

**THEATER**

**OF**

**İNCİ EVİNER**

By Nazlı Gürlek



**THE**

**UNMENTIONABLE**



(Previous spread)  
From the series "Nowhere-Body-Here,"  
2000, digital print, 125 x 254 cm.

(Opposite page)  
**OFF THE MIRROR**, 2015, still from  
three-channel HD video with sound:  
6 min. Installation view of "Spaceliner" at  
Arter-Space for Art, Istanbul, 2015.

Unless stated otherwise, all images courtesy  
the artist and Galeri Nev, Istanbul.

Eviner's studio space is housed in a large, two-story former warehouse. The walls on both sides of the doorway are lined with her favorite props, all with mirrored surfaces—a pair of silver transvestite's shoes in size 43, baby sharks in glass jars and a disco ball—as well as the triangular mirrors she used in *Off the Mirror*. The studio itself is full of books, both new and old titles, but her drawings take up most of the space. There are small notebooks, ink drawings, large canvases and silkscreen prints laid out on tables, hanging on the walls and even appended to various reflective objects around the space. These drawings, emerging from the artist's subconscious, are fascinating for their deft brushstrokes and strange phantasmagoria of imagery. It is no coincidence that she counts Yüksel Arslan—another anomalous figure in Turkish art history, who was invited by André Breton to take part in Surrealist exhibitions in midcentury Paris—as a major inspiration. Both Arslan and Eviner refuse to be called painters although they each nevertheless make use of the picture plane to tell their respective stories. Eviner herself strolls with ease not only through surrealism, but also expressionism, abstraction, performance and theater—tendencies that notably have never been very prominent among contemporary artists in Turkey—without fully belonging to any of them.

That morning, in the basement of her studio, Eviner and I watched the three channels of *Off the Mirror* on a projector, separately, one after the other. The work had been displayed as a complete installation as part of the group show "Spaceliner," held at Arter, in Istanbul, in mid-2015. The scenery is unsettling. A dazzling spectacle of abject human activity appears: disconnected body parts—legs, hands and heads of mostly girls and a few young men—are strewn within an irregular collage of triangular mirrors of various dimensions in a rhizomatic arrangement of fragmented yet interconnected parts. Each limb carries out short loops of infinitely repeating actions, like writing or caressing. Others are openly self-destructive: punching, head-butting and hair-pulling. One girl drops a knife from her mouth; another one draws an animal's claw on the mirror. Together with the artist, whose hand intervenes in the scene like a hidden self-portrait, a young man strokes various body parts and someone's hair. Drawings of hybrid human-animal beasts appear as a third kind of actor. Elsewhere, a silver shark swims across the mirrored surfaces. Among this chaotic co-occurrence of bodies and objects, half of the action appears in the mirrors' reflections and the other half emerges from holes cut into the mirrors themselves, connecting lines of sight with what is happening beneath the surface and in the reflections. The whole thing might be read in any direction, from left to right, top to bottom, or vice versa, and in-and-out of sync with the soundtrack, which consists of the monotonous voice of a young woman reading, in Turkish, the "Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," interrupted by occasional drum beats and sound effects such as bursts of laughter, smooches, screams and whistles, over electro-

"O my lord, O my love, what callest thou this article?" pointing to her slit, her solution of continuity. "I call that thy cleft," quoth the Porter, and she rejoined, "Wah! Wah! Art thou not ashamed to use such a word?" and she caught him by the collar and soundly cuffed him. Said he again, "Thy womb, thy vulva;" and she struck him a second slap crying, "O fie, O fie, this is another ugly word; is there no shame in thee?"

—*One Thousand and One Nights*, translated by Richard Francis Burton

On a sunny October morning, while walking to İnci Eviner's studio in the Çukurcuma neighborhood of Istanbul, I found myself picturing each scream, laugh and slap depicted in the "Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," one of many stories that successively stave off Scheherazade's execution by the Persian emperor in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Eviner had recently taken it as a catalyst for her multimedia installation *Off the Mirror* (2015), in which one of the characters is heard reading excerpts in Turkish. In the story, an unmarried porter is hired by a lady to help carry the things she has bought at a market. When they end up at her house, he persuades her and her two sisters to let him stay for the night and join their feast. They drink wine and recite verses together until one of the ladies strips off her clothes and jumps into the fountain. After she emerges, she throws herself on the porter's lap and asks him to identify "her slit." When he cannot, he is soundly beaten. The three ladies want to send him away but after a series of negotiations they eventually agree to let him stay, on one condition: "Whoso speaketh of what concerneth him not, shall hear what pleaseth him not."

