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Melike Kara



For her first show in Georgia, Cologne-based Kurdish German artist Melike Kara gathered new works—paintings, wall-mounted crocheted works, “knot sculptures” made from PLA filament, and a video—under the title “How She Shapes Us.” “She” is the Munzur River, which flows through the artist’s homeland—and, as if mirroring a river bend, the video *Munzur* (all works 2021) was projected on a curved white-brick wall in the staircase leading to the gallery’s second floor. Composed of three vertically oriented cell-phone recordings, the video follows from different angles the ceaseless flowing and swirling of the river as it passes through the province of Turkey long known as Dersim. This territory, renamed Tunceli in 1936, has a large Kurdish population and is the only one where the majority are Alevi, a persecuted Muslim minority. Historically, it has been a site of significant Kurdish resistance to the Turkish government. It is also one of the most biodiverse regions in eastern Anatolia, but since the 1980s ambitious dam projects have been planned and executed there, harming both the natural surroundings and the social fabric of the region.

Four crocheted-wool pieces, shimmering with silvery threads, were hung on top of the projection, forming an integral part of the video installation. As the viewer moved farther into the gallery rooms, multiple other light-pink works, from the series “Remember Us,” 2021–, were revealed, appearing abstract at first glance but containing visual references to the geometric rhythms of patterns traditional to Kurdish crafts, as well as to those existing in nature. Some of them were intentionally left unfinished, the loose threads hanging down the walls, painted a metallic silver gray. The crocheted-wool work that gave the show its title stood out as the only figurative scene, based on a family photo of Kara’s aunt and another woman washing dishes in the Munzur. Its fine needlework radiated calm and familial warmth, even as it offered a poignant reminder of the often unwritten and violently erased Kurdish histories within the Turkish state. Memories like these are now kept only within the personal archives of families.

As human and nonhuman life surrounds the river, so does the energy-industry infrastructure that endangers its fragile ecosystems. Here in Georgia, Kara’s work resonated with a local controversy around the Namakhvani hydropower plant on the Rioni River. The largest energy project since the country declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the dam was to be built by a Turkish construction company. Since early 2021, the Rioni Valley Defenders—a group formed by local residents

early 2020, the *Urban Valley* protesters—a group formed by local residents and supported by feminist and queer activists, progressive liberals, and leftists—have demonstrated hope that environmental justice could serve as a unifying platform. The protests experienced a painful rupture in July, however, when the Georgian Orthodox Church pitted the rural movement against the LGBTQ+ community during Gay Pride. Nevertheless, a small victory for the activists came in September with the construction company's withdrawal from the project and at least a temporary moratorium on construction.

Juxtaposed with Kara's wool works were large paintings whose palettes were limited to a few combinations of dark purple, conifer green, or black, with traces of pink, silver, and white. They were inspired by traditional Kurdish tapestry motifs from various regions, with titles directly referring to locations of their origin. For example, *bid majnun*, which evoked the same kinds of fluvial processes seen in *Munzur*, did not contain any clearly discernible figures. The painting was abstract, but only in the sense that a super close-up examination of a carpet in the making or a distant bird's-eye view of a landscape would be—meaning, not really abstract at all. The lightly applied combinations of lines and squares in oil stick and acrylic could well have comprised a map of the region or of any place, perhaps, that does not include dams but lets the river shape us.

— [Inga Lāce](#)

In the Studio with Melike Kara. Words by Sofia Hallström

I'd like to start this interview by asking you about your painting practice. The paintings are densely layered with condensed colour palettes and usually made using oil sticks; how did you develop this style?

When I start painting, I usually access two to three colour palettes. To focus on the two to three colours helps me to create a frame of what happens on the canvas.



Melike Kara, studio image. Image courtesy the artist

You use motifs from tapestries, craft traditions and ritual objects of Kurdish culture. How do you approach creating composition in the paintings?

The starting point for these paintings is inspired by different Kurdish tapestry motifs from various regions and tribes. The ambiguity between abstraction and figuration is already at play in these carpets. From that point the painting weaves into the here and now and tells its own story. They appear to be two figures which are dissolving at the same time.



