



*The Long Lasting Intimacy of  
Strangers*

*Aslı Seven*

*The Long Lasting Intimacy of Strangers*

April 2018, Leylâ Gediz composed an exhibition titled “Anagram” at a small artist run space, an apartment-turned-gallery in Istanbul. It was composed of

A video, a montage of found footage and archival images, black and white. Accompanied by a well-known Turkish song of the 1970s titled “Do Not Forget Me”, the footage itself was fragmented against the grey-white grid of cubes, the background of the image editing software. The abstract grid of pixels grew and shrank, the found footage of a nostalgic past receded against the expanding, perforating grid, and then grew again asserting itself as a moving image against this background, and so on. The figure of the African-Turkish singer-songwriter Esmeray was present throughout the video, only through its absence, its traces on archival photographs; her body either blurred, or shadowed by its negative space, delineated by the software’s background image.

Installations made with brown and white sugar cubes, most of which were placed on the windows like screens. Windows became the pixelated image support; they also projected the grid in shadow across the walls and floors with the sunlight coming in.

The painting of a sculpture depicting an African woman, a found sculpture, an item left behind by the previous tenants of the house Leylâ had just moved into in Lisbon. I remember video images she shot carrying the sculpture in her hand against the backdrop of the cobblestone grid of Lisbon’s streets.

I understood Anagram as an expression of Leylâ's recent displacement. She had taken herself and her family, parted with her hometown Istanbul and moved to Lisbon eight months prior to that exhibition.

In the three paintings based on the found sculpture - *Obscura*, *Encounter I* and *Encounter II* - and also in some frames of the video *Parabéns*, Leylâ's hand is part of the frame: how to hold this connection, now? Which corner to grasp it from, which perspective to see this through?<sup>1</sup>  
*What tune am I singing now?*

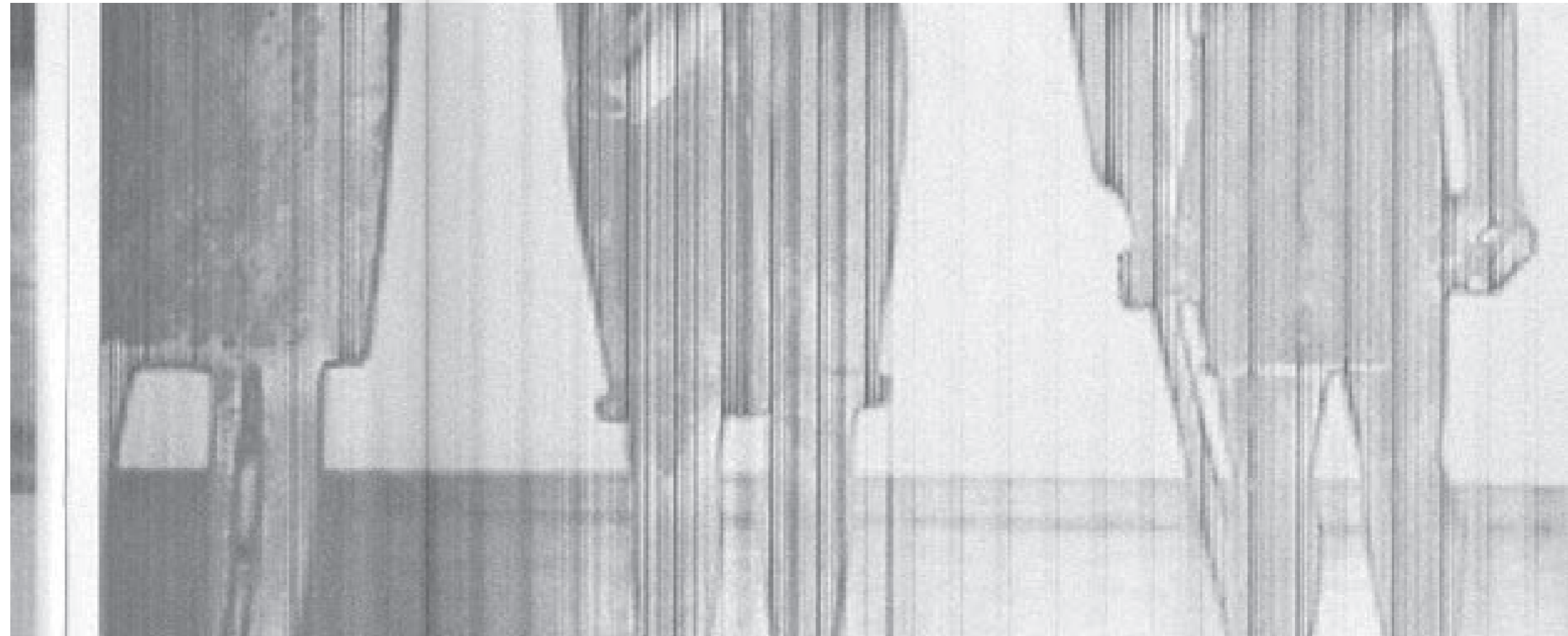
Displacement induces an uncertainty into the background/figure relationship sustaining one's life and sense of self. This default relationship, constitutive of subjectivity, dissolves in displacement. You move into a new city, a new country, a new context and, for some time, you lose your sense of subjecthood. You become disconnected from your usual background and for a while, you are devoid of any supporting backdrop or reserve against which you can build and compose yourself as a subject. It's as if the surrounding place and objects become subjects and you become an object being moved within their setting.

