

NEW CERAMICS

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OVER:
Surface detail
of a vessel

JAMES WATKINS
8ff

"Political Affairs" The Ceramic Art of ELIF AYDOGDU AGATEKIN

Jane Jermyn

In October 2012 I took part in the 2nd International Mas-cabal Wood-fire Symposium at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey.

As with most symposiums, each of the artists showed a power point presentation about their work and while many were interesting one of the Turkish participant's work really stood out. Elif Aydogdu Agatekin is a ceramic artist in her mid 30's, who uses recycled refractory materials to make work that is both beautiful and strongly political.

One definition of politics is "the art or science of government". In a statement about her work, Elif states that - "In my country, however, the views and understandings in fulfilling this art are sometimes so absurd and from time to time so unbelievable that aside from showing reaction to what is going on,

nobody feels like saying a word about it, and unresponsiveness has turned into a conscious preference."

In the 70's and 80's the younger generation protested about many issues and as a result suffered a great deal. She finds it unfortunate that that generation has now become politically apathetic and the majority of the children raised by that generation have become 'apolitical'.

Even though she is a member of this 'apolitical' generation, Elif is far from being so and through her ceramic art she expresses her reaction to a number of political situations. While she modestly states - "My reaction is not powerful enough to drag people after me, I know." - she has discovered that by producing works with a political content, they have created strong and often opposing reactions to the same piece of work

"Martyrs are mortal"



Elif Aydogdu Agatekin is a ceramic artist in her mid 30's, who uses recycled refractory materials to make work that is both beautiful and strongly political.

- since 2010 a number of her works have won awards, then have not been exhibited or when they have, she has been severely criticized by some for "playing to the crowd".

An example of this is the work entitled "**Kurdish Initiative**". In April 2010 she wanted to use ceramics to express her feelings about the ongoing discussion regarding the Kurdish Initiative, which was on the agenda in Turkey at that time. She took waste refractory tiles, dividing them into 11 pieces with gradually decreasing widths. On these she hand engraved, using a diamond-tipped milling machine, a map of Turkey, as well as her feelings on the issue. She repeated this process on the reverse and then raku-fired the individual pieces. For the bases she used waste corrugated refractory material. She aimed to emphasize in the visual presentation of the "Initiative" that, although the surface can be perceived as a whole from one angle, from another, it is open and in fact divided into sections. She used similar images on the front and back of the work to emphasize that the fragmentation takes place from both East to West and West to East.

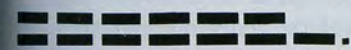
This work was awarded 2nd prize in the 11th Golden Pot Ceramic Contest organized by Izmir Rotary Club, but has not been exhibited since due to its controversial subject matter.

Another work "**Martyrs are Mortal**" was created in reaction to the phrase "Martyrs are Immortal", which



"I am not a suitcase"

"Code 1"





"Would you like a cup of peace?"

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is chanted in the streets at every martyrs funeral as if they did not die and are still strong despite the loss. Elif finds this very disturbing and decided to make an installation as a statement of her feelings.

To do this she undertook extensive research and visited Martyr's Cemeteries around the Bilecik region taking photos and observing every detail of the graves. She did similar research on the Internet, based on photographs of martyrs' gravestones shared by the families. She transferred the names, dates of birth, place of martyrdom and the martyrs' father's name from these gravestones, onto waste corrugated refractory bricks, just as they appeared on the actual gravestones. She made stencils of these texts, using a vinyl cutter plotter, placed these onto the tiles applying glaze to the un-resisted areas. Small coffins, again from waste refractory material, were glazed as if wrapped in the Turkish flag. The individual pieces were raku fired, then assembled, lining up the bricks as gravestones and adding the coffins to create the installation.

"Martyrs are Mortal" was selected for the in 70th State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition 2010 Ceramic Competition by the selection committee. It was also awarded 3rd prize at the International Gizem Frit Ceramic Art Works Competition, where she had submitted a single piece of the installation. However "Martyrs are Mortal", probably due to its title, is an artwork that both curators and galleries are reluctant to exhibit - it is now spending its time in storage.

"Cipher" In 2011, a scandal arose concerning the university entrance exam in Turkey. In this examination, it is alleged that some students knew a code that revealed the correct answer beforehand. Elif made this composition as a symbol of respect for the young students who had spent their time trying to solve

the exam questions without knowing or noticing the 'code'.

