

In Other Worlds: The work of Ahmet Güneştekin

by Matthew Drutt

Qu'ran, sura 71, 15-16: "Did you see how God created seven heavens one above another and made the moon a light therein and made the sun a lamp?"

Over the past several decades, Ahmet Güneştekin, has built an international reputation as an artist of singular imagination and profound intellect. While one can go through the usual exercise of trying to unpack his oeuvre in order to place it in a familiar contemporary context, as many have tried and failed to do, it makes more sense to delve beyond the stylistic aspects of his art and look at his rich homily of inspirations: religious texts and parables from a plethora of cultures: Byzantine, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Anatolian, and others largely emanating from the regions of the Bosphorus, Mediterranean, and their adjacent territories. If his references seem eclectic, it's a deceptive impression, because they are rooted in a common and consistent interest in the way in which the universes different cultures have imagined and the peoples who create them share common, and in some cases opposing, beliefs. In turn, these realms contain parables that have implications for contemporary society, be they in conflict or otherwise. Thus, Güneştekin is a kind of artist-philosopher, and his works are meant to leave us pondering our own reason for being as much as they deal with why the world sometimes rotates on an axis that defies logic.

It is no accident that one of the most important sources of inspiration in his adulthood was the celebrated Turkish writer, Yaşar Kemal, "someone who turned a local geography like Çukurova into an imaginary universe, where he does so with a rich lyricism that cannot be compensated in any other language... We talked the same language and shared the same culture. What I was experiencing was meeting my hero and my admiration for him. He was the master and I was the apprentice. Yaşar Kemal became my teacher. He used to say, 'in painting you are doing what I am doing in writing'. We influenced each other a lot. I learnt so many things from him about life and humans."ⁱ I cite this quote from an earlier project that Güneştekin and I worked on together because I think it is key to reading his art. Just like his mentor, there is a kind of intuitive dimension to his enterprise that creates multiple

worlds in which a subject might be considered, and this is something that only real art is capable of achieving, while most artists toil away at reaching a single destination.

Güneştekin has a lexicon of favorite themes and legends that have recurred in his work almost since its inception: Icarus, Prometheus, Lilith, Medusa, Leda and the Swan, Shahmaran,ⁱⁱ angels (both mighty and fallen), Simurgh (the immortal phoenix), and rulers or guardians of ancient lands and civilizations, among many others. They all have about them certain polarizing features that bind them together: heroism and tragedy, hubris and humility, beauty and horror, purity and imperfection, etc. This fascination with contradictions residing with a single figure or event is at the core of the artist's interest in the harmonic balance in the universe. Such offsetting features are necessary for people, and the worlds in which they live or imagine, to survive the potential for annihilation if this equilibrium is upset. However, perhaps of ultimate importance for understanding Güneştekin's work is the importance of the Sun. As he has said in the past, "I make use of the Sun as a main reference in my artworks. As we know, it is the round sphere that creates the light and the shadow. By making objects visible through light and shadow effects, the Sun lets one perceive them three-dimensionally at the same time. The light can merely emerge by using the colors and shadows. I, too, am trying to find a way to work on the canvas through the objects I see in the outer world, what I see through the light and my experiences, with a three-dimensional approach. Thus, my idea and tendency let me obtain the applications that resemble optical illusions. The symbolic Sun motif in my oil paintings reveals itself especially through the sunlight that rises up from the left side of the canvas. This radial structure consists of a slight light burst and diffusion that reflects my signature. The use of the sky as a symbol shows the protection of justice and freedom by taking the human being as a reference."ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, if one thing can be said about the artist's work, it is that his sense of light and color radiates throughout his objects, whatever medium he is working in, and it is probably what strikes the eye at first, sometimes making it challenging for the uninitiated to move beyond this luminosity to see the various levels of drawing, figuration, and abstraction that inhabit his objects. There is also a density to his

imagery that requires frequent re-engagement if one is to fully absorb the totality of the work in question.

In this exhibition, which the artist refers to as “Journeying from East to West,” a kind of mini-retrospective is in play, showing off his talent in a variety of mediums, from paintings, reliefs, carpets, kilims, and patchworks, to his most recent forays in sculpture. For those most used to seeing his paintings, it is an eye-opening experience. A recent work like Mem u Zin’s Innocence (2016) exemplifies the so-called Optic category of his paintings. It features a richly colored canvas with a large, spherical planet like object that hovers at its center. At upper left, is the ubiquitous round object that signifies the Sun, which bathes the entire canvas in a fiery and haunting light. The ground of the painting is somewhat obscured by the black horizontal lines and vertical color bars dominate the surface of the work. This kind of feature has led some to dub his paintings as “narrative abstraction,” but this is a misnomer, since it is slightly contradictory and mischaracterizes the language of the work. Hovering above the sphere is Güneştekin’s beloved Simurgh, a symbol of destruction and rebirth, beauty and strength, and sometimes tragedy. To her right are two people who appear to be locked in embrace. They are Mem and Zin, characters from a favorite Kurdish parable about love, in which a couple’s romance is forbidden. It is a classic tale of political intrigue destroying passion.