*Parabéns* carried a suspension. When you can no longer represent or perform your subjectivity - self as a figure - you feel yourself as an object. There is a momentary loss of affect, of the capacity to affect and to be affected. Hence the shout out, "Do not forget me", but we know that the forgetting is already in place. It's a tune that is played over and again, knowing that you are losing something, embracing it goodbye. I remember thinking in front of the video that composing this exhibition might have been Leylâ's way back to composing herself as a figure. An attempt at a momentary recomposition.

<sup>1</sup> *Encounter I* was part of "Anagram", OJ Art Space, Istanbul, 07-29 April 2018, while *Obscura* and *Encounter II* were displayed as part of "Parabéns", Akinci, Amsterdam, 24 November 2017 - 13 January 2018.

What is the value of reading / writing an exhibition along this kind of biographical process? What is lost when we evacuate process and biography in the name of an evaluation that analyzes and classifies? *Registering the plasticity of material in autobiographical terms*. Subjectivity is always there as the matter of work, to be worked, concealed or recovered in form. Form and process are like visibility (*le mur blanc de la signifiante*) and shadows (*le trou noir de la subjectivation*). What is visible or sayable at any given time and place always exists against the reserve of all that is unsaid and unseen - the public secret, the fault line that runs through us and splits us. How do we sing and dance across the fault line?

Displacement does not necessarily occur through change of place. You can stand still at the same place and be displaced by the sudden erection of a wall or a regime change, or by a highway that runs through the land plot where your backyard used to be. *This is not my beautiful house; this is not my beautiful wife*. When the ground upon which you are accustomed to stand and to compose yourself as a figure is lost, the fault line that defines the realm of the sayable and the visible loses its certainty, in blurring, it reveals itself and as such, it slides into focus. A defamiliarization occurs, a strange strangeness. If suspended long enough in that transitory moment, we might perceive something - ourselves included - for the first time.



September 2019, the exhibition “Denizens” at The Pill seems to hold the answer to the question of how displacement, as an “epoche”, reflects back on the notions of place and community, placement and place-making, the setting of an unstable place, the settling and unsettling of a community across multiple places.

Coined in the mid-19th century in response to the growing international circulation of people and objects, the term denizen described a new kind of non-essentialist belonging that was independent of “natural” roots in the form of blood and/or birth right, to designate people and beings that belonged by simply living, inhabiting or frequenting a particular place:

A living being that has adapted to a milieu and became constitutive of it.

A regular at a bar.

A non-native species.

An assimilated barbarian.

A foreigner allowed certain rights (but not all rights) in their adopted country.

A legal alien.

An unfamiliar familiar.

Intimate strangers.

