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Nazif Topcuoglu, *The Hunger*, 2011, C-print, Edition 1-5+AP2, 124 x 143 cm. Photo Courtesy of the artist/Green Art Gallery

One Turkish artist captures struggle with beauty

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"I don't think I'll ever ride a bicycle again," says Turkish photographer, Nazif Topcuoglu, the night before his new show opens at Green Art Gallery in Dubai.

He speaks with a touch of melancholy, buried beneath a wry smile, a mood that is reflected in his latest works.

"There was a sense that life was full of potential for the girls in my earlier images. But now it's getting narrower for them, more confined, options are running out."

We're looking at *Like Thieves at Midnight* from Topcuoglu's exhibition *Innerscapes*, a collection of visions that employ the artist's familiar aesthetic: vivid interiors, garbed in textured fabrics and lined with wooden furniture, and a host of enigmatic female models who play out strange tussles for power beneath the narrative surface.

Like Thieves at Midnight, among the show's most stirring works, shows these women clambering down a cramped staircase, dressed as schoolgirls. Some are keeping lookout, while one tries to break the lock on an antique safe. "This was shot in the basement of a historic bank in Turkey," says the artist. "My back was against the wall with the camera, and it's actually three images that I merged together to get the angle."

Innerscapes continues a sequential narrative of works that began in 2001 with *Early Readers*, in which smiling young Turkish girls frolicked in the baroque chintz of an old library. In 2009, Topcuoglu exhibited in Dubai with Green Art Gallery, showing a continuation of that theme; this time the girls were older, and an air of simmering



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violence underpinned the works as each anonymous character tried to vie for power over the other.

But now, it's as if the austere grandeur of these typically Topcuoglu interiors can't hold them anymore. They bow their heads in cramped rooms. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, they are struggling in an environment that they seem to have outgrown.

Across the images, we see several instances in which the girls wreak havoc upon their environments, whether that be raiding rooms or taking hostage the more conformist among their ranks. The suggestion being, as they outgrow their space and become more confined by the parameters of a narrow reality, a section of Topcuoglu's characters have taken it upon themselves to break through in search of something new.

A good number of these images were taken in the last months of 2010, before any notion of an Arab Spring was apparent. Yet the prescience of scenes depicting a group of people taking it upon themselves to raise the ceiling of their world does not escape the artist.

Making these works has been particularly challenging for him: "It's very hard to define a position, when there are so many conflicting ideas going on at any one time. Similarly, there's not much room for accidents composing a scene with six girls together. So the more composed, more calculated images were harder, but when I work with one or two girls face-to-face then there is more improvisation, more instant creativity."

Indeed, the pieces that really give Innerspaces its edge are the new portrait-style photographs. *Dragon* depicts the bony ridge along woman's neck in a tension of contrasts, whereas in *Solace* a languid figure rests in the arms of a girl who has a simplistic tattoo of a blazing heart on her upper chest. There are references to old Ottoman painters here as well; *The Turtle Charmer*, showing one of the models lying amid red fabrics as she strokes the shell of a turtle, borrows some of its palette of Osman Hamdi Bey's *The Turtle Trainer* from 1906.

There's nostalgia throughout for a 19th-century world of artistic discovery and vivacity of colour. Topcuoglu acknowledges this, identifying with 19th-century photographers such as Lewis Carroll and Julia Margaret Cameron. There's some aesthetic of the Pre-Raphaelite era that followed, the influence of artists such as JH Waterhouse and Ford Maddox Brown is immediately apparent in these images.

"I like the visual naivety, which was very consciously done by these Pre-Raphaelite artists. Similarly, everything means something in their paintings."

But for all of its nostalgia and embedded ennui, *Innerspaces* still shows a good progression of Topcuoglu's style: his sensitivity to shadow, and his ability to contain a robust narrative in his shutter. Like an old painter he doesn't lay all these meanings out neatly - they require a little digging into each image - and that is all part of their seduction.

Innerspaces is at *Green Art Gallery* until March 3

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