

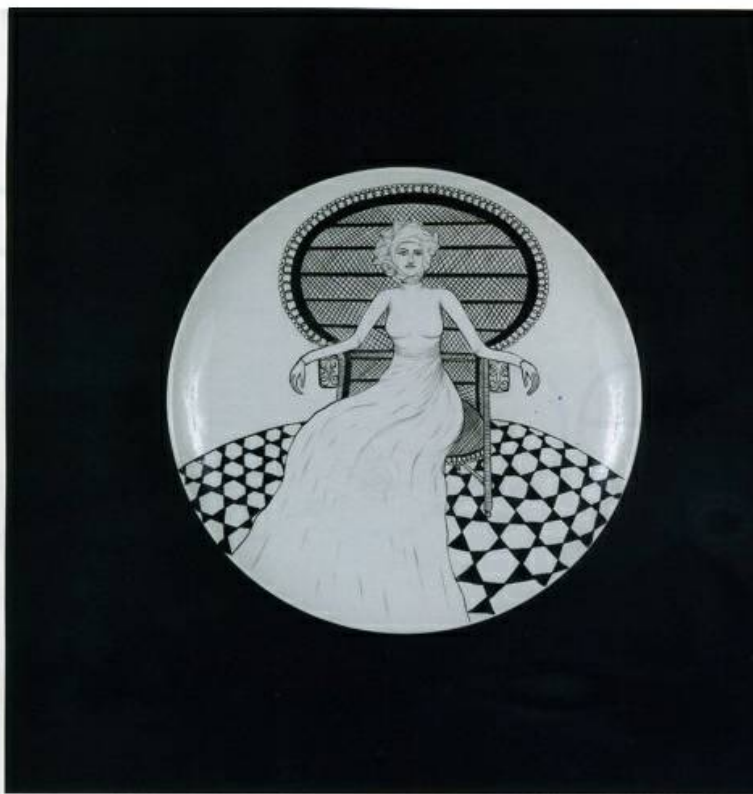


Elif Uras
profile, *Canvas* magazine
January/February 2010

profile

Opening spread: (Detail) *First Belly*, 2009.
Iznikware, polychrome underglaze on fritware.
60 x 30 cm diameter. Private collection.
Facing page: *Oiva*, 2009. Iznikware, polychrome
underglaze on quartz. 31.5 cm diameter.

The artistic journey of Turkish-born artist Elif Uras saw her stop off en route in the worlds of law and economics, but today she is producing works of profound insight and accomplishment.



TEXT BY CHRISTOPHER LAWRENCE
IMAGES COURTESY OF GALERIST

Elif Uras and I spend a cold Manhattan morning in her cavernous studio where a roaring heater and cups of Earl Grey tea supply warmth. "Well, I don't sit in front of the canvas and wait to be inspired," she says, chuckling when asked about the basis of her work. "I read a lot, I listen to a lot of news; I follow what's going on in the world. That's what inspires me." Her studio is a raw, but very comfortable, creative refuge that she shares with her gregarious dog, Socrates. Outside, just down a darkened staircase, New York City's Chinatown is vibrating with all manner of commercial and cultural activity. "I try to work daily for eight or nine hours," she says. "I come here, read the paper, walk the dog and get started." The location is not incidental. "I like the energy here," she says, contrasting Chinatown with artists' enclaves around the city. "It's not just warehouses with no one on the street. I always joke that I needed another level of alienation and so put myself into this neighbourhood, which feels like another country."

If Chinatown is another country, it is Uras's third. Turkish-born, she has been living in the USA for almost two decades; first at university and as a graduate student, then, for most of the last decade, as a painter working to growing international acclaim on canvas, on paper and with ceramics. And while it would be quite wrong to think of her as an émigré (of late, she has spent as much as a third of each year living, working and showing art in Turkey), New York is now her primary base. As we chat, she has just returned to the city, back from prowling London's museums and galleries. Uras is loose-limbed, with

a charmingly nervous instinct for kindness and hospitality. In the dimly lit studio, she seems aglow with *Art in America's* assessment of her recent show at Galerist in Istanbul. *Panorama Pasajı* (Panorama Arcade) drew conceptually and even stylistically from the critic Walter Benjamin's exploration of the architecture and spectacle of 19th-century capitalism. At Galerist, Uras's "discerning whimsy" had produced paintings that were "complex and thought-provoking," while the sculpture

that concluded the show was "a technical tour-de-force." High praise indeed from the famously rigorous journal. Whether in New York, Istanbul or beyond, Uras has arrived.

