

The Garden of Undigested Experiences

As I write these words, for an exhibition that I will most likely not be able to visit, I feel uncannily familiar with the works on display, as if I had walked about the gallery space and felt the affective atmosphere dangling in the white cube. Damla Tamer's works span continents and bridge the otherwise insurmountable physical and temporal gap between Canada and Turkey. From afar, I imagine the exhibition venue as a giant stomach, attempting to digest what we have been going through in Turkey—and most likely other parts of the world—over the last decade. An amorphous collection of undigested experiences sprouting in a garden of hope, or the garden of undigested experiences, as I would like to call it.

To me, the temporal universe of *Biber Bahçesi / Pepper Garden* opens up vaguely around 2015 in Turkey. It was a peculiar year, to say the least. That year, tens of violent attacks, most of which were claimed by what was later called the Islamic State, took place across the country. Simultaneously, the Turkish Army launched military operations in Kurdish towns, killing hundreds of people accused of allegedly engaging in terrorism. On July 15, 2016, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted a coup d'état, the failure of which was followed by a prolonged declared state of emergency. In retrospect, I now realize that those events laid the foundation for the construction of what some political scientists refer to as a "new" or "post fascist" regime. The continuity of this regime required a politics of shock and awe, which destroyed our senses of historical continuity in both the collective and personal sense of the word. The production and distribution of shock—whether a military attack or a spike in currency rates—became a rule of governance. By then, the vitality of the Gezi Uprising of 2013 had waned, and its eventfulness had diminished. The horizon of expectation it opened and the affective forces it unleashed, however, still lingered in the air.

Loose structures made up of transparent ropes hidden beneath a slurry of mashed papers, knots, tassels, and stitches entangled in texts all attempt to mend the broken lines of historical experience. Let us think of the act of digestion as a process of extracting what has been swallowed in such a way that it integrates previously neglected pieces together anew. It is in this sense that the works in the exhibition invite us to try and relate to the repression and violence unfolding in the artist's faraway home. These works want us to bite them, chew on them, and swallow them—so that we come to digest the peculiar recent history of Turkey as a multitude of stories of resistance and survival rather than a single narrative of defeat.

This is perhaps why the process of creating these works is similar to that of cooking, eating, and indigestion. The *Surface Conditions* series, which turns the Istanbul Convention and the presidential decree announcing Turkey's withdrawal from it into a mushy slurry before spraying it over transparent, thin threads and allowing it to dry, is an attempt to digest the consequences of a presidential crime that will leave many women helpless in the face of violence against women. A few years ago, in a gathering, Meltem Ahiska used the term "undigested experience" to characterize our collective structure of feeling: "We cannot even chew on what we are going through, much less digest it as an experience," she then explained. I recall talking briefly about how fermenting kefir kept me sane. I was fascinated by bacteria that reproduce themselves endlessly. Reproduction at its best, I thought, and what an effortless way of staying alive.

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Surface Conditions possesses a captivating vitality, reminiscent of the awe-inspiring bacteria that once captivated me. It allows us to situate the lived awe within a historical continuum, while not being able to devour it completely. It makes us feel as resistant and tight as an invisible thin rope, just like the women on the streets of Turkey who keep on protesting and defending life itself.

Tassels strung on thread, a piece of dyed yarn, broken threads, unraveled strands, wool, red ribbon, knotted pieces, strings woven and buried in paper, flags torn from documents, knots embedded in paper, large, seemingly directionless and irregularly stitched seam marks... What do they stitch together? Two bomb attacks, one in Ankara during a demonstration for peace and the other in the border town of Suruç where young socialists were on their way to show solidarity with Kobane, killed hundreds of people in a second of a blast. Such sheer violence was hard to swallow and impossible to stomach. Strings, threads, yarns, tassels, fabrics, and objects embedded in handmade paper in the *In Lieu* series speak of the unspeakable and un-understandable in a different language. This is the language of the body, which expresses itself when swallowing or gasping for breath and ultimately when it cannot digest. This language of textiles reveals how our collective capacities of perception, cognition, and narrativization had been violently crippled while we found a way of expressing them all the same.

