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Different Views from the Same Window:

ONE TO THE INSIDE &
THE OTHER TO THE OUTSIDE

By Olgu
Sümengen
Berker with
Elif Okur
Tolun

At the time of the establishment of the Turkish Republic, this young and revolutionary country was in an optimistic mood under the founding leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Turkish women were among the pioneers given the right to vote in 1934 by the new regime. In America, the first wave of the feminist movement had succeeded in women winning the right to vote a few years earlier.

Gender equality is a concept directly related to culture and social structure, and because of political interruptions, progressive changes in this structure have not evolved. Over time, although gender studies and associations emerged, the social position of women did not improve much in Turkey. Despite the recent developments in the status of Turkish women, violence against women has increased in general, particularly among

the uneducated and less civilized sections of society. Research on the subject has exposed that the position of women has worsened, especially in the last fifteen years.

In male-dominant societies, violence against women is legitimated and normalized in regular discourse. Being a woman always means being the “other.” Power-based relationships, gender discrimination, and socially constructed roles reveal such otherness. In his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger also denotes the position of woman as other by asserting that “to be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their inequity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space.”¹

Like many individuals in society, artists, too, are affected by discriminatory social circumstances similar to the disturbing gender-based atmosphere in society, and those oppressions are reflected in their relationships, thoughts, and works of art. Feminist artist and author Tracy Di Tolla states that because of the progress made by previous generations of feminist artists, many contemporary female artists (worldwide) no longer necessarily feel the responsibility to identify as “women artists” or to explicitly address the “women’s perspective.”² Contemporary Turkish women artists’ tendency to not label themselves is similar to

that of many international women artists. The women artists presented in this paper do not identify themselves as “woman” or “feminist” artists, but present those perspectives through focusing on women as subject matter.

The following narrative profiles two contemporary female Turkish ceramic artists, myself and Tuba Korkmaz. We are preoccupied by our status as women in such a social environment and create figurative artwork expressive of our thoughts and experiences. Our paths first crossed during our undergraduate years, but since then our careers have taken different courses. After completing her doctoral degree in ceramics, Tuba Korkmaz went on to become a chief designer in an industrial ceramic factory. I also have a doctoral degree, and work as an assistant professor in the Fine Arts Unit of Çankaya University. Alongside our artistic work, we both write about ceramics.

Korkmaz and I are artists from the same generation. As young women, we were affected by societal cruelty toward women in Turkey. Even though neither of us lived in societies where males were overwhelmingly dominant or where there was a high percentage of uneducated people, we both felt influenced and disturbed by the status of women. This, along with our focus on figurative ceramic art, is our common ground.

TUBA KORKMAZ

In her work, Korkmaz references the extraordinary experiences of her personal life, which stem specifically from her gender. She has a daughter with significant congenital mental and physical disabilities, and must care for and raise her alone. While working as the chief designer for a ceramics manufacturer, she was brutally stabbed by her former boyfriend, an engineer at the same factory, which resulted in extended hospitalization for injuries to critical organs. The news report read:

Tuba Korkmaz has been attacked by her ex-boyfriend, with whom she had broken up two months earlier. On Friday, June 17, at 7:00 a.m., Fatih S. [. . .] stabbed her in the back four times and damaged her liver, lungs, gallbladder, and diaphragm. When Korkmaz started to cry for help, he stabbed her a fifth time. A doctor living in the neighborhood ran to her aid, providing first aid care, and then she was moved to Eskişehir Osmangazi University Hospital.³

This, of course, marked a critical turning point in her life. Though she had established herself as an artist, and her focus had always been on women before this disastrous event, such an experience strengthened her artistic voice and aroused public curiosity about her subsequent works.