The Jacksons begins:

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Going back and forth. I think there are very separate spheres of influence. And I like it like that, because any kind of label, well... there are a lot of limitations with that." Uras's feel for different cultures and her ability to move knowingly through them is the product of a long education, formal and otherwise. She was born in Ankara, while both her mother and father were working as economists for the Turkish government. With the easing of state planning in the 1980s, her parents entered the private sector and the family moved to Istanbul. Uras attended an American school in the city before leaving for Brown University in Rhode Island. She began her time there with the university's

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famous introductory course, Studio Foundations, and sought out classes at the adjacent Rhode Island School of Design, but was reluctant to pursue art as a possible career. "At the time, it wasn't that common to go to the USA for college and it was a sacrifice for my parents," she says. "So it was hard for me to justify majoring in art. I felt I had to have a profession, a job. But art was always at the back of my mind..."

It would have to wait for a lengthy but ultimately crucial detour. After finishing at Brown, Uras found herself in Upper Manhattan, at Columbia University's very distinguished School of Law. A deepening uncertainty about her career path did not prevent her from pressing on with law, nor from travelling to Cambridge University for a year spent reading economics. Her studies "taught me ideas and how to read and how to think," she remembers. "But throughout, I took art classes." And so, after finishing her legal studies, she finally heeded the call to painting – first at New York's School of Visual Arts and then back up at Columbia, where she returned to take her Master of Fine Arts degree. As we talk at the other end of Manhattan, she can now embrace the breadth of her entire education. "I had a long, winding road into the arts," she says, a little wearily. "But that experience informs the ideas and themes behind my work. If I'd gone to art school at a younger age, I wouldn't really have known what to do with it."

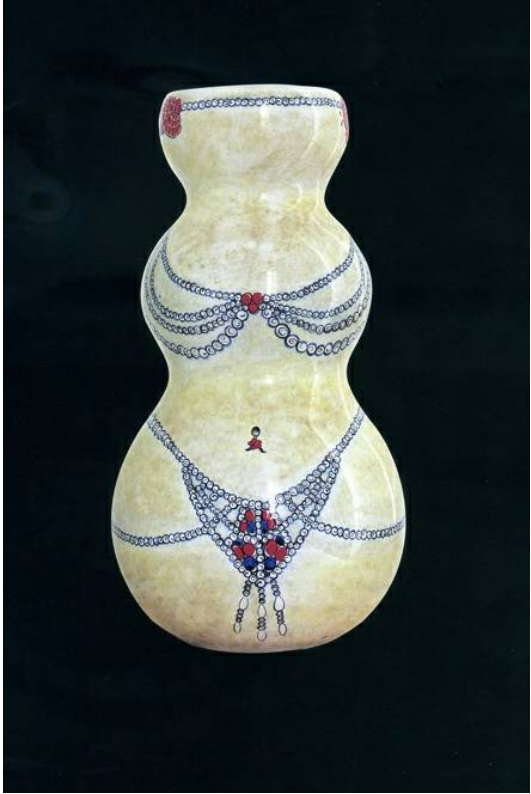
The politics, economics and critical theory of Uras's scholarly background and her studio mornings spent with a stack of newspapers energise work that is distinctly the product of a bicultural experience. From the outset, her paintings

explored issues of consumption, exploitation, gender and sexuality, and the interpretive gulf between the two worlds she had known. 'Occidentalism' became an important early concept for Uras: an inversion of Edward Said's *Orientalism* critique of the dreams and distortions of the East produced by Western scholars and artists. Often conjuring a surreal, eroticised vision of Western – and particularly American – hyper-consumerism, her paintings satirise what she calls "the Eastern perception of Western wealth and consumption as being the root of all evil." Uras is remarkably unassuming in discussing her goals. "I'd like to think of my work as having some social critique," she says with a shrug of the shoulders, yet, "I really don't want to make any judgements one way or another." The painter and printmaker Otto Dix is a beacon of inspiration, but even allowing for the bleak emptiness of Dix's Weimar Germany, the differences between them are significant. Uras's paintings are marked by humour and an essential human generosity. Uras is much more interested in playing with social political and economic folly than in condemning any particular culture or viewpoint, noting that, "I kind of like things being more ambiguous and open-ended." Again and again during our conversation, Uras uses the pronoun "we", regardless of whether she is discussing her place in American or Turkish society.

