

# GREEN . ART . GALLERY

Independent curator Mayssa Fattouh and artist Hale Tenger discuss Tenger's recent video installation "Balloons on the Sea", and Tenger's practice in general. This interview took place at Green Art Gallery on March 15 2011.

**Mayssa Fattouh: How did your artistic practice take shape and how much of it is in relation to your studies?**

**Hale Tenger:** I wanted to study arts but instead I found myself studying computer programming at Bogazici University. Unlike all other students I didn't prepare at all neither for the central university nor for the fine arts exams. Computer programming was my first choice in the central university exam mainly because it was a new program and popular at the time and there was no student counseling in those years. Anyway, after finishing computer programming I went to Istanbul Fine Arts Academy (now Mimar Sinan University) and completed a five year MA program in the Ceramics Department. It was more or less clear towards the end of those five years that clay won't be enough for me even though I was very shy when I won the British Council scholarship and was asked then if I would like to move to the MFA in sculpture instead, but wasn't sure I was up for it. Perhaps I can say that my artistic path was a semi-conscious one that at the beginning and later found its way. I was always very tactile, explored tools, at home as a child I was always fixing things, the satisfaction I got from this was less about my hands-on capabilities and came certainly more from the enjoyment I felt inside. I still enjoy the "making" part of the practice; it is one of the most delightful interests connecting me to life. I also value my visual memory for which I was considered as the image bank of the family's lost and found department. Striking and very early visual memory stories started springing when I was going through psychoanalyses in my thirties. Around those years another thing that surprised me was when I read about Freud describing some of his dreams in which quite long conversations take place. Mine though are almost speechless, they are very vivid visually but almost no conversation takes place only rarely punctuated with a few words. So, I guess the visual language always came more naturally than the verbal.

**Maysa Fattouh: Perhaps this is somewhat related to how after reading several texts about your work I understood that your artistic process retains a lot of the visual values and requires a physical presence, would you agree?**

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**Hale Tenger:** Physical presence is a crucial element in the way my installations function. What one experiences by being inside the space and the constructed atmosphere cannot be translated into other mediums. It is not possible to capture them in the same way through their video documentations. I frequently use audio, but that is not the only reason for it. Through their presence inside the space each individual brings in her/his “presence” into the work and that is the key element that makes it untranslatable. Also the presence of the individual highlights the absence of the fictional individual and that is also very effective in terms of the “uncanny” feeling which I prefer to invoke through some of my works.

**Maysa Fattouh:** Questions that you raise about modernity, progress and mainly what follows from that as human failures are presented in your work in a way that the audience feels directly responsabilized, a sort of a witness, what role do you ask your viewer to take in those failures?

**Hale Tenger:** I ask for awareness of the problems, it would be arrogant to ask for solutions from the viewers; it’s an invitation to think about possible solutions. I can say that my earlier works focused more on criticism of the negative side, lately I feel my work changed to include both the positive and the negative.

**Maysa Fattouh:** What brought you to that shift?

**Hale Tenger:** Focusing only on the failures starts bringing you down and doesn’t seem to be helpful enough in working towards change in improving the condition of humanity. Awareness can be created poetically as well without eliminating criticism. Lately that became more challenging to me. Critical thinking becomes more powerful when it is reflected without avoiding celebration, appreciation and joy.

**Maysa Fattouh:** How is this reflected in your 7-channel video installation **Balloons on the Sea** currently showing here at the gallery?

**Hale Tenger:** The very act of shooting at the balloons is deliberately omitted in the video installation. The image of balloons on the sea itself is a very joyful one if we didn’t know what was to follow. I wanted to play on the suspense element between melancholy and joy with the support of music created for that. The reappearance of each balloon after being shot at reflects resistance but in a very poetic way... We know various forms of overpowering continue to haunt societies on different levels, politically, culturally or economically but we know as well that no suppression can be carried on forever.

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**Mayssa Fattouh: Can you describe how the idea of this installation came about?**

**Hale Tenger:** It was originally from the popular hobby of shooting balloons on the sea which gave way to many references for me: the balloon itself being an ephemeral object/non-object, is a vibrant symbol of joy and lightness, this representation works mainly when the balloon is seen in the air but changes drastically when seen chained like captives on an execution row in the open sea. It is also a temporary container of our “nefas” (breath). Although I am not a believer, I am also interested in the idea of reflection in Sufism, where the universe itself is a reflection, this for me matches with the image of balloons and their reflections on the sea. Each image is projected on an individual screen that is hung loose in order to create a movement of fluidity created by the viewers walking around, moving gently in harmony with the graceful flow of the water. The music is composed by Serdar Ateser, with whom I have collaborated for many years in various projects of mine. I was seeking for a fluid quality yet accommodating some sense of suspense and he came up with an influential composition. The element of time here is portrayed in the randomness of the play of appearance and disappearance of the main element, giving an unexpected aspect to the installation.

**Mayssa Fattouh: How do you feel about categorization in the art world generally?**

**Hale Tenger:** I don't care about it. Time categorizes, I am not interested in categorizing it. It works in the history of art but the way I see it is that the rush for categorizing the present is perhaps too much of a pre-mature labeling exercise.

**Mayssa Fattouh: How concerned are you by the ongoing discourses on contemporary art practice and the market, is this integrated in your artistic process?**

**Hale Tenger:** My practice moves simply on the basis of my gutfeel, in other words I don't care about the flow of the trends or the market. I especially don't like repetitiveness in my work, so with each project it is almost like starting from scratch. It is a very painstaking process that is to find and settle on something that feels right. I take great pleasure in reading an in depth text written on one of my works, especially a creative essay which allows me to think and contemplate in new dimensions in relation to my work. However, I do not create my works through that path, but enjoy when those relations are brought into light by a theoretician or writer after the completion of the work. Literature, music, politics, social and psychological engineering

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nourish me more. I've always carried a feeling of keeping a distance from the art world. Concerning the market, I don't care about it at all in terms of my production. Obviously it makes me happy to know that my works are part of collections but it remains on the level of a financial satisfaction rather than an influence on my production. I cannot stand visiting art fairs either; it is a suffocating environment for me. The idea of showing a large number of works of various artists cramped together is a crucial problem with the biennials just as well. It is unfair and works against the viewer, the art works and of course the artists. I believe one needs to spend time to see and experience them properly instead here visitors become nothing but scavengers.

**Mayssa Fattouh: A final question, you mentioned that Istanbul Biennial 3 and 4 played a major role in diffusing the Turkish contemporary art communities to the world, how much has this had an impact on your work and did multicultural concerns slip into your work through that?**

**Hale Tenger:** It is a mix between the Istanbul biennials and the shift of politics in Turkey, which gradually allowed the art community to be more open to international relations by the beginning of the '90s. The first few Istanbul biennials played an important role in terms of letting the international art world know about local contemporary artistic production. Its main impact was to be able to move more swiftly to taking part of the international exhibitions abroad. I have always had multicultural concerns and briefly I can say that my family background has played an important part in it. I always felt as a minority in Turkey just as much as in the rest of the world. This feeling triggered an inner curiosity that made me reflect on geopolitical issues in my closer surrounding and on a wider scale. But generally, I prefer to let my mind follow the course of my life, I don't like to plan things far ahead, and work on the projects as they come up...