# Under Erasure

Beneath the Unsettled Sky

Anastasia Mina

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The exhibition is dedicated to the loving memory of Helen Michael.

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## **Under Erasure: Beneath the Unsettled Sky**

"History decays into images, not into stories." Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project<sup>1</sup>

Unsettled like the dust shaken up by many footsteps and still suspended in air. Unsettled like the uprooted or like the crystallisation of history<sup>2</sup> that seems to lie in unreachable places. Memory fades, as do images unprotected from the settling particles of time. Beneath the sun, images are protected by the fold,<sup>3</sup> layers encapsulate the complexity of the world, its unknowability and its fragility.

The work of Anastasia Mina delves into the history of Cyprus from a personal perspective. She uses techniques of printmaking, hand drawing, and digital imaging to intervene on existing photographic archives from her own family's collection. Through this, she is able to extrapolate personal histories and individual memories from the island's troubled past while keeping the subject matter personal. The images she chooses challenge the concept of photography through their non-legibility. Her work grasps at the significance of the image without specificity. This is what makes it relatable not only to the context of Cyprus and to her own family, but to our global relationship with images and history.

Mina's photographic interventions set the stage for a rich reflection on how images contribute to our understanding of events and the building of national and historic narratives. The private and public contain different dimensions that build imaginary stories that reflect on the viewer's own cognizance abstracted from their surroundings. As the artist shifts through the images in her studios she tries to remember stories she heard about events that occurred before she was born - some she remembers and others are lost, only to be speculated about based on who she recognises among the groups of people.

The family album manifests and preserves micro-histories that compliment or dispel grand narratives. They become treasured memories accessible to those who know them, who label, identify, and share the lives of the people who appear in the images. The family album thus becomes an heirloom of secret moments that loses and gains layers of intelligibility from viewership over time. From treasured moments to testaments to history - the evolving status of the photograph reflects our own human temporality. This brings up the exigency of photography<sup>4</sup> - each visage draws up the mystery of the subject - a call to discover who they were, what their role was, and who they may be today. As we peruse Mina's work we may try to identify and form sense out of images that appeal to our own sense of knowing of family, history, and identity.

## Theta

From a distance it could be monochrome. Grey shadows and stains are visible below an even layer of gold. Two figures start to be visible in the centre of an arched hallway. A noble metal shimmers over the surface - a material that never corrupts but protects, adds worth and value, and enlightens the covered subjects to a spiritual level.



Theta, archival pigment print and screen-print on paper, 66 x 104 cm, 2019 (photo credits Mirka Koutsouri)

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 476.

<sup>a</sup> The concept of the crystallization of history developed in Benjamin's Arcade Project. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press, 1999)
<sup>a</sup> The concept of the Fold in Leibnitz was interpreted by Deleuze as the cornerstone of a Baroque philosophy. The Baroque stands against the dualism of Descartes and creates a universe of infinite possibility. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibnitz and the Baroque*, Athlone. 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, pg. <sup>23</sup> (http://www.elimeyerhoff.com/books/Agamben/Agamben%<sup>20</sup>-%<sup>20</sup>Profanations.pdf)

In the Orthodox tradition gold is a symbol of divine light - it was used for centuries in the production of icons to symbolise the transcendence of Christ. Precious platings are added over images of saints in signs of deep veneration all over Byzantium and ancient Rus. This was also a tradition in the Art History of the West, starting with a gold-covered Maestá by Cimabue (1290-1300) which slowly gave way to lighter applications of gold directly connected to celestial rays in Fra Angelico's Annunciation (1426) and finally to the metaphor of light in Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in The Calling of Saint Matthew (1600)<sup>5</sup>. Contemporary artists in Cyprus commonly make use of this material to reference spiritual traditions in art. In 2016, Christodoulos Panaviotou's Untitled made of wood, paint, and gold leaf appears like an abstract geometry of two circles within a rectangular frame - it is taken from the composition of an icon found in the British Museum.<sup>6</sup> The spatial reconstructions of set objects in the work of Haris Epaminonda use large gold leaf foil on the ground to create "Baroque spatiality" full of metaphysical esotericism.<sup>7</sup> The legacy of this material is carried culturally and artistically from ancient times to today.

