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# MOUSSE

**Being without Ego:  
Melike Kara**

**Melike Kara**

IN CONVERSATION WITH

**Sohrab Mohebbi**



Melike Kara's pictorial atlas stratifies and regenerates a history and the formation of an identity by articulating an unofficial archive of the Kurdish diaspora. Without a land of their own, Kurds have no means or resources to preserve their own history, and what remains are memories and narratives passed on from generation to generation in a continual struggle to evade oblivion. Straddling the pictorial and the archival, Kara's paintings and installations reveal themselves as series of meditations on a state of mind: of "being without ego."

SOHRAB MOHEBBI is the director of SculptureCenter, New York, and curator of the 58th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. He received the Creative Capital, Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Program for the blog *Presence Documents*, and is a contributing editor to *Bidoun*.

MELIKE KARA (b.1985, Bensberg) lives and works in Cologne. Kara attended the Düsseldorf Academy of Art from 2007 to 2014. Solo exhibitions and exhibition participations include the 58th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; *Nothing is You, Everything is Yours*, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne; *as above so below*, Arcadia Missa, London; *No friends but the Mountains*, Kunstverein Göttingen; *New Work*, kunststituut melly, Rotterdam; *A Taste of Parsley*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai; *Trilogie de cendres (v.3)*, Frac des pays de la Loire, Nantes; *Sweet Lies. Fiktionen der Zugehörigkeit*, Ludwig Forum Aachen; *The Dreamers*, 58th October Salon, Belgrade Biennial; *Risquons-Tout*. Wiels Contemporary Art Centre. Brussels



SOHRAB MOHEBBI

Tell me how it all started: Was painting the primary artistic tool for you to process your research around images, and photography in particular?

MELIKE KARA

Since my early days in art school, and maybe before, I had a desire to research and dig through photographic archives, whether on a small familial scale or a larger historical one. But that drive existed alongside my painting, and they never seemed to compete. As my archival interests are finally entering the exhibition space, I still consider myself a painter first and foremost—a conceptual painter, but a painter nonetheless. I realize that, to an outside observer, the inclusion of photographic materials in my exhibitions might seem like a fundamental departure. But my recent work is part of the same quest that began with my earlier paintings. Some of those paintings were filled with groups of severely generalized, but always collectively organized, figures. While art historical references played some role, on a more fundamental level the paintings were meditations on a state of mind I describe as “being without ego.”

In a broad sense, my recent work with photographic archives still deals with that same issue. Researching my family’s roots in the Dersim region in Eastern Anatolia allows me to momentarily step out of my own head and into a much longer spiritual history. That history includes, for example, my great-grandfather, who was respected as a spiritual leader in the region and has a local pilgrimage site dedicated to his memory. In thinking about him, I realize that my personality is not just this isolated cell but rather a part of long histories of Kurdish culture and religion as well as of persecution and migration. Working with such archives reminds me that the kinds of rituals and spiritualities that were a natural part of my childhood came from him and others before him, and remain important to my thinking today. When photographs and memories appear in my most recent installations, that’s not the end of it.

Working with them also affects how I think and how I paint. Nearly all phases of my work and the different media I use deal with the same core issues. I think of them simply as different branches of the same large tree.

SOHRAB

Can you talk more about the “being without ego” state of mind? Is that part of your broader spiritual or meditation practice, or is it particularly related to your studio practice and painting as a tool to get to that state? MELIKE

It is not easy for me to put this condition into words. It’s a state of being without intentions. When we are still—and I mean truly still, that is, not indulging in any thought processes—the energy of life expresses itself a spontaneous way. This state of stillness can occur anywhere and anytime, regardless of meditation or the studio. But I find it particularly easy to attain while in the studio.

SOHRAB

You are based in Cologne, a much-mythologized site of the postwar German artistic scene, particularly in the 1980s. Do you think much about that history?

MELIKE

Quite a lot of German art from that period was centered around either embracing or ridiculing the idea that painting is the ultimate medium of self-expression and of the ego. As I just tried to explain, my approach flips that on its head. To me, the history of painting is much broader than that small slice of the Western canon, counting many traditions in which it is not seen as a particularly self-centered medium at all.

