Underwater swimmers (II) triptych, Maria Filopoulou, oil on canvas 112 x 200cm

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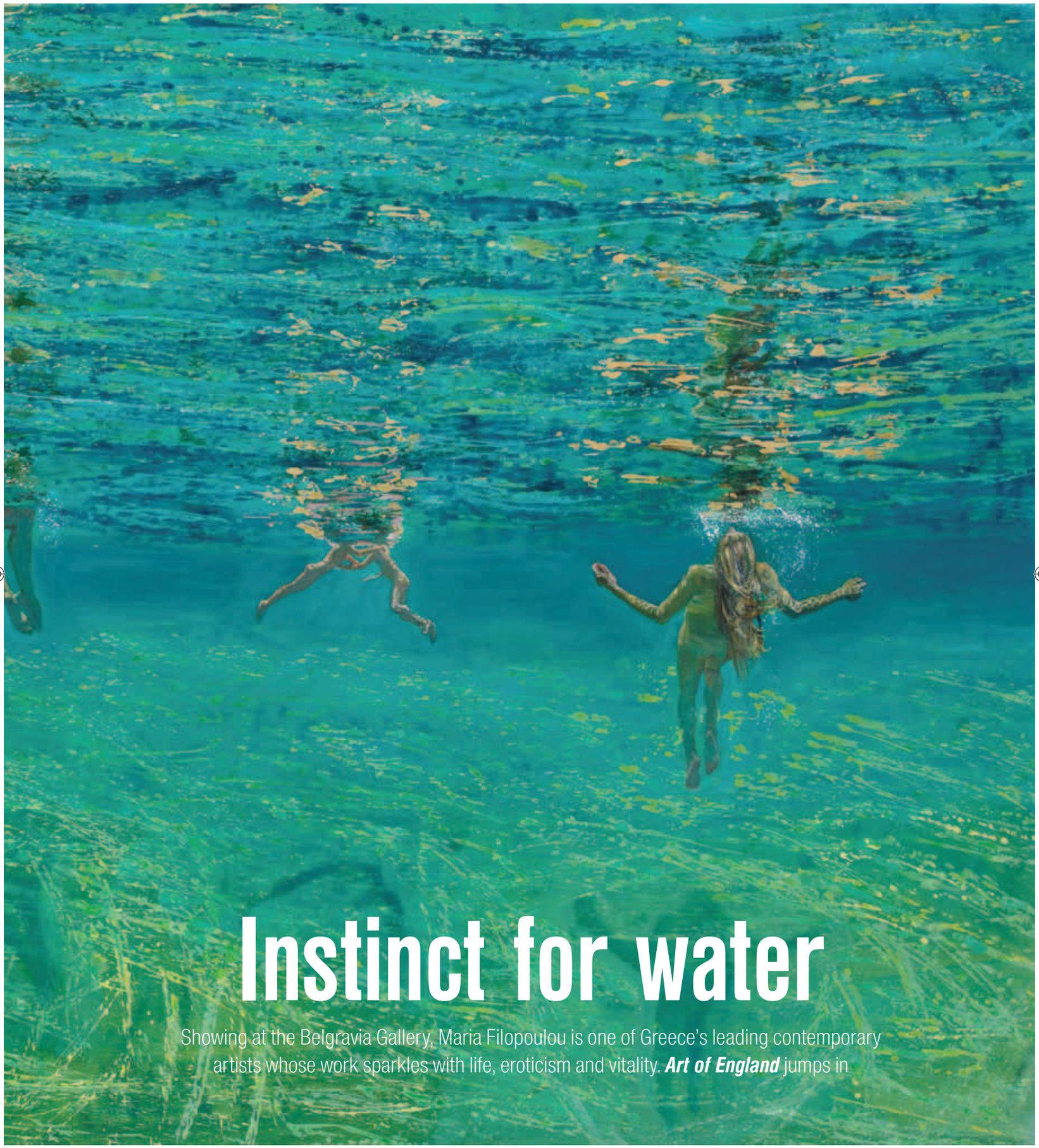

Instinct for water

Showing at the Belgravia Gallery, Maria Filopoulou is one of Greece's leading contemporary artists whose work sparkles with life, eroticism and vitality. ***Art of England*** jumps in

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With Maria Filopoulou's paintings one can feel the water like silk caressing one's legs, the sun on the surface, vitality in the air; oh to dive in and enjoy the pleasure. Breathtaking turquoises, blues and greens congregate, seep and crystalize in her vast watery swirls on appropriately sized canvases. And yet, with all paintings of water and the subject itself, the depths are hidden, the meaning not immediately fathomable.

Maria Filopoulou will be showing 18 large scale canvases at Belgravia Gallery from 15 April to 17 May signifying over two and a half years of work after which Filopoulou will "return to my beloved islands and wait to see which muse takes me."

What is so appealing about her pieces is the complete freedom with which the swimmers move; the nudes have lost their gravity. The strong light and the reflections of the water on the nude bodies, the bubbles and the sand on the bottom of the sea, transform the scene into a dream world.

