



CANAN

DISASSEMBLING SEDUCTION

You were born in Istanbul and still reside there. What was your childhood like? When did you become interested in art?

Actually, I've been into drawing since my childhood. My first memories of drawing are the sketches that I made with a pen on pieces of leftover leather in my father's shoe atelier. When I was in secondary and high school, because of being skilled at drawing, my teachers made me enter drawing competitions. I also received prizes at that time. Frankly, because the quality of art history and art education was quite low at the time of my childhood, and since my family's socio-cultural structure did not allow them to be interested in art, I cannot say that I was seriously interested either. Having no one to guide me to enter an academy for arts, I studied business in college. After graduating, I worked in accounting and finance sectors. Meanwhile, I kept opening sketch exhibitions at the school's canteen. And I was carrying the sourness of not being an artist with me all the time. After working in accounting and finance sectors for a while, I realized that some of the attendees of the art lessons—which I was taking just as a spare time activity—were getting prepared for the Fine Arts University. That led my old desires to awaken and I also took the entrance exam and started studying painting. I can say that I started being fully interested in art when I was 24.

Most of your work is political in nature: speaking out against something or voicing an opinion on a current issue. Is art a positive way to bring about political change?

Feminist theory states that "the personal is political." Being a feminist artist, I think that every event and situation in our lives, public or private, is political. In this sense, while my style of art involves a personal expression in one way, in another way it produces a political statement as well. When the art is strong enough, although it does not create a direct change in the political arena, it can make it possible to think, speak, and discuss about politics. Nevertheless, art production is not always innocent and may not include positive values. It can bring change in a bad way as well as in a good way. This is directly related to the artist's political stance and viewpoint. That's why I cannot say with ease that "yes, art is a positive way to bring about political change." Art has both positive and negative aspects, just like the other ways of production.

Some of your work is very sexual in nature, like a piece you did in 2000 depicting two people in bed touching themselves, as well as your series of photographs featuring dolls performing sexual acts. Are these pieces a response to the sexual repression in your culture and country? What are you saying about human sexuality?

In the former piece you mentioned, I tried to criticize the fact that the marriage foundation creates a tragicomic situation, since it alienates people from their own bodies by forcing two individuals to live together. On the other hand, in the latter piece – the one with the dolls- I began with criticizing the violence, incest, and alienation in the family foundation. I think the matters that I handled in both of these pieces are the matters that can be observed even in the most solitary regions of the World. Those things are experienced in my country as well as in other countries. And unfortunately, those are taboo matters that we never talk about. I think the sexuality of every individual has features that are unique. The real problem begins to arise when you generalize sexuality and create a prototype of it.

Detail from: Canon, "Turkish Delight 5", 2011.

Where do you find your models, particularly those that pose nude for you?

I use my own body as a model in almost all my works. My body is the one that I know best; I can control and give orders to it, so I don't have to persuade others. In the work you mentioned above, titled "untitled," I used the person to whom I was married at that time. In my early works, I used dolls' bodies as a body. And in terms of my later productions, when I needed to use bodies other than my own, I preferred to use my drawings.

In *Kybele*, the pregnant woman pictured is you. How do you feel baring yourself in such a naked way? Are you in a way present in all of your art?

As I stated before, in *Kybele* and in my other works, I mostly use my own body. Frankly, my body is an artistic medium for me. In the art works that I produce, I use my body as a material and, as a matter of fact, in a sense I get alienated. Although in my daily life my bodily flaws annoy me from time to time, in my works I am not annoyed by or ashamed of it.

Your images must be somewhat controversial in your sphere of the world. Have you dealt with harsh criticisms or backlash? How have you handled it?

I have been exposed to both direct criticisms and interventions. The work that I displayed in a public space titled "Finally, You Are In Me" was removed because it was found to be "harmful to the vicinity". But I experienced the actual censorship in Germany. My self-exhibition—which took place in a small German village in the gallery of a foundation that awarded me with a scholarship—included the photography series that I had produced using dolls was found to be "pornographic". It was censored with the company of police officers. It was not only about the intervention of the officers, the people living in the vicinity molested me. And this was not a legal intervention. According to the German laws, for a visual to be pornographic, the genitals should be exposed. Yet, as you know, I produced this series of photographs by using dolls. The exhibition was opened again with the help of attorneys, but I should admit that I experienced a very nervous and tiring process.

When you think of the word "naked" what comes to mind? What about "nude"?

When there is veiling that is beyond the society's moral and traditional norms, then "nudity" comes to one's mind. On the sea-side where everyone is wearing swimsuits, if somebody wanders around topless, others can perceive her as "naked". On the other hand, on a nude beach, either everybody is naked or nobody is naked. In a conservative society, in a place where everyone is tightly veiled, if someone exposes her ankle or even her arms, this can be perceived as "nudity." Or in an area in Africa where people live in nature, the people who cover themselves with a piece of cloth made out of fibers might not be perceived as "naked." I don't think that an erotic atmosphere is necessary to perceive nudity as "nude."