Melike Kara, 'Sandanj' (2021), oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 220 cm. 'Nothing is Yours, Everything is You', Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 2021. Image copyright and courtesy of the artist and Kölnischer Kunstverein

Do you have any rituals or processes that you follow in the studio?

I usually start my day in the studio early in the morning. First I water all the plants, make myself a coffee or tea and get inspired by everyday things – as well as react to/reflect on current events. And then I start to paint.

To end the day in the studio and to ground myself, I oil my calves as it helps to come back to a grounding, bodily reality.



Melike Kara, 'mother of mother of mother', installation view, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, 2021. Image copyright and courtesy of the artist and Ludwig Forum

You seem to incorporate a lot of personal narratives into your work. Can you tell us about some of the people or experiences that inform your practice?

My family, especially the older generation helped me to find a better communication to my Kurdish roots, but also travelling to the places where my family comes from or going to the religious pilgrim places gave me a very good possibility to connect. The rituals my grandmother taught me, which were so normal to her, opened up a different door – another dimension. I learned a lot from her, she was a door to my Kurdish heritage which drove me and my work to get a better idea of what it means to have Kurdish roots.



Melike Kara, 'HOW SHE SHAPES US', installation view, LC Queisser, Tbilisi, 2021. Image copyright and courtesy of the artist and LC Queisser

I wondered whether you could talk about what led you to begin building your personal archive, centred around your Kurdish-Alevi family histories and stories; and Kurdish culture and tradition more broadly. How does the archive figure within your studio practice?

When I started to dig deeper into my family history, I began collecting everything I could find. I was interested in what the bond is in a group of people as inhomogeneous as that of the Kurds. That is how building the archive started.

My personal history is connected to a specific subgroup of the Kurdish population, but I was also interested in the Kurdish community as a whole with all the different tribes. At the same time, I wanted to learn more about history and about writers, stories, poets, and singers.

They are from different regions and different networks, and they all come from different sources. There are personal family photos and pictures taken by family friends. There are photos I took myself and others taken by family members. I continue to expand the archive and am still taking photos and asking family members to do the same. Those images are accompanied by ones from other sources and regions, as well as

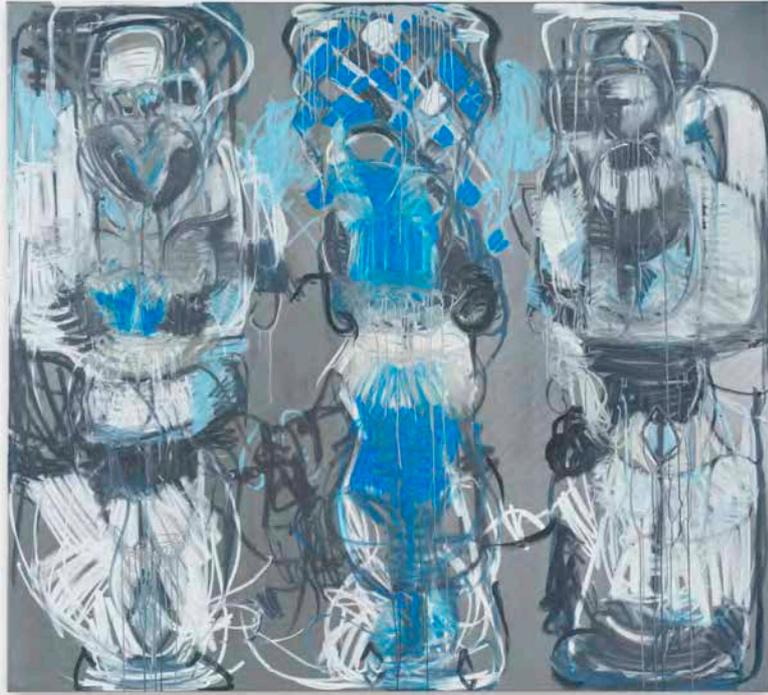
found images etc. I was interested in collecting everything and finding the hidden beauty in them. The archive is something inherent and present in all my work, something that is alive and ever-changing. I am not afraid of these changes, it is an ongoing process and some part of me will always be searching for a better understanding of my Kurdish heritage.

When we spoke previously, you mentioned the importance of celebrating the beauty that lives amongst the heaviness and hardships of a culture. Is there something that you hope viewers think about or take away from your work?