Korkmaz's works are separated into three

basic series and corresponding themes. In her first series, *Incubation*, the basic theme was the effect of motherhood on her identity. Her work entitled *Seventh Month* is one of the best examples of her skill in communicating her maternal struggle. Through deformed, ceramic bodies, she sanctifies maternity while expressing her inner confusion. In an article about Korkmaz's work, Osman Şişman describes Korkmaz's attitude: “Her drawings and sculptures make clear that she is skillful in her expression of anatomy, but instead of using her skill to make perfect forms, she puts forward deformed, aged figures as a question mark for us.”⁴

In her second series, *I Wanted to be Recognized*, her theme is the desire for recognition. She exhibits this through depicting father and daughter figures—people central to her personal life—and how familial relationships contribute to collective memory. In her doctoral thesis, she explains how her confusion and trauma turn into a pursuit for recognition through artistic means: “In this series, I am expressing the state of limbo that exists in changing my identity from being a sexual object to being a holy object—a kind of maternal trauma; and one that it is layered with the agony of seeing my daughter's disabilities as a genetic fault and the urge to cover it up.”⁵

She is further interested in the associa-

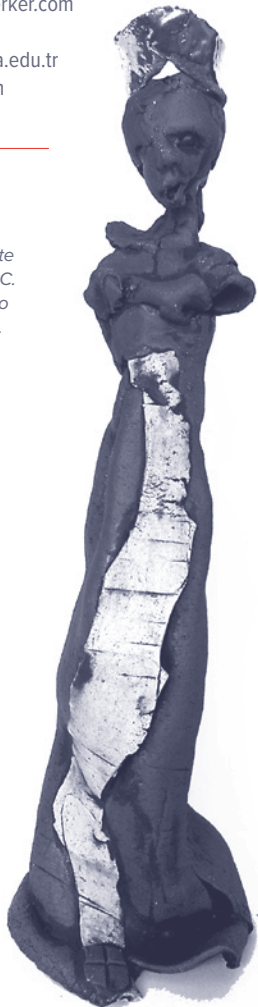
AUTHOR BIO

Olgu Sümengen Berker is a Turkish artist and assistant professor at Çankaya University Inter-Curricular Courses Department Fine Arts Unit. Her co-author is Turkish painter Elif Okur Tolun, who is also her colleague at Cankaya University as a lecturer.

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► Tuba Korkmaz.
Züleyha, 2015.
Colored chamotte
clay fired to 1200°C.
15 x 6 x 6 in. Photo
by Erman Gürkale.



tive power of her work, asking, “Can the trauma of different individuals produce a change in others’ conscience and identity, even if the trauma is not a commonly shared one?” She explains that her aim is to interpret multiple identities based on personal memories and to have the resulting feelings reciprocated by the viewer.⁵ *Snooze* is an example of a tile design in this series that presents her personal memory interpretation. In this work, Korkmaz creates tension by representing her identity as a mother in unclear or abstract form and her daughter’s disease—the subject that she is trying to cover up—as clear and evident.

Korkmaz’s third series is called *Nix: To the Nafs of the Kings and Queens*. In this series, she questions the concepts of *nafs* (Arabic for “sense of self”) and morals through twelve figures: Melancholy, Jealousy, Züleyha (a Turkish female name), Hurting, Lethargy, Cruelty, Leyla (another Turkish female name), Grace, Sorrow, Malik (in this case, the doorkeeper and ruler of Hell), Rivalry, and Mercy. She highlights the concept of otherness through disfigured forms that contrast with the rich magnificence of royalty that the series title conveys.

In a recent review, Osman Şişman explains Korkmaz’s approach:

Tuba Korkmaz’s series *Nix: To the Nafs of the Kings and Queens* embodies various ethical

and moral disparities and leaves these issues unresolved. Through its title, each work of art lures the viewer into a familiar ethical domain (e.g. Mercy, Jealousy etc.), but the works themselves are stigmatized with alienation from the familiar form due to their deformed bodies. [. . .] For example, the thrones and crowns, which represent the highly categorized ideals, are blended with the sick, deformed bodies of the figures, which portray the inevitable imperfection of the world.⁶

Şişman goes on to describe Korkmaz’s work as a kind of trauma therapy: Every day she confronts the memory of her trauma, addressing it head-on through her creation of this series. She also disguises and suppresses it within the finished work. The duality of this series is what makes it her most successful.

