

# Hale Tenger

BALLOONS ON THE SEA

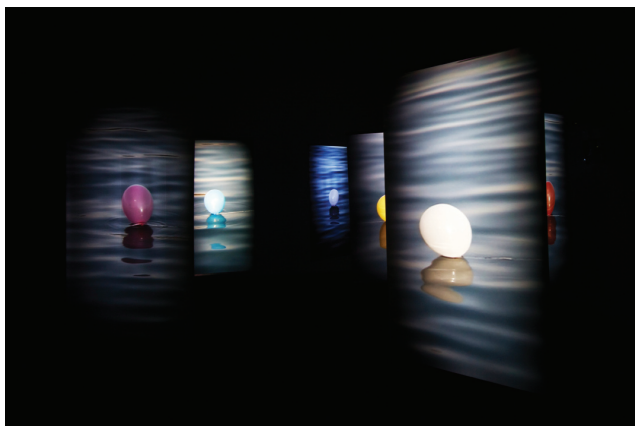
HALE TENGER  
*Balloons on the Sea*  
2011  
Seven-channel video installation,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

Though Hale Tenger strives to avoid repetition in her diverse array of installation, sculpture and video work, there nevertheless remain certain crucial recurring themes, and the critique of power looms large among them. In some works the 51-year-old Turkish artist is blunt in her examination of the male-dominated political arena. *I Know People Like This II* (1992), first shown at the 3rd Istanbul Biennial in 1992, is a wall-mounted installation of brass statues of tumescent gods and the Three Wise Monkeys (who hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil) arranged in a pattern of stars and crescents resembling the Turkish flag. Accused by the police of violating the penal code and degrading the national flag, Tenger was taken to court, although after a year the charges were dropped. Unbowed, Tenger continued to make work in the same vein, as in *Turkish Delight* (2003), a white terra cotta figure of the Greek god Priapus decorated with patterns from Iznik ceramics, with grapevines creeping up the length of the deity's enormous erection.

Yet, alongside these fairly aggressive works, the artist has also opted for subtle and poignant visuals to connote troubled politics. In 2005, Tenger was visiting Lebanon when the country's prime minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated by explosives targeted at his motorcade. Her response to the event, the video *Beirut* (2005–07), depicts the façade of the Hotel Saint Georges, which was damaged by the blast, violently animated by white curtains billowing out of its windows in the evening breeze.

Tenger adopts a similarly weightless aesthetic in her video installation *Balloons on the Sea* (2011), the sole work displayed in her first solo exhibition at Green Art Gallery. Entering the space, viewers were faced with a large screen displaying a line of 28 balloons afloat on a gently undulating expanse of water. The scene felt at once familiar and otherworldly, as if one were recalling imagery from a childhood dream. The balloons bobbed up and down to an ethereal, ambient electronic soundtrack by Tenger's long-time collaborator Serdar Ateser, their movements articulated by the occasional metallic ping of a triangle. Seen from this side, the work instilled a serene sense of calm in the space.

As one walked around the screen, however, one's interpretation of the images and music drifted into less comforting territory. Behind the main screen were six smaller vertical screens, suspended from the ceiling at varying angles, each displaying a close-up of a single balloon. At this point, it became evident that the pings in the soundtrack were more directly synched to the work's internal structure than was apparent when seen from the front. With each high-pitched reverberation of the triangle a balloon would burst, only to come back into view



moments later. One was surrounded by a never-ending cycle of obliteration and regeneration.

The setup that Tenger has used in this piece derives from a popular game played along rivers and coastlines in Turkey, in which people tether balloons in the water and shoot at them with pellet guns. Yet, for all the connotations of amusement and play, in light of Tenger's past work and the political protests sweeping across the Middle East, this ostensibly innocent scenario may easily be read as a metaphor for something more menacing. With the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples' relatively nonviolent overthrows of their leaders followed by the brutal government crackdowns on protesters in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen, it is hard not to see Tenger's balloons as stand-ins for civilians assailed by autocratic regimes. These tethered entities, each reminiscent of a human head, lay captive and exposed to attack. Though they are eliminated one by one, they return, undefeated, replaced by an identical substitute—a cycle of regeneration that speaks of a collective will to stand up against repression.

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