I don't think it's my place to want to influence how viewers see my work, but I do wish to create awareness and sensitivity to a culture that one may not have had access to before.

When you are working towards an exhibition, how do you initially approach making the work?

Ahead of preparing an exhibition, I mostly start with writing a poem; it gives me quicker access to what I am going to do. But here, too, I draw a lot of inspiration from the space and the given architecture. The artistic process for me does not only take place in my studio, but also responding to places and going to their architecture physically inspires me. In general, I am looking for an extension of painting that connects with its surroundings or architecture. Painting and sculpture interact, question each other and create a direct communication with the same. An expanded view and a change of perspective seem interesting to me.



Melike Kara, 'Sofreh Normadic' (2021) Oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 220 cm. Nothing is Yours, Everything is You, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 2021. Image copyright and courtesy of the artist and Kölnischer Kunstverein

Melike Kara *Speaking in Tongues*

Jan Kaps, Cologne 14 December – 10 February

Melike Kara uses her first gallery show in her hometown of Cologne to question everything that ‘home’ means to her. Born and raised in Germany, she’s also part of a Kurdish Alevi family forced to flee Turkey because of the persecution of their culture. Nestling in a cross-media arrangement of works, the highly personal video *Emine* (all works 2018) portrays the artist’s grandmother from a respectful distance. The old lady, marked by life, moves unsurely through her own home: Alzheimer’s is gradually erasing her awareness of her identity. With this loss, meanwhile, goes part of the family’s Kurdish identity, as Emine is the only one who still speaks Zazaki, the language of their homeland in eastern Turkey.

The wall piece *fal (a) bakmak* (‘reading coffee grounds’) also refers to the grandmother, siting her as keeper of Kurdish rites. About 300 mocha cups are embedded into a wall in a huge grid. Each cup contains, indeed, coffee grounds, whose portents the exhibition’s visitors – unlike Kara’s grandmother, who practises tasseomancy – probably won’t be able to read. It’s not only the past that dims without the grandmother but also the future. Accordingly, *fal (a) bakmak* light-footedly bridges both identities of the artist as part of a globalised international art

clique and a nearly archaic national community. Pointedly, the coffee grounds of this Turkish magic are embedded in a vocabulary – the grid – that resembles Minimalism, whose universal claim famously marks the beginning of a uniform, transnational form of expression.

It’s instructive also to regard the constellations of figures in front of a white background – resembling the paintings for which Kara is best known – as closed societies. Their interactions are opaque to outsiders and their codes inscrutable, which is to some degree the case with both minority ethnic communities and the artworld. And yet there are also explicit hints of the artist’s Kurdish origins in these groups of figures, which merge into homogeneous groups, social bodies, using calculated colour concepts. For example, there’s the fat goat that stares at the viewer in *Munzur (like she shapes us)*, blocking large parts of figures, whose silhouettes barely emerge from the sloppily applied sandy tone of the creature’s fur. The animal here serves again as code for a traditional, antiquated Kurdish lifestyle, with its ritualised goat slaughtering that clearly traumatised the artist at a young age.

The pairing of two other paintings stands out. On the right, a group of figures with a goat, *Tiefe Schluchten langer Schnee* (‘deep canyon, long

snow’), sketched in quick, light brown oil pastel outlines accentuated here and there with washed-out pink; on the left, the neatly painted *Hacı Bektaş Veli (Hadschi Bektasch Wali)*, a depiction of a spiritual leader from the thirteenth century, adored by the Alevis. He holds in his arm a miniature stag; on his lap rests a predatory cat. The depiction of the saint reads as a condensed image of the influence on the artist of her heritage and family background. At the same time *Hacı Bektaş Veli* is a fitting counterpart to the aforementioned video *Emine*, in which at one point a giant lion is inserted, digitally, into the grandma’s living room. In the stylistically very different *Tiefe Schluchten langer Schnee*, by contrast, men and goats – both rendered in a profane, expressive vocabulary – are barely distinguishable from each other. The painting brings to mind the artist’s raw, sketchy compositions from four or five years ago and thereby also functions as a guide to the reading of her recent paintings. Kara has refined the distinguishing features of the figures in her constellation, so that now they recall the masks of Noh theatre, which appear near-identical to those unfamiliar with the codes of the form yet reveal subtle differences to those in the know. *Moritz Scheper*

Translated from the German by Liam Tickner



Hacı Bektaş Veli (Hadschi Bektasch Wali), 2018, oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 60 × 50 cm. Courtesy the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne

MELIKE KARA BRINGS THE SPIRIT WORLD TO THE YUZ MUSEUM

KAT HERRIMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER



Melike Kara in her Köln studio, 2018.