In every society there are sensitive or painful topics that go unmentioned. In the course of her 30-year career, Eviner has been a fierce portrayer of issues that are considered of no concern to some and unpleasant to others. An artist, educator and feminist, she takes on topics central to feminism in order to problematize the concept itself. Originally trained as a painter in the late 1970s, Eviner rejected the medium in favor of a practice based solely on drawing. In recent years, she has incorporated video in order to expand the possibilities of her creative productions, which tend to depict powerful subjectivities and the freedom of certain unrepresented individuals within Turkish society—particularly so-called savages, such as teenage girls, migrants and refugees. With a unique visual language that defies direct messages, easy formulations and one-line slogans, Eviner dignifies subtle implications and intuitive processes.

Although she has never been a political activist, Eviner witnessed the military coup d'état of September 12, 1980, which took place the same year she graduated from the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts (now known as the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University). Ending four years of terror by right-wing, ultranationalist death squads against the left-wing opposition, the coup was the most brutal in the history of the Turkish Republic. The traumatized silence it instilled caused a deep rift in society, and many contradictions of the event and its aftermath led to the cultural paradoxes that still lie at the heart of Turkish society today. As Turkey once again witnesses a rise in censorship and public silencing around critical topics, as well as a rise in religious fundamentalism and state violence, it is an appropriate moment to consider Eviner's use of art to articulate what cannot be said directly, but can only be shown within the system of meanings that is art-making.

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ambient tones. Despite the degrees of eroticism suggested by the story, there is a palpable sense of anxiety and suspense.

I made a game of spotting the individual characters emerging from this unruly whole. They are like the characters in Scheherazade's tales, who breathe their narratives into an intertwined net of stories. "What I did in that project was to make images through the mirrors, where my drawings became 'players,' along with the real 'players,'" Eviner told me. Everything in her art, even the videos, she repeatedly said, comes from and returns to the process of drawing, which, for Eviner, embodies a subtle method of subverting the violent imagery that surrounds us every day in the media. In her drawings, isolated figures in vast dreamscapes recall elements of surrealism fused with abstraction, where aspects of the human form multiply and intertwine with animal figures. Unexpected relations emerge from the depths of the artist's imagination. With its immersive format, *Off the Mirror* presents a scenario that is so feral and disordered that it is hard to even describe or name its subject. But it is nevertheless the spectacle of this unmentionable whole that Eviner is busy portraying. If Scheherazade depends on her skill as a storyteller to survive her captivity, Eviner depends on hers to imply a complex set of concerns about this contested portion of the globe.

To contextualize Eviner's concerns, it is necessary to return to the significant and formative decade of the 1980s when Turkey awoke to a new reality. The decade saw groups from civil society that had lacked political representation—such as feminists, environmentalists, anti-militarists, gay-rights activists, human-rights defenders—coming together in solidarity around issues concerning democratic rights and demands for freedom. A sea change in popular culture paralleled social movements that took hold after the coup d'état. The personal became political, and the oil paintings Eviner produced in her early 30s were suggestive of the problematics of representation she would explore—and the performative approach she would adopt to achieve it—in the years to come. She used aggressive, highly expressionistic brushstrokes, in a muted palette of black, white and gray, to depict animal bodies that were cropped, chopped and laid open. They had a shamanistic quality about them, as well as a hint of Chaim Soutine's expressionistic style. Her desire to penetrate into flesh and bone, and read the body from within, was evident.

The body that struggles for its existence is, for Eviner, a political issue. As a child of the secular, republican nation-state, she grew up within a society that was at once busy internalizing Western ideals in denial of its Islamic heritage, where political control of the female body in the name of chastity stood as an institutionalized norm. Such paradoxical conditions stemming from a combination of two originally clashing traditions (namely, the Christian-European and the Islamic) led her to reject central assumptions of feminism based not only on the universality of categories but also those that are

based on the specificities of class, ethnicity, religion and nationality. The surreal figures in all of her drawings, as well as the abject players of her videos, confuse the assumed categories of gender through their performances. Penises grow out of female bodies, and sexes divide and multiply into hybrid entities in earlier videos like *Harem* (2009). As she told me later, in relation to the performative aspect of her work: "Apart from the retinal perspective, I discovered a very introspective position, a condition within the body—not only an image, but instead a body that struggles for existence, like those in my own culture."

