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## Studies in Contrast: Ahmet Doğu İpek at Arter

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View of Ahmet Dogu İpek's exhibition "A Halo of Blackness Upon Our Heads," 2022; at Arter.  
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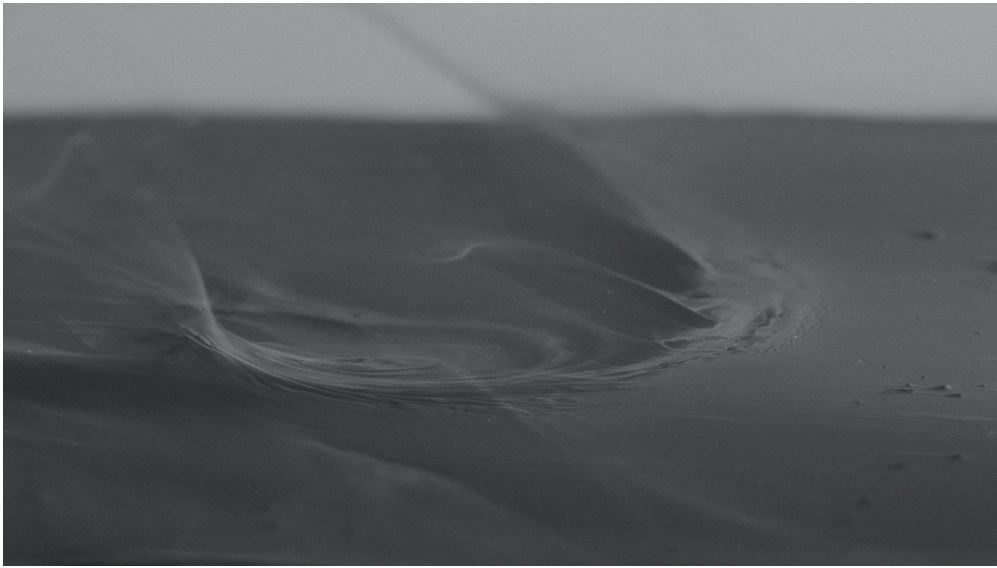
Ahmet Doğu İpek's current show, "A Halo of Blackness Upon Our Heads" at Arter in Istanbul, conveys his fascination with the intersections of natural and man-made materials. İpek is famed for his site-specific installations: In *Soupir* (2019), sited within an Ottoman-era mansion, he played with the parquet floor tiles to imagine how nature could overtake culture, creating the uncanny illusion of a green mound rising up through the floor. Similar concerns emerge in his "Roots" series (2019), in which he carved the roots of walnut trees to reveal stones nestled inside them.

At Arter, he presents several related bodies of work. For his "Subjected" series (2022), he has arranged for two boulders weighing nearly 2,500 and 3,300 pounds to be moved from the Anatolian town of Kütahya to the gallery space in Istanbul, where they sit on enormous white sponge "mattresses." An encounter between natural and synthetic materials, the installation also suggests vastly different scales of time, juxtaposing artificial sponges against rocks whose

formation took millennia. The boulders compress the sponges, which exist in a more active state, changing color from white to yellow during the show's eight-month run. The "Figures" series (2021–22) is another experiment using the same component (the artist has a collection of natural and artificial stones). İpek has drawn five stones in black watercolor: they're unique, as all rocks are, and their markings, resembling creases and wrinkles, make them read as human faces or palms; the stones' skin-like textures seem to suggest something of their history and the forces that acted upon them, questions that have particular resonance in this city. In Istanbul, where new building sites and skyscrapers take over storied neighborhoods, and asphalt and concrete displace the ancient city's bedrock, natural stones are becoming more rare all the time.

Nearly 150 mixed-media paintings make up İpek's "From Faraway and Always" series (2020–22); lining an entire gallery wall, this body of work depicts rows and rows of blackened suns surrounded, halolike, by a yellow glow. The works evince İpek's skill in using minimalist, abstract language, relying equally on repetition and precision. The opaque black circles differ slightly in scale, some blurry or surrounded by various hues, producing a sense of flux. While the dark circles against light evoke an eclipse, the forms could also read as petri dishes, a reminder of the pieces' creation during a pandemic. Involving linseed oil that subtly yellows, these works also suggest living organisms, and imply a formal connection to the discoloring foam of the "Subjected" series.

While the above works showcase İpek's gifts as a fine illustrator and conceptual artist, the two videos on view are less compelling visually and lazier intellectually. The single-channel, 10-minute pieces *Zephyr I* and *Zephyr II* (both 2021) suffer from mannerism. They are titled after the west wind (ζόφος, zóphos, means darkness), which is named after the Greek god Zephyrus, the harbinger of spring. Set to a meditative soundtrack composed by Turkish artist Ah! Kosmos, the videos offer hallucinatory animations of intermingling black shapes, beginning calmly before the forms dance around, as if in a tornado, later to morph into a soft breeze. The action looks like computer-generated imagery but is the product of a simple gesture: İpek has recorded the movements of ink inside a large glass of water. As with the linseed oil series, what these shapes stand for—tornado, sandstorm, or masses joined in a revolution—is in the eye of the beholder.



Ahmet Doğu İpek: *Zephyr II*, 2021, single-channel video, ten minutes.  
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The show's curator, [Selen Ansen](https://www.artnews.com/t/selen-ansen/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/selen-ansen/>), suggests these videos illustrate the tragic and risky interactions between bodies, and enact [Aby Warburg](https://www.artnews.com/t/aby-warburg/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/aby-warburg/>)'s “pathos formula”—a set of gestures, repeated throughout art history, that convey movement and emotion. While the *Zephyr* imagery proves visually captivating, it is ultimately superficial. The emotionally charged visual trope lacks the tight formality and resulting punch of İpek's other works here, rendering them as essentially screensavers. Still, they exemplify the artist's fascination with the transformation of systems, the kinship of chaos and cosmos, and the evolution of forms.

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