My second house was haunted. I never saw a ghost, but I felt one. I considered it more or less benevolent with the exception of midnight walks to a cold toilet seat.

Occasionally I feel this same creeping sensation staring into the eyes of figurative paintings or security cameras. At Melike Kara's studio in Cologne, I was under constant surveillance, but the source was hard to pinpoint.

You can't walk by one of Kara's oil stick paintings without catching a gaze. Her jumbles of purple, pink and blue bodies seem to follow you without any effort, but it was the omnipresence of Kara's grandmother that seemed to dominate the room on an unseasonably warm visit in April. "She's always with me," Kara says, motioning to a paper cut-out of her grandmother's face affixed to a wooden madonna. "She's the guardian angel of the studio."

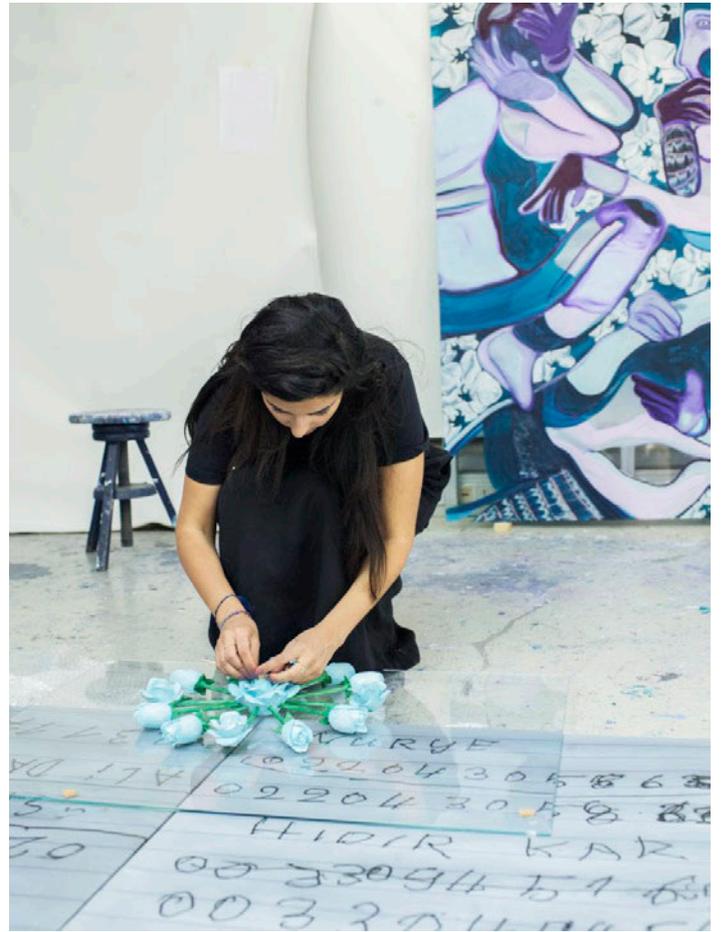
The artist's family has always played a critical role in her work. Her great-grandfather was the shaman of his Turkish village and the artist remembers the kind of magnetic pull her grandmother had during their visits. "Everyone wanted to touch her," Kara says. "The Kurdish belief is that a shaman has magical powers for healing. If you visit and commune with them in their temple, they can help you manifest your wishes."



This July, Kara plans to create her own oasis at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai for “A Parsley Face,” her first institutional solo show. During our visit, she was working on a series of semi-transparent panels, which she plans to dangle from the ceiling in order to create a temple within the museum hall. Each hand-painted pane is at once a window and a wall— a dynamic that Kara hopes will help visitors feel protected while taking in the army of new figures that flank them on either side. “Everybody sees something different in my images,” Kara says. “I wanted to push this idea and think about the way I could create new frames for looking and for being looked at. Identity is not static, it is constantly in flux like a performance or a narrative.”

