

# IN SEARCH OF TIME NOT YET LOST

NAZIF TOPÇUOĞLU

*Lamentations*, 2007. Digital C-print  
mounted on foam board. 114 x  
171 cm. Edition five of five. Image  
courtesy Green Art Gallery and  
copyright the artist.



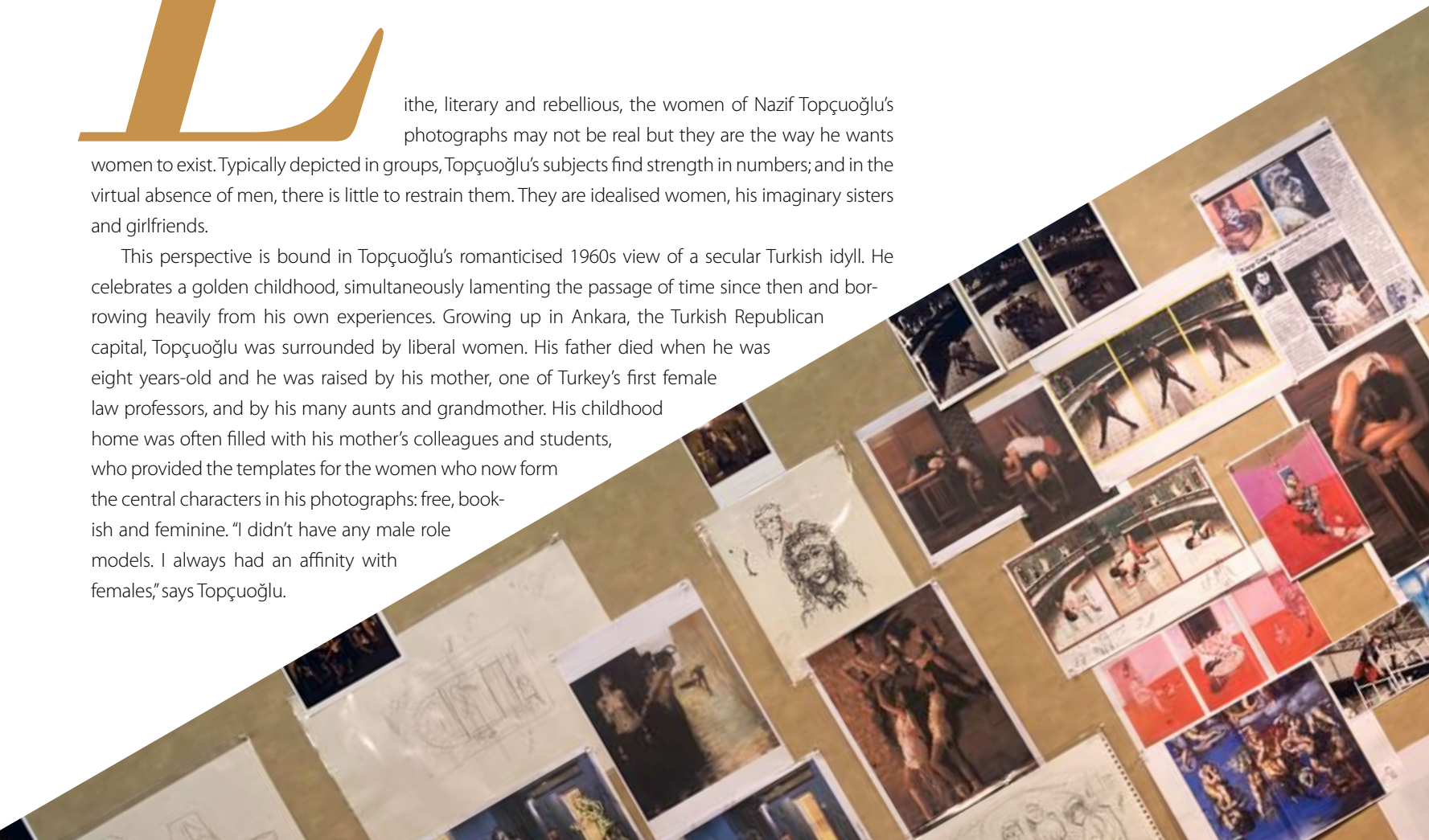
## PHOTOGRAPHY

Art recaptures what we have lost, rescuing it from destruction. Must these things be real, or can they be false memories? **Simon Johns** meets Turkish artist Nazif Topçuoğlu, whose work is fixated on ideas of struggle and grace and taps into our shared recollections of an illusory time.

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ithe, literary and rebellious, the women of Nazif Topçuoğlu's photographs may not be real but they are the way he wants women to exist. Typically depicted in groups, Topçuoğlu's subjects find strength in numbers; and in the virtual absence of men, there is little to restrain them. They are idealised women, his imaginary sisters and girlfriends.

