

## On Trends: Where Does Turkish Art Stand Today?

*The article Has been published on [www.turbulens.net](http://www.turbulens.net) with images of works of the mentioned artists. The part of the article has been published in the exhibition catalogue *Fokus Istanbul: Urban Realities*, Martin Gropious Bau, 2005. The part of the article on the artists have been published in *Tema Celeste*, 2006 issue 141.*

The need to define and evaluate in concrete terms has been a necessary and sufficient aspect of language and culture. I would like to start by focusing on the question of where Turkish art stands today and how it articulates itself. Is there a real need to have strong, concrete definitions or is it advisable to use familiar terminology in order to understand the context? How do large exhibitions function in constructing the perceptions and evaluations of a local art? How does this influence and affect the local art scene?

The title chosen for this essay poses several questions beyond its primary formulation – asking where Turkish art stands today – namely, how it should be evaluated on a global scale and which are its specificities. Is it possible to outline a concept of regional or geographically defined art and, if so, how? Moreover, talking of trends with regard to large exhibitions, one should take into account that the artists selected to participate become increasingly ‘mainstream’ as opposed to those who have not had this opportunity.

Large-scale exhibitions have a strong impact on a given local scene and the production of works, and Turkey is by no means an exception. Specifically, it could make sense to evaluate the focus on Turkish art and the local art scene in terms of searching the unknown. After the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe has been prone to a sort of confusion and a lack of orientation in the broader sense. Hence, Scandinavia and the Balkans have been the most interesting territories to research and evaluate. Turkey, as a geographically distinct territory that has witnessed countless catastrophes and social conflicts, has equally become a subject of reflection in many art works. In Turkey, under the devastating rule of the state machinery, the very foundations of existence were constantly endangered and art could therefore not be left unchallenged. This produced a specific dynamics of rupture and continuity. Turkey gained a more prominent position on the cultural map, legitimising itself in different ways. The dynamics of the country- the perseverance of its cultural protagonists and the historic background-, on which the works of the youngest generation articulated them, has a major effect. The artists that will be mentioned all share the similar gratitude of qualities that are often subordinated to an underlying narrative, via using different methods and approaches.

Ahmet Ögüt, one of the influencing young artists, brings the diversity of specific local determinations which appear to take place in a particular time and space relationship. Ögüt’s production of art and its patent subjectivism is anchored through the significant role of the media to construct and manipulate reality, thus he employs the images of events that appear in the daily digestive methodologies such as newspapers, television, and recaptures those images in a totally different frame. In his work titled *Coloring Book* which has been co-produced with Sener Özmen, the images of the circumstances taking place in the east part of Turkey has been selected and brought together in the form of a coloring book. The images represented in the coloring book addresses itself to the audience that is first asked to witness and interfere and at the same time questioning its underlying position and manipulation. His latest work titled *the book of the lost world* which comes in a three dimensional fairy tale book format is sequel to the coloring book. Through the pages of his latest work, the layers of the collective memory and its represented state is being displayed in simple drawings, while concentrating attention on the diversity of its determinations which appear to mark a certain narrative. The pictorial narratives are brought to the forefront in the works of Ögüt in a variety of ways, through using mediums that actually appear and used in for different concepts. Ögüt’s works not only appear as a documentation of a specific geography and history but also display a critical stance against what is actually taking place: The patriarchal society as a strikingly “non-anonymous” society, a society based on attributive-subjective, personal participation in historical processes. Therefore, not only does this art reveal some specific, local obsessions and phantasms: in its imagery, we clearly recognise signs of the current global paths of civilization.

With the neo-liberal economic state policy of the 1980s, the affirmation of local conceptual art praxis was connected to the simultaneous breakthrough of the contemporary art scene within the realm of emerging social conflicts. The orientation of art towards sensitive social themes and their positioning in the media moved it closer to the centre of a new cultural hegemony. Exposure to the completely different brutalities of a transitional economic order helped to produce a tension where all possibilities are still open. The amalgamation of traditional pastiche affirmed anarchy as opposed to all authority, thereby drawing lucid

parallels between the totalitarian systems of power and the representative models of modernism.