Gold and light have an intimate relationship - because the light that reflects from subjects into the lens is also what captures their appearance. Light is the medium of photography, photons enter the apparatus, a directional rapture like the lines of light in the tradition of chiaroscuro. A messianic moment frozen in memory.

In the family photograph, this golden tint does not cover a spiritual motif, but a familial one. A genre scene illustrates two women - one upright and one seated in a wheelchair. One is the carer and one is the cared-for. One is from this island, and the other arrived here with the British mission. One is young, and one is old. The woman seated in the armchair was the wife of the British governor in Cyprus. Anastsia Mina's grandmother was her carer - this was considered a privileged position. There, Mina's grandmother worked and earned her living while learning the English language. She told stories to her granddaughter about how British soldiers would pick her up on their motorcycles to take her to work even when other locals were under curfew during times of conflict. These served as short anecdotes to let the girls know to be wary of men and establish the suspicions and power dynamics of the island at the time. Through these stories and memories, the image gains significance as a record of history on the land.

Born around 1929, her grandmother is part of a generation that has seen a lifetime of changes in Cyprus. She grew up under "Palmerokratia" and witnessed the growing calls for Enosis, the achievement of independence and the subsequent civil war. All of these experiences and instability within a lifetime gives a special reverence to the people of this generation who observed this quantity of historical ruptures and events. The photograph transmits the value of intergenerational connections, the relationship between Mina and her grandmother is of a similar age difference to the wife of the British governor - today, the living memories of that generation's character and thoughts is almost completely lost to archival history.

The embodied generational connection reveals the personal and complex relationship between often-abstracted terminologies: the coloniser and the colonised, the western and the eastern, the foreigner and the local, the upper and the lower class, the powerful and the powerless. Yet, this relationship is not defined by antagonism but by life-giving care from the side of Cypriot labour. This is the power of individual photographs, they crumble monolithic narratives and give complexity and proximity to history.

In a geopolitical context where bodies are overtly symbolic, figures appear within complex entanglements of identity. The viewer who looks at the photographs also exerts their own perspective that leads to differences in interpretation. The infinite complexity of understanding, foregrounded by an infinity of possible references makes the image a departure point of myriad stories. Otherness becomes comprehensible through the known - and the most absurd scenarios point back to occurrences of catastrophe, pain, and separation in other areas of the world.

In an attempt to recognise my own unknowing position and to acknowledge the experiences that I bring when visiting this land that feels so close and yet so distant, I read and re-read the words from a parallel decade on the other side of a raging winter sea whose wine dark waves reach distant shores under the same moon, transported by a single current of slow water. And through the prismatic surface of the dry sea, I start to see and to understand an inaccessible story.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> An expanded art historical analysis is included in Àngels Miralda, Louise Giovanelli: Auto-da-fé, Published by GRIMM Amsterdam, 2021. (pg. 12-16)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Christodoulos Panayiotou, "False Form", Rodeo London, 14 May - 18 June 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> As described in Flash Art about Haris Epaminonda, Galleria Massimo Minini / Brescia, 31 July, 2019. (https://flash---art. it/2019/07/haris-epaminonda-galleria-massimo-minini/)

But the Civil Guard advance, sowing flames, where young and naked imagination is burnt out. Rosa of the Camborios moans in her doorway, with her two severed breasts lying on a tray. And other girls ran chased by their tresses through air where roses of black gunpowder burst.

> -Federico García Lorca, from Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard, 1928

#### **Under Erasure**

Under erasure is the English translation of "sous rature" - a term developed by the philosopher Jacques Derrida which means a literal striked through word on a page. This grammatical addition serves to reveal the insufficiency of language and its inability to truly express the reality that surrounds us. No amount of writing, no method of writing, can be equal to lived experience - therefore the act of "sous rature" is to openly acknowledge the truth of futility.

