

# TURKISH REVELATIONS

With Contemporary Turkish art one of the hottest genres of the moment, London-based curators **Jason Lee** and **Carlo Berardi** of Artnesia explain their approach to the forthcoming *Confessions of Dangerous Minds* group show, which offers some of the most dynamic artistic talent emerging from Turkey.

**F**rom the outset, we wanted to explore the breadth, depth and diversity of Turkey's visual arts. This meant featuring established artists, whose craft was already finely honed and their work admired and respected, alongside exciting up-and-coming talents who fulfilled the quest – so often articulated by art collectors and commentators – for the 'new' and 'undiscovered'.

As we wanted the show to be a comprehensive survey of Turkey's current art scene, the exhibition is, in effect, a journal recording the many complex stories which bind the artists with their primary subject matter: issues of identity, politics, gender and nationalism. Sitting at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, Turkey raises a range of important questions for artists but, rather than looking back and getting involved in aestheticism or stereotypes, we felt that the key to a better understanding of Turkish Contemporary art is to look at the state of mind of the artists right now. We wanted to explore their doubts, feelings, passions and hidden emotions, as well as their fears.

## CORPOREAL AND CONFLICT

An immediately striking aspect of Turkish Contemporary art is sexuality, a challenging issue

exemplified in Erinc Seymen's painting *Ikna Odasi* (Persuasion Room). His image of a girl in front of an array of sexual toys suggests the constant need for doubt and discretion as an antidote to the promises of health, prosperity and happiness given by institutions such as schools, hospitals or the army. The tension within this work is only the starting point of a mental and visual journey around the themes of sexuality and persuasion, areas that also interest artists such as Taner Ceylan, Ardan Özmenoğlu and Canan Şenol. In another circular work by Seymen, *Butterfly Bomb*, the body of a butterfly is replaced by a hand grenade, with the wings retained. The work, executed in a large circular embroidery, pays homage to a certain dichotomy between essence and appearance which manifest repeatedly in the artist's production. Living and working in Istanbul, Seymen is one of the young rising stars of the Turkish art scene, his work full of references to obedience, dedication and social issues.

It is often said that good art comes from struggle. Tolon's new work, *Waiting To Happen*, was commissioned specially for the show and articulates the artist's inner turmoil. Her paintings and installations are influenced by her architectural training but shaped by a more instinctive motivation. "It didn't take me long

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Left: Erinc Seymen. *Persuasion Room*. 2008. Oil on canvas. 100 x 70 cm. © The artist.

Right: Yaşam Şaşmaz. *Treacherous Wolf*. 2008. Wood sculpture with vinyl. 120 x 40 x 110 cm. © The artist.

to realise that my attitude to architecture was more passionate than professional," she observes. The complexity of the composition in her oil paintings is created by overlays of rigid and blurred geometric shapes that bring a sense of multiple cross-sections reminiscent of architectural plans. "My paintings are landscapes stripped to their elementary state," she explains, "and which reveal, in their discreet struggle, an inherent self-consuming urge for subsistence. [It's] something we all know already, but keep forgetting."

## EMERGING EXPRESSIONS

Although still young, some of the artists in the exhibition have already built up substantial bodies of work. Yaşam Şaşmaz, for example, has an impressive repertoire of sculptural work dealing with the age-old question of good versus evil. Her solid wood sculptures are life-size figures of children represented not as in-



## The works are a visual portrayal of the inner self of each of the artists.

nocent and naïve beings, but as disturbed, inhibited and insecure youths. The physically imposing works match the heavy psychological undertones of their theme, and for inclusion in the show we chose *Treacherous Wolf*, in which a young and evidently distressed girl is overshadowed by the menacing black silhouette of a wolf. Capturing the existential uncertainties that face humanity, this work uses the world of children to question and investigate the social clichés and stereotypes inherent in our society.

The contradiction and dichotomy of meaning is a theme that also appears in the work of Deniz Uster. Concerned with expressing the process of transmutation and hybridity, she is influenced by the notions of anatomy and alchemy, as well as by rituals and Anatolian folklore. Uster's painting *After Titian* from 2008 shows a methodical 'dissection' of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* from 1538, with the painting seemingly transformed into an anatomical diagram of Venus's body, with precise Latin definitions of the various parts of her physique, as well as the dog sleeping beside her. Playing with the idea of the artwork being dissected, not only by the viewers' eyes but also by the plethora of art historical references to which the original painting has been subjected, Uster shows a kind of

transmutation of the original and captures the contradiction between meanings that are derived through interpretation.

Meanwhile, the artist Ansen has developed a personal visual language incorporating techniques and aesthetics drawn from photography, sculpture and painting, thereby achieving a unique digital image. Lying on the cusp between Figuration and Abstraction, his work initially appears highly elusive, yet upon close examination a narrative component becomes readable. We selected one of his most accomplished works for the exhibition, a monumental triptych entitled *Through Ya*, which is reminiscent of Old Master history paintings depicting scenes from famous battles. However, in a contemporary and fascinating twist Ansen captures the violent entanglement of bodies, spears and horses using household and everyday objects.

This exhibition will be the first in its genre in the UK. It has taken us almost two years to put

together a selection of works that represents each artist at his/her best and our curatorial aim is to provide viewers with an interesting and current collection of works from a country with a complex and ancient culture and located in a very particular geographical position. As for the title, *Confessions of Dangerous Minds* was chosen because we believe that the works are a visual portrayal of the inner self of each of the artists. So we are, in a way, enticing visitors to read the artists' minds while looking at the works – a process through which we hope the audience will discover the themes discussed above, which are the *leitmotiv* of this show. 📍

*Confessions of Dangerous Minds* is on at the Phillips de Pury & Company galleries at the Saatchi Gallery in London from 18–29 April. The show will then move to the Pino Pascali Foundation in Polignano a Mare, Puglia, Italy. For more information visit [www.artnesia.com](http://www.artnesia.com) and [www.phillipsdepur.com](http://www.phillipsdepur.com)