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ART

Art that Resists Being Pigeonholed by Nationality

A recent exhibition presents the work of three Turkish artists connected through material and conceptual strands through modern and contemporary periods.



Ari Akkermans June 22, 2018



In the foreground, Füsün Onur, "Opus II – Fantasia" (2001/2018), on the walls Bilge Friedlaender, works on paper

NÜRNBERG, Germany — With the closure of TANAS in 2013, a space for Turkish art in Berlin, spearheaded by the pioneering German gallerist, curator, and publisher Rene Block (an influential figure in Turkish art since the 1990s), it seemed as if the visibility of Turkish art in Europe had been compromised, but times changed. First off, TANAS was never meant to be more than a temporary space, but also, by the 2010s Istanbul had come out of its long slumber, and a number of prominent institutions were operating. A wholly new generation of Turkish artists was emerging, beyond those Block championed. Block's influence is still felt. His collection is currently housed at the Neues Museum Nürnberg, one of Germany's newest state museums (an incredible Volker Staab design, awash with natural light, that opened in



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1999). When a part of his collection of Turkish contemporary art was sold to the Vehbi Koc Foundation in Turkey, Neues Museum Nürnberg and the Koc Foundation (mainly through its Istanbul-based art space ARTER), began a collaboration that would allow art to travel in the other direction as well.

The group exhibition “Border of Time” is their first collaboration in Nürnberg. A three-artist presentation, drawn from the collection, “Border of Time” brings together the conceptual sculptor Füsün Onur (b. 1938), whose work has been widely exhibited in Germany, the late Bilge Friedlaender (1934–2000), an only recently rediscovered figure, significant for her engagement with American abstraction (Friedlaender lived and worked most of her life in the US), and a young artist, Ahmet Doğu İpek (b. 1983), whose work is still unknown outside of Turkey.

On the left and right Ahmet Doğu İpek, “Days (Black Water Records)” (2017), in the background, Ahmet Doğu İpek, “Stars (Night)” (2017), in the foreground, Füsün Onur, “Opus II – Fantasia” (2001/2018)

“The fact that all three come from Turkey is ultimately immaterial,” explains the museum’s curator Thomas Heyden, in the curatorial statement. and goes on to argue his case: “Far more important is the

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“The fact that all three come from Turkey is ultimately immaterial,” explains the museum’s curator Thomas Heyden, in the curatorial statement, and goes on to argue his case: “Far more important is the comparability of the artwork and the positions they express.” The choice of artists is idiosyncratic in the sense that it is counterintuitive to the positions taken by artists and activists from Turkey, regularly presented in Europe. Heyden tells Hyperallergic, “the artists share a special approach to art which could be described as intimate, calm, and meditative.” This is a slightly controversial position for an institution to take, at a time when Turkish artists at home are facing increasing restrictions and censorship. But the show lives up to expectations, as a rather abstract meditation on time, while on the other hand, showcasing less visible artistic positions from Turkey.

Upon entering the first room of the exhibition hall at the museum, one is faced with a riveting, almost monochromatic dialogue between Onur and Friedlaender, oscillating between hermetic and near-ephemeral, creating a synesthetic experience, in which a simple gaze isn’t enough. It becomes necessary to really wander and wonder.

On the floor, Bilge Friedlaender, “River / House / Book” (1981), on the wall Bilge Friedlaender, “Homage to Nazim Hikmet” (1979)

Friedlaender’s paper triptych “Homage to Nazim Hikmet” (1979), a central figure in modern Turkish literature, uses his metaphor of the tree to anthropomorphize both individuality and solidarity. This is juxtaposed with her installation “River/House/Book” (1981), composed from handmade paper, bamboo, cedar boxes, sand and river stones, which is another homage, this time to the dwellings of the Nagovisi people in Papua New Guinea, where she traveled in 1978 with her then husband, the anthropologist Jonathan Friedlaender. In her notebooks, Friedlaender writes about a trip to the Tongue of the Ocean, a deep oceanic trench in the Bahamas, and returning with a transformed perception of space, after which “I engaged in an effort to invent painting again, and made paintings that were not paintings. I made paintings depicting water, that is to say, depicting the spacelessness of space.”

