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In Athens, Works from George Economou's Art Collection Take Stock of the 21st Century

Curated by Hilton Als and Ann Philbin, "The Way We Live Now" gathers works from the billionaire's collection to examine humanity's condition through the lenses of connection, politics and being.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 07/27/26 10:48am



"The Way We Live Now" is the first exhibition of holdings from George Economou's collection. Courtesy the George Economou Collection

Greek industrialist and art collector [George Economou](#) built a fortune in commercial shipping before channeling part of that wealth into one of Athens's most substantial private art collections. Notably, he did not come from one of Greece's established shipping dynasties: his father owned a small

paper-products company, and he is probably as close as a billionaire can come to being self-made. He studied at MIT, earning degrees in naval architecture, marine engineering and shipping management, then worked for shipping companies before buying his first vessel in the mid-1980s. In the '90s, Economou began collecting art, initially focusing on early 20th-century European works before expanding into Postwar and contemporary pieces.

"The Way We Live Now"

Artists: Various

Venue: The George Economou Collection

Address: 80 Kifissias Ave. 151 25 Marousi, Athens

Through: March 2027

In Politics, the exhibition considers how our individual bodies move vulnerably through a world framed by politics. Louise Bourgeois's arrangement of two chairs and a mirror asks whether identity is self-defined or produced through the reflections of others. Around it, Henry Taylor's portrait of Haile Selassie examines political leadership, iconography and Black historical memory, while Xinyi Cheng's *Legend of the Mountain I* then links the politics of belonging to landscape, myth and the meaning of home.

The third section, Being, complicates these questions further, highlighting the continuous interplay between the collective and private dimensions of existence while contemplating the threat of spreading alienation and the difficulty of intimacy in contemporary life. Lorna Simpson's *Detroit O to G* layers images of the Detroit uprising, war and environmental catastrophe to present history as fractured and multiple. Katharina Fritsch's two blue men, each absorbed in a cell phone, turn physical proximity into an image of social isolation. Charles Ray's stainless-steel figure closes the exhibition through vulnerability and incompleteness. Like Hammons's rock transformed into a head, Ray's sculpture requires us to imagine and consider what is absent, Als explained during a walkthrough. The works reveal viewers to themselves while tracing how love, politics, memory and estrangement shape the way people live now.



Divided into three sections—Intimacy, Politics and Being—"The Way We Live Now" is a travelogue through the contemporary condition. Courtesy the George Economou Collection

Observer spoke with Skarlet Smatana, who has been at the helm of the George Economou Collection as director since 2012, tasked with contextualizing it within both 20th-century art history and contemporary discourse. The collection has been continuously shaped by Economou's personal sensibilities, even as it has evolved to become a focused institution, she confirmed. Collectors typically pass through several stages, Smatana observes, beginning with a largely instinctive period in which they react to individual works before gradually developing a clearer framework that comes to guide their activities.

Smatana points to a work by the young Wuhan-born painter Xinyi Chen as an example. During a studio visit, she found books on Otto Dix and George Grosz, revealing a direct intellectual connection between the artist's work and the collection's established interest in New Objectivity.



The show was co-curated by Hilton Als, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, educator and curator, together with Ann Philbin, director emeritus of the Hammer Museum and Getty Prize Winner. Courtesy the George Economou Collection

