

Press Review

StirWorld, Ranjana Dave, April 2024

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Nil Yalter wins the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale

STIRring 'Everywhere' in Venice: The Paris-based Turkish artist is viewed as a pioneer of the global feminist art movement.

The artist Nil Yalter is one of two recipients of the **Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement** at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia - *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*, alongside Anna Maria Maiolino. Born in **Cairo** in 1938, Yalter's career spans six decades, working in **painting, drawing, video, sculpture** and **installation**. **Adriano Pedrosa, curator** of the Biennale, cited Yalter's trajectory across space and time as a **Turkish artist** who migrated from Cairo to **Istanbul**, and finally to **Paris**, where she still lives, in his remarks on the **award**. "This decision is particularly meaningful given the title and framework of my **exhibition**, focused as it is on artists who have travelled and migrated between [the Global] North and **South, Europe** and beyond, and vice versa. In this sense, my choice rests upon two extraordinary pioneering women artists who are also migrants and who embody in many ways the spirit of *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*," he said.

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Portrait of Nil Yalter

Image: Courtesy of Oliver Abraham

Yalter started as a pantomime artist. Her first exhibition was at the French Cultural Institute in **Mumbai** in 1957. With no formal education in the **visual arts**, Yalter was self-taught, conducting her own **research** on artistic practices and thematic areas of interest. She used autoethnographic methods, using her personal experience to form wider cultural understandings. She spent time living with Turkish nomads in their mud huts and round tents (built by the women of the family) to understand the social and economic factors shaping their lives – like the fact that it was common for men from these families to migrate to bigger cities in search of work. Many of the men swapped their nomadic lives in the Turkish countryside for temporary and often unstable dwellings in cities like Istanbul or Ankara, sometimes leaving the country to move abroad. In 1973, Yalter channelled this experience into the installation *Topak Ev* (La Yourte/ Nomad's Tent), a life-size tent she pitched in the Musee d'Art Moderne de Paris in **France**. In placing the intimate, domestic and transient space of the tent within the frame of an exhibition, Yalter raised important questions about home, **migration** and identity – bridging diverse cultures and landscapes as she reflected on the ways in which economic and political displacement served to drive people further from their roots. Her practice remains socially engaged, particularly examining the role of women in society.



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Yalter will participate in the **Venice Biennale** for the first time this year, showing a reconfigured version of her installation *Exile Is a Hard Job*, alongside *Topak Ev*. Borrowed from a poem by Turkish poet and playwright Nâzım Hikmet, *Exile Is a Hard Job* is a title Yalter has returned to at several points in her career, beginning in 1983, when she made a piece about women working in illegal garment-manufacturing sweatshops. In 2002, Yalter used documentation from the first iteration of *Exile Is a Hard Job* to create giant posters with high-resolution images of women. In a guerrilla tactic, these images were flyposted across the city, glued to building facades, barricades and other public architecture. Once they were up, the work's title was painted over the images in red, in the local languages of the places where the work was being shown. In a recorded conversation with Eda Berkmen, a curator at the Arts and Culture Centre, Arter in Istanbul, Yalter recounts the response to her posters. In **Vienna**, the locals who encountered her posters were furious; they were opposed to having migrant workers enter the economy. In Mumbai, where Yalter's posters were displayed in Hindi and English, they stayed intact for months, until the rains descended on the city. Yalter was interested in seeing how people interacted with the posters, even if these encounters resulted in the work's eventual destruction. In Istanbul, the posters were put up in neighbourhoods with a huge population of Syrian workers. Viewers left notes on them; the writer of one such note asked to be granted legal residency status, helpfully leaving a phone number.

Yalter's work is part of several key museum collections across **Asia** and Europe, including the Istanbul Modern, the **Centre Pompidou**, Paris, and the **Tate Museum**. In a year where the **biennale** touches on the question of identity and the pathways that artists trace between the Global North and South, both through their travels and their work, Yalter's inclusion is of particular value. Her work continues to speak to the crises plaguing contemporary society – large-scale political and economic upheaval and human displacement.