

“In Istanbul: Contemporary Art in Turkey” *Art Papers*, Winter 1998

Turkey’s unique history starts with the Neolithic era Çatalhöyük, the oldest city in the world, passes through dozens of other fascinating empires and civilizations including hundreds of years of the Ottoman Islamic empire. It finally became a Republic in 1923 thanks to the brilliant Atatürk. From that perspective, fine art in the Western European sense is a minor event. It began here only about one hundred years ago as one aspect of Ottoman “modernization.” Conceptually and technically, though, European academic painting was a major rupture with Islamic art since it depicted the physical world. At first it was mainly practiced by “soldier artists” who painted historical battle scenes. After 1923 independent artists flourished, but only in the last twenty years have Turkish artists been prominent internationally. At the same time, the intricate abstract traditions of Islamic art, particularly in tiles, as well as the centuries old village-based symbolism of mother goddesses, ceramics, carpets and kilims, are again an aspect of cultural consciousness. Contemporary artists have a choice of looking East or West, or of combining both traditions.

Turan Erol, an artist who first emerged in the 1950s with roots in tachisme, the European partner to American abstract expressionism, had a major retrospective at the Milli Reasürans Art Gallery (October 19 – December 11). While all of the works are landscape abstractions based on Turkish themes, the most imposing by far was the large Ağrı Dağı, based on a mountain in Eastern Anatolia near Lake Van. In this painting the surface and color were as compelling as the subject. In most of the exhibition, the artist alternated between flat abstractions with both Eastern and Western characteristics, and landscapes using linear perspective. Devrim Erbil, a well-known professor of art at Mimar Sinan University (which is the oldest art school in the country) achieves, in contrast, a resolved synthesis of Western abstraction and the indeterminate space of Islamic tiles and miniatures in his elegant paintings (Galeri Binyıl October 1999). The energy of these predominately blue and white paintings (the blues are directly from Islamic tiles) is entirely different from the dynamism of Western abstraction or the more settled meditative quality of Eastern mysticism. The imagery moves with a rhythmic flow that is self-enclosed, there is no single focus, no climax, no resolution.

The next generation of artists currently showing in Istanbul, are firmly international and clearly embracing Western modernism and postmodernism. Gidiş-Dönüş (Round Trip), curated by Beral Madra, for the Borusan Art Gallery (November 12 – December 11) featured four Turkish artists who are living permanently in another country. Osman Dinç has lived in Paris for years and is a Professor at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. His elegant glass and metal abstractions refer to gravity and the rotation of the earth. Dinç defies us to identify his work with Turkey. His carefully constructed sculptures, using modern materials, invoke time and space in the most classical modernist sense, and clearly are part of the constructivist traditions of France and Germany. Ahmet Oran, based in Vienna, showed almost monochromatic abstract paintings. Plastic body shapes by Azade Köker, a Turkish artist who is currently living in Berlin, address the familiar idea of the manipulation of woman’s bodies by the fashion industry.

Şükran Aziz, a conceptual artist who now lives in New York City, created a piece about memory, something that is so much a part of emigration, but also life in general. In a room filled with blue light, oversize tea balls on long wires contained tiny speakers that played the memories of about thirty-five men and women speaking in English, Turkish, or French. The memories serendipitously included traumas like being struck by lightning or moments of joy like eating a fish lunch in the sun. As we strained to hear them, these voices triggered our own memories, which in turn became part of the experience of the piece.

With the exception of Şükran Aziz, the other artists in this exhibition base their work on familiar modernist and postmodernist premises and materials. They represent one option for contemporary Turkish artists- to chose to move permanently outside of Turkey and to immerse themselves completely in Western traditions. Many of the artists I have met here have chosen to return to Istanbul after living abroad. Others have chosen to continue to work with identifiable Turkish characteristics in their art even if they live abroad most of the time.

That option is the choice of Selma Gürbüz, a Turkish artist who lives in both Paris and Istanbul. She draws on and redefines the carpet traditions of Anatolia. Her exhibition at the French Institute of Istanbul was a two person show with Christine Khondji., a franco-Iranian writer, artist, and scholar of Islamic art. Gürbüz’s amazing carpets, which she calls “Contes à toucher” (stories to touch) are woven in Konya, a city in Anatolia that is still famous today for carpet weaving. These carpets are made of wool, spun by hand and woven in a technique used only for carpets intended for personal uses such as beds, but in the exhibition they were all hanging on walls for obvious reasons.

Fantastic human/animal motifs such as a fish man, a lion man, or a dragon with seven heads inhabit the carpets, imagery that Gürbüz says the Anatolian weavers had no trouble understanding as they link to local traditions. The figures invoke eroticism and black humor. The exhibition included metal cut out wolves, hanging from the ceiling, and reflecting on the walls. The artist also produces ceramics, chandeliers and other types of objects, all populated by her benevolent but slightly sinister menagerie. The joint factor between these two artists was an interest in a fifteenth century Uyghur painter, Siyah Qalam, who depicted demons and half human giants and

cannibals in miniatures. Khondji's drawings depict childlike monsters in a scrawling stream of consciousness style.

Finally, another variation on the international character of Istanbul is that many artists from Western Europe and the United States have chosen to live here. Dimitri Tzamouranis from Kalamata, Greece, lives in Berlin, but spent six months here this year and held an exhibition in December at the BM Contemporary Art Center (also under the auspices of Beral Madra who is by far the most internationally active curator in Istanbul.) Tzamouranis is an artist of the late nineties for whom nothing is sacred or serious: he undermines the pretentiousness of art and laconically exposes its link to commerce. He amusingly turns the traditional abstract expressionist scrawl into a messy flowchart on the economics of business and tourism.

The main feature of the exhibition was *Die Flut* (The Flood). The film was made before and after the earthquake here. It is both a parody and a fairy tale of contemporary art and tourism, among other topics. Opening with the "genius" artist living in a factory with some friends, it includes a fabulous performance by Albrecht Hirche that hilariously took off from Jackson Pollock's bad boy side. After the earthquake, the artists look at the destruction, and then escape on an "archeological" cruise that proves to be as ridiculous and pseudo histrionic as the art life they left behind. There is no substance in this world, only shallow imitations of life and death. Even ritual death is a meaningless act with no feelings or conviction.

So what does all of this tell us about Istanbul and its art? Islamic and Anatolian historic traditions provide one basis for contemporary art here, along with Western European academicism, modernism, and postmodernism. In addition, there is now also the nomadic artist who exists in a detached and ironic meta culture linked by cyberspace. Life in the late nineties provides many competing impulses, but the international character of Istanbul itself and its position as a link of Asia and Europe, of East and West, of centuries of history and contemporary life, continues to be the most important fact for artists working in this city.

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