*Becoming an object of bureaucracy, like those polystyrene supports of packaging, in search of a category to fit in: refugee, migrant, expatriate, none of the above.*

*How to dance and sing between a rock and a hard place?*

More accurately and in legal terms, denizen designates a transitional state between “alien” and “natural born subject”, and projects into the world all the non-conformist, transitory and shifting modes of existence in relation to place, and positions itself in tension with the other, conventional and central term of the political citizen, putting into question and shaking the grounds of the sedentary habitus. Denizens relate to the diasporic paradigm, both in its dispersion, loss and links to neocolonial forms of dispossession, and its utopian potentials towards alternate, heterogeneous, decentered forms of community. No longer compatible with existing categories, and simultaneously accommodating and resisting assimilation, diasporic being is burdened with invention.

In Leylá’s composition however, diasporic-being reaches far beyond the legal and political duality of citizen/denizen, to suggest a level playing field between objects and images, support structures and paintings, tool-beings and people. And the term “denizen” expands from the most bureaucratic sense to the realm of aesthetics.

Leylá’s “Denizens” is about recomposing the world from the standpoint of what is usually held off the frame, in a painting or an image or in an exhibition, with attention directed towards what constitutes the support of painting as practice, maintained in displacement. It is about defining a place through the margins, taking as point of departure diasporic and nomadic realities carried by bodies, people, images, objects and tools alike, while bringing the frame, the mold and the software themselves to the center of focus.

A personal ethnography of the infinitesimal infrastructure that shapes and defines the possibility of a *diasporic painting* ensues, and reveals the ethnographer-surrealist in Leylá – “*Surrealism is like water*” - tangled up in writing, composing and figuring herself through: logistics of transportation, moving in, moving out, carrying a canvas on a plane, the cardboard water glasses of Portuguese Airlines ornamented with the Lisbon cobblestone, stretcher bars of a canvas, the undercarriage of a bed, the undercarriage of a bathtub, the texture of canvas, the bed base (not the bed, but the base), Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), the IKEA world of cardboard packaging, the understated value of compatibility, cardboard separators inside cardboard boxes, cardboard protectors of canvas corners, a drawing folder with shifting affective states and mobile phone charger cables we are increasingly dependent upon. All these “things” created to be compatible as supports, to fit with one thing, and one thing only, achieve

full ontological status when freed from their subordinate position to the objects they were made to support, and gaze back at us as embodiments of a newfound incompatibility. They become closer and distant at the same time. They are the incompatible inhabitants, the unfit denizens – no longer useful and freed from their subordinate function; they emit animacy and agency through their “thingness”.

In Leylâ’s compositions these support structures and carriers are not only the main figures depicted on canvas alongside people, objects and scenes, they are also displayed as installations. *Denizens* emphasizes the grid and the wooden stretcher as material conditions of possibility of a canvas, of painting. The ground is thus brought to the fore, as “painting” recedes partially to the background; they are stretched together on the same plane. *Unhappy Folder*, a carrier of works on paper, hangs – almost swinging, and blinking to its oblique sister, *Happy Folder* – from the wooden grid the undercarriage of a bathtub provides.

In *Erkete*, we see the corner of a street, a makeshift neighborhood in the composition of superimposed cardboard boxes of oil paints and canvases that rest haphazardly on one another’s surfaces like building blocks in a shantytown, or an improvised barricade. The painting conveys simultaneously a sense of place and of displacement, and almost literally emits an installation in transitional state between an inversed IKEA bed base and Venetian blinds that condense the color spectrum of the entire exhibition. *Erkete* reflects one of the central threads underlying the exhibition. A bed, by definition, is the elementary space of the human body, in horizontal form. It is the space of surrender and sleep, of intimacy and vulnerability; but here, it is unnaturalized, in vertical standing, as if prepared for movement, turned into a barricade or a shelter – “a place from which to keep watch or view the landscape” while remaining unseen. *Erkete* means lookout. It is a Turkish word from Greek origin that describes the watch kept, against getting caught in crime or being exposed. It is nervous and uneasy. *It has something to hide - or thinks it does.* Yersiz-yurtsuzlaşma ile köksüz bir yerini bulma arasındaki her yatış bir erketeye yatıştır.