Beyond her homage to Hikmet — in other works she reflects on Malevich, the Ottoman architect Sinan, Agnes Martin, Bonnard, and Emily Dickinson — her square mutations and through the white light series (1970s, on show in the same room), amply demonstrate her engagement with the fundamental questions of American minimalism, as it attempts to establish a language of its own, independent of European abstraction: the infinity and parallelism of the line, the return to a basic geometry of space without the pictorial ideology of painting, and the understanding of shapes as open systems rather than mere tools.

Yet her position goes beyond the simply formal, investigating cosmic relationships between humans and nature. This made her, according to Gregory Volk, part of the alternative history of spiritual abstraction in the company of figures such as Emma Kunz, Hilma Af Klimt, and Annie

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In the background Füsün Onur, "Third Dimension in Painting – Come in" (1981/2014), in the foreground, Füsün Onur, "Opus II – Fantasia" (2001/2018)

Onur on the other hand, presents a slightly modified version of her subtle but conceptually complex installation "Opus II – Fantasia" (2002). Originally created for the floor plan of Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, this is one of her most iconic works from a later period in her career when her interest in the formal qualities of music led her to reproduce the concepts of variation, repetition and modulation, in



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In the next room, Füsün Onur's "Third Dimension in Painting – Come in" (1981–2014), however uncanny, was a rather revolutionary work of art when it was first shown, at a time when her work was poorly understood. She tells stories of her response to people asking her whether or not the shows were ready to open; she would invite viewers to interact with the work, having them take a moment to relax inside, looking up into a woolen firmament.

The affinity between Onur and Friedlaender is clear from the beginning. Escaping from the rigid formalism of classical art school, finding a space of freedom in the hard-edge abstraction of 1960s America (Onur also attended graduate school in the US), and working outside the studio, collecting materials from the world; they rejected the analytical figuration prevalent in Turkey at the time. In terms of reception, Friedlaender was very active in the US, during the crucial 60s she was based outside of New York City, and she was virtually unknown until her ARTER exhibition in 2016. For Onur, regardless of recognition by European institutions, in the grand narrative of art, Onur is still an outlier, whose place is unclear.

Ahmet Doğu İpek, "Days (Black Water Records)" (2017), detail

In the final room, Doğu İpek's "Days (Black Water Records)" is exhibited alongside the final section of Onur's "Opus II – Fantasia"; it's an installation composed of 157 works on paper (100 included in the show), made between July 2016 and March 2017, using only paper and black aquarelle paint mixed with water, and each executed on a single day through the movement of the paper without any tools. Doğu İpek's reference to Kazimir Malevich is formally inescapable (although incomplete) and in combination with Onur, the work is the most pleasant part of the show, exhibition-design wise, where the curatorial concept delivers most, and the poetics of time merge seamlessly with the architecture. The weaving of established and emerging artists makes clear the emphasis in this show on aesthetic considerations.

Doğu İpek is a much younger artist, whose earlier work could be consistently considered in the tradition of figuration (large architectural drawings), and who only more recently took on the color-field as a method and subject matter. This newfound engagement with temporality signals a recent shift in Turkish contemporary art, from the loud and concrete demands of a rather documentary, earlier political art, to a more accentuated abstraction, paradoxically coinciding with both increasing censorship and a critical update in the form.

The title of the exhibition, "Border of Time," according to Heyden's text, is borrowed from Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), where he uses the poetic image of a "border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it is in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us." I would prefer to replace presence, an abstraction of everyday reality, for present, the here-and-now, where the struggles of these pioneers, are acute manifestations of a key issue in Turkish art history: the absence of an avant-garde, except as the categorization of Turkish artists into Western movements. Onur has been turned into a major figure in a collective movement that never existed (by Block among others), and likely future scholarship on Friedlaender will follow the same path. So yes, the exhibition is a meditation on time, but also a paradigm of historical time, highlighting the need to historicize artistic practices differently, apart from the grand narrative of Europe, in order to present both the modern and the contemporary (undistinguishable in this case) as a polyphony of voices rather than a historiography.

"Border of Time" was on view at Neues Museum Nürnberg

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(Luitpoldstrasse 5, 90402 Nürnberg) until June 10, 2018.
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