

ENVY, ENMITY, EMBARRASSMENT

An ignoble triumvirate of emotions, “Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment” served as the title and thematic basis for Arter’s second annual exhibition of newly commissioned works, which addressed “social, cultural and political memory” through the three interconnected concepts. Though it may seem counterintuitive to address sociopolitical subjects from a psychological or emotional perspective, consider that in the debates over modern Turkish identity, the philosophical virtues of liberalism—democracy, equality, religious tolerance, secularism—have been effectively co-opted by political forces that in reality work to curtail them. A new language is clearly needed—here, as much as elsewhere.

There is a superficial consensus about Turkey’s democratic and secular characteristics, which is belied by looking beneath the surface of the social body. This idea was encapsulated in *I Know People Like This III* (2013), Hale Tenger’s labyrinthine light-box installation of archival photojournalistic pictures printed on x-ray paper, including recent images of protests in the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakir. Winding through the piece, viewers encountered photographs from the late 1960s, featuring scenes of mass demonstrations, sectarian attacks, bombings and executions of revolutionaries. This serpentine corridor felt like a grand mausoleum; even recent history was transformed into an unfamiliar spectacle, at once fascinating but distant, with no alternative vision of the future.

The funereal air was echoed upstairs in Canan’s elegiac archive, *I Beg You Please Do Not Speak to Me of Love* (2012), a room lined with posters from 1970s-era erotic films. At the center was a vitrine containing a robe worn by one of the female stars, embroidered with the titular words taken from her suicide note. Selim Birsell’s installation *Grown in the Backyard* (2012), a gathering of new and older pieces, was pessimistic in its own ways. Miniature tanks were hand-printed onto the wall leading to an ersatz garden that contained “flowers” rendered in metal cones and circular-saw blades, and an old prison cot that served as a bench. Here the comforts of private life are predicated on the cruelties of militaristic rule—the story of modern Turkey following the 1980 military coup.

If nostalgia mixes with resignation among the artists born before the 1970s, younger artists exhibit a pronounced tendency toward precocious solipsism, an eagerness to please and a reluctance to transgress, innovate or risk failure. The five videos of Erdem Taşdelen’s *Worrier* (2012) were a Woody Allen-esque take on conceptualism, humorously capturing the artist discussing various art-career-related anxieties with a therapist. In Merve Ertufan and Johanna Adebäck’s two-channel video, the duo compliment one another

for one hour—a richly fraught performance filled with duplicity, false sincerity, passive aggression and backhanded praise. But, however engaging these works are to watch, what’s really at stake here other than inter- or intrapersonal contretemps?

Many things still remained unspoken or in the dark. Yusuf Sevinçli’s grainy black-and-white pictures portrayed dismal locations following acts of defacement or vandalism, capturing a pervasive contempt for public space. Berat Işık’s video *Hole II* (2012) was created by lowering a camera down a hole in the hills near Diyarbakir—a possible metaphor for burrowing into history. Indeed, such holes were often used to dispose of bodies during the Armenian genocide a century ago, though this is not directly addressed by the artwork.

A project for the times, the exhibition revealed the prevalent modalities of reflective nostalgia, resignation and narcissism that the emotions of envy, enmity and embarrassment have produced. At a moment when even recent history is rendered unfamiliar, where incremental personal advancement and petty hostility have replaced collectivism, empathy and passion, the profound lack of formal experimentation—the exhibited works largely conformed to established post-1970s modes and genres—indicates that artistic language has also reached a point of stasis.

One instance of more developed idiosyncrasy was found in Nilbar Güreş’ embroidered collage, *Twin Goddess: The Sketch of an Encounter* (2012), in which two figures dressed in opposing conservative and provocative styles observe a two-headed statue from Ankara’s Anatolian Civilizations Museum, ringed by arcane symbols and framed by curtains. Along with its queerness—in the broadest sense of the word, encompassing both the “strange” and the “alternative”—it also contains a compassion and curiosity about what it would mean for people of divergent attitudes to live together, and to live with history.

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