By recalibrating the focus away from the centrality of painting towards the formal and material language of the support, of sustaining textures and stretchers, Leylâ partially erodes painting’s conventional authority and uniqueness. As multiples and variations abound, and as canvases lodge and dislodge themselves in installations and as fragments, an interplay of place and displacement, of presence and absence, of exploration and remembrance unfolds. “*I am made of a thousand pieces.*”

We are presented with variations on a theme in the twin paintings *In The Field II* and *In The Field III*: a gathering between four figures around a support structure – a railing – to be installed. The railing, a supporting

structure here decontextualized and framed as the place-maker, draws its full performative potential in shaping a gathering around its twist and asserting itself as an active member of the temporary community engaged in searching for its place.<sup>2</sup> Composing a scene again and again is like playing a song over and over in loop because it affected you so much, to hold on to that feeling of having discovered something for the first time, with the joy and excitement of trying to but not yet being able to fully grasp it – *unfinished, because completion would mean outgrowth, and why would anyone listen to a song they’ve outgrown?* The two paintings create a magnetic field that expands in time and space, through two other works: *Alegoria*, where we see four figures again, moving and gathering around a wooden stick, but yellow-washed and removed in time and space, these are children playing on a beach – or are they alternate versions of the railing-gatherers? In the opposite direction in time and space stands *In The Field I*, through its absence, and opens the ground of the collaboration between Leylâ Gediz and Deniz Pasha, a performance to come inside the exhibition.

“Denizens” operates like a music record, an ensemble of tracks, samples, remakes and variations that interact with one another and create a force field between them to navigate, and yet the objects and scenes from which these tunes emanate remain withdrawn, removed. History is here.

<sup>2</sup> In choosing to paint this scene, Leyla draws multiple references embracing one another: The scene actually depicts the process of installation of a railing model originally designed by Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz, and reinterpreted by Mike Cooter for a collaborative exhibition with Tomás Cunha Ferreira in the Azores Islands. There is a line between this referential embrace, and the one depicted in *Umarmung*, a couple walking in the streets of Lisbon – a memory from her first visit to the city a decade earlier – also embodied in a second canvas embracing the one holding the painting.

There is a thread that runs through “Parabéns”, “Anagram” and “Denizens”, which started with the abandoned wooden sculpture Leylâ found in her new home in Lisbon, depicting an African woman. This thread that lead to her collaboration with Esmeray, an Afro-Turk, unfolds now in *Taliswoman* and *Sleeping Beauty*, and gives way to her collaboration with Deniz Pasha.

From the woven and stretched texture of the canvas, we transition to the multifarious textures of a world fabric weaved by the threads of colonial and neocolonial violence, through all the ways in which Leylâ engages in a dialogue with African diaspora and artefacts, in *Istanbul via Lisbon*. From the Black Atlantic to the Black Mediterranean, denizens are *denizdenler*, from the sea, caught up in the passage of the sea, the space of movement, gathering and dispersion.<sup>3</sup>

We speak of the unsayability of what she’s saying, the fault line of who owns the pain, and yet, who can pretend not to be affected by it. “*The bloody catalog of oppression*”. Where do we stand in this history of extraction of human bodies, cultures and land by dispossession? What happens to us when we become displaced – stripped from the illusion of identity, some things you can only see in dispossession, and you’re forever altered. Can we preserve the illusion of purity, in dispersion, as the diaspora we’ve become, is there any truth to purity, about us or about these histories we are now entering in? In the process of writing this, I keep remembering Fred Wilson’s *Afro Kismet*, and the face of Kuzgun Acar appears and reappears in my mind.<sup>4</sup> Have we been kept outside of History? For how long have we refused to recognize this other in ourselves? What does “decolonization” mean to us, here and now? A blindspot in

