

LOST

WORDS

CONSTANTINE

PETER LOST

WORLDS

Our language has no bones

and cannot break bones either (anymore)
it cannot (anymore)
it is a tongue that slips.
a tongue with many *un-*

(un-)

an untongued tongue
a tongue
unuttered
unfathomed
unrecognized
unknown
and unburied
and yet
unsought
unfound

it flows like water
but does not become water,
and if it does become water
it is undrinkable.

Self-translated from Arberishte

*Buzzing Portal
of Syllabograms →
85 x 85cm*





← *Speaker for the Bird*, 30 x 23cm

When a language becomes extinct, it takes with it more than just its words to a silent grave. With it disappear millennia of culture, knowledge, and tradition. Its unique interpretation of our world unravels and dies.

UNESCO warns us that 90 to 95 percent of our world's languages will die by the end of this century. And what are our descendants to expect by the end of the next? The UN reports that one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within decades. And with this ecological catastrophe, humankind will be facing a bleak world, an Armageddon of two or three languages vying for supremacy, moving toward a barren monoculture of one world, one language.

When I was a child, our village in Corinth spoke a language that no one speaks anymore. *Glyúkha egúrteh*, Language of Stone. Also called *Glyúkha ezógut*, Language of Birds, because of its melody, tones, and sounds. I would never have thought that a language could die within a generation. And yet it did. I feel the burden of being one of the last speakers in the community, a terminal speaker. It is for me now a silent tongue: I talk to myself in half-forgotten phrases, as there is no one else to talk to. And if I forget a word, it might be lost forever.

In my artworks, human figures interact with extinct and lost words from Bronze Age Greece. There are explosions of color as these figures—self-portraits in a way—engage with ancient and forgotten Greek hieroglyphs and logograms that appeared over a millennium before the Greek alphabet.

In some cases, we know a word's meaning, but no longer its sound.

In some cases, we know a word's sound, but no longer its meaning.

In some cases, we know neither its sound nor its meaning; all that remains are the silent lines and loops of the hieroglyph cut into stone or clay.

Each of my works is an attempt to reach into and fathom a lost word and hieroglyph: the extinct ancient words are returning to warn us of many more thousand language deaths if our governments and communities do not take action.

HUMANS AND GREEK HIEROGLYPHS



*A language takes millennia to evolve
but can die within a generation.*

↗ *Impaled by Two Lost Words, 93 x 110cm*

Almost everything we know about the Bronze Age women of Greece comes from frescoes, statues, pottery, rings and seals. The women in Minoan frescoes seem emancipated and strong, proud and dressed in finery, while the men accompanying them are usually naked, which has led archaeologists to believe that the early cultures of Crete might have been matriarchal. And yet there is only one Minoan logogram for *woman*, and twenty-three variations for *man*, as well as several unidentified logograms that have legs and arms and are carrying what seem to be swords and shields.

In *First Women and Their Hieroglyph*, two Mycenaean women—one clear in the foreground, the other faded further back—are crouching in the logogram for

woman. The Mycenaeans, who thrived in the centuries after Minoan Crete was devastated by tsunamis, were unbendingly patriarchal. The texts on the clay tablets of their palaces are all about men and their activities. No women had the power and supremacy of Queen Clytemnestra, who murdered her husband King Agamemnon when he returned from Troy and then ruled Mycenae with her lover. In the following works of this section unknown logograms with legs and arms interact—sometimes gently, sometimes portentously—with the human figures who are seeking them out.



↗ *First Women and Their Hieroglyph*, 46 x 60cm

Peter Constantine *Lost Words Lost Worlds*

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