If I had to name artists from that time who have had an influence on me, I would name the legendary feminist artists Jutta Koether, Birgit Hein, and Rosemarie Trockel, who were certainly no less important than their loud male barfly counterparts. During my time at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Trockel was one of my most important professors. My work certainly looks quite different from hers, but I learned a great deal from her about constantly reinventing oneself on one’s own terms, and resisting some of the art world’s most simplistic categories.



SOHRAB

There is a strong archival dimension to your work. You have been working on a growing archive of Kurdish visual culture that started with collecting family photos and gradually expanded beyond that. Further, your paintings archive the knots in weaving and fabrics, creating abstract images that are entangled with a context. Can you speak about how these two currents came about and how you bring them together?

MELIKE

An image from my childhood comes to mind: I put my hand in my mother's jacket pocket. The pocket seems unbelievably big, but her hand wraps around mine like a protective shell. I lift my head and look around. We are standing in a large square filled with people. People are shouting, dancing, and demonstrating for a free country. Many memories like this have shaped me and spurred my explorations of origins and identity. When I started to delve deeper into my family history, I began to collect everything I could find. I wanted to understand the unifying elements between such a heterogeneous group of people as the Kurds. My personal history is linked to a specific subgroup of the Kurdish population, but I was also interested in the Kurdish community as a whole, all its different tribes. To expand my research, I started to connect with a wide network. It is an ongoing and active process of creating an unofficial archive of the Kurdish diaspora. Without their own land, the Kurds have no means or resources to preserve their history. What remains are memories and narratives that are passed on from generation to generation and struggle to evade oblivion.

In terms of patterns and knotting techniques, I amassed all the books I could find on the subject. Research on the tradition of designing carpets is elusive, as borrowing and adapting motifs is a consistent practice in the history of Kurdish weaving. The repeated forced resettlement of Kurdish tribes has also led to changes in knotting techniques, as motifs have been adapted from and for each new environment.

I recognize certain parallels between painting and the making of carpets. The paintings tell a new story from the now, weaving together personal histories, rituals, destinies, and thus allowing a new structure to emerge. Édouard Glissant compares the personality and identity of an individual to the appearance of a fabric, in which, at the moment of observation, the individual threads are not so discernible, but patterns and colors come together to form a holistic image. He thus refers to the complexity of identity constructions and their intended opacity, an idea to which I feel connected in my multiple affiliations. I weave threads from past and present into something else—a personal way of dealing with history.

SOHRAB

It appears to me that the archival aspect is related to your desire and investment in preserving a culture that is gradually disappearing. The Kurds are primarily dispersed in four oppressive nation-states and also scattered all over the world, and your project responds to a need for cultural preservation. Yet your artistic practice also uses the archive as a tool. What I find very powerful is the relationship or correlation between erasure (cultural erasure, and also metaphorically but also literally the erasure of imagery with bleach in your wall-papers) and assemblage or construction, as you create images, be they painterly abstractions or spatializations of the archive. This to me speaks to your interest in art as a site for reconstitution.

MELIKE

The bleaching process you speak of takes several days, and the results vary. While I'm doing it, it feels like I am walking through my own history, but also that of the Kurds. Due to the passage of time and changing circumstances, the stories and memories are in constant danger of fading. I counter this threatening loss and lack of history with a pictorial form. It is important to me to tell not only of displacement and erasure, but also of Kurdish rituals and the beauty of their traditions. I combine the various insights regarding the past and present into a pictorial atlas.



MELIKE

The bleaching process you speak of takes several days, and the results vary. While I'm doing it, it feels like I am walking through my own history, but also that of the Kurds. Due to the passage of time and changing circumstances, the stories and memories are in constant danger of fading. I counter this threatening loss and lack of history with a pictorial form. It is important to me to tell not only of displacement and erasure, but also of Kurdish rituals and the beauty of their traditions. I combine the various insights regarding the past and present into a pictorial atlas. But it is more than a reconstruction, because the Kurds' processes of identity formation and of negotiating the geopolitical situation are ongoing. I challenge the exhibition space in its much-described neutrality and transform it with my installations into a site that is as spiritual as it is political. This translation, if you will, of archive into space is immensely important as a gesture to claim and occupy the physical space that has always been forbidden to the Kurds. From where I stand today, the place where I am rooted, I remember the fate of the Kurdish people, but also deal with how these memories are perpetuated in our identity and our present.

SOHRAB

The piece you presented at the 58th Carnegie International is primarily in green, yet other recent ones are more purple and blue. Can you talk about how you choose color, and how it relates to the broader aspects of your project?