<sup>3</sup> “Black Atlantic” refers to the title of Paul Gilroy’s seminal work, and the more recent term of “Black Mediterranean”, to Alessandra Di Maio. Both studies attempt at opening to the multiplicity of African diaspora as caught up in the passage of the sea as the founding moment – it is not in an African “home” nor through citizenship rights and integration, but in the very moment of passage through the sea that the African diaspora appears in its full historical and epistemological potential.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Wilson’s *Afro Kismet* was an installation focusing on the depiction of African figures in paintings from the Orientalist collection of Pera Museum, 15th Istanbul Biennial, 2017. Kuzgun Acar (1928–1976) was a leading figure in Modern Turkish sculpture of Libyan origin on his mother’s side.


the peripheral vision of the last European Empire (the qualification itself being a ground of contestation), itself stretched like a canvas between the continental margins of all the old and new World peripheries, now entering its final phase of dispossession.

Entering an uncharted territory, to the question of how diasporic being affects one’s sense of place and belonging, one’s consciousness of history and one’s place within it, Leylâ answers by bringing it home. Mining her history – our history – of African bodies and artefacts, comes another move off the frame, an attempt at resuscitation. The ornamental African figurines depicted in *Taliswoman* and *Sleeping Beauty* both come from her family home in Istanbul where she grew up. *Taliswoman* carries the formal language of a search for the right distance – again, how to touch this, how to handle this, which corner to hold it from? – a photograph inversed to its negative, blown up and fragmented into a grid of A4 printouts, some of which appear partially erased by digital glitch, against the blank whiteness of half the canvas. The painting conveys a signal loss, an error in transmission, and simultaneously restitutes these objects in their unfamiliarity, or rather, their opacity. This is a painting, not of the figurines, but of the multiple layers of remove that lie between us and these objects, between these objects and their painterly depiction and as such, it reveals these artefacts in their *right not to be seen*.<sup>5</sup>

Through these gestures of remove, of searching for the right distance, these objects appear to us as animate beings. Instead of being locked in a “botany of death”<sup>6</sup>, they speak and compose and sing side by side with all the denizens Leylâ brings together in this exhibition as a gathering of intimate strangers that, maybe, belong not to a fixed territory, identity, race or class, but only to each other in their incompatibility and their resistance to *naturalization*.

<sup>5</sup> For the right to opacity as the right not to be seen, and also the links between violence and ‘distancing’, see Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> This quote is from Chris Marker, Alain Resnais & Ghislain Coquet’s 1953 film “Statues Also Die” on African Art under colonial gaze: “When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.”



A creolisation between Portuguese and the Arabic inshallah, Oxalá has a sensual twist in the sound world of Turkish, as if it was a command to touch: Okşa, Caress. In this transitional and translational space of multiple languages we inhabit, I hear it as an embrace of uncertainty, of not knowing, of trusting and becoming with the flows of things, but conditioned on touching – on letting your body enter into contact with realities and bodies that are “other” – a kind of touching from a distance, of touching the distance itself. Which is what Leylâ attempts at, touching and being touched by History and the present of diasporic being, wayfaring through a texture of the World full of violence, hope, pain and joy.

*\*This text relies on conversations with Leylâ Gediz, Jacques Ranciere, Martin Heidegger, Donna Haraway, Lynn Margulis, Timothy Morton, Luca Guadagnino, James Clifford, Edouard Glissant, Bruno Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, Tim Ingold and many others.*

**Aslı Seven** is an independent curator and writer based between Istanbul and Paris. Her current research and curatorial projects focus on infrastructural and intangible forms of violence embodied within landscape and built environment, with an emphasis on fieldwork and collaborative artistic processes.

Since 2016 she is a member of the doctoral program “Document and Contemporary Art” at the European School of Visual Arts in France. Since 2015 she curated solo and group shows at Arter, Pi Artworks and Galerist in Istanbul and at CNAC Magasin and La Box, Bourges, in France. Her writing has been published at Salt TXT, Art Unlimited Magazine, Arte East Quarterly, Harper’s Bazaar Art Arabia, Agos and m-est.org. She is a member of AICA Turkey and a collaborator with ICI.

