

PRESSBOOK

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

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Visual Arts

Istanbul Biennial: revealing the human cost of political turmoil

The event's curators respond to a turbulent world with imagination and respect

YESTERDAY by Rachel Spence

Professorial curators should be nervous. This year's Istanbul Biennial, curated by Berlin-based artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, proves what many recent exhibitions have led us to suspect: these days, it is often artists who make the best curators.

Striking a balance between personal and political concerns, and prioritising emotion over theory, "a good neighbour" — as the 15th Istanbul Biennial is titled — is direct, humane and relevant. At a moment when millions of people are on the move, and the rest of us are wondering whether and how to extend a welcome, few themes could be more appropriate than that of neighbourliness.

Nowhere is the issue more acute than in Turkey. Wedged between the Middle East and Europe, home to about 3m refugees, and the target of numerous terrorist attacks, Turkey is a country whose rapport with its adjacent countries feeds its people, and the wider world, on a diet of uncertainty. To add to the pressure, in July 2016 a failed coup attempt saw tens of thousands of people, including journalists, academics and writers, imprisoned by a government, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, determined to crush dissent.

In the fearful climate that followed the coup, Elmgreen and Dragset, partners in life as well as work, considered pulling out. "We asked ourselves: what role could art have at this time?" admits Dragset as we chat in a taxi en route to Istanbul airport. To answer the question, they met with Turkish historians, academics, journalists and artists. "We realised that everything [in Turkey] is very complex and that there are always many sides," says Dragset. "But everyone was saying: 'We need the Biennial' . . . They all agreed that Turkey must not find itself isolated, and that art can broaden dialogue and understanding."

This biennial should fulfil that ambition. Spare, cadenced and profoundly ruminative, it responds to political turmoil by highlighting its human cost with imagination and respect. Although there is no official starting point, a good venue to begin peregrinations is at Istanbul

Modern, the city's privately run contemporary art museum, which has devoted its ground floor to the display. The first work here, "Ground" (2014/17), Chinese artist Xiao Yu's video of a donkey pulling a plough through a furrow of wet cement, thrusts us back into a sylvan, pre-industrial era when man and nature were peacefully interdependent. Around the corner, "Cri", Adel Abdessemed's 2013 sculpture of a naked screaming child — taken from Nick Ut's famous 1972 photograph of Vietnamese children after a napalm attack — ushers in the intolerable perils of the industrialised world.

The show that follows testifies to a society all but defeated by violence, dislocation and displacement. In Latifa Echakhch's "Crowd Fade" (2017), a room frescoed with flaking, irreparably damaged murals depicting political demonstrations, we see the death of democratic protest. Lydia Ourahmane points to the poisoning of both our earth and our values with her incomplete concrete building "All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell" (2017). With its stark metal rods awaiting the building of the next storey, the bleak skeleton replicates one of the tiny plots of land in Algeria contaminated by chemical toxins, and therefore available to impoverished buyers.

Over and over, this biennial stresses the worldwide disease of unbelonging. Taking inspiration from philosopher Slavoj Žižek's concept of the "homeless object", Los Angeles-based artist Kaari Upson creates a dystopian domus of squashy, stained antifurniture — the armchairs double as toilets — arranged around a TV on which a young woman is freaking out about the disquieting otherness of a suburban home. Two austere black and white paintings by Iraqi-born, Ontario-based Mahmoud Obaidi proffer figures who wear their houses on their heads, a rootlessness underscored in the same artist's installation "Compact Home Project" (2003-04). Located in the Galata Greek Primary School, a handsome neoclassical building whose former classrooms make ideal exhibition spaces, Obaidi's rusting archives of ephemera bear witness to his grief on leaving his birthplace of Baghdad.

When so much earth is scorched, where do we find refuge? Images of escape and retreat run through the exhibition like a hesitant refrain, at times hopeful, at times a survivor's last resort. In her video triptych "Home Sweet Home" (2017), Turkish artist Volkan Aslan installs a young woman on a ramshackle houseboat where she studies, writes and pots her plants in serene indifference to whatever horrors are befalling the world beyond the Bosphorus, which glides by on another screen.

The siren call of the underground frequently offers itself as an alternative dwelling. At the Galata school, Colombian artist Pedro Gómez-Egaña choreographs actors crawling through a skeletal framework that underpins the deserted sitting room comprising his installation “Domain of Things” (2017). In the same venue, US duo Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe assemble a dizzying maze of rooms that whisk us through the grungy countercultures — psychedelia, punk, eastern European smugglers, fake luxury-goods — that bubble beneath California’s Hollywood-healthy sheen.

When mainstream discourse turns sour, its institutions crumble. This is the message ringing out of the chapter that unfolds at the Pera Museum of Ottoman art, usually a stalwart of municipal culture in Istanbul. Here, among 19th-century paintings of foreign diplomats in traditional Turkish dress, Dayanita Singh’s black-and-white photographs chronicle the downbeat loveliness of abandoned museums, their mood of neglect intensified by empty wooden desks bearing the legends “curator” and “registrar”. Around the corner, a less subtle expression of catastrophe comes in the shape of a Romantic landscape painting almost swallowed by an exploding slab of concrete, courtesy of Mexican artist Alejandro Almanza Pereda.

In less skilled hands, “a good neighbour”’s artery of melancholy could leave us inconsolable. In truth, it fosters our faith in art as legitimate and powerful resistance. No one will forget “Wonderland” (2016), Erkan Özgen’s shockingly eloquent video of a deaf and mute Syrian boy as he explains through sound and gesture his experience of Isis’s 2015 siege of Kobanî. Equally striking is African-American artist Fred Wilson’s display on the second floor of the Pera Museum. A magnificent multimedia installation, it includes Iznik tiles, traditional Turkish and African sculptures and engravings, and vintage photographs to illuminate the experience of black people that was entwined with yet erased from Ottoman history.

On the top floor we find an assured feminist constellation, including Monica Bonvicini’s epic 1997 video “Hausfrau Swinging” of a naked woman banging her boxed head against a wall, and Aude Pariset’s “Toddler Promession” (2016), a cot infested with live worms. Over in the Cihangir neighbourhood, Egyptian artist Mahmoud Khaled has turned a beautiful modernist residence into a moving shrine to a young queer man who fled to Turkey, where homosexuality is legal, to escape punishment in his native Cairo.

Such works remind us that certain establishment structures, those that privilege colour,

gender or sexuality for example, are better left for dead. As for those who contend that this biennial should have confronted Turkish politics more directly, surely, in a country where people are regularly imprisoned for expressing their opinions, it’s hard to blame artists or institutions for treading softly. Furthermore, Turkey’s situation — where a secular, wealthy elite is in tension with a poorer majority and a democratically elected leader is encroaching on civil rights — is hardly unique. Most of these works are as resonant in Istanbul as they are in New York, London or Cairo. Finally, Elmgreen and Dragset’s decision not to publish the artists’ country of origin on their wall labels underscores that, these days, the struggle for human freedom affects one and all.

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