

DISCOVER

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Turkish contemporary art at the Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg

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Asli Çavusoğlu's "A Few Hours After the Revolution" (2010)

Street art is often eloquent, and political graffiti always packs a punch. Asli Çavusoğlu's "A Few Hours After the Revolution" (2010) is a reproduction, in brothel-red neon, of a piece of graffiti that has become common on Turkey's streets: it reads "DEVİRİM" ("revolution") but is often defaced by rightwing opponents to make it illegible. Transported to the Museum for New Art in Freiburg, it forms part of an exhibition to celebrate the strength of Turkish contemporary art and the German city's friendship with Istanbul.

The second in the museum's *Freundschaftsspiel* (friendly game) series, the exhibition is built round two private collections, those of Ayşe Umur and Agah Ugur. There is very little state support for the visual arts in Turkey, so the remarkable health of contemporary culture in the country owes a great deal to SAHA, a group of some 100 collectors whose members travel to big art events across the world. The exhibition shows Turkish artists exploring similar themes to Argentine, Bulgarian,

Canadian, Estonian, French, Finnish, German, Romanian and South African artists also in the collections.

The current Turkish regime may be attempting to define the essence of the country in a narrow way, but there are few places in the world where one can find such robust individuality. This comes with a confusion and profusion of identity that Erdem Taşdelen illustrates in a work simply called “Erdem Taşdelen” (2011). It consists of 48 different coloured business cards where he oscillates between being Erdem Taşdelen, eternal adolescent and cynical artist, delusional lover and distraught egomaniac, drama queen and unhappy queer.

Gender is one of the most prevalent themes. The poster for the exhibition shows a wild but elegant lady bringing out a tray of tea. She is a composite figure made out of pieces of cloth and simple ink lines, but the invitation is traditional. The artist, Nilbar Güreş, is a complicated mix, like many people in Turkey. Her father’s family are followers of the Alevi branch of Islam and come from a village that is not linked to the mainline telephone system, so she has made a film entitled *Open Phone Booth* (2011) which shows the villagers going up to the top of the hill to try and make contact with the outside world. In the present context this seems like a desperate cry.

The two collections here, which are shown alongside works from the museum’s holdings, are very different. Agah Uğur’s consists of video work, one of several strong such collections in Istanbul, and provides a two-hour loop of films chosen by co-curator Didem Yazıcı, a young Turk living in Freiburg who built her reputation on the museum’s video programme in the Schauraum.

Ayşe Umur’s collection is very much linked to books, literature and libraries. The constant evolution of language and meaning, as seen in the work of Çavusoğlu and Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, reflects a belief that Istanbul is not just a place of deep learning, has often been a barometer of world culture.

Appropriately, the exhibition has an accompanying book programme. Ciprian Muresan, a skilled draughtsman from Cluj, Romania, will be making an artist’s book referring to one of the star pieces in the show. In the Unlimited section at Art Basel he made a wall of 15 two-metre drawings that told the story of the first 15 years of the 21st-century art market. He literally drew the contents the magazine *Art Forum*, each panel containing the pages of the 12 volumes of the magazine for one year. Comparing the panels, it was possible to trace the changing state of the market based on how much was advertising, how much editorial. The art was easier to see in leaner times — a wry comment on money’s influence on the art world.

At first sight, Muresan’s sculpture in Freiburg looks like a huge pile of books. It is a pile of art volumes, but only the top couple of feet of it. Beneath is what appears more like a crate, but is in fact layers of board, with etchings in between each layer made by the artist. They are being flattened by the weight of art history above them. And the dialogue of Muresan’s piece seems more ironic when placed against three works by the British-Argentine artist Amalia Ulman. She is known for the semi-fictional persona that she has created on social media, and the photos here are pages from her Instagram life. One declares that “Books are Better than People”. It’s a sentiment that could all too easily be taken as genuine in the current age.

As part of the exhibition programme, a book is being created by filmmaker and photographer Ali Kazma that reflects the fragility of literature, art and life. Kazma, who represented Turkey at the

Venice Biennale in 2013, is also showing some photographs and a video installation in Freiburg. What the visitor cannot yet see is a work in Umur's collection that Kazma made as a 40th birthday present to himself entitled *Written* (2011). It consists of six screens showing burning texts. Kazma is an avid reader and when he finds passages that he likes he writes them down in a little book. It is these passages that are burning. The work inspires horror, recalling the violence done to books by bigots such as Savonarola, Hitler and Isis, yet Kazma calmly reflects that many books end in fires for a range of more mundane reasons.

This exhibition shows that we don't have to live in the dull market-led world revealed by Muresan's drawings of Art Forum. We can support artists who give us alternative visions in very difficult times.

'Freundschaftsspiel Istanbul: Freiburg', Museum für Neue Kunst, to October 9. freiburg.de/pb



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