Certainly when observing Kara’s figures I find myself constructing my own stories about how they all ended up together and who is in charge. For hints I bury myself in the details, some of which are inspired by the psychedelically-colored tassels her grandmother used to knit. An assortment are lying on a bed in the thick of things. The spread reads as a kind of three-dimensional storyboard as the soft strawberries, dresses and animals play off one another, not unlike the masked figures that occupy the artist’s paintings. “I especially love the dogs,” Kara says lifting up one of the crude figures speckled in bright green and a clashing pink. Kara’s obsession with four-legged friends is well documented.

Her 2017 exhibition with Peres Projects was titled “Köpek,” the Turkish word for hounds, and featured a suite of long-eared sculptures guarding her paintings like gargoyles. The Yuz Museum show will also include new wooden sculptures, some of which currently populate the floor. The notched surface of her carved material presented a challenge to the artist who typically works on canvas with oil sticks. “I had to find a new way in, but now I think I’m getting the hang of it. I’m used to the directness and immediacy of the oil stick. This is a more decorative process,” she says, picking up a clock whose hands have been replaced with blue roses. These are the romantic flourishes that enable Kara to bridge the space between the domestic and the mystical. The fantasy is not outside but within. One of Kara’s strengths is her ability to create and break her own rubrics. For example, when working on a group of paintings, Kara tends to stick to a singular color palette of three to four colors. “It’s not really about creating a signature of favoritism, but rather a way for me to focus,” the artist says of her tendency to condense. “Since I’m surrounded on all sides in the studio, I find color helps create a sense of cohesion that enables me to work through an idea without losing myself.”



Kara's aesthetic idiosyncrasies are what initially drew gallerist Javier Peres to show her work in 2016. "Melike's pieces are enigmatic, what some would call 'primitive' and yet somehow deeply sophisticated in mood," Peres says. "They are memorable as they seem to depict some social tableaux of a long-lost civilization. Or maybe they are about a future civilization. Her work leaves a lot of room for interpretation. It's not about deciphering the what, when, where and why, but rather it's about the work asking questions and opening the possibilities."

The generosity found in Kara's work is an extension of her own. Like her shamanistic elders, the artist has a commanding presence—but one that generates new energy rather than domineers. This is the discovery I make during our visit. The ghost or presence that I perceived upon arrival isn't a function of an outside force but one that radiates outward from Kara's core and manifests itself in her work. I ask her if anyone has accused her of having powers before, and she laughs: "My family has lived outside of Turkey for three generations. If anything my work is an effort to get in touch with this history, to draw it out and use it to create myths of my own."

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Your first encounter with Melike Kara's paintings may depend on your general comfort-level in social situations, on how easy you find it to show up at a party filled with strangers, or on how well your anti-anxiety medication is working that day. Often slightly more than life-sized, Kara's canvasses are populated with small casts of characters. They are groups numbering between three and eight, often piled atop each other, with limbs intertwined like corals ready to petrify into a reef. Engaged in situations that look in turn like subdued cocktail parties or ecstatic bacchanals, these characters relax, converse and fuck, all while either staring blankly off to the side or straight out into the empty space in front of the painting.

Some of modern art history's most iconic works—Manet's bar at the *Folies-Bergère* as much as Picasso's *Demoiselles*—have drawn their power from the quizzical expressions on the faces of their protagonists, inspiring scores of critics to wax about the coldly seductive gazes sent out by these *demi monde* denizens. In front of Kara's works, such fantasies are harder to sustain. It is undeniable that there is something sexual about these paintings, filled as they are with gyrating torsos and embracing limbs. But where her modernist precursors pandered clearly to the fantasies of their (overwhelmingly male) audiences, Kara leaves it to us to figure out the basic rules of engagement with the inhabitants of her paintings. Are we welcome here? Are we even allowed to watch? Are these characters posing for us or for each other? Do they know we're there, and if they do, do they care? Like the artist, who is hesitant to explicate her work in detail, her creatures do not appear particularly interested in speaking to us. Instead, they seem to be waiting out

an awkward silence, like the crowd at a party when a new guest walks in unannounced.