In *Grammatology* (1967), Derrida writes about how nothing about the world points towards a specific word or method of describing it. Many of his terms are developed only through the lens of "sous rature" and cannot be imagined in any other way. This is to write a piece of text while understanding its insufficiency, but to maintain its importance to our construction of the world.

"This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)" <sup>8</sup>

All language is under erasure because it is necessarily an imperfect form, it is untranslatable and perfectly translatable if we can only understand its necessary inadequacy. If we extrapolate from this the idea that an attempt at comprehending the other may be inadequately possible, we also recognise that it is always impossible and entirely possible. An image is not different, in this sense, to a piece of writing. Although photography transformed our relationship with reality since its invention - the image is not faithful to the event.

We can extend the meaning of *Under Erasure* from the word to the image whose visage slowly fades and whose faces become less and less recognisable. The trees and the landscapes of these old photographs slip away through time, through erosion, and social change into new forms - becoming increasingly unrecognisable. The image is useful as long as we can understand its limits. The work of Anastasia Mina plays with the borders of the photograph - it serves as an anchor for the expedited transformations that occur to the image in forms of layering, wear, and the fading of time. These modifications give significance to the image by embellishing them with protective covers which simultaneously erase information. This realisation creates an abstraction of the subject by leaving outlines, suggestions, and incomplete scenarios which can only be interpreted in each viewer's mind based on their own experiences, histories, and identities. The philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote some of the most complete and convincing

<sup>8</sup> Translator's preface pg. Xiv: Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1998.

arguments on the composition of time and history. His concepts of messianic time fascinated and influenced thinkers such as Derrida, who continued to develop and unfold our complex relationship to the past. In his *Theses on the Concept of History* (1942), Benjamin writes that, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." <sup>9</sup>

Inside the buffer zone, buildings lay abandoned and fallen. They are left to crumble as time trudges on. There is nobody left to salvage the contents or stop the decay of history as natural forces take their course. Everything returns to ash, but in Nicosia this is on constant display for all to see. Mina's grandmother grew up in Paphos - far from the line of action - this is the reason why there are smiling faces and that these photographs exist at all. The unnerving backdrop of the island's recent history fades away in the family album where pictures are taken during celebrations and gatherings away from scattered territories. The existence of these photographs also symbolises a lack - Mina has no photographs of the youth of the other side of her family, those photographs were left behind by refugees who fled with only the bare necessities to survive.

This lack of information or gap in the photographic archive is similar to that experienced through family relationships. Family is a cornerstone in Cypriot culture. Unlike the nuclear families of the West, the immediate family may include cousins, aunts, and even more distant relations. This connection spreads not only horizontally, but backwards and forwards in time. The previous generations must be remembered as well as preparations made for the generations to come. Packed away and protected, the photographs become an anchor to stay with the people of the past, to know their faces, smiles, and characters through the bits of information we are able to receive.

Yet, not all information is passed forward. The image serves the purpose of maintaining a silent memory, not one that expresses emotion, desires, shortcomings, or the real essence of the person depicted. Hidden aspects of lives remain hidden and conflict or mystery slip backwards never to be revealed. These considerations are also to be acknowledged - who takes the photograph and when, which are preserved and which are missing, and what moments are culturally acceptable to photograph and which others are lost to the archive.

#### **Metallic Velum Series**

The metallic velum works are an extensive series that repeat the gesture of applying a semi-transparent gleaming surface to enlarged digital prints. The photographs are always selected from Anastasia Mina's own family albums. The increased visibility of the subjects is due to the artist's recognition of the people depicted within them. Apart from *Theta* (2019) several distinct colours are added to images that span decades of historical time and generations of family members as they live, grow, and pass through important moments of their lives.

