

# On Means and Possibilities: Graft

## Five questions with Ahmet Doğu İpek

October 25, 2019 Words: [Büşra Erkara](#)

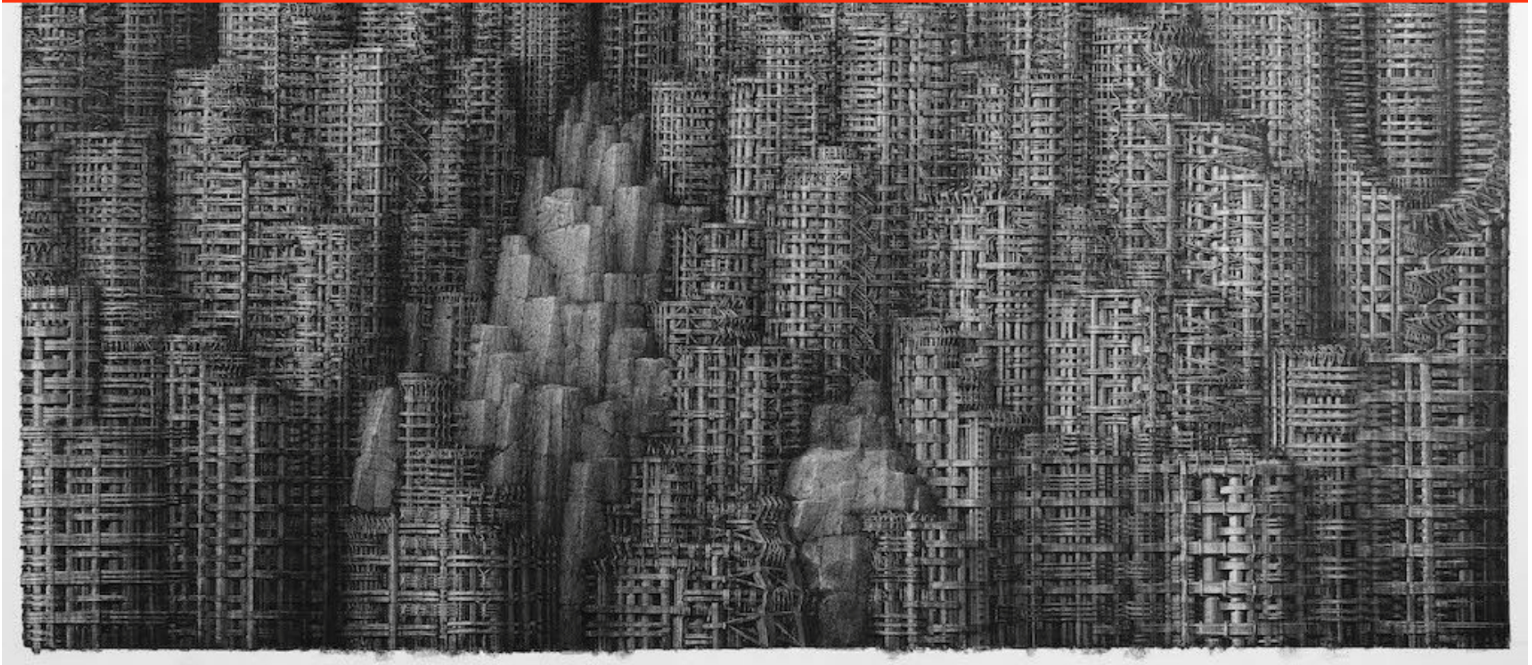


Ahmet Doğu İpek, Aşır 2, 2019, watercolor on paper, 200 x 140 cm

Istanbul-based artist Ahmet Doğu İpek sure had a hectic summer: While the artist's recent works were a part of the opening exhibitions at two new and exciting museums (OMM and Arter), the site-specific installation he created with architect Hakan Demirel, *Soupir*, is a reminder of the primeval and sometimes dark powers of nature on display at "Child Within", a group exhibition at the Mejid Efendi Mansion. İpek's first solo show at Galeri Nev İstanbul (through October 26), reflects on the artist's works from the last year and a half, encompassing different materials and techniques, coming together around the exhibition's theme.

Originating from the idea of encounters and possibly peaceful co-existence between "dissimilar" elements, Graft can be described as a meditation on hybridization. In the exhibition, installations and manipulated found forms are accompanied by the artist's process-oriented (some paintings take up to eight months to complete) ink and charcoal works.

We chatted with Ahmet Doğu İpek about his solo show, Graft, at the tail end of his busiest summer to date.



Ahmet Doğu İpek, Construction Regime - Self Portrait, 2019, watercolor on paper, 125 x 170 cm

At Graft, there is a work from your “Construction Regime” series, which we are familiar with, however it tells a new story alongside your recent productions. You have been drawing these building landscapes since 2011. The beastly constructions that appear in your paintings have been rising up in Istanbul since the '80s, however, with recent developments like Fikirtepe and Bati İstanbul, I feel like our generation has witnessed the pinnacle of it. Like, on steroids.