Given her work's maturity of style, it can be surprising to learn that Kara's public career is only a few years old. Born in Germany to a Turkish Alevi family, Kara attended Düsseldorf's famous art academy until 2014, when she graduated as a *Meisterschüler* to Rosemarie Trockel. Although Kara's style of painting shows little visual resemblance to her teacher's practice, it was there that she learned to create arrangements that manage to appear suffused with sexual energy to one viewer, but unapproachably distant to another. It may not be wrong to think of the recent excitement around Kara's work as another testament to the strength of the Rhineland's resurgence as an art center or the undiminished strength of that region's painterly tradition. However, what sets Kara into a class of her own is her unique skill to powerfully re-infuse the restrained formal sensibilities of her peers with the political and sexual energy often associated with previous generations of feminist artists.

It is this balancing act between form and not-quite-narrative elements that lets us chart a path through Kara's shifting and evolving oeuvre. The oldest painting displayed on the artist's personal website is just two years old. More oil drawing than painting, the stark white background of *on the other doorbell* (2015) is divided up by a network of nervous blue lines that coalesce into a group of five figures as if by accident. There is no doubt that this work was painted quickly, in a bout of inspiration, and the figures seem to reflect this. They are all action, no interiority. Even though we witness them hugging and acrobatically climbing each other, there is no clear indica-





tion what relationship these individual figures might have to one another. In the poem the artist wrote to accompany the work—in fact, every painting has a poem to go along with it—Kara herself seems to confirm this connection between the furtive execution and the work's inhabitants. It hints that a love story may have provided the inspiration for the work, though one in which both sides are prone to act without fully understanding the situation. Roughly translated, it reads: [...] the outline is black you say / for me it's a rose color / what are colors after all / they tell me one step after another / that heals everything I suppose. [...]

For Kara, the two years since the completion of this painting have been filled with small formal innovations, none monumental in and of itself, but each with a subtle effect on the mood and power of the work. Soon after *on the other doorbell*, many paintings started to include more than one color, the background being filled in more and more with fields of soft rose, violet or earth tones. The process slowed down, lines got smoother and characters more precisely rendered. In a recent painting, a gaggle of gimp-masked figures lounges about in front of a soft pink background. Still ultimately inscrutable in their intentions, these characters have become slightly more legible and available as a site for our projections. The bearded man (Kara herself denies that any of her figures has a fixed gender at all) at the center seems in charge of the situation, his contorted companions by contrast project a feeling of confusion. Ultimately, whether we see this space as a beach scene or the inside of a sex club caught mid-orgy, it tells us more about ourselves than about the intentions that lead Kara to create the piece.

The most recent formal step may be the most daring one yet. For a solo booth at Independent Brussels in Spring 2016, Kara created, among other works, two floor-to-ceiling glass divider walls, each painted on

both sides. A look at just one of them, *die Geister die ich rief* (2016), reveals the depth this expansion into three dimensions adds to figures that otherwise resemble those appearing in previous works. By blacking out most of the glass with scrupulously applied oil stick, Kara both obscures and draws attention to her transparent painting surface. Focusing on one area of the image, the figures seem suspended in outer space or trapped in a deep hole. Focusing on another, one becomes acutely aware of the work's bi-directionality. Are the figures on opposites of the glass in conversation with one another? Are they part of the same space or do they show the same cast of characters caught in two different situations?

The next step will be to take this exploration of sculptural space one step further. A recent showing at Independent New York in 2017 served as the first showing of a number of wood sculptures painted a ghostly lime white. It will be exciting to see where the possibilities of the new medium will lead. Standing in the gallery space in New York, Kara's creation for the first time leaves the safe confines of the bidimensional picture plane. If her painterly experiments have turned amorphous groups of characters into ever more distinguishable individuals, perhaps this will be the time that these characters step out of the safe comfort of their natural habitat. As Kara's poems and personal conversations have long hinted at, many of her paintings have their roots in the real world, in concrete personal and political experiences. Maybe the next step will be to address those experiences directly, for Kara's characters to step out of their cliques, so to speak, and walk towards us, their audience.





ELEPHANT

Melike Kara: Body Language

“There is a big shift in the exhibition in that the figures in my paintings do not seem to belong anywhere.”

