

## “Sublime Porte: Art and Contemporary Turkey” - Yulia Tikhonova

### Sublime Porte: Art and Contemporary Turkey

*Sublime Porte: Art and Contemporary Turkey* brings together work by thirteen artists for whom Turkey, and Turkish culture, is a primary focus of their art-making. Turkey has been a center of media attention for the past several years, and its booming economy has propelled its contemporary art scene. Turkish modernization has taken place at a very fast pace, exposing the impact of industrialization, democratization, and secularization. The artists in this exhibit respond to these issues from a critical perspective – those who live far from the homeland do not trust its covert politics; those who live in the country view them with cynicism.

The majority of artists in this exhibition belong to the Turkish American diaspora. They received their MFA's from the best art programs in the U.S. These programs introduced them to Western Art History and inspired their investigation into the ethics of Turkish society and its governing elite. The multimedia education they received in the U.S., as opposed to their more Academic training in Turkey, has equipped these artists to embrace technology, software and interactivity in their art practices.

Burak Arikan, and Orkan Talhan are alumni of MIT, and Osman Akan is a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts. They utilize their technical skills to construct objects using industrial materials that reflect the recent Turkish construction boom (Akan), or to create software for children's education (Talhan). They target issues of urban planning, mass media, and neoliberalism (Arikan), – problems that have long concerned intellectuals in the West.

Elif Uras studied at Columbia University and Peter Hristoff at the School of Visual Arts. But they draw heavily on the Turkish applied arts tradition, even to the extent of having their work produced in Turkey. Uras makes her astounding vessels in Iznik, where some of the most refined ceramics of the Ottoman Empire were produced. Uras fashions her vessels as female figurines, and uses patterns to decorate them as sexy belly dancers. Peter Hristoff weaves his prayer rugs with the Priene Hali workshop, in Gullubahce, Turkey. Hristoff call them "Seccade" which is a term used to define a sacred space. His rugs not only define a sacred space for prayer, they also elevate a craft into a sublime art form.

The artists residing in Turkey focus on the subjects of identity, the role of women in society, and education. They use the traditional mediums of painting and embroidery to create a cosmos of absurdity and paradox reflecting on Turkish neoliberal society. Kezban Batibeki and Gozde Ilkin create work that is humorous, interactive and sharp in its critique of the clichés attached to Islam and Muslim women. In the work by Gulay Semircioglu, made out of wire thread, the viewer finds media technologies, but not the pop media language of today; this language is a fusion of tradition, modernity and craft. Murat Germen engages with the city of Istanbul. He uses it as an image and a symbol, pursuing an inquiry into the adventures, misdeeds, and dilemmas of its buildings, streets and citizens. His landscapes - rendered through Photoshop - build on the post-modern concern for the historical layering that constitutes contemporary Istanbul as it absorbs the impact of globalization. This history is not only reflected in the urban and architectural remnants, but also in the photographic archives that Germen utilizes. The American artists in this exhibition - Alex Morel, Paul Fabozzi and Michael Marfionne join ancient culture to revelations of modernity. They play the game of being mistaken for locals – their shifting identities are at the heart of their projects.

Sublime Porte is the West's familiar name for the Ottoman Empire (1300-1924), which, at one point, encompassed parts of the Middle East, Europe and Africa, and which produced a great culture in this region and beyond. This exhibition ranges from refine craft to industrial fabrication, from sophisticated Ottoman cultural legacy to Western critique, it offers a window into the latest movements in contemporary art. The contributions by non-Turkish artists add a provocative, yet insightful, "Orientalist" perspective. Works that interpret space, time and identity challenge the perception of the public, the art expert and the collector.

Burak Arikan's *Islam, Republic, Neoliberalism* comprises three maps of the Istanbul urban system.

The artist maps the locations of all Istanbul's mosques, creates blueprints of the monuments to Turkish officials, and charts the city's shopping malls. Arikan connects each location by a network of lines, highlighting their connections and interdependency. As the title reflects, these large digital prints represent the major political powers that govern Turkey today: Islam (mosque), Republic

(monuments) and Neoliberalism (shopping malls). Arikan creates large-scale linear diagrams that, at first glance, look like celestial maps. Rendered with the precision of an architect – in an objective graphic style – their physical links are visible. In the past, Arikan has been concerned with revealing the hidden dynamics of globalization, whether of the industrial economy or the world art market.

His early works such as *Meta-Markets*, 2007 and *Artist Collector Network*, 2010, reveal how the art world depends on status, privilege and secrecy. *Islam, Republic, Neoliberalism* represents Arikan's urge to expose the connections that the ruling class wants to conceal. Similar to the American, Mark Lombardy, Arikan reveals the intricate web of connections that lurk beneath current headlines. Since his graduation from MIT in 2006, Arikan has been living between Istanbul and New York, teaching workshops about networks, and producing prints and performances that seek to render visible, and open to discussion, the power networks that rule our lives. *Islam, Republic, Neoliberalism* debuted last year at the Istanbul Design Biennial, 2012.

As curator, I have been especially excited to work on this exhibition. Like many of the Turkish artists in this exhibition, I also received my education in the U.S. And I am also continually re-evaluating my position as an intellectual and curator working between the West and the East (Russia). This multicultural position is both challenging and exciting. A shared language of post-modernism, and a belief that art will change the world, joins me to the artists in this exhibition.

Yulia Tikhonova

Guest Curator

*Sublime Porte: Art and Contemporary Turkey*