Deconstructing the Landscape

Turkey is very much in evidence in her technique, which touches on her cultural heritage even as it departs for some other place. "Pictorially, I'm influenced by Islamic miniatures and their flattened spaces, but I'm also combining and integrating it with this overly exaggerated perspective, because Islamic art

Previous spread: *Kapital*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 209 x 183 cm.
Facing page: *Great Divergence*, 2008. Oil and moulding paste on canvas, 180 x 150 cm.



or traditional Turkish art doesn't have a very developed sense of perspective. It's usually very flat, so I try to push perspective and distort and exaggerate it." While that applies broadly, she is referring specifically to *Kapital*, the bilingually funny look at the financial crisis that became the showstopper at Galerist. The idea, she says, was to "create a space beyond what you can perceive normally, or through any other medium besides painting." A look at the vanishing carpet of world currencies and undulating skyscrapers pulls the viewer deep into the picture and the spiral of disappearing value(s). Meanwhile, trophy wives and skyscrapers share space with an evil eye motif, harpies and snakes, all drawn from non-Islamic traditions that circulated within the Ottoman Empire. Uras, who has in the past worked on wood panel or even aluminium, is now known for her use of a sanded moulding paste on canvas. It is a rigid and unforgiving surface, which deprives her of some flexibility but yields a ceramic-like quality. "It's challenging, with no room for mistakes," she says. "You really have to play with the paint, but it's all there." In the case of *Kapital*, nearly four months of continuous work yielded a Marxian economic analysis – in a dazzling, vertigo-inducing two dimensions.

Uras's recent trip to London was not merely a holiday. The primary purpose was to explore inspiration for her recent work in the traditional Ottoman ceramics of Iznik. The style is

Previous spreads
 Left: Eurasian Bely 2008. Iznikware, polychrome underglaze on quartz, 60 x 30 cm diameter.
 Right: Island Bely 2008. Iznikware, polychrome underglaze on quartz, 60 x 30 cm diameter.
 Left: Black and Blue Bely 2009. Iznikware, polychrome underglaze on quartz, 37 x 30 cm diameter.
 Right: Pearl Bely 2008. Iznikware, polychrome underglaze on quartz, 60 x 30 cm diameter.

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named for the Anatolian city that served as a trading centre during the Ottoman period and produced exquisite pieces and patterns for the sultans. A substantial part of her year is now spent following the practice and working to renew the relevance of a tradition that had been devalued in the Turkish Republic's push to modernity. "It's easier to see good Iznik in the West," she notes. "There's a lot at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] and I saw a lot at the Victoria & Albert [in London]. In some ways, it's more valued than here."

Making ceramics and painting on them has altered every aspect of Uras's working life. "I always wanted to somehow move my imagery from two dimensions to three and I always wanted to work with porcelain. It's such a strong tradition in Turkey and when I got this opportunity, it clicked." The discipline and focus required for the intricate brushwork has sharpened her conceptually as well

as compositionally. "Being able to work in Iznik has made my paintings a lot deeper," she says. "I realised that I need to put more time into them and it's a really layer-by-layer process. The Iznik work and the patience that entails made me look at my painting differently." It also makes her show differently and has shifted the context for her canvases. The two media now work in concert: "I would like to show my paintings with my sculptural work. They relate to one another. And, of course, in the ceramic work, I'm starting to incorporate even more drawing and painting." There's a fabulous intricacy to the painted elements, while the hourglass forms they adorn are increasingly anthropomorphic and even erotic. But beware the gentle curves of the vessels, adorned with their belly-dancer

outfits composed of traditional motifs. Uras tends to slip in sets of eyes that gaze out at the viewer. It is a slyly effective device for shaking up daydreams of a passive female sexuality.

Being Out

"I am pretty much used to it," she says, downplaying the demands on her and the challenges of travel and of the various worlds in which she circulates. The London trip will turn out to be a precious opportunity for Uras to recharge for 2010 that will demand even more movement. Not quite a week after our meeting in New York, she has been announced as a member of a group show, *Survey of Contemporary Art*, at Quadro Fine Art Gallery in Dubai, running until late January. In spring, her work will be featured prominently in the book *Unleashed: Contemporary Art From Turkey*, due from Britain's Ikon Publishing. In addition to time spent working in Iznik, she will also be the subject of another solo show in Istanbul's Beyoğlu, this time at Galerist's new Tophane space.

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Finally, in November 2010, there will be collaborative piece for a group show at Pratt Manhattan.

"I think it's something I embrace now," says Uras of her ability to move and adapt. "It's sometimes difficult to adjust back and forth, but I don't think I could do one without the other. It would be very hard for me to just leave here and go back there or vice versa." Socrates is beginning to look a little restless and I surmise that they will head downstairs for a visit to Chinatown not long after I do. For all the excitement of her career and plans, Uras maintains her light touch as she sidesteps the idea that she is special. "In a way, a lot of artists are pretty much world citizens, able to live in different places and to produce work where they are. And also maybe," she says with a grin, "to get influenced by local culture and politics. I welcome that." ☺

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