Looking into the idea of belonging as an individual and as part of a group, Melike Kara's sketchy, energetic paintings are full of interlocking limbs, tongues and clusters of figures in states of play and aggravation.

Words by Rosalind Duguid



Köpek, Installation View

In a new exhibition, Köpek at Peres Projects in Berlin, the Cologne-based artist examines the concept of cultural and family history as a part of identity. The characters in Köpek exist in a seemingly infinite white space, their bodies' borders breaking off and slipping into anonymous backgrounds. Yet location is pinpointed to some extent, as the paintings hang on photographic wallpapers of German and Turkish scenes from Kara's personal archives. Whilst the photographs taken in Turkey are specific to the artist's own family history, those of German locations document Turkish-owned market stalls. Having studied in Dusseldorf and exhibited globally, Kara's work questions how identities are constructed by the spaces our bodies inhabit and the histories we carry within them.

Can you tell me a little about the exhibition?

In this show I deal with questions of identity through those of anonymity. There is a big shift in the exhibition in that the figures in my paintings do not seem to belong anywhere. On the other hand, the photographic wallpapers are out of my personal archives. I questioned myself: Where does my own identity begin? How much am I referring to my background? How much influence does my background have on me? Where do I belong?

“We all feel each other’s non-verbal communication during every communication we have, or within every social structure we enter.”



Naked Words, 2017, acrylic and oil sticks on canvas

The paintings in the show are predominantly blue, from an electric zingy blue to a more pale pastel hue. What drew you to bring this colour so heavily into this body of work?

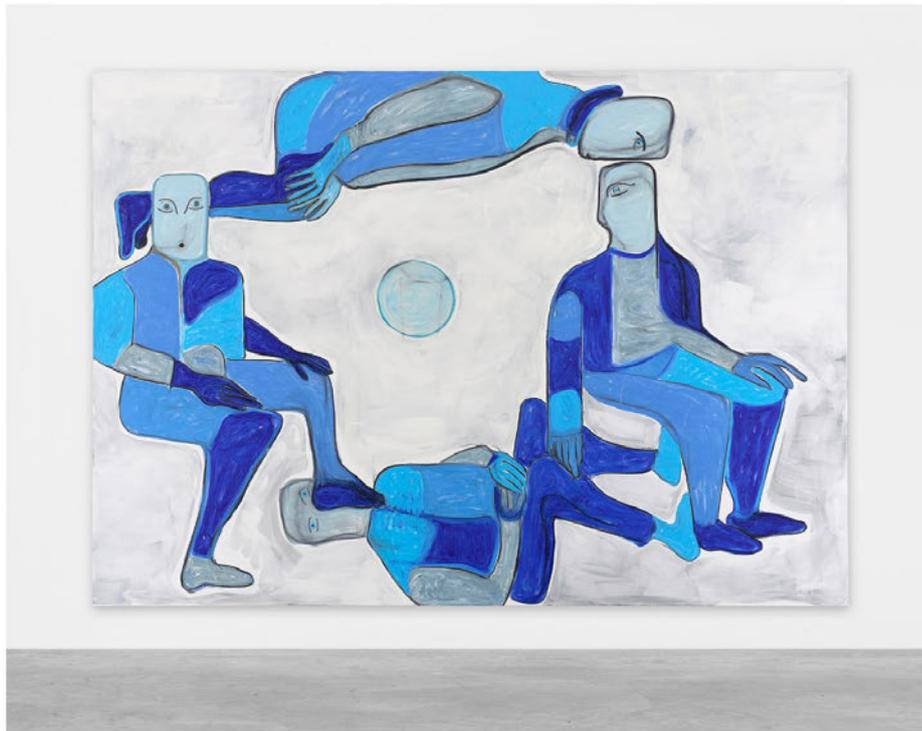
It’s more an intuition. It’s more about finding the right balance, restricted to two to three colours.

In the show your paintings are hung, almost collage-like, upon walls printed with huge photographs. Do you feel that the space operates more as one installation, or as individual pieces of work that communicate with each other in the space?

Every work is to be understood individually, but they interact with each other within the exhibition. Every piece forms an additional layer in the general concept of one complete installation. For example, the photographs build a sort of frame for the show, and I find it interesting how the different architectures and relics within the photographs react to the architecture of the actual space.