This perspective is bound in Topçuoğlu's romanticised 1960s view of a secular Turkish idyll. He celebrates a golden childhood, simultaneously lamenting the passage of time since then and borrowing heavily from his own experiences. Growing up in Ankara, the Turkish Republican capital, Topçuoğlu was surrounded by liberal women. His father died when he was eight years-old and he was raised by his mother, one of Turkey's first female law professors, and by his many aunts and grandmother. His childhood home was often filled with his mother's colleagues and students, who provided the templates for the women who now form the central characters in his photographs: free, bookish and feminine. "I didn't have any male role models. I always had an affinity with females," says Topçuoğlu.





Nazif Topcuoglu's working board, entitled *The Great Wall*, refers humorously to The Great Wall of China. It is a collection of the artist's drawings, sketches, Xeroxes and computer outputs and sheds light on his various artistic influences throughout the past seven years. Image courtesy the artist.



*Virgin Suicides*. 2009. Digital C-print mounted on foam board. 112 x 167 cm. Edition one of five. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery and © the artist.

## DEFINING BOUNDARIES

An early series, *Readers*, establishes Topçuoğlu's thoughts about women. A clear reference to the ones he met as a boy, the series is a murky attempt to challenge the position of women in Turkish society, a preoccupation of Topçuoğlu. While a fifth of Turkish women are illiterate, according to United Nations figures, Topçuoğlu says: "I have this dream of girls in a secular society educating themselves."

Topçuoğlu tries to produce images which are proactive rather than exploitative. To a large extent, this endeavour is successful, until you get to *Secrets*, from 2003, in the *Readers* series. One girl is whispering into the ear of another, who, unsurprisingly, holds a copy of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, the story of an older man's lust for a sexually precocious girl. Both are wearing school uniforms. This casts doubt on whether the relationship between the artist and his subjects is always so wholesome. Topçuoğlu, who teaches courses at Istanbul's Bahçeşehir University, thinks of the women in his works not as models but as actors. He often casts them from art school. Some are "stars"; others form the supporting cast, and none are paid. Most of the players are in their early 20s, yet all have the elfish good looks of teenage girls.

Like the set of a film, shooting the picture is long and tiring, and one shot can take an entire day to perfect. But the women are enthusiastic to play out his ideas. "He explains the background to us in broad terms and informs us of the influences he has in mind," says Işık Dikmen, 24, one of Topçuoğlu's recurring players. "Then the story can change based on the women taking part or evolve because of the setting." An extract of Topçuoğlu's pre-production process was on display as a wall of storyboards and collages that accompanied a spring exhibit of his latest series at Istanbul's Galeri Nev. The wall is an insight into the artist's influences, with cut-outs of Paul Delaroche's *The Execution of Lady Jane* and Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac*. Other hints include one of the iconic snapshots from the Abu Ghraib prison showing hooded prisoners in a pile; poses from *Vogue* magazine; and a historic black-and-white shot of a woman with catatonic schizophrenia.

## JUDGE AND JURY

The centrepiece of the Galeri Nev exhibit was *The Triptych*, three 1.8-by-1.2-metre panels, which sold at a Sotheby's auction in April for \$33,133. Set in Santral, Istanbul's first power station and which has recently been converted into a museum, *The Triptych* uses its antiquated surroundings to evoke a shared memory. An arch formed by a bank of the power station's control panels cuts through the three pictures, creating a barrier behind which stand 24 of Topçuoğlu's "conformists". They are neatly dressed in traditional school uniforms with well-kempt hair. Some of them are gossiping while others are quietly peering out from behind the large machines. Some of them appear multiple times across the triptych. The objects of their attention are three groups of grubby, tightly knotted "rebels", draped over tables and chairs in a central arena. They lie in contorted anguish and their clothes are torn, like Francis Bacon's famous naked wrestlers.

The scene is a trial, with the conformists judging the rebels. It is not clear what charges the defendants face. All the while, the viewer – presumably male – looks down on the scene and passes down the final verdict. "The rebels are being tormented because of their beliefs. In a conservative and traditional society, if you are a rebel, you will automatically suffer, one way or the other," Topçuoğlu says. Here, the sense of the audience and the male gaze becomes acute. His fiercest critics are women, says Topçuoğlu. Those who see overt sexuality in Topçuoğlu's work are

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Facing page: *Magic Carpets*. 2010. Digital C-print mounted on foam board. 103 x 155 cm. Edition of five plus two artist proofs. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery and © the artist.

This page: *Is it for Real?* 2006. Digital C-print mounted on foam board. 112 x 133 cm. Image courtesy the artist.





**“I have this dream of girls in a secular society educating themselves.”**

ignoring the simple fact that there is no nudity or explicit pornography. They do not recognise the themes of empowerment and instead rely on assumptions reinforced on a daily basis in the media that any attractive woman who is photographed must be lascivious. Moreover, Turkish viewers are unaccustomed to seeing their countrywomen depicted as sexual beings. In the nation's literature and cinema, fallen women are usually Christian and their saviours, if they are to be any, are always Muslim men.