Just like the figure of the red pepper. This is a well-known motif used in many parts of Anatolia, and from hearsay, it is known that when a woman wears a scarf ornamented with chili peppers, she gives a public signal of tension in the home without resorting to words. Red pepper also brings to mind a common saying, as in "I'll rub chili in your mouth," when one should refrain from saying something that is considered unspeakable or shameful. In both senses, the giant lace mountain of red pepper, or *Pepper Mountain*, as the title of the work has it, lingers on the shores of the speakable but brings about a certain truth. One has to go through the bitter-sweet mountain of anger, frustration, and anxiety in order to come down, perhaps not healed but transformed.

Basket Sketch for Womb (Time Moves in One Direction) is perhaps a smaller and less public "stomach" within the majestic stomach-space of the gallery. It chews on and swallows bits and pieces of a rather personal history: a bunch of dandelions and other materials such as hair, red wool, threads from the Turkish flag, and the articles of the Treaty of Lausanne on the 1923 population exchange between Turkey and Greece, which functioned to "purify" the nation at the founding moment of the state. A family's past and its untold memories, stately symbols, and words are woven together using the cordage technique, which keeps the woven strings strongly together by creating

With gratitude as uninvited guests, Access is located on the unceded and ancestral territories of the *xwməθkwəyəm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *Səlilwətaʔ4/Selilwitulh* (Tsleil- Waututh) Nations.

Access additionally recognizes its location in Vancouver's Chinatown, an area for the gathering of predominantly Cantonese-speaking Chinese labourers, settlers, and businesses since the nineteenth century. Our gallery borders the site of Hogan's Alley, an important home to Vancouver's Black population until their forced displacement through the construction of the Georgia viaduct fifty years ago.

Established as a non-profit artist-run centre in 1991, Access Gallery is a platform for emergent and experimental art practices. We enable through new configurations of audience, artists, and community. www.accessgallery.ca

access
GALLERY

27 JANUARY - 23 MARCH 2024

WORKS

friction between the two ends of the rope. The basket is made up of violent and compassionate memories of the past, but we do not know what is going on inside, what is being digested, or what will come out of the process of ingestion. Hope lies therein.

All works included in this exhibition deal with the recent history of Turkey—both on a personal and collective level. Yet, in these turbulent times, *Biber Bahçesi / Pepper Garden* inescapably speaks to what is happening in different parts of the world—from Ukraine to Gaza. On that note, the absence of works dealing with the artist's current "hometown" Vancouver appears more telling. Access Gallery is situated within the unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories. When there is no treaty or document to be found that proves the violence of colonial pasts and possibly the present, what is left undigested?

This is, nevertheless and fortunately, a garden—a garden where red peppers and delicate dandelions grow side by side.

Begüm Özden Fırat

For Katie Belcher's curatorial text for this exhibition, and to access Fırat's text online, please visit the exhibition page of our website.

Yüzey Halleri / Surface Conditions (2022-2024)

Woven clear nylon thread, coated with sprayed paper pulp from copies of the 2011 Istanbul Convention and the 2021 Turkish presidential decree to withdraw from Istanbul Convention

each of two works is approximately 89x66 inches

Biber Dağı / Pepper Mountain (2021)

Oya (needle lace) on fabric from curtain, black dye 29x23 inches, framed

Kırmızı Bahçe / Red Garden (2023)

Oya (needle lace) on a string, with blue fragment from garbage bag or shoe cover, a bunch of silver coloured wires, my mother's hair, fragment from cotton rope (?), frayed piece of green laundry rope, pigeon feather, aluminum foil, copy of the last page from my sister's journal, adhesive bandage that my son put on my finger for a knife cut, red ribbon, piece of marine rope I found on the beach in İzmir, white laundry rope untied from the gate between the front garden and backyard of the apartment building I lived in as a child, fibres from broom (?), silver wire, fragment of bracelet handed out at family diaspora picnic

29x23 inches, framed

Çiçek ve Biber / Flower and Pepper (2022)

