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Art Market

How Istanbul Gallery THE PILL® Became a Tastemaking Force

Osman Can Yerebakan

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Exterior view of THE PILL®, featuring Irem Gunaydin's installation *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Bunny*, 2023. Courtesy of THE PILL®.

When Suela J. Cennet moved from Paris to Istanbul in 2013 to open her own gallery, the space she found in the city's historic Balat neighborhood had a pill-like interior. It was this unlikely architectural characteristic that prompted a series of thoughts for the philosophy major, who was born in Paris and had just graduated with three master's degrees from the city's prestigious Sciences Po institution.

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“I thought about the role of the pill and its connection to the truth in *The Matrix*,” Cennet told Artsy. “Art is a search for truth, but the space also made me think about the invention of the birth control pill which is essentially an anthropological rupture, a form of freedom in the form of a pill.”

Cennet named the space THE PILL®, in homage to these physical and metaphorical connotations.



Ozlem Altin, installation view of “Kismet” at THE PILL®, 2022. Photo by Kayhan Kaygusuz. Courtesy of the artist and THE PILL®.

A contemplative first step into her venture was also backdropped by a sociopolitically tumultuous environment in her family’s hometown. The violence and despair of the Gezi Park Protests in Istanbul that same year had swept the cultural sector, and many of Cennet’s peers had discouraged her from opening a commercial space. “I wasn’t French enough in France, and in Turkey, I wasn’t fully Turkish,” she recalled.

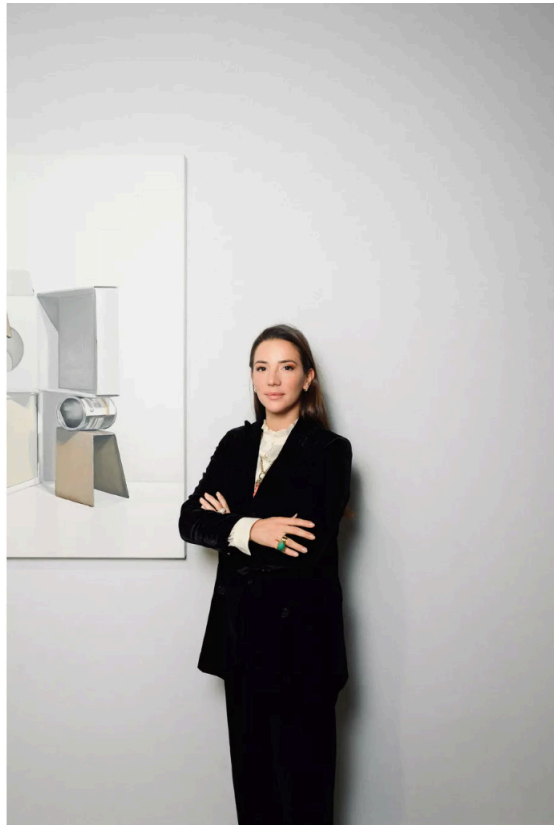
Dotted with colorful houses and a history of Greek and Jewish communities, the Balat neighborhood by the Golden Horn was a charming yet unconventional choice to start an art business. “The idea of a gallery became a symbol of resistance,” she added. It turned out to be a risk that paid off. THE PILL®’s inauguration with French artist Daniel Firman’s solo exhibition in January 2016 saw long lines that were unusual for the quaint neighborhood, partially thanks to the show’s central massive elephant sculpture.

The gallery’s sophomore show with Paris-based artist Eva Nielsen — a university friend of Cennet’s — received an *Artforum* review and cemented the gallery’s position in the art world. Its neatly blended international and local program would also grab the attention from the likes of the *New York Times* and *Art in America*; and it has participated in several art fairs such as Untitled Art, ARCOmadrid, Expo Chicago, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, and Paris Photo. Last year, the Paris-based book publisher JBE Books released a book that chronicles the gallery’s seven years as a commercial space, placing a strong emphasis on curatorial experimentation.

