

## INTERVIEW WITH FERHAT OZGUR

**Fani Zguro:** Dear Ferhat, from the beginning of 2000 you have been showed your works at different spaces around the world (from MoMA PS1 NYC to Berlin Biennale). You live and work in Istanbul, producing various types of works (video, photographs, works on paper), traveling a lot to follow your exhibitions and in the same time you do other projects such as Mardin Biennale. Please tell about all this?

Ferhat Özgür: Since the beginning of 2000 I have been travelling quite a lot for various projects I am involved in, extensively across Europe. I used to live in Ankara, teaching in Hacettepe University Fine Arts Faculty for almost two decades, until I moved to Istanbul in 2010 to manage my international relationship, for in Ankara it was in general so problematic with respect to flight connections. I obtained my bachelor, master and Phd. Degrees in painting discipline yet over time I switched to video, photography and site-specific installations according to given concepts. MoMA PS1 solo show invitation came through 6<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale (2010) where I showed two videos entitled 'Metamorphosis Chat' and 'I Can Sing'. As I was in artist-in-residence programme in Cite des Arts Internationale in 2012 I got the solo show invitation from MoMA's chief-curator Klaus Biesenbach who said that the video 'I Can Sing' was still lingering in his mind ever since he watched it. He wanted to make my solo show as early as possible because everything in the venue which video installation required had been arranged accordingly long time ago. I felt so honored by this invitation and it was a great chance for me to put the video into international circulation. It is still touring many other countries like my other projects.



*Cimon and Pero, 2011, video, view, 'a room of emotion', Gallery Nev, Ankara, courtesy of the artist*

**FZ: How would you describe your artistic attitude in general?**

FÖ: I can say that I am a chronicler of my surroundings. Most of my works emerge from the historically important melting pot of my home country, where different cultures and religions converge which also require complex searches for clues. Furthermore, I always try to position my works in between the tensions of tradition and modern times: some are spontaneous observations, some cinematically composed pieces.



*Remains of the Day, 2013, video, 10.20 min, courtesy of the artist*

**FZ: We were so sorry to hear that 3<sup>rd</sup> Mardin Biennale was postponed. Anything you can tell about this issue?**

FÖ: Alongside my artistic activities I also collaborate with my curator-artists colleagues in different kind of events such as group shows, social responsibility based projects and biennales. Mardin Biennale is one of those I collaborate with my dear friends Döne Otyam, who initiated it in 2010. Döne and I curated the first one and we are working for the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in May 2015 with my other colleagues such as Fırat Arapoğlu, Ferhat Satıcı, Hülya Özdemir, Fikret Atay, Claudia Segura Campins, which unfortunately we had to postpone it due to the civil war in Kobanê, Because Mardin, an important junction and an area of interaction between Mesopotamia and Anatolia, we sought to do so by blending the shared memory of these two regions with other corners of the world through new artistic syntheses. The timing of this project was rather meaningful. During the period in which we took this task upon ourselves, we were witnessing not only the remapping of territories, but also a time in which the future of peoples was being determined. In order to understand what is meant by this, one does not need to look further than what has recently befallen on the fate of the Yazidis and the Kurdish people in Kobanê, who have been and continue to be ruthlessly attacked.

**FZ: Personally I prefer the videos. So, what about “Cimon and Pero”?**

FÖ: “Cimon and Pero” was a work commissioned by Mr Ahmet Meray who has got a private collection dedicated entirely to this story. Since his mother’s name is Pero, in order to learn its real meaning, he pursued the story and found out that the amazing and breathtaking dramatic reality dates back to Ancient Roman times. This story has also been interpreted by several masters in art history. I was asked whether I could produce ‘Pero’ as both a video and also a photographic study. I was happy to accept the challenge and to work in both of these mediums. Pero is a story that occurs between a daughter and her father. Her father, Cimon, was put in prison. It was anticipated that he would die of starvation. Whilst in prison he is allowed to be visited by Pero, his daughter. In order to rescue her father Pero takes out her breast and relieves her father’s hunger by succouring him with her own milk.