Oya (needle lace) with thread, dye 14x11.5in, framed

Yerine / In Lieu (2020-2023)

Materials variable: handmade papers with embedded threads, strings, yarn, ribbons, laundry rope, printed sentences from personal notes taken after Suruç and Ankara bombings, fragments of Turkish flags from torn documents, removed weaving

each of 21 exhibited works is 14x11.5 inches, framed

Basket Sketch for Womb (Time Moves in One Direction) (2023-2024)

Silver wire; cordage made of dandelions collected with my son, printed clause of 1923 Lausanne Convention regarding the compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey, raffia, threads from Turkish flag, green laundry rope, my grandmother's hair, thin silver wire

23x12x6 inches

Bundle (2024)

Dandelions, bound and unbound 25x5x5 inches

BIOS

Damla Tamer is a visual artist and educator born in Istanbul, Turkey and currently living on the unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories. Her practice involves a close engagement with textile crafts, narrative performances and social-collaborative work. Damla Tamer's work has been the focus of solo exhibitions at Gibsons Public Art Gallery (Gibsons, 2022), the fifty fifty arts Collective (Victoria, 2018) and the Darling Foundry (Montreal, 2013); included in *The Artist's Studio is Her Bedroom* at the Contemporary Art Gallery curated by Kimberly Phillips (Vancouver, 2020), and featured on the cover of *Capilano Review* (3.42: Translingual). She has received grants and prizes for her art and writing, including an international fellowship at the Stundars Museum in Finland, which has enabled some of the works in this exhibition. Damla Tamer is a founding member of the artist mothers collective A.M. (Art Mamas). She currently teaches at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University.

Begüm Özden Fırat is Professor at the Department of Sociology in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul, Turkey. She works in the fields of visual culture, urban sociology, and social movements studies. She is the co-editor of *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009), *Cultural Activism: Practices, Dilemmas, Possibilities* (Rodopi, 2011), *Aesthetics and Resistance in the age of Global Uprisings* (İletişim, 2015), and *Property and the Commons: The Construction, Execution and Violation of Property in Turkey* (Metis, 2023) Her book entitled *Encounters with the Ottoman Miniature Contemporary Readings of an Imperial Art* is published by I.B. Tauris in 2015. She is one of the directors of documentary "Welcome Lenin" (2016) and the director of the short experimental video "The Lightwell" (2020).

Sanem Güvenç is an independent scholar based in Vancouver. Her current practice sits at the intersection of social-political theory and psychoanalysis, and works towards carving and mapping possible instances of echoes, dissonances, knottings and alliances in between those two broad fields. She traces these, on the one hand, in the humanities and social science classes she teaches at ECUAD's Critical and Cultural Studies, where she is positioned as a scholar in residence. On the other hand, these tropes are the founding questions of her book manuscript, tentatively titled, *Topologies of the Void*, where she employs speculative narration and experimental theorizing. Previously she journeyed through twentieth century, its beginning and end through politics of eugenics and diseases in the first half of the twentieth century and neoliberal governmentalities at the tail end of it. At the moment, she is acting as the co-president of the Lacan Salon, the Vancouver-based psychoanalytic society that promotes and transmits analytical discourse.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION:

Friday 26 January 2024 from 7 to 9pm

Join us for the opening reception of *Biber Bahçesi / Pepper Garden* by Damla Tamer.

IN CONVERSATION:

Damla Tamer & Sanem Güvenç, Phd

Saturday 17 February 2024, 2 to 4pm

Damla Tamer and Sanem Güvenç will explore the themes of the exhibition through a casual conversation and collective discussion.

RESEARCH SHARING: Damla Tamer

Saturday 23 March 2024, 2 to 4pm

Through reading, videos and narrative accounts, Damla Tamer will present her ongoing research on the aesthetic ecology of Çağlayan Courthouse of Istanbul, exploring feminine justice in relation to psychoanalysis, dreams, and the archetypal space of the "garden."

Masks are encouraged, please see our website for our most up to date COVID-19 Safety Measures.