

Turkish Artist Gülsün Karamustafa on Her Practice

(From an interview by Mary Hyunhee Song)

Mary Song (<http://enclavereview.org/writers/mary-song/>) ER03

(<http://enclavereview.org/issues/er03/>)



Turkish Contemporary Art

It has come such a long way in the last 20 years. In the beginning, there were certainly a small number of artists who could be called 'contemporary'. Then, a whole generation of contemporary artists arrived. I can call them a generation, because they are almost all in their late 30s. We started to work with this group. There was a generation gap between us and them: we are from the 60s / 70s generation and they were considerably younger. Now an even younger generation has arrived: they are in their 20s; they are doing so well; they are well-exposed. It's not local work, it's quite international. I feel this is important. And Istanbul has become a centre of activity, drawing artists in. I am really happy about that.

Towards an Expanded Practice

I come from 'painting', I graduated from a fine arts academy as a painter. But this corresponded with a time of intense politicisation, the time known as the May '68 period. And when I was a student, I found myself within this movement, the Turkish manifestation of a world movement. Back then to keep to the surface of the painting was political, and I was feeling a kind of power as a young person and as a student. I found this stressful: the surface of painting wasn't enough. I tried to do other things: theatre, film, things like that. And back then, there was so much depression. Then Turkey was taken over by a kind of military regime. For five years I couldn't really think or do anything. But when I returned to work, when I tried to express myself again, I found I had to do things differently. I felt I could not make 'pure art', art for art's sake: there had to be something I could tell, I could express.

I looked for ways to do this and produced a painting that was about migration, movement, humanity. The subject seemed to naturally lead towards installation as a way of treating it – installation spoke more than painting – and then on to video. But I do not limit myself to one medium or another: I can do installation, video, video in installation, or even go back to painting. Whatever one I use it's still contemporary art. They are just my means of expression.

From *Trellis of Mind* to *Mystic Transport*

First expression comes, and then form. Then they mingle. *Mystic Transport* was an installation, an installation that moved, kinetic in a way. But, *Trellis of Mind* was more in the tradition of painting, of wall painting. It was a wall-frieze, 20 metres long when it was first done in Kassel. I didn't employ traditional ways of making a wall painting: it's made up of transparent photocopies. When they overlap, they bring about a new kind of sense. What I was trying to combine were the various religions: mingling Christian, Jewish and Muslim images. The transparent photo copies, which I put together quite randomly, combined to make a really strong image that gave an insight into the different religions: I didn't understand what crossed over between the different faiths, but all these religious stories seemed to be thinking about the same thing.

That's what's behind *Trellis of Mind*. Of course it's also about the city I live in. If you walk around Istanbul you can easily find yourself in front of a Christian church, with a mosque on your right and a synagogue behind you. That was my starting point.

Mystic Transport is about moving, immigration, and constant travel. What the wire baskets contain are Turkish quilt blankets. In Turkish culture there is a saying about these quilts: 'if you have one in your bag, you can go anywhere in the world'. They cover you and they keep you warm. And that's all you need. My idea was that I put the Turkish quilts into the baskets, and as they were moved into the exhibition space, so they were free to move on to anywhere else in the world. I made that piece in 1992, but the quilts are still moving from one place to another to this day.

Transit Immigration / Unawarded Performances

I'm very attracted to the question of immigration, and I try to find out all I can on the subject, but I'm not sure how well qualified I am to speak on the subject: I speak about it through my art. The final decade of the 20th century was a very good time to think about the situation: there was a general reflection on what had happened as regards migration.



(<http://enclavereview.org/wp-content/uploads/mary-song-interview-with-gulsun-karamustafa-web.jpg>)

Gülsün Karamustafa: *Mystic Transport*, 1992. Installation view, courtesy of the artist.

Transit immigration is a particular kind of immigration: the immigrants don't stay in the new country, they move on again. They come and go: you find this kind of immigration from the early 90s onwards, when the Soviet Union fell and the regimes changed across Eastern Europe. Turkey was the most liberal and the richest country in the region, so you had a large migration into Istanbul. A whole new economy started out of their suitcases: prostitution, mafia – there was so much trafficking of women then.

The Moldavian situation was very meaningful because we hadn't known for years that there was a community speaking Turkish in Moldavia (the Gagauz people). When the borders were opened, they began to arrive in Istanbul and Ankara, looking for work. Only women came, elderly women in particular: they came to work and save their money for when they returned to their families. The piece *Unawarded Performances*, about the Moldavian immigrants, was commissioned by projekt migration in Köln in 2005.

Prayer Rug with Elvis

There was a great amount of emigration from the Turkish countryside in the mid-80s. When I lived in Istanbul as a student, there was a population of 2 million; but by the end of the 80s it was 15 million. I was very interested in this migration from the countryside to the city: it wasn't just a matter of moving but also of changing cultural scene, and I found this cultural change fascinating. Istanbul was changing: the scene developing, diaspora and immigration, something happening all the time. Then kitsch appeared, it was everywhere, and there were very few subjects not touched by it. So I thought, 'why not?' I made a lot of work with kitsch around then, including the carpet with an image of Elvis. Traditionally carpet-making is women's work and I have no problem with that. So I wove it all myself.

10 November 2010

Mary Song is an independent curator from Korea, currently on a curator's residency in Finland.

Text copyright Mary Song. First published in Enclave Review, Spring 2011, p.9

© 2024 Enclave Review