

Painting in the dark

Feminist artist Canan shines a light on Turkey's troubles through her work. Alan Philps meets her in Istanbul

Turkey's foremost feminist artist uses only her first name, Canan. She dropped her surname in protest at a law that gives her ex-husband the right to stop her using it. There is much else she has dropped: she often appears in her works naked as a challenge to Turkish society as it becomes increasingly conservative.

These are turbulent times for Turkey – a raging conflict in Syria, a rekindled civil war between Kurds and the state in the southeast, bombs going off in major cities and a huge migration crisis. At the same time the government is cracking down on dissent, with journalists and lecturers arrested regularly on terrorism charges.

So it's probably a difficult time for an outspoken social rebel. I find the artist in the Rampa gallery, a discreet Istanbul basement next to an underground car park, which is showing her latest work.

She is sitting in front of a gorgeously coloured work of applique: it shows three naked women chained together by a demon. It can be viewed two ways. At first

sight the harsh message – it might be about the mass enslavement of Yazidi women in Iraq or the situation of women in general – is softened by the sparkling gold, red and blue she uses. But the work is also projected on to the back wall where, stripped of its colour, it seems as if the girls are being led into hell. It is part of a series called 'shining darkness' encapsulating a paradox which strikes any visitor to Istanbul. Bombs have scared the tourists away, yet life continues much as normal.

'We are going through a time when we constantly feel insecure about our existence,' says the artist. 'Yet the day after I hear a bomb explosion, I can be back at work. While the migrants are dying in their boats, people are making holiday plans for the same sea. I wanted to reference this paradoxical situation, bringing in both the glamour and the darkness.'

This year is a big one for contemporary art in Turkey. For the first time the Victoria and Albert Museum's £25,000 Jameel Prize will be awarded not in London but in Istanbul, at the Pera Museum, which combines a permanent Ottoman-era art collection with travelling modern exhibitions.

The prize, for contemporary artists 'inspired by Islamic traditions of craft and design', has 11 candidates on the shortlist, including two from Turkey. They are Canan, with two Ottoman-influenced views of the protests which shook Istanbul in 2013, and Cevdet Erek, an artist working in sound, space and rhythm.

In 2013, demonstrations erupted across Turkey in protest at the planned redevelopment of Istanbul's Gezi Park. But it was far more than a dispute over green space – more an uprising of civil society against the authoritarianism of the ruling AK party of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The artist was at the protests day and night and finally fell asleep for an hour during one of the key events, the attempt by police with water cannon to stop demonstrators crossing the Bosphorus Bridge. When she woke up, she saw the protesters

had got through. 'I thought I had slept through the revolution,' she says. There was no revolution; the rising was crushed and 'dark forces' took over the country.

Resistance on Istiklal Street uses the visual language of the Ottoman miniature to show the facade of every building. She consciously uses Ottoman art forms because they were derided as primitive under Turkey's enforced westernization in the last century. It's a quiet rebellion against the obliteration of Turkey's Islamic and imperial history.

'Art has a long history and being alienated from these forms of art does not allow us to understand the recent past,' she says.

I ask her if the brutal break with history – a new script was introduced, cutting Turks off from earlier written work, and clothing and social mores were westernized – had inevitably led to the Islamic revival that Turkey is experiencing. She says it is too soon to know, but what is clear is that society is turning towards conservatism and the state and the media are doing their best to impose it.

Despite the intolerance of the authorities, Canan says she has only once been censored. She put up a banner outside an internet café saying: 'At last you're inside me' – a reference (she insists) to the baby daughter in her womb. The local council saw sexual innuendo and took it down.

Why had Turkish women, who gained full political rights in the 1930s, seen their march to emancipation stalled?

'This is not a problem unique to Turkey,' she says. 'Even when these rights existed in law, they remained on the surface. And all power structures – the state, society, the military – have been happy to keep it that way.' I ask her about the difference between the concerns of Turkish feminists and those in Europe and America. 'We have to deal with some much more backward issues. There is a serious struggle to be waged on behalf of the great numbers of women in Turkey who are raped or regularly subjected to violence or harassment.'





Resistance on Istiklal Street, by Canan, far left, uses the visual language of the Ottoman miniature to show the facade of every building

‘I don’t share their vision of the future and I don’t want to live life as they expect me to live. If Turkey was no longer a secular state it would be a disaster’

For years, she points out, the official ban on women wearing headscarves in public places including universities has been a feminist cause. ‘Until a few years ago women had to struggle for the right to wear a headscarf in public. I am not specifically for headscarves, but I am for women who choose to wear them to be in the public space as they wish.’

But what if women are forced to cover their heads by family pressure or the crushing burden of tradition?

‘Even if a woman is forced to wear it, we can still fight for her right to do so. This is her access to education. Demanding the right to wear a headscarf in the public space gives her access to something that could possibly change her situation.’

‘Also it’s a woman’s choice to be conservative. If you deny this identity, I would say that this is the oriental gaze of the West which is refusing to see this as an identity owned by a woman.’

This principled stand does not change

the fact that she and others like her are deeply concerned at the Islamizing trend of Turkish politics and society.

Two days before we spoke, the Speaker of the Turkish parliament floated the idea that the new constitution which President Erdogan wants to introduce should drop the reference to Turkey being a secular state and reflect its Islamic identity. While Erdogan distanced himself from this goal, activists saw it as a sign of where ruling party supporters want to take the country.

‘I don’t share their vision of the future, and I don’t want to live life as they expect me to live it,’ she said. ‘If Turkey was no longer a secular state it would be a disaster I couldn’t live with.’ In the dark shadow of the terrorist threat, no one takes to the streets to protest these days, but the spirit of opposition lives on in her work.

The Jameel Prize exhibition will be on view at the Pera Museum, Istanbul, June 8 – August 14