



Modern Painters
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Talking Turkey

Two generations of artists question their national, and international, identity. by **Berin Golomu**

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CONTEMPORARY Turkish art has come into its own. An essay by the scholar Ahu Antmen in the recently published *Unleashed: Contemporary Art from Turkey* (Thames & Hudson, 2010) states that after two centuries in which Turkish artists looked to the West for new developments, one can now claim that the Western art establishment is looking to Turkey, as well as other parts of the Middle East, for a sense of what is to come. And in the country itself, despite the growing pains that have accompanied its advances, the rapidly expanding population and economy have fostered a new generation of art collectors dedicated to supporting Turkish artists and heightening their profiles abroad.

Artists have played an essential role in moving Turkey's democratization forward, often acting as the country's conscience. The politics of representation is a delicate topic in Turkey, and many artists take significant risks in flouting censorship to counter socially sanctioned norms as well as to question state-sponsored historical narratives about national identity. Questions of representation are also complicated when Turkish artists present their works abroad: They either face prejudice because of their background or are expected to correct inaccurate notions about their culture through their work. The artists discussed here each push the boundaries of what it means to claim the identity of a Turkish artist.

Some of the most powerful work in Turkey is being made by women, and the mid-career artist Inci Eviner is among the most accomplished of that group. Born in Ankara in 1956, Eviner combines drawing, painting, silkscreen, and video in elaborate compositions that address gender relations and cultural differences in a postcolonial context. At play are the power dynamics that accompany desire. The psychological subject matter she explores deals with the formulation of personal identity in relation to cultural, ethnic, and religious differences. As if in an effort to highlight the fabricated nature of selfhood, she is constantly tearing down the borders that delineate individual forms, as well as those that separate

aesthetic traditions, media, and most important, the self from the other. Half-animal, half-human figures painted in black and white ink commingle with silkscreens of segmented body parts that morph into lush floral patterns. The thick vegetation that winds through Eviner's works often evokes the exotic foreign setting of the colonialist imagination.

Nouveau Citoyen, 2009, a three-channel video installation in the permanent collection of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, compares three Eastern and Western colonialist patterns commonly found in textiles and on ceramics and wall tiles. Sections of each turn into animated women's faces and forms, some of them hybrid or two-headed monsters sprouting grotesque appendages. The women engage in manically obsessive acts and masturbatory gestures, exhibiting a dangerous sexuality in defiant opposition to the rules of decorum suggested by their elegant surroundings.

Similar figures appear in Eviner's *Harem*,

2009, but their setting is Antoine Ignace Melling's late 18th-century Orientalist drawing of a sultan's harem. The harem was a favorite subject of Orientalist painting because it was a space forbidden to male Western visitors. Although it tries to pass itself off as a factual study, Melling's work is a voyeuristic fantasy of the mysterious goings on in this sanctum, depicting various scenes of harem life within an elevated building plan. Eviner has replaced Melling's women engaging in domestic chores and expressions of piety with ones performing more indelicate actions. A roomful of women praying in the earlier piece, for example, have been transformed into female activists carrying placards. In other scenes, women devour and destroy one another or engage in lesbian acts. By highlighting the sexuality and violence of life in the harem, Eviner is not just critiquing the Ottoman power dynamics that kept women in a position of servitude but also pointing out that the



Hali Allindere
Two stills from *Mirage*,
2008. DVD, 7 minutes, 20
seconds.



Elif Uras and Linda Genjian
Navel Stone (Göbek Taşı) [detail], 2010.
 Printed ceramic tile, wood platform,
 21 x 74 x 74 in.

Western colonialist demystification of foreign lands' cultures was driven by a desire to physically and sexually dominate their people. Eviner is currently working on two new videos dealing with the difficulties immigrants face in moving up through Europe's social hierarchy, which will be unveiled in an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in January 2011.

A discussion of diversity within Turkish society inevitably brings to mind the state's repression of minority ethnic groups and cultures in an effort to present a coherent national identity. Halil Altındere, one of the most provocative and prolific artists in the country today, has used his work to criticize the elitism and hubris associated with this identity and the violence employed in constructing it.

Raised in southeastern Turkey, where he was born in 1971, Altındere appeared on the Istanbul art scene in the mid 1990s with pieces that debased beloved national

symbols to comment on governmental abuses of power. This work was fueled not only by his minority status as someone of Kurdish descent but also by the state's eviction of Kurds from their villages in southeastern Turkey during those years. Altındere's memorable pieces from this era include an image of a banknote on which the representation of Atatürk—Turkey's founding father and most revered figure—is covering his face with his hands, as if in shame; fake postal stamps showing photographs and names of Kurds who disappeared in Turkish police custody; and reproductions of Turkish national identity cards bearing inflammatory photos like shots of topless men and women, the latter particularly arousing the wrath of religious conservatives in Turkey, who accused the artist of obscenity.

