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## Once Upon a Time in The Fertile Crescent: Two Girls and a Hat



"LIFTING A SECRET": Fertile Crescent artist Nezaket Ekici will be performing this piece on Thursday, October 4 at Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts, Matthews Acting Studio, 185 Nassau Street. Audiences are invited to visit the installation in progress from 2 to 8 p.m. and to return at 8 p.m. for the culminating performance.

*Miss Butterfly is going to meet the sun; as she is looking for a way out and reaching for the light, she becomes caught in a spider's web.* —Shadi Ghadirian

The piece of impromptu performance art recounted here happened in Turkey long ago at a crossroads clearing near Eregli, 243 kilometers south of Kirsehir, the birthplace of Nezaket Ekici. I'd begun the previous day's journey in Izmir, where Ebru Özseçen was born. Ekici and Özseçen are among the 24 artists represented in the Rutgers Institute for Women and Art's "The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society," a complex, many-faceted show of unparalleled scope that is currently spreading the wealth over multiple venues through the enlightened leadership of curators Ferris Olin and Judith K. Brodsky.

I've been scanning the faces of the women on the Fertile Crescent website ([fertile-crescent.org](http://fertile-crescent.org)), with its "signature images" of the artists and their art. The faces are remarkable. Strong and delicate, sultry and refined, some sly, some shy, some witheringly stern. For reasons that will soon become apparent, I'm trying to imagine what these women looked like when they were children. Since the impending scene takes place once upon a time in Turkey, I've been paying special attention to the photos of Nezaket Ekici, who has a bold, no-nonsense air, and Ebru Özseçen, who appears demure and unassuming, although her video "Jawbreaker" is edgy and erotic.

The closest I've come to finding the features of the child I'm searching for is in the smile of the Iranian artist Shiva Ahmadi whose work is described in the online commentary as "at once meticulous and loose, playful and somber, mythical yet very much dealing with the real." These are qualities similar to those of the performance-artist-in-the-making I shared the roadside stage with late one hot August afternoon. Since Ahmadi's contribution to the Fertile Crescent won't be on view until Thursday, October 4, at the Arts Council, I have yet to see her work in person, but the samples displayed online in Google images are stunning and the equal of anything in the exhibit, even including the Iranian photographic artist Shadi Ghadirian's darkly impressive "Butterfly Series" at the Bernstein Gallery.

### ***In the Clearing***

It's the hour before sunset and I've been dropped off at a spot that appears to be the province of children. Earlier in the day at a Turkish version of a truck stop cafe where men sat talking and sipping tea while women in heavy robes worked in an adjacent field, I'd seen, not for the first time, an example of what women were up against, at least in the provinces.

After the long hot hours in the open back of the truck from Konya, I head for the nearest shady spot, stow my pack, and prepare to relax. Not for long. I have company in the person of a sunny, forthright little blonde of around ten, whose name I later learn is Atalette; she's accompanied by a tawny-haired barefoot sprite of maybe six (possibly her little sister) who is hopping with peek-a-boing and dancing in place behind her. The name this mercurial being goes by is Gül (pronounced "Jewel"), according to Atalette. They want me to join them out in the clearing where the other kids are waiting, as if a show with a guest appearance by a skinny, unshaven, 20-something American had been advertised in advance of my arrival.

What can I do? Hot and tired as I am, I obey the call. It soon becomes clear that I'm to be merely the go-between, the prop, the sorcerer's apprentice. The sprite is focused on my shabby, shapeless straw hat. Lurching forward, dancing backward, spinning sideways, she sees something outlandishly, overwhelmingly desirable in the ludicrous object that I'd been wearing ever since a friend abandoned it on Mykonos. She has plans for that hat; designs on it, you might say. Too shy and too short to put her plan into action (she'd need wings or a ladder), she turns to Atalette, who mimes the message: Gül wants not merely to hold the hat but to put it on. And perhaps something more, something unlikely and unimaginable that is still only beginning to take shape for her. So I hold it out, here, take it, try it on, but that would have been too easy, too prosaic, too adult. Instead, after circling me, coming at me and backing off, she performs an impish pirouette and charges across the road, splashing happily in and out of a stream before disappearing briefly behind some trees; then back she comes in a zestful zig-zag, one dirty hand outstretched, only to retreat again, giggling, as if she were teasing me and herself and the boys

who have been stolidly watching us the whole time.

Finally the moment arrives when the artist artfully and artlessly commands me to put the misshapen yellow blob on her head, a slapstick coronation, as she all but disappears under it. Then off she goes, a sudden gust of wind forcing her to hold the hat with one hand while wildly paddling with the other as she dances down the road followed by one of the older boys, who retrieves the hat, and solemnly returns it to me, like a diplomatic enforcer dealing with a potentially punishable indiscretion.