**Leylâ Gediz** was born in Istanbul in 1974. She lives and works in Lisbon where she relocated two years ago.

She completed her MA in Visual Arts at Goldsmiths College (London) and a BA in Fine Art (Painting) at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL (London). She has had solo exhibitions in Istanbul, Los Angeles, Zurich, Helsinki and Amsterdam.

Gediz occupies an important place in Turkey for her groundbreaking research on painting as a contemporary practice. Her work has been widely exhibited and is included in prestigious public and private collections, such as Istanbul Modern, Arter (Istanbul), ARCO Foundation (Spain) and Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven).

Gediz is married and has a son.

**Deniz Pasha** is an artist currently based in Istanbul. She graduated from Chelsea School of Art and Design (London). Her painting practice revolves around themes of otherness and diasporic existence based on her experience living between the United Kingdom, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Her work draws from post-colonial literature, African philosophy, political theory and Afro-surrealism. Photography and journaling are integral to her practice.

She has, among other exhibitions, participated in ‘Flesh and Bone’, curated by Kevser Güler at Operation Room (Istanbul), ‘Dancing into One’, curated by Ezgi Yıldız for Martch Art Project at Yoakim Greek Girls’ High School (Istanbul), and ‘Ohne’ at Mekan 68 (Vienna).

Text: **Aslı Seven**

Translation from English: **Sinan Refik Akgün**

Design: **Studio Pul**

Print: **Mas Matbaa**

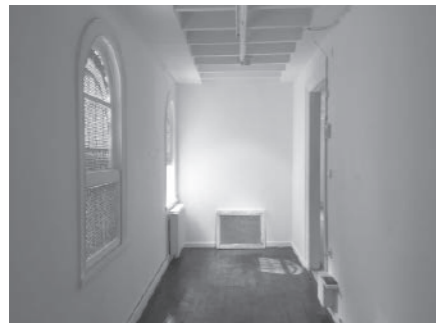
# DENIZENS

## *Leylâ Gediz*

05.09.2019 – 26.10.2019

THE PILL®





*Anagram*  
2017  
Installation with brown and white sugar cubes  
OJ Art Space



*Parabéns (4:07)*  
2017  
Mpeg Video



*Encounter I*  
2017-2018  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 50 x 4 cm



*SEF (Immigration and Borders Service)*  
2019  
Oil on MDF  
26,5 x 20,5 x 4 cm



*Unhappy Folder*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 50 x 3,5 cm  
150 x 80 x 60 cm (open crate)



*Happy Folder*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 50 x 3,5 cm



*Encounter II*  
2017  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 60 x 2,5 cm



*Denizens*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 79,5 x 3,5 cm  
180 x 120 x 4 cm (grid)



*Erkete*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
79 x 59 x 4 cm  
TARVA Double bed (140 x 200 cm)  
LÖNSET Bed base (70 x 200 x 2 cm)



*In the Field II*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 230 x 3,5 cm



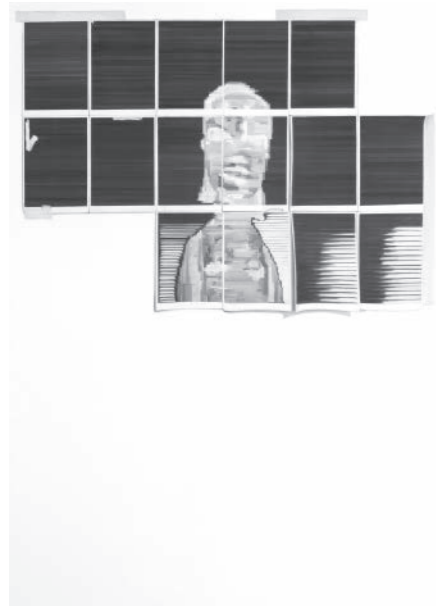
*In the Field III*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
160 x 210 x 4 cm



*Umarmung*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 120 x 4 cm x 2



*Alegoria*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
99,5 x 120 x 3 cm



*Taliswoman*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
190 x 135 x 4 cm



*Sleeping Beauty*  
2019  
Oil on canvas  
70 x 50 x 3,5 cm

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission by the publisher.



THE PILL®