



Greek mystique: City inspires art

By Steve Bennett - Express-News
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San Antonio photographer Trish Simonite's Dolphin Sea, featuring superimposed spectral images, is part of "The Akrotiri Project" at Trinity University. COURTESY OF TRISH SIMONITE

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Akrotiri, on the Greek island of Santorini in the blue, blue Aegean, is the source of much geologic and archaeological speculation.

One theory holds that the excavation site, buried under the debris of a catastrophic earthquake 3,600 years ago, was the swan song of Minoan civilization. Like the Roman ruins at Pompeii, it boasts well-preserved frescoes, pottery and furniture, as well as advanced drainage systems and three-story buildings.

Another popular theory, perhaps just wishful thinking, is that Akrotiri is the source of the legend of Atlantis.

Such a romantic site long has captivated San Antonio photographer Trish Simonite.

"I've been trying to get there for years, but it is always closed to the public when I go," Simonite says. "This last time, a building had collapsed and killed a British tourist, so they closed it down."

Enchanted nonetheless, and determined to capture Minoan ghosts through her viewfinder, Simonite revisited the Greek islands last summer. She made the series of pictures and photo collages that comprise her exhibition The Akrotiri Project in the Michael and Noemi Neidorff Gallery in the Dicke Art Building at Trinity University. Running through Oct. 8, the show is part of the 2010 Fotoseptiembre USA celebration in San Antonio.

"They are volcanic islands, and there is such a fierce kind of beauty about them, something threatening in the landscape, and at the same time they are very peaceful," says Simonite, an associate professor of photography in the department of art and art history at Trinity and one of the city's foremost photography artists.

In large-scale works such as Dolphin Sea and Octopus Storm, Simonite has superimposed shadowy, spectral images from Minoan artifacts - some from the site of Knossos on Crete, the ceremonial and political centre of the Minoan civilization and culture - over dramatic views of the sea-dominated landscape. These are haunted images in which the past speaks to the present, the theatrical scenery having changed very little in millennia.

"The artifacts are, in a sense, reinserted back into the landscape," she says.

Other, straightforward photographs, such as Door to Nowhere, are more documentary in nature; their geometry tells you there is no other place like this on Earth.

Such is the beauty of the region, with its gleaming white buildings clinging to cliff-sides and numerous Orthodox chapels perched on mountaintops, that some images become abstract expressions of a simpler, more alluring life. A prime example is Steps, Oia, Santorini - an

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off-kilter view of rising white stairs, like crooked teeth or out-of-tune piano keys.

Still others, such as octopuses hanging on a line at a seaside restaurant, simply make your mouth water. "I ate a lot of octopus while I was there," Simonite says with a smile. "It's fabulous food, really, so simple and fresh. I'm crazy about Greek food now."

Simonite is already making plans for her return. All those small chapels beckon her and her camera.

"There are so many of them; families have their own small chapels," she says. "They are amazing buildings. Because a lot of them have been made by hand - hand-formed stucco painted with brilliant white crushed marble paint - they are very sculpted."

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