MELIKE

From the archive of different carpet patterns and knots, I choose one color palette per painting, which then accompanies me the rest of the way. For me, choosing a color for a painting is like speaking a universal language. One color alone can have so much power. Things that are difficult to connect can be tied together more easily, and what is important comes to the fore.

SOHRAB

In your 2022 exhibition at Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne, you used wooden framed projection screens to show videos that you shot in Kurdistan together with the paintings.

Can you talk about your use of moving image vis-à-vis photography?

MELIKE

When painting begins to communicate with its environment, be it architecture or something else, a new level of meaning-making opens up. A context emerges in which other approaches can be discussed. At the Kölnischer Kunstverein, the paintings and videos are of the same size. Both claim their space and are mutually reinforcing. The paintings with the abstracted carpet ornaments are inscribed in a Kurdish history, and the videos gain depth by extending the discourse into the present.

The videos are assembled from photographs taken in Kurdistan and Germany, and film footage from my family archive. The aim is to bring history to life and convey a level of feeling by means of a personal story. They tell of my family's life—of pain, loss, and death, but also love, struggle, earth, sun, and goodness.

There is my grandmother in the last minutes before her death, my grandfather reciting an Alevi prayer, and the family celebration with people who will later sacrifice their lives in the struggle for freedom. In the videos I want to show this coexistence of grief and beauty, as well as my own search for my place in this history, against which I sometimes feel like a silent observer.

The paintings, on the other hand, show how new connections can emerge. They go back to my decision to create something new from the present moment—not to give more space to pain and oppression, but to turn toward brightness. They are driven by the question of how much is left to be Kurdish when so much is lost, and to what extent I and others in my situation can decide for ourselves what being Kurdish means today.

SOHRAB

Iran has been witnessing weeks of uprisings in the wake of the killing of Mahsa Amini by the so-called morality police. The protests spread quickly all over the country and the brutal oppression has claimed many lives, arrest, disappearances, and injuries. Kurdistan province, where Amini is from, is among the most heavily attacked regions by government forces.

Seeing these images on your Instagram feed, I wonder how they relate to your broader archival practice. It's strange to see such images flicker, and then disappear among memes, food pics, pet photos, ads, and everything else. Erasure, in this case, happens through the proliferation and infinite circulation of imagery.

MELIKE

I am obviously following these news developments closely. To my mind, they are tightly connected to the Kurdish history of struggle for women's rights. And I also understand what you're saying about the image politics of the moment. Although I do not aspire to become an expert in the visual politics of Instagram, a similar type of skepticism around the circulation of images in Western media channels guides me when I select images from archives. I want to give a face to the Kurdish people, away from dominant narratives, and so I consciously divert my focus from images of violence and suffering. Instead, I seek out calmer images showing beauty in everyday life—daily routines, festivities, traditions, rituals. Images that are not intended to alarm or outrage and therefore find no foothold in news cycles or trending topics.



# OCULA

Ocula Magazine | Features | Exhibition

## The 58th Carnegie International Overwhelms, as it Intends

By [Neil Price](#) | Pittsburgh, 19 October 2022



Thu Van Tran, *Colors of Grey* (2022). Exhibition view: *Is it morning for you yet?*, 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (24 September 2022–2 April 2023). Courtesy the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art. Photo: Sean Eaton.

**How do you present an international exhibition that brings together artworks that collectively respond to over 77 years of U.S. hegemonic history? And more to the point, without overwhelming viewers?**

While there is no singular path to resolve such questions, the 58<sup>th</sup> Carnegie International (24 September 2022–2 April 2023) in Pittsburgh sets out to follow 'the geopolitical imprint of the United States since 1945 to situate the "international" within a local context'.



Left to right: Melike Kara, *qarajorlu / pahlevanlu; darreh gaz (dorunger valley / bajiran region)*; weaving (background) (all 2022). Exhibition view: *Is it morning for you yet?*, 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (24 September 2022–2 April 2023). Courtesy the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art. Photo: Sean Eaton.

Under this broad framework, viewers are asked to find their way through a show that is heavy on new and existing works from both established and emerging artists, but light on overt curatorial guidance.

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‘With Carnegie, there are enough moments along the way when the gamble pays off.’

