

# Nazif Topçuoglu

Nazif Topçuoglu populates his staged mises-en-scènes with young women and girls from Turkey's educated class to create images informed by fantasies about an idealized past. A past when Turkey's sense of belonging to the Western world felt more assured, before the current wave of Islamification started sweeping through parts of society. His photographic universe is inspired by a sense of nostalgia coupled with his love of intellect – ranging from authors such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Vladimir Nabokov and Lewis Carroll to artists such as Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Based in Istanbul, Topçuoglu, 55, talks to *Eyemazing* about how his work is informed by a yearning for childhood days during a less politically complicated era.

**Anna Sansom:** You concentrate on creating staged mises-en-scènes. What ignited your interest in photography and staged scenes in particular?

**Nazif Topçuoglu:** I started doing staged photography a bit late in life after doing commercial work and street scenes following my initial training as an architect. I think of photography as another way of making pictures or paintings, and that the more control I have the better it is. Maybe it's my architectural training that makes me want to control everything. I would rather create controlled events in which I allow small accidents to happen than capture actual ones. I make sketches for my photographs; most of them are carefully designed before I put the girls in them. The good thing about photography is that allows a certain degree of spontaneity although I provide the framework for the accidents to happen such as the unexpected gesture a girl makes. And when you have four or five girls together in a room they start to do things together that you can't possibly plan, like fighting or cuddling on a couch. Then I take parts from each frame and put them together on Photoshop. It's the final picture that counts not how it's assembled. I'm not trying to make any semblance to reality or portray real events, it's all artificial.

**AS:** You've said that your work is about your constant preoccupation with time, memories and loss, and that in order to cope with the transience of life you are

trying to recreate the unclear images of an idealised past. What are your strongest memories of growing up as a young boy in Turkey, and what aspects of your youth are you most seeking to idealise?

**NF:** Turkey is a very peculiar state at the moment and also at a very particular stage, caught between Westernisation on the one hand and Islamisation on the other. There are major discussions in parliament about allowing women to wear headscarves at universities. When I was growing up, the upper classes were far more secular in appearance and people thought they were becoming democratised. Now people are having second thoughts about this because Turkey is becoming Islamic. I was brought up thinking that I was part of Western civilisation and education at certain schools put that conviction in our mind, that we were another Western country but with another religion. My mother was a professor at university, teaching sociology and law, so we had lots of books at home. Our law is based on Roman law, like other Western European countries, there's nothing Islamic about it yet! I had no brothers or sisters but if I'd had a sister she might have been like one of those girls in my photographs. I have this nostalgia for some un-lived, idealised past that doesn't have any reference to any time or place and wish that I'd had a childhood like that [the one portrayed in my images].

**AS:** Your work evokes a very affluent, socio-political background. Is this the milieu of Turkish society that fascinates you the most and which you feel most comfortable in?

**NZ:** In Turkey the upper classes or the rich and educated used to really feel they were part of European civilisation and those are the circles I grew up in. Now it's becoming more and more evident that this wasn't a very sustainable or tenable policy; Western Europe doesn't really accept Turkey and the majority of Turks don't want to become part of the West. It's a bit of a puzzle because we don't know what's going to happen.

**AS:** Why did you choose to focus on using these

young, pretty women and how did you approach the aspect of male voyeurism?

**NZ:** The girls are like my imaginary sister or my mother if she were younger. They're retro pictures; there's no time reference. People look at my pictures because they have good-looking girls in them and this makes them attractive. But when you look more closely you see something different going on from *Playboy* or *Centrefold*. I play on how Western people are used to looking at young girls with a male gaze, treating them as sexual objects. Even girls in Turkey have adopted this male gaze and look at each other as men would. So I have the girls taking male roles and doing things that men would do to each other, with animosity and hatred maybe. I'm trying to make them sexual subjects with their own power or identity. I have an ambiguous relationship with these pictures.

**AS:** Your images also show ambiguous relationships between the characters and dualities of behaviour, such as the girls being domineering or submissive, passive or aggressive. Why do you want to present the girls in this way, and what does this suggest about Turkish society?

**NZ:** In my images the girls are always in a unity of groups, they're more challenging than submissive in their attitudes and gestures. They are very independent, strong, wilful, emancipated and determined young women – like *Thelma and Louise* [from the film of the same name] but without that kind of violence. They don't need males and aren't there for male pleasure. They are brave and knowledgeable. I respect their desires, their individuality and determination to learn. I identify with them in a way; I could be one of them. Information is power as everyone knows and this is my idealisation of how I would like women to be. There's this idea that a woman with a book is dangerous and I'm building on that; it's a theme I developed in my earlier series, *Early Readers and Recent Readers*. My girls aren't waiting for men to arrive and that's a very important thing to show, especially in an Islamic country because women are always second class citizens in this part of the world. Do you know the song "Woman is the Nigger of the



© Nazif Topcuoglu, "Suicide", 2007







© Nazif Topcuoglu, "Lamentations", 2007







© Nazif Topcuoglu, "The Bridge", 2007







© Nazif Topcuoglu, "interrogation", 2006



© Nazif Topcuoglu, "Is it for Real?", 2006

World" by John Lennon and Yoko Ono? Because that is doubly-true over here.