*Ressurrection, 2012, double screen video, 5 min, courtesy of the artist*

**FZ: The beginning of “Remains of the Day” looks as Museo Aero Solar, then everything becomes a ‘logic’ by photoshop.**

FÖ: “Remains of the Day” associates with both my previous works and many others I am still working on, including two dimensional work in photography, drawing and water colours and participatory projects. Because I studied painting I can say that I never gave up this discipline. Generally my drawings are based on irony, anti-militarist references, socio-political and cultural paradigms. While the main sources of my videos and photographs are the city and the streets, my drawings and watercolours are predominantly based on metaphors, pastiches, surreal and absurd scenes. ‘Remains of The Day’ has a cinematographic language created through sequences ruled by an imaginary rhetoric, connecting these different techniques to each other? It is a kind of work where real and surreal actions are entwined. It was also designed as a performative enactment of some of my works on paper. It is a complex combination of a series of stories that continuously unravel, disentangle and merge again. Just like a dream. It is the nature of a dream to have real and surreal situations occurring at the same time. The same actors appear throughout the film, but their experiences in life keep changing. Thus by placing different images on top of each other or side by side, I tried to create a bundle of metaphors that are weird, not fully comprehensible, open for interpretation and that cannot be tied to a fixed meaning. My conscious mind is at work at this stage. However, if I am to talk about a specific meaning in each work, it would mean I am on the wrong track. It is important not to mix things up. Explaining the emergence of a work of art or a project is not the same as determining the possible meanings the audience will get from the work in advance. The latter concept closes the work down. The video can be described as a performative video. In that sense it is a moving version of the pastiche-collage method in my works on paper. In my opinion it also has a refined manoeuvrability in bringing together concepts that look contradictory or function in different ways.



*Marble Dance, 2010, 5.35 min, courtesy of the artist*

**FZ: And “Ressurrection”?**

F.Ö: The double screened video installation ‘Ressurrection’ visualises comparative representation of relationship between body and architecture. The work also correlates with the book of ‘Flesh and Stone’, which tells the story of urban life through bodily experience, written by Richard Sennet. Whilst the left scene of the video consists of the documentary footages in slow motion, taken from different archives demonstrating only the buildings in the process of demolition and perishing, the right scene depicts the ritual of washing and purification a dead body prior to burial ceremony in accordance with the Islamic belief/tradition. In architectural context, whilst ceasing to exist or dying, in parallel with developing and progressing in modernist manner, hints at a different kind of resurrection, washing the dead body to be purified is to involved in the soil, experiencing same process like architecture. Demolishing building is supposed to resurrect, penetrating the soil by way of exchanging its own place with the new ones to come, as the dead body identified with the soil, will experience the resurrection process in different forms. The accompaniment Baroque and dramatic aria of Bach, The ‘Magnificat’, which sounds like a cathedral to be built, strengthens the metaphorical relationship between body and stone.

**FZ: “Marble Dance” is the kind of video which refuses the pre-production, cinema filters and other stuff, for me is fantastic. Can you tell me more about this video?**

F.Ö: Contrary to what you assumed regarding the video’s pre-production I would like to emphasize that its preparations, in other words pre-production lasted nearly three months before realizing it. To convince the performers, adjust a proper studio etc. should be considered as a part of pre-production. On a particular day I bought all the ‘simit’ off the two simit-seller men who had migrated from Ardahan (an Eastern Anatolian city) to Istanbul. ‘Simit’ is a popular street snack in Turkey. It is a ring-shaped baked bread, typically encrusted with sesame seeds. According to their account they sell a maximum of 170 simits a day. So I generously gave them an extra 170 TL which is normally their total income for a day. I wanted them to do only one thing: to have ‘The Right of Laziness For One Day’. As one of the other immigrants, they were just two of the Kursidsh

immigrants who try to cling to life in a city whose ground is 'slippery'. In a city that they do not know well enough and with folk music that they were not familiar with, they were supposed to dance and have fun. After all, it would mean for them 'The Right of Laziness For One Day' to the accompaniment of music on the gently moving Marmara Sea. The installation consists of two walls. Whilst the first one shows the video dance performance of the two simit sellers; the other one is a big sized photograph covering up the whole surface and shows a snapshot of the solidarity between the public and the simit sellers whose workbench has been destroyed by the municipal police. A large number of bronze casted simit sculptures (imitation patterns) are spread on the ground. So, while the project portrays a certain reality from different viewpoints with different mediums, it also reflects a transivity of various mediums used at the same time.



*The Will or Ten Commandments', 2009 6.25 min, courtesy of the artist*

**FZ:** There seems to be a self portrait: "The Will or Ten Commandments". Is the fake you are looking for at your videos?

**FÖ:** "The Will, or Ten Commandments", is a parodic work which refers to the ills of not only Turkish artists, but all non-Western art worlds in relation to Western art and its history. I also mention the Danish Museum of Modern Art in the end, which is a reference to the Copenhagen Criteria that Turkey has to abide by to become a member of the European Union. The whole video itself is a satire on Turkish artists' relation to the West and how art has always been perceived as a

matter of importance for the modernization project of Turkey. In the post-modern era, my false-desperate situation only draws laughter, or is it perhaps tears?



*The Artist: Ferhat Özgür*

Ferhat Özgür's (Turkish, b. 1965) practice critiques contemporary political realities with humor and irony. Living and working in Istanbul, Özgür principally focuses upon the relationship of the individual with society, using his work as a space within which individuality can be expressed in spite of the context of oppressive environments. Özgür has exhibited at MoMA PS1 New York, Mercosul Biennale Porte Alegre, 6th Berlin Biennale, 10th Istanbul Biennale, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Fondazione Re Rebaudengo Sandretto Turin, Kunsthalle Winterthur, Contemporary Art Projects Hong Kong, Casino Luxembourg, Centre George Pompidou Paris, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin and Soma Mexico DF.