

COMIC RELIEF

Cartoonist and artist Cem Dinlenmiş has been up to some funny business

WORDS BY MAHA MAJZOUB | PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY X-IST, ISTANBUL



Above: A portrait of Cem Dinlenmiş © Opposite page: Penguen 9 Yas: A comic page from Penguen magazine's ninth anniversary issue

Comedians and comedy professionals, they say, are among the brightest folks to have ever walked the earth. Now let's not over exaggerate things, as comedy is not exactly brain surgery, but that does not change the fact that an exercise in comedy does entail excessive brain activity. Comedy – writing and/or performing comedy – is a cutthroat profession that you don't just fall into when your career in sales crashes and burns, but one you knowingly choose if you have the right amount of wit and astuteness as well as stellar writing skills and cognitive abilities. Examples that validate this are one too many.

Like me, you're likely thinking of Conan O'Brien right now.

The American TV show host might be goofy and kooky and today has an army of writers and prompters that make him look good every time he speaks, but O'Brien had graduated Harvard magna cum laude. And before he rose to fame, he made the rounds writing for satirical newscasts as well as Saturday Night Live and The Simpsons – two of the most successful, intelligent comedy shows in television history.

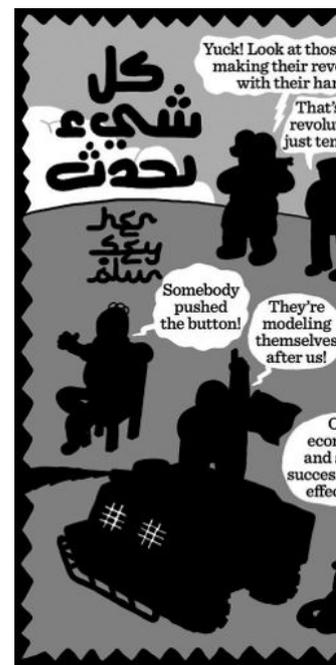
Another case in point is Paco Erhard, the up-and-coming UK-based German comedian. That guy is more of a freak of nature actually, having gotten into Mensa, the largest/oldest high IQ society in the world (to be admitted, you have to get an IQ test score higher than that achievable by around 98 percent of the human race).

HAFTALIK PENGUEN





Her Sey Olur #361: The search of collective consciousness for a solution to the issue of the Kurdish people's rights.



Turkish satirist and comic artist Cem Dinlenmi is no exception to the list of quick-witted and artistically endowed funnymen. He might not have a show or be doing stand-up, but he is just as fun to watch and follow. The 27-year-old graphic design graduate cut his creative teeth doing editorial illustrations for the Turkish pop culture magazine Bant and drawing cartoons for humor magazine Penguen. With Penguen, his political comic series “Her Sey Olur”, which loosely translates as “anything goes”, was so well received that he’s had a weekly column for some seven years now. Dinlenmi continues to illustrate common incidents from the world, particularly from Turkey, while ingeniously drawing a link between them, and making frequent references to computer games, public education clichés and the Internet culture.

The popularity of the series led to publishing drawings from 2006 to 2010 in a graphic almanac styled book. Midway through that period, in 2008, the artist got his big break when cutting-edge Istanbul art gallery x-ist offered him exhibition space. Timid appearances at group expositions were followed by grand scale solos where the versatile artist demonstrated his many talents, including painting on wood and canvas. After Istanbul came Stockholm, Berlin and Dubai, and next, it looks like the world...

Why do you think it is that makes your art appeal to people so much?

I don’t know. I like to tell stories about things – sometimes sad or disheartening things – but always in a playful mood.

You work with several media, including wood. What inspired the use of this medium? Such works as “The Man Who Eats Himself” are very original. What drew you to this style?

I’ve always been someone who likes drawing more than painting. So my relationship with painting started with paint markers, which I could carry with me and use on every kind

of material, indoor or outdoor. Then I was looking for a hard surface that I can put on my table and lean on while drawing. Also the chance to produce small pieces and put them together eased my way into working with wood.