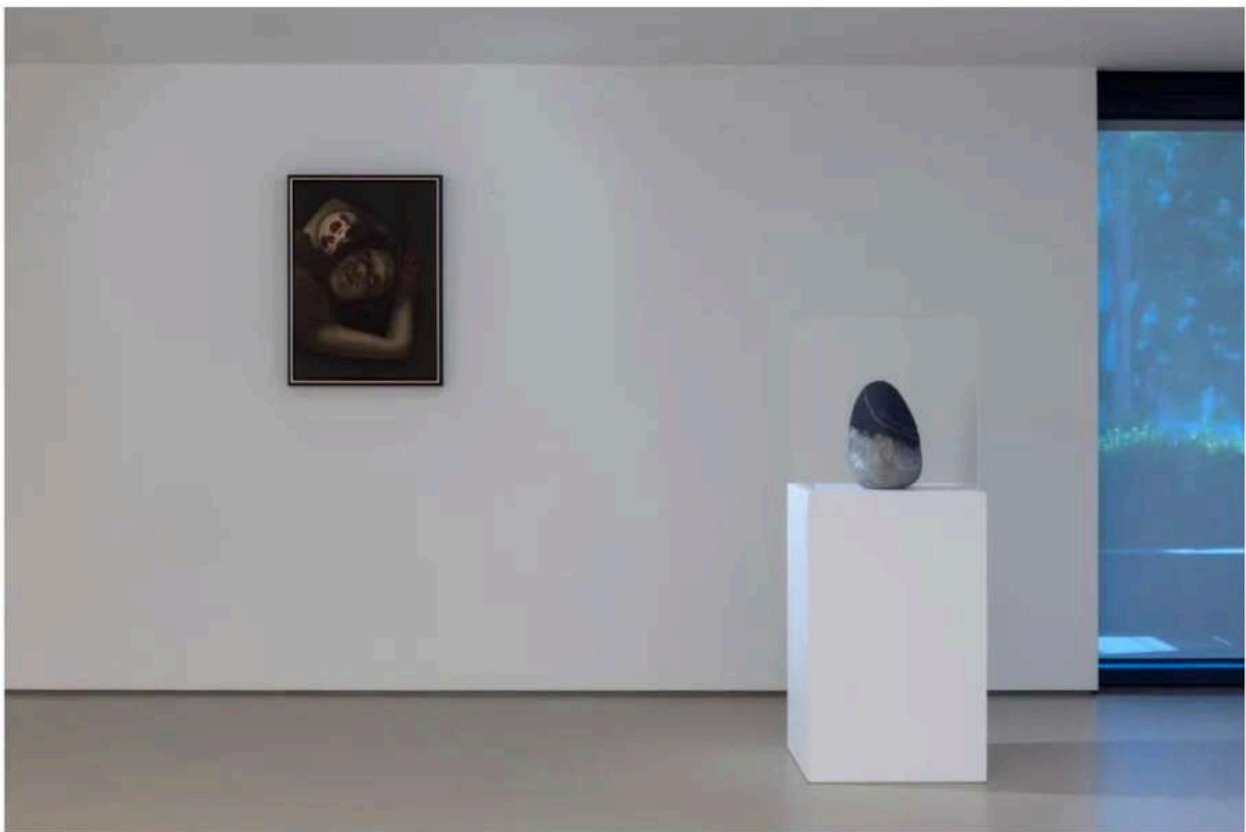
The George Economou Collection tends to favor artists whose work centers on the figure, psychic intensity and the instability of the image as a means of representing the complexity of both personal and collective experience. “The Way We Live Now” presents Economou’s contemporary holdings as a distinct account of the 21st Century. “We wanted to reinforce the collection’s turn-of-the-century focus, which had not yet really been articulated,” Smatana said during the press preview. “We have already lived through more than 20 years of this century, which is a significant amount of time, and we are asking what that period looks like. We then came to the idea of looking at the contemporary part of the collection and inviting guest curators who could encapsulate what is taking place today.”

During the walkthrough, Als pushed further, describing the Economou Collection as an act of faith comparable to the commitment Dominique and John de Menil showed toward artists and their community. In his view, the collection’s diverse works share a desire to reach viewers in intimate ways while remaining inseparable from politics, grief, pleasure and the longing for life. “The works assembled here are radically different in form and content, but they share a sensibility and a desire to touch us in deep and private ways,” he said.

Stylistic and historical continuity and contextualization, however, are not the only criteria. The collection also looks for innovation and for artists whose work contributes something meaningful to contemporary experience. “We are also very conscious of innovation. George is always seeking the evolution of aesthetics,” Smatana says. “I am an art historian, so I keep things within a historical framework, but I am also looking for innovation. How does a work advance our understanding of human existence? How does it move the needle? What is the artist contributing?” Because the collection cannot acquire everything, those questions provide essential guidance for its acquisition process.

There is no fixed annual acquisition target. The number of works acquired varies according to what becomes available and what is happening in the world. Because the collection has developed clear priorities, the goal is to respond quickly, but without acting impulsively. This preparation and careful analysis are especially important for living artists, since an acquisition marks the beginning of a sustained commitment rather than a single transaction.

Smatana says the collection also frequently supports the production of new work, particularly when material costs prevent an artist from realizing an ambitious project: “We see that support as part of the process and as part of our role within the community. An artist may be unable to realize an ambition because of the cost of materials. If that is the only thing preventing the artist from reaching a higher level of production, then we can help.”



The George Economou Collection is located in Athens, Greece, and rooted in history and social awareness. Courtesy the George Economou Collection

The collection's reach and outlook are deliberately international. Smatana travels frequently to Asia and pays close attention to artistic activity beyond traditional Western centers. Yet at the same time, it remains a Greek collection based in Greece—a country that has not always been positioned at the center of the international art world. Asked why Greek art, despite its rich history and the strength of contemporary talent, still struggles to gain greater international visibility, Smatana identifies education as the central weakness. Countries with established art scenes tend to have well-funded schools capable of attracting important professors, visiting artists and educators from abroad, she notes. For that reason, such institutions do more than provide technical training: they create early networks, introduce artists to international conversations and generate the intellectual exchange required for a dynamic art scene.

The George Economou Collection's exhibition program follows the same principle, regularly inviting guest curators from different countries, generations and backgrounds to bring new perspectives to the collection. The institution is also considering how it can contribute more actively to the visibility of Greek artists. Economou now serves on the Board of Trustees of the Athens Biennale, alongside Dakis Joannou, following the organization's major governance restructuring ahead of its 8th edition, which opens in April 2027 and will be curated by Thiago de Paula Souza.

Smatana confirmed that the work to support the Greek art scene will develop gradually through new programs and partnerships, with further initiatives planned in the coming years.