



home coming

hristina panovska documents a return to her macedonian home, 15 years after saying goodbye

by nikki davis

do you remember the first time you actually thought about leaving your parents' house? was it after you were told you couldn't go outside until your chores were finished, or after your parents grounded you for sneaking out to a party?

although these situations are hardly universal, the desire of young people to have a semblance of freedom and control over their lives is. but there's a big difference between having the freedom to leave your house on your own terms and facing the unknown of *having* to leave home.

the latter is the reality in which hristina panovska found herself, and she's documented her experiences in the current exhibition at mahan gallery.

aoma; doma—within, belonging to, home, is a photographic and filmic account of panovska's return to her macedonian birthplace, 15 years and many worlds after leaving. taking advantage of her academic background in architecture, photography and film, panovska has created a personal montage layered in memories, meaning, history and, inevitably, time and space.

born and raised in the town of bitola, just north of the balkan country's southernmost neighbor greece, panovska's family decided to immigrate to the united states in 1989 on the eve of macedonia's 1991 establishment as a sovereign nation. with macedonia's centuries-old lineage—the name itself is europe's oldest surviving—and its long status an independent nation state, the country is a remarkable confluence of the ancient and the modern. and it's against this historical background and panovska's personal re-acquaintance with her native land that she captures the country's shifting identity.

anyone who's ever returned to their birthplace after living elsewhere for years can relate to the conflicting feeling of simultaneously being home and being a visitor; panovska's photos reveal both that familiarity and distance. with various large- and small-scale pictures displayed throughout the gallery featuring urban and natural landscapes interspersed with shots of family members and bitola residents, there's a tangible perception of history and transience.

in *optichari house (kukata vo optichari)*, an elegantly decayed residential building captures a sense of stability against the changes of time, while *graffiti (grafika)*, documents the collision of an emerging international language and culture amidst timeworn architecture.

while the landscapes are appropriately panoramic, it's panovska's interaction with people and her actual home that reveal her connection with her homeland. although panovska utilizes a wide shot to frame *aunt coca (teta coca)*, the juxtaposition of her subject against the backdrop of a large whitewashed building has the effect of drawing in the viewer while also maintaining a respectful distance.

these feelings of rediscovery and reservation, anticipation and uncertainty of what's next, lie at the heart of panovska's short film. located atop a pedestal near the rear of the gallery, a television monitor allows the viewer to witness panovska and her family's return to their country. beginning with the ride from the airport in macedonia's capital skopje, panovska's mother, father and younger sister variously describe their personal feelings about returning home.

through intermittent stops at familiar locations—amphitheatres, churches, graves, waterfronts, relatives' homes and ultimately their own remarkably intact house—their responses vary from surprise to mourning.

even in an age when anyone with the means and access to digital technology can communicate their respective realities, panovska's experiences as a working artist place her in an unusual position. she clearly has the expertise to manipulate or omit the images presented, but she doesn't.

the overall effect is a powerful desire to understand and explore the people and places left behind while gaining closure for the present.

"aoma: doma—within, belonging to, home" continues at mahan gallery through june 24. for call 294-3278.