Not all of the Optic paintings are suffused with a warm glowing light. Sometimes they are an icy, ominous blue, or in the case of works like Wings of the World of One Thousand and One Colors (2014), they radiate a bright white. Objects like this also incorporate a metal screen into the imagery, adding an additional level of dimensionality as well as blurring the line between painting and sculpture. This piece recalls a completely different aspect of his work, paintings whose entire backgrounds are rendered in a monochromatic white with overlapping brightly colored abstract forms, as in Icarus Who Can't Reach The Sun (2014) and Inconsolable Pain of Prometheus (2014). Güneştekin uses a technique of rendering his white forms in a sinewy, rope-like all-over style, which gives the impression of an intuitive, fluid, interlocking structure. As with everything he paints, the colorful forms that intersect the images are not without significance. In Sundial (2012),

those forms refer to the Sun and how the Earth's orbit around it led ancient cultures to discover a means for measuring time.^{iv}

Beginning ca. 2012, Güneştekin embarked upon a new series of works entitled Encounters. Initially large in scale and rectangular in format, they are composed of a plastic-like material rendered in relief made up of a forest of symbols that relate to the history of Istanbul, from mosques, churches, and synagogues, to the Islamic crescent, the Star of David, and the Orthodox and Roman crosses. Seen from the front, they appeared to be rigidly abstract stripe paintings, always with an orb embedded at the upper left symbolizing the Sun. However, when viewed from the side, their rigidity breaks down into a chaotic sea of forms leaping out into space. Up until recently, they were strictly concerned with the birth of Constantinople and its tumultuous history over the centuries, its rise and fall as a political and religious capitol, stopping short of the transformation into Istanbul. The use of a petroleum-based material like plastic also subtly but purposefully incorporated the role that oil plays in regional conflict and prosperity. He has continued to develop this body of work alongside his painting practice, and beginning last year he took the series into an entirely new direction. At the same time that he finally embraced and incorporated modern-day Istanbul into the series, he changed its format and demeanor. In works like Encounter with Istanbul (2015) and Faith Hill 1B, Kostantiniyye Series (2016), the objects have become circular, and the orb has shifted to the center and is rendered in metallic mirror. This allows the reliefs to change depending on where they are installed, since they reflect their surroundings, but also inscribe the viewer into them as they too are reflected when looking at the object head on. Güneştekin also began to use language instead of just symbols, as in the Encounter with Istanbul series, which incorporates all of the different names of the city over the centuries and even sets free whole areas of the tondo to allow the metal to shine brilliantly. On the other hand, in the Kostantiniyye series, which describes the names of the seven hills of Istanbul, the imagery is more densely packed and the mirrored orb is at the center, giving the objects the appearance of having been spun rapidly.

Yet another aspect to his work we find in the current exhibition are his carpets and kilims, which he began making in 2011-12 and have a very different appearance and character. Whereas carpets are traditionally used as floor coverings and have a pile and texture, kilims can function in a variety of ways, including being used as wall hangings, and they are woven in a manner that makes them entirely flat. In Güneştekin's hands, they obviously function as works to be regarded as wall objects, though I suppose they could also become functional if one were so inclined. Thematically they follow the same intellectual interests he has pursued in painting (e.g. mythology and cultural diaspora), but the manner of these works is decidedly more minimal and brings traditional handicrafts directly into play. They also have the unique ability to collapse the boundary between image and support; the image is the textile and vice versa, unlike painting which imposes one medium onto another, almost completely obliterating the support material.

Just as the carpets and kilims have a likely Kurdish cultural derivation for him, Güneştekin's Patchworks also emanate from this context (see separate text in this publication on the subject). In their traditional framework, Patchworks are clothes composed of different pieces of textiles stitched together in an almost collage-like manner and often with very different textures compiled into a single article of clothing. Güneştekin's have a very different demeanor; they are wildly colorful, whereas as traditional Patchwork are normally understated. They also can look like stained glass from a distance, given their luminosity and move between abstraction and figuration to an even higher degree than his paintings. Yet they again consistently reflect the themes that occupy him in painting, such as Phoenix's Dream (2016), which places Simurgh into a mosaic-like context, perhaps an abstract garden of forms anchored at lower left by the Sun.

Finally, alongside these new Patchworks, Güneştekin has been working on a breakout series of sculptures in ceramic and metal this year that represent the greatest stylistic transformation his work has undergone in more than a decade. The series carries the general title of Dhul Qarnayn. There are conflicting accounts of who this legendary Yemeni king was (some believe he was Alexander the Great), but in the Qu'ran, he is referred to as "he of the two horns"^v, sanctioned by Allah to build

a wall between mankind and Gog and Magog, man-eating giants from the Turkistan region who embodied chaos. According to most versions of Islam's description of the Apocalypse, if Gog and Magog breached the wall, it would bring about the end of the world followed by the Resurrection once God destroyed them. Dhul Qarnayn has many other legends attributed to him, but in Güneştekin's hands we have the classic guardian king figure empowered to save the world from destruction. He has rendered the idea of him in a series of grotesquely beautiful ceramic urns containing ornate skulls and horns that radiate from and through the walls of the urns, as if he is a Medusa figure. By far the masterpiece in the exhibition is the artist's monumental Autoportrait, Dhul Qarnayn Series (2016). Composed of a large metal wall unit with compartments containing all manner of horned skulls, clusters of snake-like horns, and other objects, it is as horrifying as it is mesmerizing. By positing it as a self-portrait, what is Güneştekin telling us, that his art is the salvation from the impending Apocalypse? Based in Istanbul at a time of unbelievable terror both there, in the region at large, and towards his Kurdish brethren in particular, it is not hard to imagine.

ⁱ Excerpt from an interview between Drutt and Güneştekin in 2015 published in Ahmet Güneştekin: Million Stone, exhibition catalogue, La Pieta, Venice: Marlborough Gallery, p. 14.

ⁱⁱ The twin-headed snake-queen, part female and part reptile, popular especially in Kurdish mythology.

ⁱⁱⁱ See endnote 1, p. 15.

^{iv} Paintings like this also relate to a body of abstract metal monochromatic sculptures from 2011-12 not covered in this project, but again are important to understanding the evolution of his two- and three-dimensional imagery.

^v Surah 18 verses 83-101