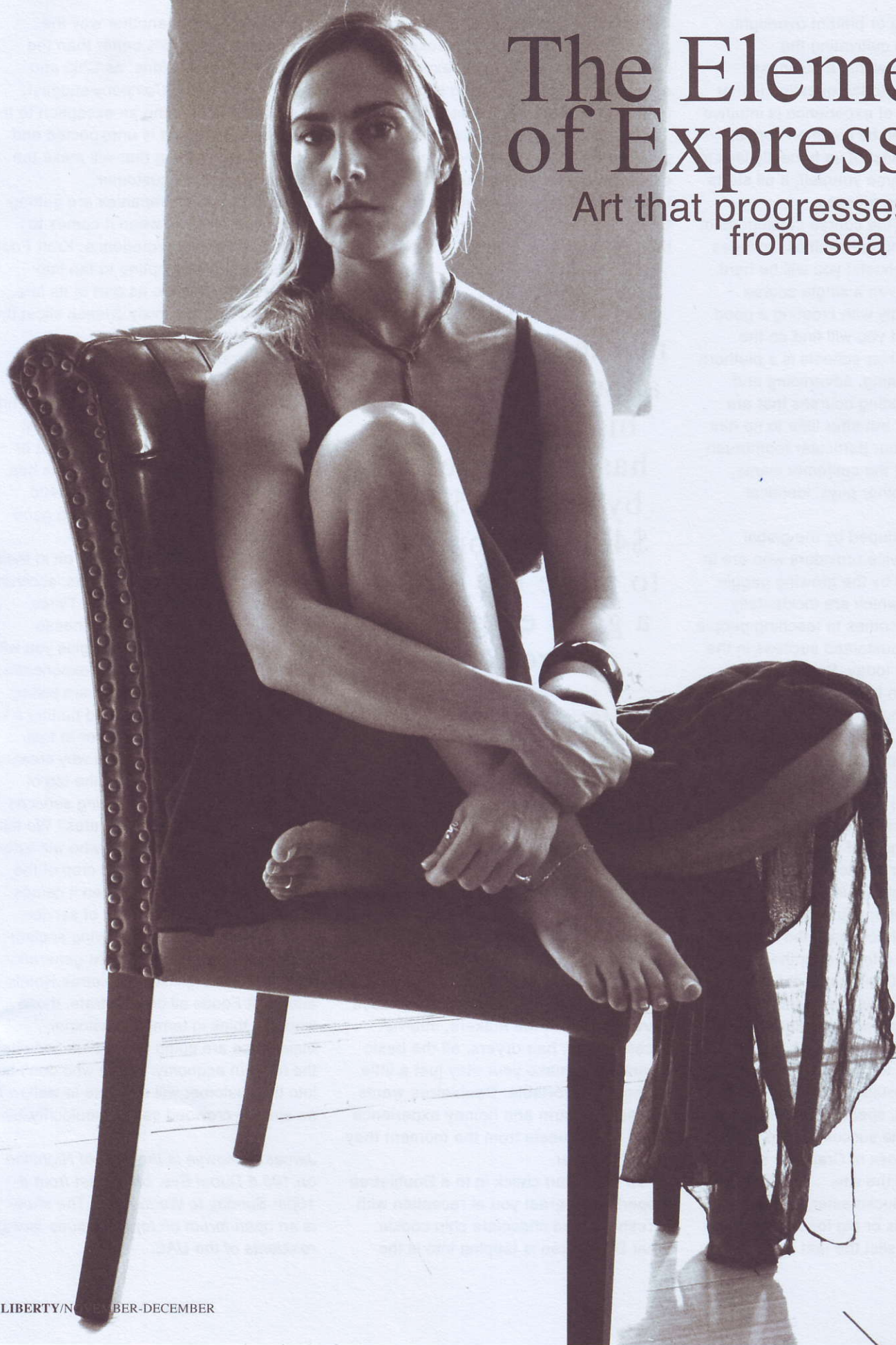


# The Elements of Expression

Art that progresses  
from sea to sand







*Sea 2007, Oil on canvas, 100x200cm*

American-born Greek artist Christina Mamakos came to Dubai in search of a unique landscape to exhibit her latest work. Drawing her inspiration from the vastness of nature, Mamakos' work impresses a unique sense of being both small and transcendent, among an enchanting array of landscapes, and seascapes. Christina agreed to sit down with *Liberty* to discuss her latest show, how nature inspires her, and how she came to create her unique pieces of art.