The act of repetition and seriality are methods which are used in art processes to investigate the core of a subject as well as creating rhythm between works. In this case, since printmaking is the base process of these works, the repetition of exact monochrome applications of pigment are a testament to the quality and precision of the prints. Many things can go wrong in the process of printmaking and the monochrome is the most vulnerable to error. The metallic films therefore must fit tightly and adhere correctly to the surface, the gesture of which embellishes their value even further. It can take many attempts to produce the final image without any defects or imbalances.

This series is relatively legible compared to other works by Mina. The surface gives way to the image and does not disrupt it with opaque interventions. It is only through the movement of the sun and the spectator that the image becomes erased by the shifting direction of light. The viewer can make out the image, but only through a choreographed motion around it, up and down and side to side, to decipher all of the corners of the image. This interplay between light, materiality, and physical space leads to the overarching goal of this series of works, which is to give generously while acknowledging the distance that can never be bridged between us and the pictured subjects.

Pomegranate, I hold one (2022) and All sorts of pomegranates are of a pleasant taste and good for your stomach, (2022) are two nearly identical images composed with the same pinking tone of overlaid metallic ink. The two photographs were taken just moments apart. The same childish face looks around the room while women chatter in the background. The scene is put into motion by the repetition which enlivens the otherwise static subjects.



Pomegranate, I hold one, archival pigment print and screen-print on paper, 50 x 50 cm, 2022



All sorts of pomegranates are of a pleasant taste and good for your stomach, archival pigment print and screen-print on paper, 50 x 50 cm, 2022

In *Mum* (2022) we see a group of young people standing one beside the other that suggests they are having a day outdoors, in a garden, someone's yard, or on a hike nearby to a forest. The image is happy and jolly covered by a beige metallic imprint that nearly covers their identities while revealing their positions within the sunny landscape. This happiness on people's faces is jarring when compared to the historical context of the island at the time when this was taken and the catastrophes of the recent past. The photographs are a testament to the fact that joy is necessary for survival and that making moments for happiness is also a political act.

In *Siblings* (2022), the image is a colour photograph, more recent than other black and white images seen elsewhere. It reveals a child and a young woman standing on a set of stairs. The scholastic dress presents a coming-of-age story while the title suggests that these two sisters are growing up through the local education system, the photograph captures the moment like a rite of passage. Here, the pearl laminate lets the botanical and architectural elements of the building be visible and leave an abstract stroke through the bottom of the image - the subjects hide in the shade from the sun that bleaches the floor adding a second layer of comfort and protection from the shade of the historic building.



*Mum*, archival pigment print and screen-print on paper, 35 x 48 cm, 2022



Siblings, archival pigment print and screen-print on paper, 50 x 50 cm, 2022

#### **Metallic Grids**

The motion of covering an image to protect it and at the same time erasing information and visibility is also part of the series of metallic grids. In these images the people are not all recognisable to Mina, and therefore the coverings become more intrusive, even violent to some degree. The composition of the photograph and group dynamics become more important than the individuals whose exact names she cannot remember. Rather than an even layer covering the entire surface, these works contain precise silver-leaf interventions forming patterns that appear like grids and block accessibility to the depicted subjects while leaving windows that reveal general positions and features of groups of people.

This series does not use gold and other colours, but holds a reliance on silver-leaf as a material that gives this group a cohesive palette. The forms come from doilies that her grandmother used to cover the actual images in her archive - a resourceful protective method using the materials available to her. From the original paper patterns, Mina arranges and collages the forms digitally onto enlarged photographic archives. The digital collages are then hand-transferred in a process of delicately cutting the silver leaf into a patchwork of visibility and invisibility.

The format of the grid speaks of Modernism in itself - Rosalind Krauss wrote a text about the grids of artists such as Reinhardt, Mondrian, and Malevich among others which positions the grid between matter and spirituality. It becomes the modern solution to the loss of spirituality towards the field of the more "rational" twentieth century as a solution to overcome the divide between mind and matter. She writes that "the peculiar power of the grid, its extraordinarily long life in the specialised space of modern art, arises from its potential to preside over this shame: to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time." <sup>10</sup> The shame in this instance is the reticence of the present to acknowledge the spiritual needs that reside within art - here the grid becomes the format of myth-making. "For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."