“I never wanted to be perceived as a foreign gallery,” Cennet said of her international scope and her personal identity as the French-born daughter of Turkish parents with Balkan heritage. (The dealer underlines that being fluent in several languages “and feeling comfortable speaking about art in different environments” has been immensely beneficial in maintaining a global outlook.) Besides an “organic connection with the local context,” she said that another key thread in her program is “asking the questions that shake our generation.”

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Portrait of Suela J. Cennet by Jean Picon. Courtesy of THE PILL®.

It's a broad attitude that is reflected in THE PILL®'s program which includes Lisbon-based Leyla Gediz, a key figure in Turkish contemporary art who has so far opened three shows at THE PILL®; as well as France-based artists Apolonia Sokol and Soufiane Ababri; and Mexico City-based Pablo Dávila.

Cennet always had a determined future in the arts — perhaps before she realized it. While immersing herself in anthropology, art history, and philosophy during her studies in Paris, she had always found herself hanging out with artist friends, including Nielsen, in the bohemian Saint-Germain-des-Prés district. “Then, I thought the only way to be involved with the art community was to be a practicing artist,” she said.

After graduating, she worked in public policy with a focus on the cultural field which led to a realization for other potential paths. The idea of an art gallery started to blossom when Cennet was working for the Cultural Ministry of France, and her time there would come in handy when a collector asked for her help with closing a deal at Galerie Templon. What was planned as a 15-minute meeting to finalize a sale turned into a four-hour session, which ended with a job offer from Daniel Templon. The seminal dealer was looking for a sales director while expanding his gallery. “I was 26 and knew I was going to open my own gallery at some point, but I had no plans to start my path yet,” she said. Although she reminded Templon three times at that initial meeting that she had no experience in running a gallery, the seasoned gallerist convinced her to stay.

Between working with artists like Kehinde Wiley, Jim Dine, and Will Cotton at Templon, she further sculpted the idea of opening her own gallery. “Daniel was so generous with me in terms of teaching how to run an art business while I was upfront about my plan to eventually run my space,” she recalled.

Besides the aesthetic exhilaration of being close to the Bosphorus strait with THE PILL®, Cennet assumed a transhistorical thread in fluidity, cleansing, and reformation, all embodied in the expansiveness of being by the water. “[My] mobility is anchored in Istanbul—I could easily move to other ports but also be in the center of my own diasporic self,” she said. “I am a fruit of many exiles between my life between France and Turkey and my family, which started in Yugoslavia. I am a result of many migrations.”

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Between solo shows with international artists and art fairs around the world, movement is also a theme for the gallery. “We have loyal collectors who follow us everywhere and we meet new ones at different fairs,” Cennet added. A fundamental part of the gallery’s success has been Cennet’s friendships with her artists, some of whom she studied with, met through overlapping circles, or by “being a part of their process and even seeing that our conversations help shape their practices.” On the operational level, the gallery runs with a handful of employees, including curator Asli Seven as the head of curatorial research, while expanding its staff based on projects in various scales.



Apollonia Sokol, installation view of “You Better Paint Me” at THE PILL®, 2022. Photo by Kayhan Kaygusuz. Courtesy of the artist and THE PILL®.

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After summer, THE PILL® will launch the new season with participation in the art fair Contemporary Istanbul in late September along with a solo show of Ababri at its gallery timed for his solo presentation at the Barbican in London. Later in the year, a booth at Untitled in Miami will coincide with an institutional solo show of Sokol in Copenhagen, which also coincides with a new documentary on the artist by Danish filmmaker Lea Glob.

The idea of a pill still resonates with Cennet about her venture, like the first day she stepped into the space which would transform into an embodiment of her philosophy. A time capsule, a metaphor for the truth, or a symbol of bodily empowerment, THE PILL® contains many meanings and experiences for the dealer. “The gallery is a space for creation and being in Balat in Istanbul [which] essentially and unintentionally makes it also a place of resistance,” she mused.

Osman Can Yerebakan