**Liberty:** Firstly, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Mamakos:** I was born in San Francisco; I studied comparative literature at Harvard, and then did my post-graduate work, my MFA, at the Ruskin School at Oxford. Then I was in New York for a couple of years, until I moved to Athens. So that's my basic education and geographic motion.

**Liberty:** You were in literature?

**Mamakos:** I started out in literature. I actually have a very strong background in music as well; I was studying at the Paris Conservatory of Music for a while. And then I went on and did my MFA in sculpture, actually.

**Liberty:** How do you move from literature to sculpture, and then from sculpture to what you do now?

**Mamakos:** Well, I was always making stuff. Even as a kid, I was taking art classes. And American universities, you know, have a nice sort of broad educational spectrum, so I took advantage of that. Because, what do you know at 18, you know?

So I'm very happy that I studied something that wasn't plastic-arts-oriented initially. It gave me some kind of basis of education, and then learning the craft afterwards, the master's degree, was a very rich experience for me. I studied sculpture instead of painting because I wanted to make molds and make all that kind of stuff actually.

**Liberty:** And then here you are with a mixture of painting and sculpture; you're working with steel?

**Mamakos:** There you go, that's the perfect example actually. The steel is a good example in terms of a sculptural approach to painting. Because they are objects, there's not paint on them, it's just rust and burnishing. I use a lot of acids to develop the form or whatever, so that's the perfect example of sculptural painting really. And it comes from the technique of etching, except that I use a steel plate that rusts, and I use salt water, from the sea, so the elements are actually used to build the image. It's pretty toxic.

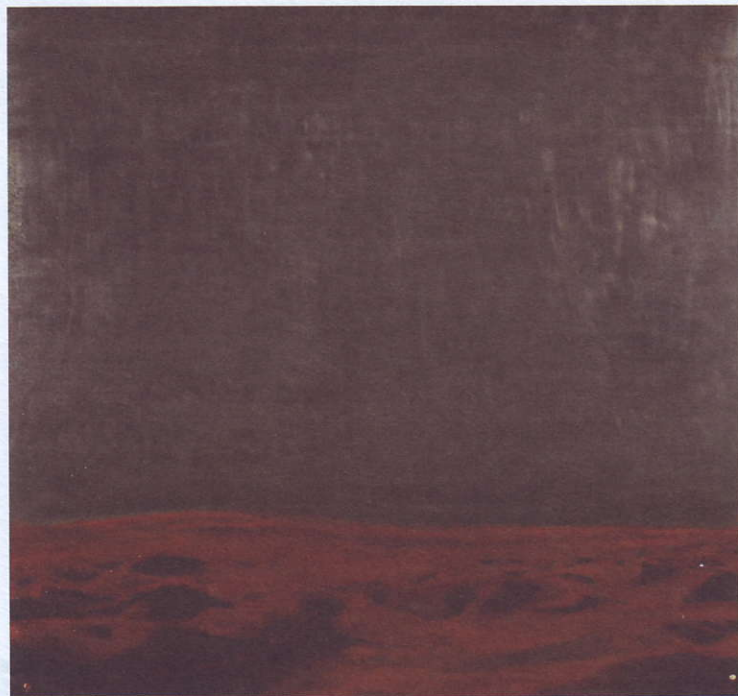
**Liberty:** Do you find any kind of common thread between literature and sculpture?

**Mamakos:** Well I'm not sure if I can see art and literature as drastically different. I see them as really well-linked. You know, there are themes of art within a lot of literature, and even with the work that I'm doing now, on the sea and the desert, in literature, those iconographies are really linked. If I said I was in economics and went to art, well ok, that's pretty drastic, but from literature to art, it's maybe more of a side step, really. I was always doing art; it's just that at Harvard, I could take advantage of the academics, so that was pretty amazing for me.

**Liberty:** When was your first exhibition?

**Mamakos:** Well I had a show at the Ruskin; then I moved to New York, where I studied for a doctorate on aesthetic philosophy and studio art. And I had a couple of etching shows there. Then I moved to Greece, and I did my first show, which was





*Clockwise*  
*Scape 11 2007*, Corten steel, 100x100cm. *Scape 10 2007*, Corten steel, 100x100cm. *Scape 9 2007*, Corten steel, 125x125cm. *Scape 7 2007*, Corten steel, 100x100cm





*Scape 3 2007, Corten steel, 100x160cm*

mostly of paintings of boulders, in a sort of abandoned, neo-classical building, in the center of Athens that was a brothel, basically. It was a clinic, and then a house, and then a brothel, and then abandoned.