Filopoulou's paintings have the rare ability to automatically transport you to the Greek beaches where they were first painted, so evocative is the sense of imagery created with the wonderful use of texture and colour; in particular rich emerald greens, cool turquoises, and iridescent blues. The artist's gaze has just happened upon one of these scenes, and has automatically captured the moment so well.

Marina Lambraki-Plaka, Director of the National Gallery of Athens, states: "The monumental scale led Maria Filopoulou to what Monet had discovered earlier: that the image is not confined by the canvas, the frame, but spills out beyond it to radiate in space."

As well as swimmers, Filopoulou also captures the rush of waterfalls in all their powerful glory. She told Greek art critic Margarita Pournara, "I discovered the magic their rushing waters exercised over me, about seven years ago. I first saw

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left:
To The Light, Maria Filopoulou,
oil on canvas, 126 x 155cm

below:
Flow III, Maria Filopoulou,
oil on canvas 90 x 127cm

a small waterfall at Kythera and later, I made my first trip to Samothrace, which is renowned for its falls. It's one more form of the water element. I was beguiled by the power, the force, the sense of salvation. The magic of exploration. To my eyes, a landscape with waterfalls has something extraordinarily beautiful, almost unreal. I feel, in fact, that in putting behind me the serenity and carefree spirit of the swimmers in the sea, and going on to the waterfalls, it is as if I am ready to face my fears."

Maria Filopoulou's motivations

Filopoulou, a Greek painter who trained in Paris has been in love with the sea from a young age. "I am a swimmer and a painter," explains Maria, "I love the Greek scenery, I swim every day in the summer and as much as I can in other seasons, I travel a lot around the various small islands and I am most happy either in the sea or near to it." What gives strength to Filopoulou's work is the light. It dazzles. "I can't work without the strong Greek light, there is nothing like it." Her pictures do indeed dance.

Filopoulou describes them most accurately. "They are scenes of paradise in the lives of people we see in films. Perhaps the well-being, the relaxation, the union with nature, the eroticism people feel in the water, precedes or follows a difficult, unpleasant experience. My view is that our whole existence is a delicate balance between the knowledge that happy moments are precious and that we need to recognise them and appreciate them.

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At the Beach, Maria Filopoulou, oil on canvas, 93 x 190cm

So I paint the borderlines of happiness, isolated from anything that goes before or after. There is no time, only place. I love life and I try to be aware of every day, as it goes by. It may be there that a cultured person can find fulfilment and peace. I myself find happiness, serenity and freedom in nature. It is this sense that I try to transfer with my works."

Who collects Maria Filopoulou's work

Filopoulou's work hangs in The National Gallery, the Greek Parliament, and private museums and collections in Greece and abroad. Marina Lambraki-Plaka says: "Maria Filopoulou, beautiful, ethereal young woman, comes to confirm with her painting what I have always believed about art: there is no male and female expression – there is just good and bad art".

Maria Filopoulou, painter and swimmer

She has held 14 solo exhibitions in Athens, Thessaloniki, Paris and London and has taken part in more than 50 group exhibitions in Greece, France, Belgium, Monaco, London and the United States.

About Maria Filopoulou

Born in Athens in 1964, Maria Filopoulou studied painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts under Professor L. Cremonini during the period 1984-1988. She continued with postgraduate studies at

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the same school with French government scholarship during the period 1988-1989 (lithography under Abrahad Hadad). It was the light that drew her back to Greece. "Of course learning to paint in Paris was a formative time for me, Cremonini was an excellent professor. I loved the museums; returning to the Louvre day after day, but I had such problems with the light. There was such fog in Northern Europe, such a heavy climate, I longed to return to Greece."

Filopoulou did return and began painting interiors and gardens yet not approaching the sea until 1995. "I was afraid to deal with the sea as I didn't want my work to be related to the tourist industry but my personal fixation with the sea and swimmers drove me on. The relationship I have with water is elemental in the extreme." Indeed so inviting are her pieces that the viewer, looking long and longingly enough, can join the image anticipating a splash here and there.

Early into her artistic career Filopoulou only worked from nature but now she comes looking outside while retreating to her atelier in Kavouri near Athens where she paints in series, spending months on each painting and "always scrapping off if I'm not happy. I am a perfectionist and don't easily accept my own boundaries and limitations."

With the help of a little music, Filopoulou paints "until I've got the scene or image out of my mind. I love the process, though it's a serious obsession I am able to be playful with my pieces." Indeed, the appeal of her work lies in the uplifting sense of optimism she creates; viewers are transported visually and emotionally. "I think that the non-Greeks who buy my work are happy to enjoy the light, the colour, the optimism and I hope it enhances their lives and brings them bursts of joy." ■

Maria Filopoulou, Instinct For Water, from 15 April to 17 May at Belgravia Gallery, 45 Albemarle Street, London, W1S 4JL, 020 7495 1010 *www.belgraviagallery.com*

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