Krauss mentions the work of Agnes Martin who is a major reference in the development of the grid. Her minimalist paintings defined by their meditative lines in pastel colours have worked this format almost algorithmically, to an exhaustive level of possibility. Her fascination with grids came from the power of its simplicity and its communicative ability. In 1965, art critic Jill Johnston described the grids in Martin's work as "the quiet intensity of a perfectly contained image that moves in and around itself without moving at all." <sup>11</sup>

In Anastasia Mina's metallic grid series, the grid exists on one layer above the rest. Behind it, the image breaks through in several locations, abstracted into pixelated information. It is complicated not only by its contrasting rich materiality, but by its connection rather than abstraction from the world. By placing it on top of a photograph, it is positioned in the place of a window - looking through from one spatial world to a completely distinct one beneath the surface of the grid through the physical act of looking at photography. It is a portal into another time that can never have the clarity of the photograph itself, as information and memory tends to decay, the names of people begin to fade, and the group becomes further unrecognisable.

In this image, the reflective surface of the silver points outwards while the eye strives to understand the shadows beneath. In this contradictory composition with a strong tension. To protect is to lose, to reveal is to squander, and the grid serves the purpose of keeping it all in place.

The subjects of the large-scale work The Sky Hasn't Decided (2021-23), are colleagues and friends of Mina's mother and aunts. The entire group stands together tightly forming a line. The outline of legs is visible in the vertical details best seen in the centre of the composition. The subjects appear to link arms - the grid creates ambiguity within the image that could make the viewer imagine that this group of people are either posing together or making a statement or political protest. Through the obscured faces, the image can only be read through a treatise on group dynamics without access to expression or emotion. Proximity is something that is shared by families as well as groups of protestors. The group forms a line, some have arms raised and the others down, they stand together in unity. One of the most common strategies in political demonstrations is the formation of tight linkages between people to bar access to a specific zone - this use of closeness is shared with the casual positions of group photograph as people line up one next to the other and the photographer asks them to pack in tighter. The physical format of photography congeals the casual laughter of posing together with friends with the togetherness of political action and mutual desire for future outcomes. In this case, their line of friends is captured together by the lens - that winter in Cyprus there was rare snow.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids" (https://culturescontexts.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/krauss-grids.pdf)
 <sup>11</sup> Christopher Régimbal, "Agnes Martin: Life and Work" (https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/agnes-martin/style-and-technique/)

### **Untitled VII**

Layers of blue ink, black graphite, and gold leaf reveal and conceal images as they entangle themselves on the surface of the paper. *Untitled VII*, (2018) originated from images manipulated via digital imaging platforms. The colour of the ink is sourced from images in the original photograph. Behind the nearly opaque layer of ink, hints of an image are still visible. The grid is also present in this work but as a structural device that falls to the background rather than the finishing layer. This is further covered by hand-drawn graphite marks that fill in spaces and voids in an automatic motion of covering.

On the top layer of printed and hand-drawn material, is a delicately applied layer of gold-leaf that appears like an abstract scrawl calligraphically horizontal but evading the meaning of words. This script appeared on the back of the same image - it attempted to form a note but its intention remains inaccessible. Written by her grandmother, who was never taught to read or write, it is an attempt at annotating information without the practice of a writer's hand. The golden scrawl is the first and last element to reveal itself - handwriting in nature, it is illegible to the point of becoming an image. In the loss of communication is a focus on form. The words are indecipherable, but the intent, nevertheless, remains present. The gesture of the indecipherable emerges from a failing attempt at communication, but points, ultimately, to the impossibility of true understanding of history.