**OLGU SÜMENGEN BERKER
(by Elif Okur Tolun)**

Olgu Sümengen Berker describes her basic motivations for making her artwork: “I spent all my life with women who were preoccupied with being a woman, my grandmother, mother, my teachers, my friends and colleagues.” Her experience is common, as every woman questions her identity, but for her, like Korkmaz, this questioning becomes creative fuel. But in contrast to Korkmaz, Berker takes a more objective approach. Beyond the simple cognition

of “I’m a Woman,” Berker’s questioning of identity includes examining social power differences between men and women, culturally constructed characteristics of “being a woman,” and the expressions of one’s self through the lifestyle or occupation.

As is true of Korkmaz’s, Berker’s works are separated into three series. The first involves the interpretation of historical icons, “mother goddesses.” The very first sculpted imagery was of mother goddesses. According to some references, during the era of transition from nomadic life to permanent settlement, women made these likenesses as an expression of themselves. Thus, they are the interpretations of women coming from women’s minds and symbols of fertility, the basis of life; existence is sanctified by the mother goddess figurine. Using such historical imagery as a fundamental concept, Sümengen Berker’s colorful sculptures seem to sanctify the existence of “woman.” Her figures are abstract and primitive forms, on which she applies a variety of bright and strong colors, further underscoring the idea of fertility.

Her second series, *Osteoporosis in Art*, was part of her doctoral thesis. When she was producing her artworks for her thesis, she worked on simulating the textures of bones deformed by osteoporosis. She experimented with various innovative techniques, such as constructing her art with different types of materials, such as cotton waste and foam. These figures represent the

deformation of the female body by aging. In contrast to her previous series, this series focusses not on the sanctification of the existence of women but on the annihilation and deformation of the female body. Her osteoporotic figures of women seem to be heavily burdened with the weight of being an organic organism that is gradually decomposing and becoming deformed.

In her third, and most recent series, Berker centers her work on creating representations of women's bodies that have been exposed to violence. She has examined formal studies on violence against women, in order to understand what being a woman in Turkey means in statistical terms. Every figure in this series has a number on it, which references the research and also serves as its title. Among the figures referred to are the percentage of women exposed to violence, the number of women murdered by men in one year, and the percentage of women forced to get married before the age of consent. As part of this series, she has also exhibited figures based on traumatic personal relationships, such as her work titled -1, based on a coworker's

grandmother killed by her husband. She is empathetic with those who are suffering as women. Her ceramic figures, collectively titled *Lost Womens' Bodies*, protest the normalization of inequality and violence against women in social life.

SUMMARY

As two ceramicists from a similar social and educational backgrounds, Korkmaz and I are creating works that question life from our individual perspectives. Using her personal trauma to examine identity and express her inner strife, Korkmaz is fortunate to have been able to gain ground and use her voice and creativity to reach out to a wide audience. I work from a different perspective. I observe, gather data, and express social conditions empathetically in my figures, and give voice to those women, who unfortunately, are not able to do so. We have common ground in our choice of artistic media, educational backgrounds, social status, and lifestyles. In terms of our sculpture, we are like two women looking through the same window; but one is looking to the inside and the other to the outside.

ENDNOTES

- 1 John Berger, et al. *Ways of Seeing*. (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1973), p. 46
- 2 Tracy DiTolla, *Feminist Art*. (theartstory.org, 11/14/2016).
- 3 "Kardeşim Bıçaklandığında Nefes Alamıyorum Diye Yalvarmış." (hurriyet.com.tr, 11/14/2016).
- 4 *Askıda Kalan Tekinsizlik (Suspended Uncertainty)* (korkmaztuba.com, 11/14/2016)
- 5 Tuba Korkmaz, *Kimlik-Bellek: İstedim ki Bilineyim (Identity-Memory: Desire for Recognition)*, Competence in Art Dissertation (Artwork Report), Marmara Üniversitesi, Güzel SanatlarEnstitüsü, Seramik ve Cam Anasanat Dalı, İstanbul, 2016.
- 6 *Askıda Kalan Tekinsizlik (Suspended Uncertainty)*. (korkmaztuba.com, 11/14/2016).

“The very first sculpted imagery was of mother goddesses.



◀ *Olgu Sümengen Berker. Untitled, 2007. White vacuum clay and colored glazes, fired to 1040°C. 24 x 14 x 22 in. Photo by artist.*