The public work "Finally You Are In Me (Nihayet Icimdesin)" which displays the Turkish text in public places, was considered confusing and harmful to many because most people did not know the context, that you, the artist, was pregnant. Do you mean to stir up controversy or provoke people with your work?

My initial intention was, of course, to say, "welcome" to my baby that was going to be born. I also like to use this method time to time. There is a significant difference between "provoking" and "being sensational." I always try to steer clear of being sensational. But in my opinion, to provoke via art is always a right method.

When nudity is used in art, does it have to be sexual? Is it erotic by association of the naked body?

Of course nudity does not have to be sexual when it is used in art. On the contrary, for years feminist artists have produced critical works with a feminist outlook that have gone against the usage of the female body as an "object of desire." They have used their own naked bodies when producing those works; despite that, their works did not evoke the sexual or erotic. It can, but with a different viewpoint. Not only the eroticism that is produced with the masculine viewpoint, but also the erotic that is perceived by the feminine viewpoint.

The use of body in art cannot be understood through veiling the female body, hiding it, or displaying it fully, I think. It is about changing the viewpoint.

In both cases of production that are founded on displaying or not displaying the body, we accept that we are an "object of seduction," which is a situation that feminist artists are totally against. If we declare, "whatever we put on, we are not the objects

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Canan, "Turkish Delight 2", 2011



Canan, Top: "Turkish Delight 4", Bottom: "Turkish Delight 1", 2011.

of seduction," a feminist artwork also states its standpoint through this discourse. In this sense, what is important is not the place where I display my work, it is what I say through the place where I display.

What is the difference between showing your work in galleries and showing it in public spaces? Is it essential that your work be shown to the public? Is that the only way it can make a political statement?

There are a limited number of works that I produced for public spaces. While I am producing, I take a particular idea or an emotional state as a starting point, and I choose a method of production and display that suits that particular idea or state of emotion best. The technique to choose the area of display—whether a gallery or a public space—develops depending on this method. Undoubtedly, the excitement of displaying your works in a public place cannot be compared to the excitement of displaying them in an art gallery. The former is very exciting and it also carries some risks. Viewers go to a gallery with the motivation of seeing artwork, whereas when the viewers run into artwork that is displayed in a public space, it happens unintentionally. You address a mass that is larger and not chosen. I don't think that displaying your work in a gallery or a public space has anything to do with its political content.

How has being a woman shaped your work?

It naturally determined its content. Being a woman led me to be a feminist, and being a feminist led me to produce feminist works.

You've worked with so many mediums - drawing, painting, photography, video, and installation pieces. Is there one that represents your vision the best?

In the process of production, first I think about the medium that best reflects the idea that I want to express; afterwards I decide upon the technique. Although using a different medium each time is tiring time after time, I believe that I keep on producing without repetition. To tell the truth, whether photography or painting, both forms of production serve as a preliminary preparation for my video productions. I think video is the form of production that reflects me best.

As I have looked at your work spanning from 1997 to the present, the style and medium has changed a great deal. Today you work a lot more with ink and illustration. How have you grown and changed as an artist?

I started painting miniatures in 2006. I completed my fine arts education in a foundation that uses Bauhaus model as a base for teaching. From this point of view, I can say that I received a fully Westernized education. With the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, a forced disengagement from the art that had been produced in this territory took place and when Turkey turned its face to the West, it got alienated from its indigenous ways of production. After adopting a way of production that is Western, I realized that I did not know the indigenous art techniques produced in this territory. When I realized that this ignorance serves for the existent political viewpoint, I decided to improve myself both technically and in terms of art history. I started to study in Fine Arts University again in 2006 as a guest student, this time to study miniature. Making this type of decision is a tough one if you are a professional artist, but, while criticizing the recent history of Turkey, I had to use various ways of production in order to bring about my criticism visually. When I started to criticize the existent productions, I discovered my own forms. This discovery continues today.

Are you a global artist or a Turkish artist?

I don't think that there is such a distinction. Every artist carries both global and local features inside.

You play a lot with gender and sexuality, often warping our perception of what it means to be a woman or a man. What is it to be a woman?

I generally produce my works via criticizing societal gender politics. The definitions of "manhood" and "womanhood" are the concepts that are produced in line with the societal gender politics. As Simone de Beauvoir said, I say, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one."

Are there any artists who have represented the naked female form in a way you relate to and respect?

The first artist that I can think of is Marina Abramovic.