What does doing a weekly comic column require on your part? Do you regularly have to keep up with the news or current affairs for instance?

Yes! I have a notebook which has a page for every week, and every week has around 24 headlines about what happened in the seven days that follow. I take notes nearly every day, from every kind of source I can find. I also conduct Internet researches and summarize the issue at hand in a short phrase or sentence, such as “The biggest floods in Chinese history” or “Officer accused of torture appointed deputy police chief of Istanbul”.

Have you considered making your comics in English in order to be accessible to a worldwide audience?

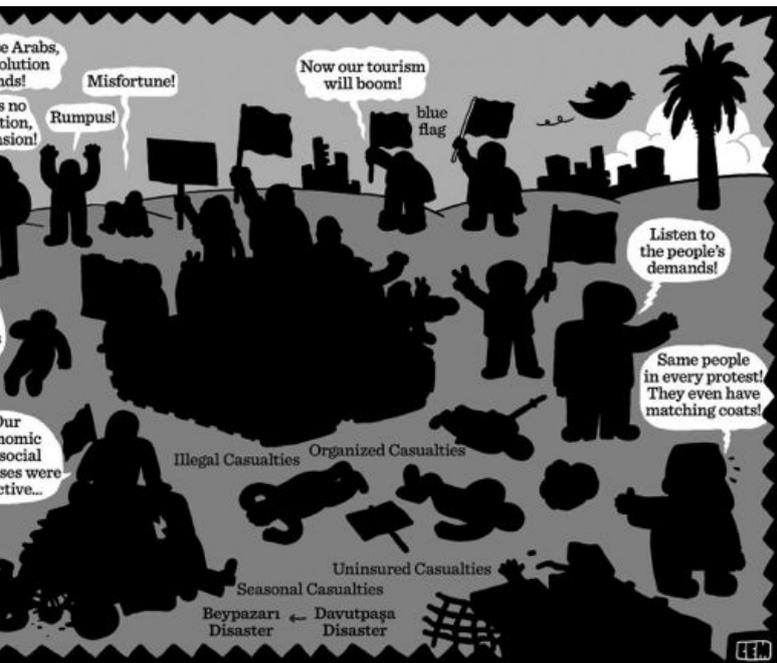
Actually, I translated some of my “Her Sey Olur” series for some exhibitions and collective books. But cartoons are similar to poems in some way; many things are lost in translation. Making a whole book for everyone on the planet is what I’m hoping to do some day.

Do you worry about being labeled a political artist since most of your work is a commentary on sociopolitical affairs?

No. The downside is having a limited audience, but I tell stories with graphics and I’d like everyone to find an essence and draw conclusions about what is going on.

Are you concerned about censorship, as your work is critical of the state? Where you ever in trouble over something you published or an artwork you displayed?

Most of the time I can’t guess what is going to offend the government. In 2005, a court ordered cartoonist Musa Kart



Her Sey Olur #437: The revolutionary wave of ousting dictators in the Arab world, which started in Tunisia and Egypt, continues to sweep across the region.

of Cumhuriyet newspaper to pay Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan 5,000 Turkish Liras (\$US 2774) in damages for drawing him as a cat! Penguen magazine artists at the time protested the decision by drawing him as nine different animals, including the magazine's mascot penguin. Erdogan sued the magazine, but eventually lost the case. My work has more subtle forms of ideas, so I've never been in trouble personally.

Tell us about your experience at the recent Çankaya Humor Festival. What did you display and how was the response?

I had a solo exhibition consisting of selected 45 pieces from my comic series "Her Sey Olur". Each of them tells the story of a week in the world's and particularly Turkey's political agenda, and when printed in poster size and brought together, the exhibit became a summary of what happened in the last five years. The gallery space was huge, and I am glad many people had the chance to see it.

As an artistic commentator on sociopolitical issues, what do you think is troubling Turkey and the region the most these days?