**AS:** Are the girls models?

**NZ:** No, they're all amateur Turkish girls. It's hard to find girls to be in these photos, given the changing state that Turkey is in today. People are very wary. But I made connections with these girls through teaching at universities. The girls are university students, upper-middle class; they're more like ordinary people than pretty models. They enjoy [participating in my images] and their input is important. I think of them as actors and of my pictures as theatre scenes. Even though the pictures are arranged, there's some acting or improvisation.

**AS:** You consistently style your images with late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century backdrops and dress the girls in boarding school uniforms. Why did you want to juxtapose this kind of décor with contemporary issues?

**NZ:** I'm not very happy with the present, as you may have understood! My work is inspired by paintings by Rembrandt, Caravaggio and the Pre-Raphaelites, and by Lewis Carroll's drawings. I like very pictorial lighting and my work comes together when I have old-fashioned clothes, settings and lighting. I'm trying to say something very modern with a nostalgic look. My images evoke the Turkey of my childhood, during the 1950s or 1960s, which was a bit like Europe in the 1920s.

**AS:** Your compositions use rich colours, unusual poses and classical viewing lines such as complex triangular compositions. How do you prepare the compositions of your images? Do you imagine the scenes before you sketch them?

**NZ:** If I have certain architecture, such as the impressive building with big arches in *Suicide* and *Stigma*, the presence of the building dictates what I do. But I don't usually have such dominant architecture to work with. Sometimes the images are based on some-

thing specific. *Is It For Real* is based almost exactly on Caravaggio's painting *Doubting Thomas*, which shows Thomas touching Christ's wound following his resurrection. In my image, with these women acting to be Jesus and the disciples, I'm playing with the idea of manipulation versus realism in photography today. The girl who plays Jesus has a surgical scar down her chest in real life but you wouldn't know that unless I told you. I could have easily added it on Photoshop. The important issue here is that it doesn't really matter whether a photograph depicts a real scene. What matters is what you're trying to say with photography and the picture.

**AS:** Your work has a lot of tongue-in-cheek humour in addition to references to the evolution of Turkish society, current affairs and the media. How do these ideas develop?

**NZ:** I am sort of disillusioned in my old age and am poking fun as a last resort. For example, *The Bridge* [showing a girl with her hands on a bookcase and her



© Nazif Topcuoglu, "The curious Operation", 2004

legs on a piece of furniture, her body suspended between the two] is very funny and tongue-in-cheek. It's about how in Turkey we think of our country as being a bridge between the East and the West. So I am showing the idea of a metallic bridge through the girl's stockings! Other works, like *Suicide* are more pessimistic. It shows what can happen to girls who read all the time, consuming fashion magazines. There's the skinhead girl who is looking at, and yearning after, the girl who has jumped over the banister. It's a tongue-in-cheek way of saying that Turkish girls have either become consumers of fashion or they're doing unusual things. It shows what can happen when ideals have been lost. Westernisation is understood by many people in Turkey to just be about the latest fashions or doing trendy things as opposed to learning or studying. I'm criticising the girls in society on whom I built all my hopes. They've taken the very superficial aspects, like the Western way of dressing, consuming or entertaining, but there's a whole intellectual side that is difficult to integrate.

**AS:** Your image *Lamentations*, showing 11 girls sprawled across an oriental rug, was based on the pictures of American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq standing in front of piled-up bodies of Iraqi prisoners. Yet the image is very subtle. How did it come about?

**NZ:** In Turkey you feel much more closely about what's going in Iraq because it's next door. So it's in our subconscious all the time. Abu Ghraib was the starting-point. Then the three girls on the right-hand side making Islamic gestures are a reference to Goya's *Disasters of War* while a girl on the left-hand side is similar to a figure in Théodore Géricault's painting *Raft of the Medusa*. These references to the atrocities of war and the nasty behaviour of America all come together in this photograph and yet it's also very beautiful. If people know a little bit about art history and what's going on in the world they can figure it out. The curved frame on *Lamentations* is also very oriental and Pre-Raphaelite in style. I made the picture in parts since I

didn't have a big enough studio to do it all at once. If you look closely you'll see that the same models appear in two or three parts. I spent two or three days shooting and then a week stitching it all together on the computer. It gave me unexpected problems; even that curved top wasn't originally planned. I'd planned it to be a horizontal image but then I put the arch on top. I think my pictures should look attractive so people like them. I'm trying to make photography more layered and complicated than a lot of the imagery around today which is very obvious and reduced to slogans.

TEXT BY ANNA SANOM

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