So I arranged with the owners to take it over, and to make this event with these different stages of architecture, one on top of the other. There was all this peeling paint; it had this amazing kind of atmospheric feeling to it, and then I put in it, these big chunks of nature. So it was like urban decay, and nature, all in this haunted house. The viewer goes in and, you're hoping, that there's some sort of transformative event going on. That was the ambition.

And I did the same thing with my sea period. It was in this abandoned building on the shore of the sea; and I put on an event like that. And that inspired the show here, where it was the steel pieces, with the projection on the ceiling to make it look like the surface of the water from underneath. So it's like you're in the desert, but in an aquarium.

**Liberty:** So you get your inspiration from nature? How are you trying to express that?

**Mamakos:** Well, I don't know whether I try

to express my work in any particular way, but yeah, in terms of inspiration, definitely nature, definitely repetitive forms, seeing what's beneath the surface... I don't know, my work is what I try to express. It's very difficult to verbalize it. But, absolutely, nature is the focus.

**Liberty:** What interests you intellectually?

**Mamakos:** In terms of my work? I'm not sure how to answer that. I hope that my work isn't intellectual. I hope that it attracts the viewer on a level that isn't academic.

The ambition with this show is that I suspended a ring of desertscapes on the inside of a courtyard, and a ring of seascapes on the outside. And in the ceiling, we suspended a tent with an underwater video projected on it. So, the idea was to create a kind of a fantasy environment that seems impossible. Desertscape, seascape, with the intention, with the hope, that it gives the viewer some kind of psychological space, or space for imagination, or just seeing things in a different way, maybe.

**Liberty:** It seems that most of the art here in Dubai right now, is really meant to be up on a wall, it's not necessarily focused on installation.

**Mamakos:** I agree. That's a really good point.

That was my intention with doing it here. When I talked to people over here, I saw that that didn't exist here at all. So, I thought that was something I could offer the community here, and maybe inspire other artists. So yeah, absolutely. To be fair, it's not that common in Greece either, it's just starting now, but the installation idea is pretty "old hat" in New York or London.

**Liberty:** What do you think of the emerging Dubai arts scene?

**Mamakos:** Well it's pretty small, from what I understand. There are something like five or six galleries, and there's very little interest in contemporary art. I don't really know if that's true or not, but that's what I've heard. So it's promising, in the sense that it's embryonic, but frustrating obviously, because in order to survive, you have to go against something that people don't necessarily understand.

**Liberty:** How long have you been in Dubai?

**Mamakos:** Five days.

**Liberty:** Why did you come to Dubai?

**Mamakos:** Just in terms of this show, Dubai is perfect. It has the sea and the desert. You're





*Clockwise*  
*Mare nostrum panorama g* 2005, pigment paper on canvas, 100x200cm. *Mare nostrum panorama k* 2005, pigment paper on canvas, 100x80cm. *Mare nostrum panorama o* 2005, pigment paper on canvas, 100x100cm



hovering between these two topographies of vastness, which are obsessions in my work. And the city itself, it's got all of this amazing potential. So, from an outsider, it feels like it's this new sort of Promised Land. It's entirely constructed, and yeah, its very consumption-oriented, but with all of the cultural stuff that they're doing here and in Abu Dhabi, it really interested me to exhibit here.

And then the frustration here is that because it's so embryonic, there's a lot more infrastructure to fight against. But in terms of the idea of this being the beginning of a new kind of Promised Land, there's a lot of promise here.

**Liberty:** Do you consider yourself an artist?

**Mamakos:** As opposed to...

**Liberty:** The reason I ask, is that because it always seems to me that art sort of kills creativity. That once you start calling yourself an artist, it throws you into doing stuff for the sake of art, but not necessarily for the sake of any creative impulse.

**Mamakos:** I see. The self-pressure of calling yourself an artist, yeah that's probably a very negative thing. The idea is to be able to create freely. I had never really experienced the tension that you've talked about, though. But I do see that that's a concern in general. And it's unfortunate. I agree with you.

I think the installation approach was one of the ways to get around that. Because, it's not just a painting on a wall. It's an experience that you want to transfer, or an atmosphere you want to create, it's something you want to invite the viewer into, to experience. So that almost bypasses what you're saying.





*Mare nostrum 4* 2006, ink paper on perspex, 55x75cm.  
*Mare nostrum 30* 2005, ink paper on canvas, 50x40cm.  
*Mare nostrum 33* 2005, ink on wood, 20x16cm.