Meanwhile the sun has begun to set, giving the moment an aura of melancholy glory. So dazzled and disarmed am I by this time that I *want* her to have the hat, for good, forever, it's hers, she's given it a new life. I want to see her go dancing off with it again, and so she does, only to surrender it once more, tearlessly, bravely, wisely, to the relentless boy, who grimly brings it back to me. At this point Atalette has had enough: she tears into the enforcer, punching and kicking him in a kind of ecstasy until he slinks off. A beautiful moment, and it's only the beginning now that both girls have the hat, and off they go, shouting and laughing down the road, passing the enchanted entity between them, until it seems to take flight on its own, glowing golden in the sunset light.

A truck is coming, it's a ride clear to Adana. I grab my pack, ready to leave the hat with them, but Gül hands it back with a wise old look that seems to say, "It's not for us, it won't ever be ours, that's how it is, that's life."

All the children are waving as the truck pulls off. I'm standing in the open back. Gül has stopped moving, it seems, for the first time since I got there. She's giving me a strong, steady look I can't help reading something into, perhaps some dawning awareness in her of the wider world at the other end of that road. Most children at her age still have a spark of genius in them but she's aglow with it, burning with it, and I'm thinking of the lounging men and laboring women I'd seen earlier and what it suggests about "gender and society," and I know, with a heavy, sinking certainty, that one day not that far in the future both these brilliant girls will be working in the fields while the grown-up boys sit drinking tea and talking politics and watching the women work.

### **Dream On**

I'd like to think that the artists of the Fertile Crescent, Nezaket and Ebru, Negar and Sigalit, Shazia and Shirin, Farah and Parastou, are grown-up, productive, liberated versions of Atalette and Gül. I thought as much four years ago when I met Arzu Komili, a Princeton senior from Turkey whose exhibit at the Lewis Center I visited at Commuiversity 2008. Ed Greenblat's photograph of her has been cheering up my work space, smiling out at me, ever since. Arzu may have been born and raised in Istanbul, in a well-to-do household, but there's a hint of the roadside sprite in her smile.

The two Turkish artists in "The Fertile Crescent" website may be half a generation younger than Atalette and Gül would be now, but the boldness of their themes and concepts suggests that they have fought the good fight against similar odds. Born in 1970 a half day's drive from the crossroads near Eregli, Nezaket Ekici lives in Germany now and will be at the Lewis Center tomorrow, Thursday, October 4, in a performance piece she calls "Lifting a Secret," in which she's drinking coffee and reading passages from an adolescent diary she kept about a forced marriage arranged by her father. As her anger mounts, she spatters the wall with coffee, which, as it drips down, reveals the passage from the journal she's been reading and that she'd written on the wall with petroleum jelly before beginning the performance. She refills her cup over and over again, slopping the coffee on the passage until all her words have emerged. Coffee makes the case nicely; it's a darker and more dramatic developing fluid than the tea the men in the cafe were drinking while watching the women work.

For 41-year-old Ebru Özseçen, who also lives in Germany, indulge me for a moment and imagine the sort of art Gül would produce if by some miracle she'd run off to Europe to become a dancer or singer or sculptor or filmmaker, lured by the glow of that moment when the hat became her creation. In her artistic statement, Ebru plans to explore mundane reality in order to discover "its magical and unseen aspects, in the process, revealing a space where fantasy and memory hide in plain sight."

You can see Ebru Özseçen's brief video *Jawbreaker* on YouTube, as well as a four-part conversation apparently taking place in the proximity of the White Cliffs of Dover. In her proposal for a competition on "New Forms of Remembering and Remembrance," she writes of a "memorial kindergarten" that "will be visible in the evening after the children go home .... The other phase will be seen in the morning, when the walls are lowered, and the children enter the kindergarten. When the children sleep, the work ... stands guard"

### **Princeton Venues**

Nezaket Ekici will also take part in the Arts Council of Princeton's portion of The Fertile Crescent, from October 4 to November 21, along with seven other Fertile Crescent artists, including, as mentioned, Shiva Ahmadi, whose work can be seen on page 15. For full details about other venues, including the Princeton Public Library and the Princeton University Art Museum, visit <http://fertile-crescent.org/signatureartists.html>.

*Note: In the unlikely event that readers of this column have read or may read my book *Indian Action: A Journey to the Great Fair of the East*, they will find an expanded version of the scene in the clearing with additional players and a different focus.*

Written by: [Stuart Mitchner](#)

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