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Once you accept this open-ended arrangement as a challenge—and maybe even learn to invite it in—the exhibition becomes a delightful menagerie of art that offers something for everyone.

**Gallery Network**

**Spotlight: The Carnegie International Returns for Its 58th Edition, Seeking to Trace World Events From the Macro to the Micro**

Titled "Is it morning for you yet?", the exhibition asks visitors to consider alternative perspectives.

**Artnet Gallery Network**, October 6, 2022



Julian Abraham, aka Togar, *OK Studio* (2020–ongoing). Photo: Sean Eaton. Courtesy of the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art.

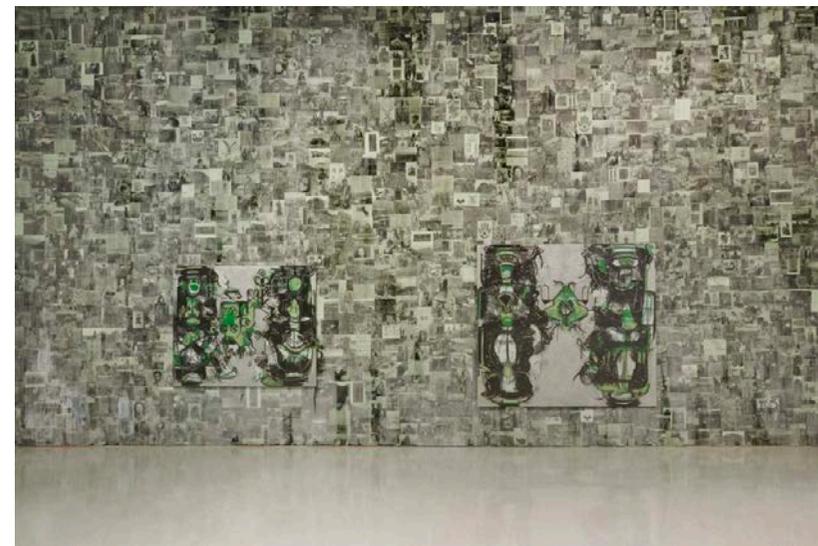
*Every month, hundreds of galleries add newly available works by thousands of artists to the Artnet Gallery Network—and every week, we shine a spotlight on one artist or exhibition you should know. Check out what we have in store, and inquire for more with one simple click.*

**What You Need to Know:** The 58th edition of the Carnegie International, the longest-running presentation of international art in North America, opened last month in at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and will run through April 2, 2023. Titled "Is it morning for you yet?", the exhibition brings recent works and new commissions by contemporary artists together with historical pieces from the museum's collection, international institutions, and artist estates. The exhibition seeks to chart the geopolitical impact of the United States from 1945 through today in an effort to identify, demarcate, and interrogate the ways in which this force has been felt, from a global perspective down to a highly localized one. The title of the exhibition is drawn from the customary Mayan Kaqchikel salutation "is it morning for you yet?"—as opposed to simply "good morning"—which recognizes that along with differing internal clocks, people's lives and experiences can vary drastically: when it's morning for some, it might still be night for others.

**Why We Like It:** With works from over 100 artists, collectives, and estates from around the world—including recognized names like Claes Oldenburg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, as well as artists who have never exhibited in the United States before—the range of perspectives and ideas presented in the 58th Carnegie International is truly awe-inspiring. Melike Kara's *weaving* (2022), for instance, is a massive wall installation comprised of photographs depicting facets of her native Kurdish culture in the diaspora. Thu Van Tran, a Vietnamese immigrant living in Paris contributes a massive, central atrium installation *Colors of Grey* (2022), which references "Rainbow Herbicides" that were used in the Vietnam War. Elsewhere, Anh Tr an's paintings employ multiple techniques to engage with discourses around non-Western versus Western practices—just a few examples of the dynamic and ingenious ways that artists have approached the overarching theme. Alongside the visual program, the Carnegie International is hosting "Refractions," a series of conversations between artists and collectives and audiences.

**According to the Curator:** "Our hope was to create an exhibition that speaks to common entanglements, desires, and shared experiences through divergent aesthetic currents and artistic practices. The 58th Carnegie International brings together an ensemble of erratic, cunning, unruly, disobedient, undisciplined, and intractable attitudes, and gestures that overwhelm the ambition of any one organizational intent. We are grateful to all the artists and contributors for sharing their art, time, and thoughts with us, and look forward to finally welcoming visitors to experience this exhibition." —Sohrab Mohebbi, the Kathe and Jim Patrinos Curator of the 58th Carnegie International

See inside the 58th Carnegie International below.