It was in the 1990s postmodern context, during the time Turkey discovered its own domestic "third world," as some put it, that Eviner experienced the appropriate environment in which to establish the basis of her visual lexicon. At the time, her studio was located in the Tarlabası neighborhood, in a disused Armenian monastery occupied by artists and performers. They shared the neighborhood with Roma, Turkish and Kurdish populations that had arrived from all over the Anatolian steppes and settled in the former homes, shops and churches that were looted and emptied during the 1955 pogroms against the area's Greek residents (as well as Armenians). Later on came the African immigrants and transsexuals who found themselves unwelcome in other parts of the city. It was there in Tarlabası that Eviner experienced firsthand for the first time a panorama of life on the margins, which led to her experiments with acrylic paints and copper depicting disembodied clothes, disconnected heads and limbs painted on triangular plates of plywood, in works like *Body Geography* (1993), and sculptural objects made in fortified leather such as *Skinless* (1996).

Her photographic series of figures performing child-game-like actions in a wasteland, "Nowhere-Body-Here" (2000), featured, for the first time, objects with reflective surfaces that would soon form her own symbolic mythology—the transvestite's shoe, the silver fish and the disco ball. In these photographs, girls she



(This page)  
Ink-and-silkscreen sketch on paper, as part of **OFF THE MIRROR**, 2015, a three-channel HD video with sound: 6 min.

(Opposite page, top)  
**HAREM**, 2009, still from HD video: 3 min.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**AN EXPLOSIVE HEART**, 2002, wall work, digital print, watercolor and collage on paper. Installation view of "Leather and Surface" at Kasa Gallery, Sabanci University, Istanbul, 2002.



had met in Tarlabası play with albino boys she had encountered during her research trips to Esentepe, one of the then-newly developing, peripheral neighborhoods of Istanbul where unplanned urbanization, in the form of shanty towns, accommodated the city's expanding population. In her works from the 1990s, the inspiration she garnered from the immigrant characteristics of the Tarlabası population, as well as her readings at the time of philosophical texts by the French duo Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, led her to depict bodies that appear as free-floating entities against an alien and unaccommodating landscape.

Following the staged panoramas of "Nowhere-Body-Here," in which she merged painterly compositions with performance and photography, she then began to stretch the limits of drawing, deploying it in combination with digital animations in installations such as *Unheimlich* (2005), and spreading it across walls (in *Broken Allegory*, 2008), or into wallpaper patterns in works like *An Explosive Heart* (2002) and *Arabesk* (2005). But the most radical breakthrough came with the single-channel video work *Harem*, in which Eviner combined digital-video techniques with an existing image for the first time. Now with editions in the permanent collections of the Vehbi Koç Foundation in Istanbul, TBA21 in Vienna and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the video deconstructs the representative claims on female sexuality implicitly made by Antoine Ignace Melling in a 1795 engraving imagining women's activities within the Ottoman harem. In Eviner's rendition, she replaces the women in Melling's engraving with multiple figures of her own, each a tiny video clip. Many of her figures share a single costume—a striped jumpsuit resembling at once pajamas and a prison uniform—and look like conjoined twins, as they repeat wild gestures such as caressing dead bodies, stabbing themselves, biting each other and undressing, among other small vignettes all positioned within a larger tableau.

The kinetic visual language she has developed over the years from *Harem* onward highlights the female body as a medium of artistic research, and movement as a weapon against the hierarchical claims of the stability of the pictorial plane. Her take on motion comes in opposition to the trajectory of modernist painting in Turkey, which, as epitomized by the teachings of her alma mater, the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts, was a purely Western import. In the 20th century, the government had sent artists to Paris on state



scholarship to learn the style of European artists, and they were meant to educate their peers and students upon their return. For Eviner, the universality presumed by the painterly context parallels the assumed universality of the patriarchy.

Following *Harem* came other videos using the same techniques, such as *New Citizen* (2009), *Parliament* (2010), *Fluxes of Girls on Europe* (2010) and *Broken Manifestos* (2011). The subjects in each of these works are diverse, but Eviner's attention remains focused on the vulnerable and unrepresented subject, as opposed to the socially and legally recognized one. While *New Citizen* and *Parliament* share a common sensibility around issues surrounding the illegal subject and the citizen, *Broken Manifestos* diverts the camera to protesting dissidents. *Harem* and *Fluxes of Girls on Europe*, on the other hand, explore the suggestion of a savage inner life of teenage girls that marks the thresholds of a sexually oriented social contract. *Fluxes*, a three-minute loop that shows a map of the European continent from the United Kingdom to the middle of Turkey overrun with girls, evokes Turkey's negotiations over membership in the European Union (active at the time), as well as prefigures the current refugee crisis. Her teenage figures, existing in a state between child and woman, threaten to rise up against the social order, and like other figures, such as the refugee and the migrant, their rebellious-seeming activity opens up new territory between law and disorder, representation and concealment—a space full of potential for liberation.