Using scale to further abstract language, the billboard-sized script seems almost impossible for a single person to write. The golden value and monumental size gives validity to the humility of countless attempts to write down a story. This piece questions who has the ability to transmit their memories, their stories, and their experiences into history - and how language and image contribute to this task. These giant marks reverse legibility, allowing us to see how writing appears to those who cannot read it, and allowing us to imagine the vast expanse of knowledge that has been lost to history.



Untitled VII, archival pigment print, graphite and gold leaf on paper, 152 x 214 cm, 2018

#### **The Almond Picker**

The motifs that adorn and cover the images of Anastasia Mina's family albums become progressively more complex. Departing from the grid, a new almost marbled appearance covers the surface of this image. In it, a figure is seen standing in a wide open landscape. The title reveals the purpose of the field and the actions of the person involved. Overtop, the pattern is abstracted from the design of a blanket that is still in Mina's grandmother's home. It appears in many of the photographs over the years and has become a symbol of the protective layering over the images which the artist applies.

Mina first made an abstract drawing of the blanket's design and transferred it to a printmaking setup. The floral images repeat in long horizontal columns down a page or soft texture of the fabric. Abstracted yet again into a digital layer, these can be scaled up until it overlaps neatly with the image. The transfer of these elements from one medium to another always creates a loss of information, and in this case the pattern almost becomes an accidental and torn relationship with the paper as if another layer had been stuck on top. Similarly, the photograph itself is torn on one end - but this defect is also included in Mina's valuation and care. The marks of time may erode the information in an image but it becomes no less valuable.

#### **Sandpaper Prints**

The sandpaper prints are a series of works that use techniques of digital printing on the rough material of sandpaper. This tool is an industrial product often used in craft and construction made of either the natural mineral garnet, or synthetic solutions such as aluminium oxide or silicon carbide. These minerals create the rough textures necessary for the job but also contain gleaming edges that sparkle when exposed to light. Through these properties, Mina is able to achieve a reflective effect from these prints in a similar way to the metallic prints but this technique also contains the marked loss of information over time.

Because of the nature of the print technique on sandpaper, it is not a permanent image. Through time, the pigments fade away as chemical reactions produce temporal appearances. The ink is slowly absorbed by the coarse surface through a process of consuming material that lies on its surface. The material travels inwards into the support - therefore the loss of the image is only that which appears to human perception, while the material will always remain. The subtlety of the images printed onto these surfaces is thus coupled with their de-materiality. In a sped-up process of what occurs to every image in the long-run, these contain a limit of obsoletion.



Swimmer I & II, archival pigment print on sandpaper, average dimensions 21 x 29cm, 2018 (photo credits Yoi Kawakubo)



*The Almond Picker*, 30 x 40cm archival pigment print and metallic paint on paper, 2023

& to the burning I say my worry is a whole country.

...

l've been myself longer than my undoing heavy trunk of silverware museum glass polish portraiture of bent flags.

I'm here as my grandparents were only with a moving mouth.

-Anthony Anaxagorou, from "Cause" in After the Formalities, 2019.

**Àngels Miralda** describes her curatorial practice as a secret politics of materiality with the belief that materials contain significance in themselves. The tools of an artist relate their work to the supply chains of industry and historical circumstances of the world. She has organized exhibitions at Radius CCA (Delft), Tallinn Art Hall (Estonia), MGLC - International Centre for Graphic Arts (Ljubljana), Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic (Zagreb), the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chile (Santiago), and the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (Riga). Miralda regularly publishes her writing for Critics' Picks at Artforum (NYC), Terremoto (Mexico City), A\*Desk (Barcelona), and is editor-in-chief at Collecteurs (NYC).

Anastasia Mina is a visual artist whose practice investigates and interrogates historical and political images sourced in personal and press archives. She is interested in dismantling or disabling an image's content to redirect and reclaim its meaning. She works with print media, drawing, text, and installation to explore visual manifestations of identity - culturally specific, politically charged, coded and ambiguous. She holds an MA in Print (Royal College of Art, 2014) and a Diploma in Painting (Athens School of Fine Arts, 2010). She lives and works in London.

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