During the creative process she asked herself many questions - Who wants to get a place in a university using these codes? Who has the right to progress while disregarding the rights of others? Who uses these codes? What can society expect from a youth selected, educated and promoted to a prominent role via coding? Can you imagine a doctor, a lawyer or a public prosecutor who has passed the examination through having the special code?

To express her anger at the mindset that finds this acceptable and also at the figures created by this mindset, she cut various waste refractory kiln props into slices and used them to make a code that would perfectly match the coding application in the university exam, with each prop shape representing the different code symbols, being given a different glaze.

She used the sliced kiln props to represent the code sequence that had become public knowledge. These solve the problem without even having to reading the question. The code indicated the correct answer at the intersection of the numbers when read in ascending order. She showed the coded question symbolically, as insignificant lines in the top left hand corner and glazed the correct code symbol that corresponded to the correct answer in red.

"Would you like a cup of peace?" Is a symbolic work that makes a statement about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of reconciliation between the Turkish and the Kurdish communities. In both communities, tea is very much part of the culture and could be seen as way of creating a dialogue between both groups. By using a teapot, cup and saucer cut in cross-section, so they cannot be filled, the impossibility of this solution is represented.

"I am not a suitcase" While all Elif's work makes strong forceful statements, coming from Ireland where abortion is banned, 'I am not a suitcase' is the work that resonated with me the most.

Elif feels that "Being a suitcase does not give you the right to decide what you would carry. Whether you like it or not, you have no choice but carry whatever you are stuffed with. Then

Elif Agatekin was born in Ankara, Turkey, in 1977. She lived in Ankara until she has completed her high school education at TED Ankara College. She studied Ceramics at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Anadolu University where she graduated in 2000. She received her Master of Arts (MA) degree with a focus on Ceramics from the Institute of Social Sciences at the same university. She worked as a decoration designer at Toprak Seramik for a short time. Afterwards she worked as an assistant expert at the Product Development Department of Eczacıbasi Karo Seramik for 4 years, where she mastered software for surface printing on tiles and operating CNC machines. She obtained a PhD from Anadolu University, Sufficiency in Arts Programme at the Institute of Fine Arts, Division of Ceramic in 2012 on the subject of the "Use of Waste Ceramics in the Art of Ceramics as an Alternative Means of Expression". She is working as an instructor in the Graphic Design Program at Bozüyük Vocational School, Bilecik University since 2008.

ELIF AGATEKIN

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you are emptied and put aside until you are needed again for the next carrying work..."

Recently women's reproductive rights have been discussed in Turkey in a way that it never was before. The Turkish government has passed a law making elective caesarean sections punishable by law and any Doctor persuading a woman to undergo an unnecessary caesarean, subject to a fine of €420. They are now only permitted in cases of medical emergency.

By listening to all the opinions being expressed in both the conventional and social media Elif came to the conclusion that, in a land that used to revere the fertility of the ancient mother earth goddesses, women were now being seen as no more than suitcases.

This work became a piece dedicated to every women who has given birth, willingly or not, had or had to have her baby aborted, wanted to give birth or experienced the pain peculiar to the process, and who is never just a suitcase.

For this work, she cut waste refractory tiles into rectangles and painted, using a raku glaze, different sized fetuses on the suitcases before raku-firing. Waste porcelain bowls were sliced and attached as handles. On these handles the 'destination' of each of the fetuses was shown by luggage labels with codes representing SEZ (Caesarean Section), NOR (Normal Birth) or KÜR (Abortion) representing the birth of each of the fetuses, since the government is attempting to take this issue under their control.

During the symposium I spoke to Isik Gençoglu about Elif's work. Isik is the Curator & Design Manager at Istanbul Concept, an organization that brings the culture, art & design community together.

"In any group of ceramic works you can immediately pick out Elif Aydogdu Agatekin's work. They have their own identities, they tell their own stories. They stand up for themselves. She uses a simple language to transmit her ideas to the viewer. Her ideas compliment each other and are brought to life in her works. She is highly intelligent and her artistic skill is unarguable. Her talent at aesthetic expression separates her from others in a distinct manner. Her sensitivity to developments in her environment makes her very human. She is a realist and her work very real. She dreams, but they are not of something that can not be realised. I believe in Elif, in what she says, and how she says it. It is a pleasure to spend time with Elif's works. In her works, there are many themes both spoken and unspoken which will pass into the future and which should never be forgotten. I can see that this is her cause. And I believe in this cause too. Because the cause is my struggle. For this reason, working with Elif has been special for me."

Jane Jermyn is a ceramic artist who lives and works in Lismore, Ireland.

"Kurdish initiative" front