Altındere has been arrested and tried for making art deemed dangerous to society. In 2005, when he curated an exhibition titled

"Free Kick" for the ninth International Istanbul Biennial, he was charged under the controversial Article 301 of the Turkish penal code with showcasing work that publicly denigrated the Turkish republic (the charges were later dropped). In 1998 he came close to being sued by another Turkish artist, Esat Tekand, after spray painting a dollar sign on a Tekand painting for which the artist had appropriated imagery from a Joseph Beuys performance, which Altındere saw as a commodification that drained the Beuys piece of its radical intent. More recently, Altındere's public sculpture in Berlin of a German police car overturned on the street angered conservative Germans. At the ninth Sharjah Biennial, in 2009, his painted portrait of one of the UAE's most respected sheiks, hung in front of but not quite concealing a wall safe, garnered him threats of physical harm.

In an effort to expand what is acceptable within the Turkish art world, Altındere



FROM LEFT: **Elif Uras**
Installation view,
"Panorama Arcade,"
Galerist, Istanbul, 2009.

Pink Belly, 2009.
Iznik ware, polychrome
underglaze on fritware,
23½ x 11½ in.

has undertaken various side projects, such as founding the *art-ist Contemporary Art* magazine and publishing the book *User's Manual: Contemporary Art in Turkey 1986–2006*. His curatorial projects, which bear provocative titles like "I'm too Sad to Kill You," "Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible," and "When Ideas Become Crime," bring together antiauthoritarian works by artists from rural parts of Turkey who have, until now, been peripheral to Istanbul's art scene. Altundere's critiques of various entrenched systems, whether state repression or the politicizing tendencies of the art market, have set a new progressive standard in Turkish art.

Eviner has replaced women engaging in domestic chores and expressions of piety with ones performing more indelicate actions.

Elif Uras belongs to a growing group of Turkish artists living abroad who complicate and enrich their Turkish identity by blending different cultural influences in their work. Born in Ankara in 1972, Uras now claims both Istanbul and New York as her home. Having studied law and economics before becoming an artist, she takes as the main subject matter of her paintings and ceramics Turkey's swift transition in the 1980s from a state-controlled to a free-market economy. This transition profoundly altered

the social makeup of Istanbul, shifting its class structure, greatly increasing its population, and ultimately creating a greater discrepancy between the rich and the poor. It also spawned interesting class tensions, such as that between the newly wealthy religious merchants and the old secular elite, with their Western ideals.

Uras's pieces contrast modernity with tradition. She recently started working with a ceramic studio in Iznik, where some of the most refined ceramics of the Ottoman Empire were produced. She updates tradition, however, by using the nonfigurative patterns of Islamic tiles to decorate huggable-size vessels whose forms suggest voluptuous

female figures, such as belly dancers or bronzed babes in string bikinis lounging on Turkish beaches.

For the group exhibition "Blind Dates," opening this month at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery, in New York, Uras collaborated with the Armenian-American artist Linda Ganjian on a sculptural installation titled *Navel Stone (Göbek Taşı)*. Uras and Ganjian each created a set of ceramic tiles that they'll bring together on a *göbek taşı*, a lounge platform that traditionally forms

the centerpiece of a Turkish bath. Uras's tiles, produced in Iznik, illustrate tales from Ottoman history in which Armenians played a prominent role. In her tiles Ganjian—working within the aesthetic tradition of Kütahya ceramics, which gained prominence late in the Ottoman empire and were produced mainly by Armenian craftsmen—depicts a narrative interweaving the history of her own family's exodus from Turkey with their craft traditions. The two women's collaboration examines the traumatic break between Turkish and Armenian identity in the early 20th century in an effort to imagine a harmonious coexistence in the future.

Many artists who identify as Turkish voice the need to place their work outside the framework of Turkish art. It's a natural enough impulse, especially for those presenting their work abroad. But it risks leaving in place the restrictions that define the framework they're rejecting. If this framework were modified to allow a diversity of viewpoints, couldn't it afford a buffer against the homogenizing influences of the global market? In making work about issues pertinent to Turkey and its immigrants abroad, artists like Eviner, Uras, and Altundere help expand notions of Turkish identity, presenting them as evolving rather than fixed. Their art not only holds its own internationally but also helps create within Turkey a cultural transformation that is felt beyond its borders. Having a rigid framework to rebel against instills the urgency to move this transformation forward. **MF**