Erinç Seymen, produces his work in a variety of mediums and mainly painting, interrogates through a variety of phenomena and brings out a criticality on the aspects he puts out to be envisaged. He employs and addresses the aspects of sexuality, childhood, family, the marginal through depicting the uncanny relationship between the person and the society, the machinery of devastating rulings. His work titled Symbiosis displays two separate self-portraits, tied together at the skulls with a sticky organic substance, a representation of an interaction between two or more adjacent but distinct organisms. The implication in the painting and its title not only reproduce the preoccupation with the sense of the self but also marks the fracture that opens the body of the so-called undividable unit of the individual. On the one hand, Seymen employs and positions himself in his production; on the other hand, he applies his line of thinking that is based on notions of situation and context, namely the otherness, and its technologies. The dichotomies are revealed and examined in precise contextualization.

Global and local disintegration of moral values on one side and the significant role of the media to construct and manipulate reality on the other side have functioned mutually, so that the production of art and its patent subjectivism is anchored in the authentic and in fundamental characteristics of art.

The decay of grand narratives and ideologies, the loss of a meaningful social perspective, and the impossibility to think the totality of the world are accompanied by an enormous concentration of fragmentary identities. Also the internationalisation and expansion of meaning enshrined in an unfathomable multitude of "small historicalisations" of the non-narrative constructs. Sefer Memisoglu goes through these notions and brings out visual aspects of the activities that are taken from our immediate vicinity and everyday environment, the activities that are creating their own logic, poetry, or development of events. His video work Untitled evolves around the well known specificities and abstracted visualizations are given close-ups, manipulated and given a new character, but at the same time remain completely recognizable. Not only the constructed is put to test but also the familiar background phenomena are reconsidered, revived, reactivated, and re-deployed.

The ineffability of meaning, the impossibility of analysing or establishing it, deeply compromises the culture of narration, which relies on the original nature of verbal languages and thus opens up a space for additional arguments in favour of the evident domination by the culture of the image and its fractal nature. With the need for concrete historical identification, there is a shift from local obsessions regarding national salvation to a desire for the fastest and most encompassing connection. The production in Turkey could only gain a presence as a belated consequence that the site of imagination mostly situated political and historical conditions as meta-political and meta-historical. The populist discourses dominating the cultural domain have been influential on the production of art works and a style of following trends.

Besides the follow up of the populist discourses Elmas Deniz, Osman Bozkurt, Ekin Saçlıoğlu produce works on other various dynamics. Elmas Deniz, artist and one of the founders of an artist run space K2 in Izmir, realizes installations of drawings, carvings and video works, in which she not only questions the site-specificity of the exhibition places but also the accessibility of various themes. Her work titled Unrealized Journey consists of two-series of sketches that have been copied from encyclopedias. Each image having its own narrative is copied the preliminary sketch papers in black and white. The first series are based on the intimate journey that is taken by the self; and the second series are composed of images that glorify technology and the notion of evolution, in other words the modeling of the idea of evolution that is presented. Deniz questions the relationship that has been constructed between man and machinery by making references to their layered historical conceptualizations as well as underlining the relationship founded between the image and its positioning. This intention can be evaluated as a way to posit a direct connection between the images selected from history and the re-established aesthetics. In this scenario, the introduction of the common acknowledgement serves to ground the narrative in the artist's intention, in such a way that it makes the intimate bond between its presence and its referencing serve as an unassailable foundation for the images being presented.

Osman Bozkurt, brings out the fragility, consequentiality of daily circumstances and cultural patterns, through video works and photography. His work titled Rest in Peace is a scene shot in a grave specially made for a religiously glorified persona. The image not only recalls the fact of the ritual taking place, that is to say its continuously being visited but also the highly internalized condition of the dead. The keeper of the grave resting beside in total comfort not only displays how death is positioned in society and social life but also the extreme condition of being associated with the no-longer alive.

Besides the specificity of the geographical context, Ekin Saçlıoğlu works on the medium of painting and its aspects, questions the painting as such. The brought about togetherness of the appearances in her production is full of life, energy and strength abstractly dealing with a variety of subjectivities and a variety of subjects.

The togetherness gradually gives physical density to the gaze of the audience, while the artist calls for reflection and awakens the interplay in the sense of non-verbally, non-text based connotations, and instead grown out of something that the viewer can recognize and identify as a reflected narration. Saçlıoğlu enables an interplay that creates unexpected angles of approach which in turn force the viewer to take up a new position in their approach to painting and its content.

The production of art has been shaped by the facts that I have tried to outline – and the more the artists performed their intention to re-evaluate those facts the more they have received recognition on a global scale. Lastly, the present moment can no longer be defined concretely; the special relativity of each work of art and the artist cannot be categorised, mapped, and charted; that is to say linearity has lost its meaning and functionality.