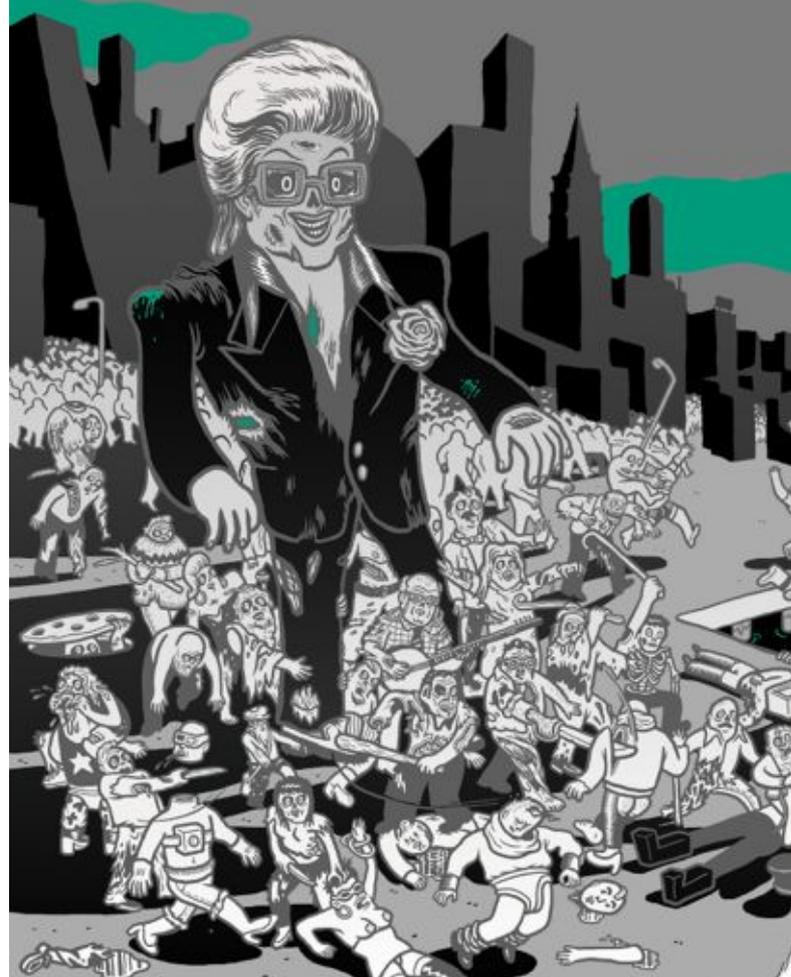
I think change is the definitive word as far as both Turkey and the region are concerned, and I haven't seen it happening faster before.

Turkey has had ongoing problems for over hundred years now, and sadly every glimmer of optimism is followed by some other disappointing turn of events. The Turkish people who have faith in democracy and justice are heart-stricken.

Who are the artists that have been instrumental to your artistic growth?

I guess the most influential has been American comic book artist and cartoonist Chris Ware.

Let's get technical. Brief us about your work process in terms of both your comics and artworks.



Funny Holocaust: A two-page spread from Istanbul Zombie 2066, a collective graphic novel by Mery Cuesta and a group of Turkish artists.

When drawing comics, I spend most of the time not drawing, but thinking with a paper and a pencil in a well concentrated ambiance. I mostly start drawing my "Her Sey Olur" series without a completely finished idea in my head, and I just let it flow.

When preparing for an exhibition, I am eager to design something new, to come up with a new discovery. The painting process requires a long time and a great deal of work with all black and white as well as colored sketches that have to be made.

Tell us how a typical day of your life plays out.

Every Sunday, Monday and Tuesday I work hard on drawing my weekly comics. Monday nights I don't sleep and so I make up for that on Tuesdays. On other days, I wake up around 10a.m., have some breakfast, go boxing, have coffee with friends ... tend to my flowers, create illustrations, do some sketches... read magazines/books...

What kind of reading material do you usually enjoy and what are you currently reading?

Naturally, I like pictures as well as words. I love fashion and photography blogs, designer books, catalogues, modern classics, history, comics, sticker albums...

I'm currently reading "Design as Art" by Bruno Munari.

What's keeping you busy these days?

I'm working on a startup project, and it's a secret!

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