**Liberty:** Your work seems very calming.

**Mamakos:** It's interesting that you say that, because a lot of the work I've been doing, especially with the sea series, was exploring the repetitive themes of the Earth, and constructing a language. So imagine if you could organize the symbols you see on the surface of the sea and translate them... you could, in principle, translate the sea. So, what could it say? That's a fascinating topic to me. And then I had a chat with my old tutor at Oxford, and he mentioned that it was sort of a literary approach to art. Here I am making a language of the sea.

**Liberty:** What is creativity to you?

**Mamakos:** These are tough questions. Creativity, I think, is when an image takes on a life of its own. So, my focus may be the sea or the desert. But one or two of these images may end up really opening up possibilities, so I think that process is what someone might call creativity.

**Liberty:** Is there a difference between craftsmanship and art. When does craft become art?

**Mamakos:** Well that's an old question. I think it becomes art when it speaks to you on a level that you can't verbalize, but that's a very hard question to answer. My dissertation in college was on the sublime, so I would say the answer to that question is when it fills you with awe. Essentially, when it's unexplainable, or ineffable. It's the point where you're blown away by something on a level that you can't explain or can't verbalize. You can have a beautifully crafted bottle, for one thing, and when that beautifully crafted bottle begins to affect you, that's art.

**Liberty:** Tell us about your latest work.

**Mamakos:** I had this series of work on water, and on mountains. So the idea was to supplement that with something new, and specific for Dubai. So that's where the idea of desertscape came about.

And steel became something I was really interested in, because the desert is sort of rust-colored, so you've got all the elements of the desert, in the actual piece itself. And you're also taking something as impenetrable as steel and making it malleable, which is what the desert

is, there's an impenetrability about it, but also a softness about it, so that's what I was trying to convey. And then I was very excited, when my brother bought me an underwater video camera. I was very excited to spend hours underwater filming the surface of the sea from underneath. The video itself is about 25 minutes long, and so it was a wonderful experience for me, it was my first video work and it was an entire undersea fantasy. So it was really, really lovely.

**Liberty:** How tied are you to a medium?

**Mamakos:** I'm not. And that's a great question. The frustration with art schools, is that you're forced to choose a medium. You can either go

And in principle, the aesthetic experience is about transforming the viewer, or creating a sense of awe; you're no longer really who you were. So it could change something fundamental in an individual and in a society. So it's frustrating for me to see so much negative art, as opposed to seeing things that express moments of beauty or space.

I see a lot of Middle Eastern art that is directly political or liberal or a comment on the culture, and I think that's probably a very positive thing. I see a lot of art that makes mention of women and their position here, which obviously needs a lot of attention. That's one approach, and another approach might be moving on a more subtle level, on a more emotional level.

**Liberty:** Why have you chosen to live in Greece?

**Mamakos:** Well, I'm Greek, my family is Greek. But I had never really lived there as an adult, and so I went there, and the lifestyle is just so great. I love the sea, I swim all year round. The light is amazing, so as a painter, I have peace, I have nature, I have the sea.

**Liberty:** Can you live away from the sea?

**Mamakos:** I have. But since I've been living in Greece

for the last 4 or 5 years, I haven't tried it. So it is something that scares me a little bit. Not so much being away from the sea, but not being able to swim. It's something I've been thinking about, because I've been spending more and more time in New York City, and I really miss swimming when I can't swim.

**Liberty:** What should people walk away from your work with?

**Mamakos:** Well, I'm hoping to transfer the idea of possibility. I don't know if I can really say any more. I think that there is a fear, here, of not having possibilities or losing that perspective. Maybe not just here, but anywhere, you can be born into a problem or a situation or a society that feels intractable. And I think that art can be a wonderful way to remind you that, if your situation is intractable, there's the life of the imagination, the life of the mind. There might be possibilities; you might be able to do anything you can imagine, as cheesy as that sounds.



*Making the steel desert scapes for Scape 2007*

into painting, into sculpture, or into printmaking. This is a very limiting process for a creative person. So I feel very fortunate to have worked with a lot of different media.

**Liberty:** What would you tell a young artist?

**Mamakos:** Well, it's one of the most difficult roads you can choose, I think. Of course I'm not a doctor, so I don't know really, but it's extremely hard to find economic reward. It's extremely hard to find support. It's extremely hard to do. But its rewards, in terms of personal creative expression, are enormous. So if it's worth it to you, to be able to create, then sure, it's worth the price; but it is a high price.

**Liberty:** How does art serve a community?

**Mamakos:** Well even with the ancients, there was a very clear link between what is beautiful and what is morally good. So that connection, between aesthetics and morality, is something that has existed for thousands of years.