“The way I represent women doesn’t fit the stereotype of the *Playboy* centrefolds, but my critics cannot see this,” he says. “They accuse me of using women, of making them sex objects, but this is because they don’t have the visual culture, they cannot look at the picture and see the historical references.” Intellectual curiosity has allowed Topçuoğlu to mine a rich seam of cultural references. “I believe that he is one of those rare artists who has accumulated an intellectual wealth, which is inevitably reflected in his work,” writes gallery owner Haldun Dostoğlu, a friend of Topçuoğlu since the early 1970s. “In order to properly understand, appreciate and enjoy his images, it helps if one has an awareness of the many art history references hidden in them.”

## FEELING THE PAIN

Themes of suffering, sacrifice and redemption permeate Topçuoğlu’s work. Those motifs are intrinsic in the West, but are not part of the vernacular in Turkey. “We see suffering as a weakness in Islamic culture. It is not looked upon as a good trait, while in Christianity it can be a virtue,” Topçuoğlu says. Like Marcel Proust, he thinks the ability to effectively look at art must come with the capacity to read signs, of which his work has plenty.

In *Magic Carpets* from 2010, Topçuoğlu turns symbolism on its head in a knowing attempt at Orientalism. In this flight of fancy, one girl impossibly floats in midair, held up by a stick-armed colleague and the magical notes from the ney,

*The Triptych*. 2009. Digital C-print mounted on foam board. Triptych, each panel 180 x 120 cm. Edition three of five. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery and © the artist.

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the Eastern flute, played by a third girl as a snake charmer would to levitate her companion. The setting is an antique shop in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul in which folded rugs line the shelves like dusty old books. The light is warm, such as that cast by a reading lamp.

For one collector, Topçuoğlu’s appeal lies in his ability to rekindle a collective memory. “The link established between my memory and a superficial knowledge of classic Western art is what attracted me to his pictures,” says Mustafa Terzioğlu. Indeed, Topçuoğlu’s work constantly references Western artists, both visual and literary: Proust and Caravaggio, and implicitly Bacon, Titian and Théodore Géricault.

Another challenge Topçuoğlu encounters is more universal. Staging a scene and then photographing it as if it had actually occurred is a pretence that betrays the honest parameters of photography, or so audiences think. In the vis-

ual arts, only photographers and documentary cinematographers are criticised for ‘setting up’ scenes. Other disciplines always offer re-creations of the world and, as such, are given considerable latitude to invent and dream.

Topçuoğlu’s riposte to criticism that his work lacks veracity is *Is it for Real?* from 2006. Girls huddle around a member of their clan, pointing to a very long surgical scar on her chest. It is also an homage to Caravaggio’s *Doubting Thomas*, which itself predicted Magritte’s *La Trahison des Images* by some 330 years. Pictures are not real, in the sense that they depict reality; they are only real in the sense that they are objects. This is why Topçuoğlu sees himself as a picture-maker and not a photographer. He recoils at questions about technique or process and is more than satisfied with the less than perfect resolution of his digital camera, preferring his oversized C-prints and likening them to paintings.



## CHANGING FOCUS

His camera is merely an instrument, and Topçuoğlu says he would happily express himself otherwise, such as through painting, if he had completed the training. Instead, Topçuoğlu studied architecture in Ankara at the Middle East Technical University. He always took photographs, but it remained a hobby until he moved to Chicago in 1981 and studied for an MA at the Illinois Institute of Design, founded as the New Bauhaus in 1937 by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

Topçuoğlu returned to Turkey in the early 1990s and began working in commercial photography. He soon became disillusioned, even bored, with advertising. One of his later commercial projects, a calendar produced for Mercedes-Benz, is a preview of what would happen when he took the plunge into full-time art. Each month of the calendar is a *telenovella*, and characters are dressed in the vivid colours of Bollywood. The work tips its hat both to Jeff Wall's photography and Cindy Sherman's sin-

gle-shot movies. During this time Topçuoğlu, 56, wrote three books on photography, including *Photography Is Not Dead, It Just Smells Funny* in 2000, a riff on Frank Zappa's Be-Bop Tango.

Topçuoğlu's fan base is expanding rapidly and his extremely limited editions are driving collectability. His work can be found in the JPMorgan Chase Collection, one of the world's largest corporate art collections, as well as at Hoboken Erasmus University in Rotterdam and Amsterdam's Reflex Miniature Museum of Contemporary Art. The appeal of his work perhaps lies in its internal conflict between innocence and experience, submission and dominance, reality and fantasy. "Memories are not always correct," Topçuoğlu says. But an eye for the signs and ideas of our common past will suffice in their place. 📷

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*Like Thieves at Midnight*, 2010. Digital C-print mounted on foam board. 121 x 210 cm. Edition of five plus two artist proofs. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery and © the artist.