What's your relationship like with these buildings?

Those are the gloomy, chaotic and exaggerated images of the density and pressure I experienced in İstanbul as someone who came here later in life. It is not the literal reflection of the city but actually an expression of the density and pressure I feel here.

From the mid-2000s onwards, the construction industry has gained incredible leverage, becoming the driving force of the economy. Labor, work and capital all piled up there. And when it comes to a hold, many other things stop as well, just like they stopped right now. Meanwhile the damage has already been done to İstanbul. The city's border starts at the Northern Forests and almost reaches to Tekirdağ. There is the traffic jam and the crowds. Which also leads to this: If we

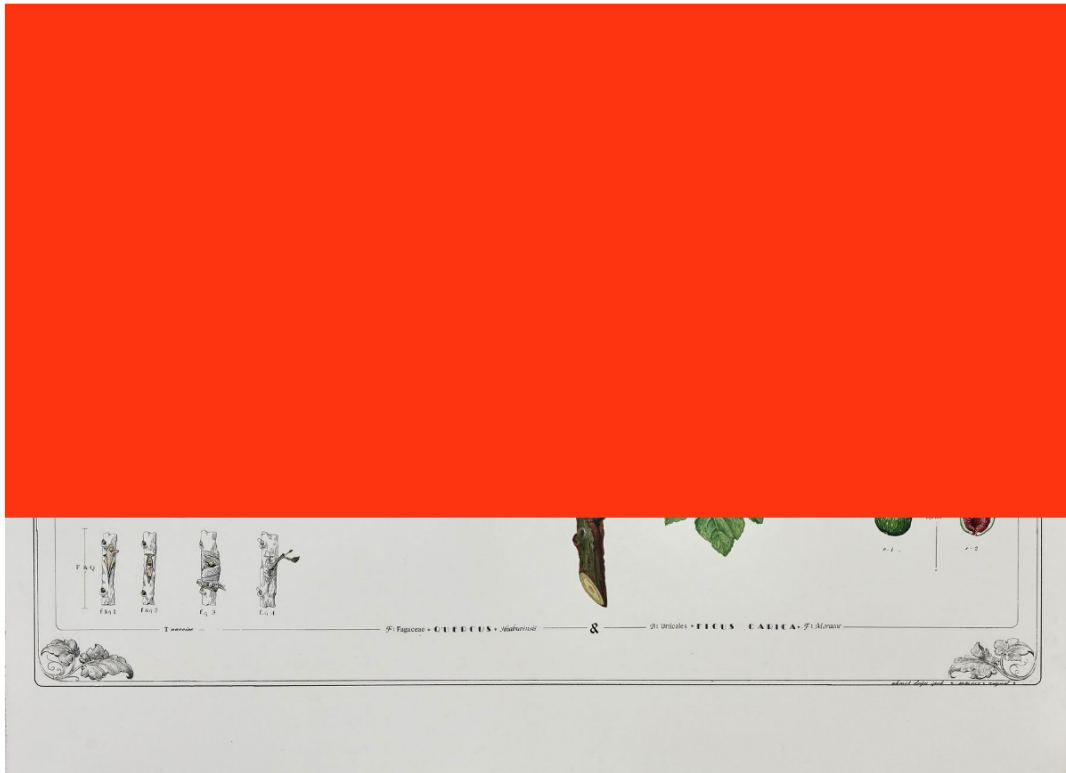
invest an enormous amount of energy to such a limited space, the rest of the country is left to be miserable. Most of the cities in Anatolia have got no investment and live in poverty. Wherever you go in Istanbul, stereotypical residential projects reach up to the hills. Indeed, none of these constructions create any value, they are just shelters.

## Today, the fact that issues like education crises, water wars, and famine are common topics of conversation signals that worse days are yet to come.

These cannot generate energy, value or capital on their own. When they change hands, some people make profit off of it.

This also goes for basic needs like the food we eat or water we use. We eat breads made from lab-developed grains and pay for clean water. It is very bothersome that these vital needs have become a ground for windfall profits.

Today, the fact that issues like education crises, water wars, and famine are common topics of conversation signals that worse days are yet to come. Only a few years ago, construction, urban responsibilities, the city itself or its architecture were talked about in a similar way—and they still are. As someone who lived and breathed that atmosphere, I found myself working on the “Construction Regime” series shortly after. My interest in architecture also played a part.



Tutmaz Ağı: Meşe ve İncir, 2019, watercolor and ink on paper, 78 x 107 cm

Surprisingly, there was definitely an “earth” theme at this year’s Istanbul Biennial as well as at the satellite exhibitions.



