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Balloons on the Sea

A popular pastime on the Bosphorus leads to an understanding of spiritual truths

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WEEKEND REVIEW

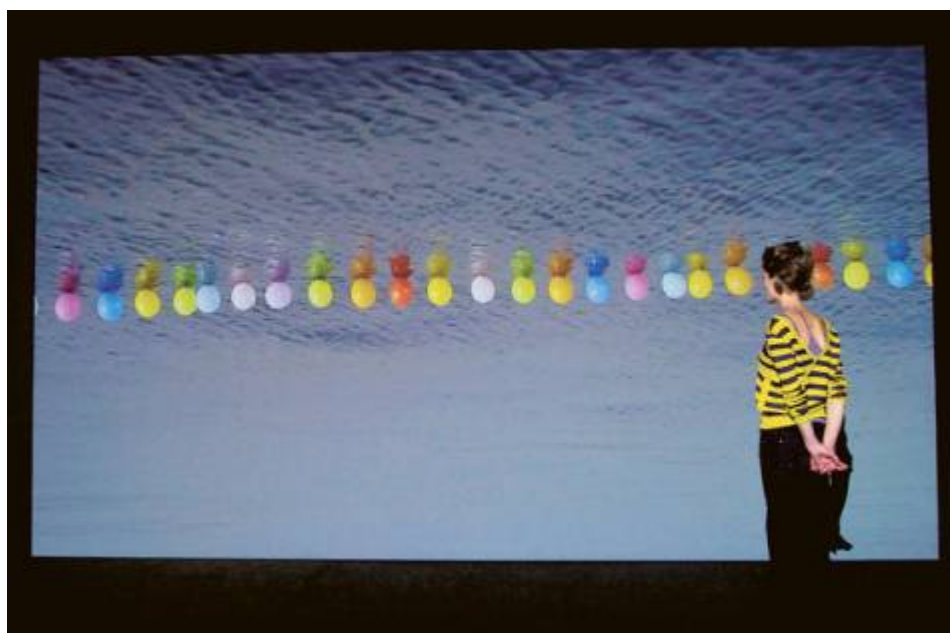


Image Credit: Supplied

A light box displays a picture of balloons on the sea. Next to it is a screen on which is projected an upside-down video of the same image. The fact that the balloons are there to be shot adds a sense of tension to the tranquil scene

Shooting balloons that have been tied together and laid on the sea is a popular pastime in the coastal areas of Turkey.

Halé Tenger has taken inspiration from this familiar Turkish sight to create a poetic and profound seven-channel video installation. The Istanbul-based artist's first exhibition in Dubai, *Balloons on the Sea*, comments on the ephemeral nature of life, political oppression in society and the undying spirit of human beings.

The exhibition begins with a light box displaying a picture of the balloons laid on the sea. Next comes a huge screen on which is projected an upside-down video of the same picture accompanied by music, created especially for the artwork by Tenger's long-time audio collaborator, Serdar Ateser.

As you look at the multicoloured balloons on the water, strung together, bobbing on the sea, you realise that because of the image reversal, it is actually the reflection that you are looking at.

There is no gun to be seen but the knowledge that these balloons have been put there to be shot adds a sense of tension to the tranquil scene. The haunting music adds to the lyricism and the tension.

By using this large projection, Tenger has actually divided the gallery space into two separate areas. Behind this screen are six smaller screens. As you walk in between these screens, you can see individual balloons blown off, each one making a different sound, a last sigh.

But magically, the balloons reappear in an almost ghost-like manner. Both the popping and the reappearance of the balloons are random, thus a tension is built as you expect a burst but do not know which one will pop and when.

Thus the artist draws you into two separate worlds — one a dream-like scenario that charmingly invites you to indulge in the joyful reverberations of the gently floating balloons and the other, almost as soft as a whisper, brings the spectral side of existence into focus.

As is typical of Tenger's sculptures and video installations, this work has personal, political and spiritual connotations. "As children, we have all loved balloons and we still like them as adults.

But we are always used to seeing balloons floating freely in the air. These balloons are sad, because they have been shackled and will never fly up in the air. And we know that they are there to be shot.

They are thus a metaphor for ordinary people or animals that are vulnerable and oppressed by armies, terrorists or their own governments and thus cannot escape. But the fact that they reappear makes a strong statement that suppression will not work forever," Tenger says.

The artist also plays with the Sufi concept that everything that is going on in the world is just a reflection.

"By turning the image upside down I wanted to make the viewer question what is real and what is a reflection. Interestingly, we are so brainwashed into seeing things in a certain way that even in the inverted

image, we tend to look at the reflections as the real thing. I often do this inversion in my work, just to explore new ways of thinking about life, society and politics," she says.

On a spiritual level, the popping and the reappearance of the balloons signifies the transience of our existence and the eternal cycle of life. "This is a well accepted idea in Eastern philosophy but more materialistic Western societies tend to think that they are here forever.

And particularly politicians around the world think like that. By coincidence my reappearing balloons reflect what is happening in this region at the moment, with people power reasserting itself so effectively," Tenger says.

Setting up seven separate projectors was quite complicated but Tenger believes it was essential for creating the right effect.

"I did not want to show the guns or the shooters — only the balloons popping, so that even people who are not familiar with this Turkish pastime will know that something is going on here. And I wanted to divide the gallery space into two separate areas, like a coin with two contradictory sides, reflecting the tension between birth and death, existence and non-existence," she says.

"I hope viewers will appreciate both — the meditative side of this work and the unavoidable sad reality of our temporal existence that it depicts. The work has powerful political connotations and one cannot escape from the significance of the imagery of pressure building up and bursting, and balloons that will just not

go away. But it is also poetic and subtle.

Eventually all humans are linked and although we see ourselves as individuals, each one of us is just a small speck on Earth, which in turn is a small speck in the universe. Although our souls are ephemeral, we are all part of a never-ending cycle of death and regeneration. And it is up to us to find that fine balance and do justice to our planet and all living beings," she adds.

Balloons on the Sea is on at Green Art Gallery until April 28.