Your works, to me, seem to have something of the work of Wifredo Lam in them, but also the boldness of Nicola Tyson. Who have been your painting inspirations?

During my studies I was pretty much in love with Isa Genzken.



A New Earth, 2017, acrylic and oil sticks on canvas

The figures in your paintings sometimes appear to be struggling between themselves for space in the frame yet some appear to be taking comfort in each other's closeness. Do you see your paintings as having narratives?

The figures in my paintings are visual representations of non-verbal but very common social interactions. We all feel each other's non-verbal communication during every communication we have, or within every social structure we enter. The figures mostly reflect this kind of social struggle. At first sight they don't have any reference to gender, age or culture, but if you have a look at the whole set up of the show, maybe they belong somewhere...

Dogged Disclosure: Melike Kara

by Milan Ther

Melike Kara's exhibition *Köpek* at Peres Projects in Berlin includes photography-as-architecture (custom sized for the gallery walls), along with paintings and sculptures. Together these elements weave a semantic web related to the ways in which art, utterance, and identity are subject to mechanisms of social hegemony by intertwining the artist's personal identity with her practice.

The paintings, depicting figures in blue hues and pale skin tones, set against white or black backgrounds, are placed on top of the black-and-white, made-to-measure photographs covering some walls. The painted figures' indeterminate gender, ethnicity, and age mirrors their undefined relationship to the monochromatic realm they inhabit. The empty backgrounds are in stark contrast to the specificity of the photographs, which depict sites in Turkey and Germany. In one we see a Turkish market in Cologne; another shows a large rock that is a site of pilgrimage for the Alevi in southeast Turkey; yet another depicts Kara's great grandmother's gravestone. These photographs show a range of proximities between the artist, her family, and historically defined minority communities—groups that have experienced pressure in the form of persecution or stigmatization in Turkey or Germany. This disclosure of biography signals a departure within Kara's work.



1 2 3 4 5 6
Melike Kara "Köpek" at Peres Projects, Berlin, 2017
Courtesy: Peres Projects, Berlin

The figures in the paintings are involved in social activity. They fight, coerce, search, ponder. Their formal interweaving produces bodily architecture, with their gesturing and touching hands functioning as structural joints. *why it matters* (2017) shows eight figures, arms extending across the bodies. One figure's hand makes another figure's pondering facial expression, while two others shake hands, and a third couple appears to put something into or pull something out of each other's mouths. In *naked words* (2017) eight figures deploy another drama of gestures, touching each other's mouths and bodies. In *mental notes* (2017), the smallest painting in the exhibition, a larger blue figure looms over a red-fading-to-violet face while squeezing its mouth, physically shaping it. This relationship, emblematic of the social mechanisms in all the paintings in *Köpek*, suggests that there is always an element of force between the expressing and the receiving party. Evidently, these figures populate a world of rhetoric and power—a social ground in which they express themselves, and force, pull, and shape the language of others. While they manifest little difference in visual appearance, sameness does not signify cohesion. Rather, they depict membership in the social body as a continuously negotiated act, fragile and vulnerable to force.

Through the juxtaposition of the photographs and the paintings, *Köpek* generates two modes of identity. One documents geographic sites as part of the foundation of identity, and the other depicts expression of identity as a struggle. In this sense, identity becomes a battleground for the ability to publicly claim existential territory. Kara seems to suggest that identity, as an expression of the links between individuals and the spaces they occupy, is enforced and regulated. In the end, this battle does not succeed in erasing the ground against which it is set, but shifts public discourse toward narratives of intolerance that serve the interests of one group by restraining access to existential territory for another group.



1 2 3 4 5 6
Melike Kara "Köpek" at Peres Projects, Berlin, 2017
Courtesy: Peres Projects, Berlin

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In *Köpek*, however, there is hope. The title is taken from the Turkish word for "dog," often used in a derogatory sense. The dog sculptures in the exhibition, made from lime-washed wood, rest or sit in pairs or alone. Plants spring from some of their backs, similar to how acanthus leaves ornament Hellenistic pillars. They alter the visitors' navigation of the severe architecture on Karl-Marx-Allee, serving as a quiet act of consideration in an otherwise difficult climate.

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