ISTANBUL BIENNIAL AS WELL AS AT THE SATELLITE EXHIBITIONS.

It's because we almost no longer walk the earth – our feet barely touch the ground. Everywhere we go is built, designed, fixed and cleaned up. Yet I think the mankind has not fully adapted to urbanization and all the things that accompany it. Modernization and urbanization took place at lightning speed. So the adaptation process is still not complete—mankind has this connection to and yearning for nature.

What I find alarming is the fact that this is just a sense of longing. If you placed a city dweller in nature, they simply wouldn't know what to do. They have forgotten about agriculture and have no way of communicating with animals. The villages, where the earth and animals coexist in harmony, have become places where only older people dwell. Young people are no longer inhabitants. The course of life we learned, which goes back millions of years, was overturned within 40-50 years, and people lost—and were made to forget—something in the process.



Ahmet Doğu İpek, Kök Series, 2019, walnut tree and stone, varying dimensions

In Graft, the most impressive artworks to me are the sculptures carved from the roots where walnut tree roots and stones intertwine. As far as I heard the story follows as: In furniture making, the roots of the walnut trees are filled with stones so that the walnut trees grow horizontally, instead of vertically, the former “preferred” for furniture-making purposes. You work with those roots. How did you start working with found objects?

Previously, I rendered a sculpture in the shape of a coffee table by carving the root of a walnut tree. While carving one of the table's legs, a sparkle made me realize there was a stone inside. I was mesmerized. There, you witness how a motionless organic life form reacts to a lifeless piece when they meet.

Later, I went back to the factory where I found the first tree root. They cut the top part off with a big chainsaw to be used industrially and throw the bottom part away. I checked their waste storage areas, where I collected other roots wondering if there were stones inside and started to carve and cut them off. Indeed, as they were cut off, the stones and rocks came out. Actually, the only way I interfere with the roots' process is through making the stones— the graft nature itself put together—visible to the outside world.

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# is the answer to the many problems we think we have.

The intertwined condition of these structures correlates with your initial ideas for "Graft".

Absolutely. I made some of those art pieces, however, some of them were shaped by nature anyway. While preparing for the exhibition, I studied the questions of communal living, living off the same root, sharing the same table—the possibilities of coexistence. I looked at nature and displayed what I found alongside the paintings. I think hybridization is the answer to many problems which we happen to believe exist today. Let people come together, let them touch each other, let there be a spark where they touch. Otherwise these confrontations cause conflicts. On a small scale, they turn into fights, on a larger scale wars break out. In the instance of the roots and stones, it is like they accept each other, embracing and hugging. I feel like making an effort to coexist is the answer to the many problems we think we have.



Credits: Hadiye Cangökçe

## What my hopes are in regard to trees in general would be a better way to phrase this question.

There is also a tiny pine tree in the exhibition space. It is not an art piece; however, it is a part of the exhibition. What is the story behind it? And what are your hopes for this pine tree?

What my hopes are in regard to trees in general would be a better way to phrase this question.

In the exhibition I refer to a kind of graft, not a medical vaccine; but rather a state of imbuing or supplementing something. I refer to the botanical grafting that I have witnessed and participated in myself when I was young. To sum up, a fruit seedling or a branch is placed inside the bark of a grown tree, and the bark gets sealed back up. Usually, you'd do this in the spring. For example, since the bitter almond tree's fruits are too bitter to be edible, a peach or apricot tree branch is split, inserted inside and tied together. From a certain point onwards, priority is given to the survival of the graft. In five years, you may call it a peach whereas it is actually an almond.

The pine tree in the exhibition: I took it from the Faculty of Forestry, already grafted and hybridized. It's a pine tree and a silver spruce.

The green one is frequently seen in Turkey and grows locally, especially in the Black Sea. However, in appearance it is not much of a “looker”, whereas the silver spruce is gorgeous and beautiful in color and does not grow on our soil. Seedlings are imported from abroad, their branches are cut down and grafted with the local pine trees. Subsequently, they are used for creating landscapes or for industrial purposes. To emphasize my point, I displayed this living plant, had it accompany us during the exhibition as a physical manifestation of the ideas that are represented symbolically otherwise.

It sits there as a natural portraiture of communal living, which I consider a political stance. I want the tree to keep picking our brains. At least my brain, anyway. It's confusing, because this subject of “graft” has both good and bad connotations I feel.

It's good, for it brings along hybridization and a new, crossbreed form. Bad, for it usually serves some type of human profit, serving someone's benefit. The priorities are defined through concepts like what is considered ugly or pretty, what is powerful, what is in our self-interest. Whereas in nature, the spruce and the pine get along just fine, one doesn't assume dominance over the other. They coexist. They get grafted and hybridized, naturally, not by force. Of all the pieces in the exhibition, the tree was the most “ready-made.” We put it in a pot and it was done with. It's not a work of art, it just points at a situation.