

Meet the artist haunted by violent moments in Turkey, Lebanon

Arie Amaya-Akkermans February 24, 2020

Article Summary

Turkey's veteran artist Hale Tenger tackles coups, destruction and political assassinations in the Middle East, using marriage of poetry and images.

Artist Hale Tenger's wooden guard house surrounded by a barbed wire is a critique of Turkey's turbulent history.

"Did we pull the body from underwater?" Letters that pop up from a pitch-black sculptural box form this eery sentence that could have been used in a film noir. It is, in fact, a stanza by Turkish poet Edip Cansever.

"Cansever is one of my favorite poets. I have quoted some of his verses either as titles or integrated them into some of my works," said Hale Tenger, an artist who held her first solo exhibition in seven years in a gallery months ago.

Tenger's first use of Cansever's poetry goes back to 1995 when she recreated a guard booth placed inside a barbed-wire zone. The work, which was a site-specific one created for the 4th Istanbul Biennial, was destroyed at the end of the exhibition but was reconstructed in 2015 with nonprofit Protocinema in New York. It is now exhibited at Istanbul's Arter museum. "It also took its title from one of Cansever's stanzas: 'We didn't go outside, we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside, we were always on the inside.' It has been 25 years, and now it is included in one of the inaugural shows at Arter, and unfortunately, it is still extremely relevant to today's conditions," Tenger told Al-Monitor.

A quarter of a century later, Tenger's exhibition at Istanbul's Galeri Nev borrows its name from one of Cansever's best-known works, "Where the Winds Rest," a poem from his 1980 book "The Travel Log of a Poet." The exhibition was launched last December in the historical Misir Apartments erected in 1910 by Armenian architect Hovsep Aznavur, at Istiklal Caddesi, the main artery in downtown Istanbul. From the suggestive context of Tenger's work, it would be possible to misconstrue the phrase as a quotation from Turkey's charged present, but it dates back to one of the most turbulent years of Turkey's history — the infamous Sept. 12 military coup that was accompanied by arrests, disappearances and the death of thousands.

"I quoted two lines from [this poem] back in 2007. I wanted to return to the poem in its entirety in my solo show," Tenger said. "[The poem] was first published in 1980 and the turmoil of that era are embedded into the poem in a subtle and extremely sensitive way."

The titles of all the works in the exhibition — the two videos and several sculptures — reference the stanzas in the poem. "Walking into the exhibition space, the viewer first encounters video images on the two gently floating screens hung across from each other. One of those images is the sea and the other is the plains — two landscapes that are both sculpted by the force of winds," Tenger added.



Turkish artist Hale Tenger's "Where the Winds Rest" (2019, mixed media installation) is inspired by the poetry of Edip Cansever, Istanbul, 2019. Photo credit: Laleper Aytek/Galeri Nev

The poem says: "Did you pull the body from underwater?/Did we pull the body from underwater?/We didn't pull the body from underwater./We had pulled the body from underwater."

For Tenger, the use of Cansever's poetry conjures the feeling of something unfamiliar that is encountered in the present, but yet — consciously or unconsciously — had already been encountered in the past.

Tenger used the same poem in an eponymous 2007 installation, where the same line from the sculptural box was projected on the walls of a dimly lit room. The work was displayed at Izmir for Port Izmir 07, at an abandoned mansion across from the Alsancak train station. The palatial home, built in the 19th century for the director of the British railway, was a first-hand witness of the Great Fire of Smyrna that swept through the city in September 1922. Turkish and Greek sources differ widely on just who caused the fire. British author Giles Milton, in his "Paradise Lost: Smyrna, 1922," said the Turkish soldiers who captured the city days before had caused the fire. Tens of thousands of Greeks and Armenians were killed, and thousands of others crowded the Aegean harbor, hoping to get on a boat that would take them across the sea to Greece.

Between the installation in Izmir, the hometown of the 60-year-old artist, and the most recent exhibition at Nev, tectonic shifts have taken place in the country. And the mood of contemporary art has moved away from the political documentary toward more abstract poetics. Tenger has always been moving ambiguously between both.

Isin Onol, a New York-based Turkish curator, who interviewed Tenger for the 2018 book "Authoritarianism and Resistance in Turkey: Conversations on Democratic and Social Challenges," spoke with Al-Monitor about how Tenger's work serves to preserve memory. "The politics of the [Turkish] state is based on denial, suppression and erasure. Therefore, it is a reflex — for everyone, but particularly for cultural workers — to document and archive information in any possible form," she said. "The abstraction, symbolism, conceptualization, satire and many other methodologies that art allows are terribly useful in documenting, remembering, reenacting and mobilizing the events to remain part of the collective memory," she told Al-Monitor.

Onol maintained that it was "crucial to visit the politics of the 1980s — and before" in order to understand today's political atmosphere. "Hale Tenger's work brought a subtle and yet impactful and elegant response to the absurdities of the Turkish state, which [makes] her work distinctive and relevant today," she said.



Hale Tenger's "Appearance" was part of the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Photo credit: Ali Erdemci/IKSV

“The Closet,” an installation displayed at SALT Galata in 2015, narrates the oppressive atmosphere of a typical home in Turkey, with the radio broadcast that was meant to evoke life after the military coup. But the results were uncannily similar to the setting of the year the exhibition took place — 2015 was a year of spectacular violence in the country, particularly in the southeast.

It is hard not to observe the different layers of correlation between narrative and history in Tenger's work, as if they almost chase each other. Her work for the 16th edition of the Istanbul Biennial in 2019 — a mixed media and sound installation titled “Appearance” — was housed in the garden of the Sophronius Palace on Buyukada, the largest of the Princes’ Islands. The work, placed at the summerhouse of Ecumenical patriarch Sofronius III of Constantinople references the ancient history of mirrors (the work is based on obsidian stone), set against the background expropriation and erasure of minorities. Based around the concept of regeneration, but set against the background of a systemic collapse, the artist asks whether it is possible to change the current course of events in the country and in general.

Circling back to Izmir for Tenger's last presentation in 2019 at Monitor Izmir, another older work comes back to life: The video “Beirut” (2005-2007), shot at the infamous St. George's Hotel, the site of Rafik Hariri's assassination, which would change the history of Lebanon, becomes now suddenly and unknowingly reactivated in the context of Lebanon's ongoing protests.

“As the recent protests in Beirut started in a very peaceful way — just like the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 — I really wished that it would have led to a positive transformation in politics in Lebanon,” Tenger concluded. “Apparently not — not for now at least. But there is this thirst for equality and justice. People need it everywhere in the world. However, within the parameters of an ecological crisis — with resources becoming more limited and no wise immediate plan — it is really not easy to be optimistic.”

Found in: Art and entertainment, Ethnic/Religious Minorities



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