Installation view of works by Melike Kara. Left: *qarajorlu / pahlevanlu*. Right: *darreh gaz (dorunger valley / bajigran region)*. Background: *weaving* (all works 2022). Photo: Sean Eaton. Courtesy of the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art.

# ARTFORUM

Melike Kara, *How She Shapes Us*, 2021, wool, 20 1/2 × 38 5/8".

## Melike Kara

LC QUEISSER

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 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 LGBTQI+ 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*

émergent magazine

## 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.

Interview with Melike Kara



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, studio image. Image courtesy the artist

In your practice, you work with many different mediums broadly encompassing painting, sculpture, installation, film and text. What influences your choice in which mediums to use?

Every medium has another way of telling, if art is more than representation, if it is a form of communication, then directness of narrative is different in every medium. This is what guides me – depending on what I want to say, the choice of media follows.



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

# FRIEZE

## 5 Exhibitions to See During Art Cologne

To mark the opening of the 54th edition of the fair, we've put together a guide to the best shows in the Rheinland

BY SOPHIE KROGH CHRISTENSEN IN CRITIC'S GUIDES, EU REVIEWS | 17 NOV 21

Melike Kara

Kölnischer Kunstverein

13 November – 5 December 2021

'May all of our stories / fit into one sentence / rolled up / packed together,' muses Melike Kara in a poem accompanying her solo exhibition, 'Nothing Is Yours, Everything Is You', at Kölnischer Kunstverein. Moving through the upper-floor galleries, the institution's postwar architecture is transformed by red- and blue-tinted paintings inspired by Kurdish tribal patterns, video projections, soundscapes of Kurdish folk songs and poetry, and wallpaper photo collages – using images culled from her personal archive – all of which come together to make the spaces vibrate with the voices and resistance of the Kurdish diaspora. In the top-floor 'Studio', the cushion stacks *bridge ties* and *collective memories* (both 2021) lean against bleached, blueish family photographs and refer to furnishings traditionally used for social gatherings and prayer. Utilizing the institution's interior and exterior spaces, Kara weaves a narrative that captures a fading collective memory, tying a visual knot to the last sentences of the poem: 'so / that not much is left / except / a free and unwritten soul /suspecting nothing / wanting nothing / floating in a light void.'



Melike Kara, 'Nothing Is Yours, Everything Is You', 2021, installation view, Kölnischer Kunstverein. Courtesy: 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 nearly 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 MAIER



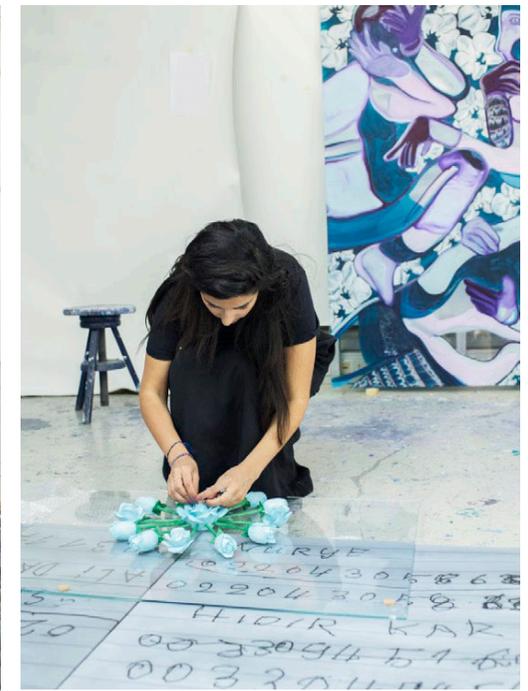
Melike Kara in her Köln studio, 2018.

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.”



## MELIKE KARA

BY GREGOR QUACK

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 tell 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.

Salsang, 2016 (opposite page) Untitled, 2015 (p. 147) your bunch of fresh fruits, 2016 (p. 148-149) All images Courtesy: Pares Projects, Berlin



# 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...

### **Köpek**

Until 3 November at Peres Projects, Berlin

[peresprojects.com](http://peresprojects.com)

Images courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin

# 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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