The same unrepresented subjects return in another new filmic piece, *Runaway Girls* (2015), which was commissioned by the Drawing Center in New York, with support from Istanbul-based art nonprofit Saha. It is shot in a cavernous building, still under construction, where gender-ambiguous figures, with faces obscured by mysterious drawings of hybrid animals, dance, struggle and chase one another in brief, fragmented scenes captured by a camera that is continuously rotating from a fixed position. At one moment, two figures are seen lying together on a rolling pallet while another one crawls inside her companion's shirt as though she were trying to physically merge with her, while yet another one presses her face against the body of a sheep. Pairs of disembodied pants and a couple of policemen dressed in drag—wearing silver stilettos—accompany the girls before the camera. The video's circular space and time suggest a mysteriously unresolved story that is constantly folding up on itself without ever reaching its end.

As Eviner and I discussed *Runaway Girls*, the artist said, "I live in a country where three women get killed every day, and I still can't view them as victims, although this is what I am expected to do. They get killed at the very moment they ask for freedom." These remarks shed new light on the drawings that adorn the bare concrete walls of her studio. In the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus, the eponymous gifted musician travels to the Underworld to rescue his dead wife Eurydice and, after his failure, returns from the journey with enchanting songs. As an Orphic figure herself, Eviner surprised me with the kind of inspiration she receives from trauma. "I am full of rage, and I demand to be considered a subject along with those girls. I pick at life, eat it, inhale it, spit it out and laugh!" She finds motivation in her countless attempts at giving voice to the ones whose ability to speak has been obstructed by fear or death.

At one point she told me that she also feels a certain sense of shame while she is making art, a feeling she underscored by quoting from literary critic Nurdan Gürbilek's *Share of Silence* (2015): "The shame one feels for recounting something that she had not witnessed in person, something that had silenced others, rendering impossible their ability to express themselves." I wonder if other artists have the same feeling.

Eviner also described the complicated production phases she had to go through while developing this technically challenging work. A member from her team had dropped out. This did not come as a surprise to me, knowing how she likes to push the limits of herself and those around her during production processes. She always works with a loyal team of "players," as she likes to call her young performers, who are asked to interpret an abstract set of instructions based on her ink sketches with their own intuition and sense of experimentation. During long rehearsals, Eviner and her players challenge each other psychologically, with a set of highly irrational requests whose aim is to rid the performers of all the bodily gestures that they would normally employ. "I try to extract what is inside—a certain something that is very raw," she explained. "In fact, I look for the animal in us; rather than what happens between men and women, I try to capture the body through gestures during the process of its preparation for sexuality, at the very threshold of that social contract."

Her search for liberated ways of being is likewise reflected in the way she trains her students. Currently teaching at Istanbul's Kadir Has University, she was previously head of a transdisciplinary program at Yıldız Technical University, where her former students included a young generation of artists of international repute such as Ahmet Öğüt, İz Öztat and Burak Delier. Among Turkish academics, she is known to be a devoted researcher of innovative art-education models. *Co-Action Device: A Study* was the title of her project for the 2013 edition of the Istanbul Biennial, where she brought students from different disciplines together on the ground floor of the Galata Greek School to set up an open school and a stage to produce and perform actions and events during the run of the biennial in a new, hybrid creative form. "*Co-Action Device: A Study* may have seemed too utopian to be a self-sustaining education model," she said about this experimental education platform, "but it certainly entertained the possibility that things can change. Besides, you cannot deny the substantiality of experiencing a certain kind of collectivism."

I'm very curious to see what Eviner will make next. Two solo shows are scheduled for 2016, one at Istanbul Modern, opening in June, and the other at Pearl Lam Gallery in Shanghai in September. Undoubtedly, she will continue to interrogate and push the boundaries of art-making in ways that focus on things that are otherwise unmentionable in societies like ours, and to provoke those around her. As she pursues her interests in individual desires and a sense of collectivism, she will continue to empower young women, and to keep on influencing new generations of artists and contributing to the art scene in Turkey and beyond. Her female players possess numerous characteristics, all equally wild and intense, and exploring them is no easy task. What salvation she offers is to be found in their likeness to all of us. 🐾

