





ART
AT SEA

HERA BÜYÜKTAŞÇIYAN



C

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan dives into the murky waters of history to tell the stories of the dispossessed. **Ayla Jean Yackley** speaks with the artist between her appearances at the Venice and Istanbul biennales.

Connecting disparate elements across cultures, time and space is at the centre of Istanbul-based artist Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's work. So when she discovered letters penned 200 years ago by the English poet George Byron at an Armenian monastery in the Venetian Lagoon, she had the nucleus for her project for the Venice Biennale. Those missives, detailing Byron's arrival at San Lazzaro degli Armeni in 1816 and his struggle to learn the monks' impenetrable language, are re-imagined in Büyüktaşçıyan's sculptural work, *Letters From Lost Paradise*, on view in the National Pavilion of Armenia within the monastery, established in the early 18th century. The great Romantic poet called Armenian the "language of Lost Paradise" in reference to historical Armenia's location in Mesopotamia, thought by some to have been the Garden of Eden.

The sculpture uses oversized printer's type embedded into a mechanised replica of an antique writing desk set in what was Byron's study. A motion sensor detects a visitor's arrival, and the letters, which spell the name of the piece in curly Armenian script, begin to move up and down, like a player piano, emitting a haunting moan. "It is about keeping a language alive and showing how, when it is spoken, it is very much a part of the space it occupies," says Büyüktaşçıyan. Its companion piece, *The Keepers*, consists of 11 bronze and wax casts of the artist's own hands clutching more Armenian type. The hands are secreted in glass-fronted bookcases, playfully gesturing towards the room's more sombre artifacts – an Ethiopian mummy and an Egyptian sarcophagus, part of the monastery's museum of curiosities. San Lazzaro also possesses the world's most exquisite collection of Armenian manuscripts.

Büyüktaşçıyan, along with 17 other Armenian-rooted artists hailing from far-flung nations, helped win the exhibition *Armenity* the Golden Lion, the top honour bestowed by the organisers of the Biennale, now in its 56th edition. *Armenity*, curated by Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg, commemorates



“It is about keeping a language alive and showing how, when it is spoken, it is very much a part of the space it occupies.”



this year's centennial of the Armenian genocide, when as many as 1.5 million people were massacred by Ottoman Turks ahead of the creation of the modern Turkish Republic. Much of the work focuses on this defining event for the Armenian diaspora, but for Büyüктаşçıyan the exhibition transcends the tragedy. “As a name, *Armenity* both expresses the sense of loss but also of possession, and it helps to break through the clichés surrounding 1915,” she says.

ACROSS BORDERS

Büyüктаşçıyan's interest in erasing boundaries may be rooted in her own upbringing. Born to Christian parents – an Armenian photographer

father and an Armenian-Greek mother who is a Byzantine scholar – in Muslim Turkey in 1984, Büyüктаşçıyan was impelled to look at issues of identity and alienation. Today, just 60,000 Armenians and 3000 Greeks remain in Istanbul, a city of 15 million people. “I spent my childhood visiting historical sites and archaeological excavations or with my nose in a book,” she says. “Since preschool, I knew I wanted to be an artist, though I would have been a historian had I not pursued art. An artist is like an archaeologist. She has to probe the past to understand the time she now occupies.” The rigour with which Büyüктаşçıyan investigates her projects and layers them with historical fact speaks of this

Opening pages: Installation view of *In Situ*. 2013. 2000 blocks of soap, blue vinyl. Variable dimensions.

Facing page: Installation view *The Keepers*. 2015. Mechanism, wood, bronze. Photography by Piero Demo.

Above: Installation view and detail (inset) of *Fishbone*. 2015.



intellectual focus. Training as a painter at Marmara University, she quickly moved into 3D and other media as a means to probe complex themes of memory and loss.

What is striking is Büyüktaşçıyan's singular pursuit of her core themes in all her work, which is consistently clean, honest and direct. Influences are woven in with enthusiasm: Beuys's combination of organic and inorganic materials; Kosuth's use of language; Bourgeois's deformed body parts. Time is expressed through the mythology and history of the environments in which her work is situated.

In a relatively short career, Büyüktaşçıyan has created a substantial body of work and participated in a dozen or so group shows, including *Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment* at Istanbul's Arter in 2013, and a handful of solo exhibitions. She has joined residency programmes in Yerevan, Istanbul,

Stockholm, Munich and London. Rampa in Istanbul and Green Art Gallery in Dubai currently represent the artist. "Hera's practice, which is deeply rooted in her own diasporic Greek-Armenian background, is quintessentially trans- or even post-national," said Yasmin Atassi, director at Green Art Gallery. "Much of it speaks directly to the crossing of borders, whether by choice or through forced expulsions, as well as the material and immaterial belongings that people both take and leave behind."

DELUGE

Exodus is the undercurrent in 2015's *Destroy Your House, Build a Boat, Save Life!* The title is taken directly from an inscription in Babylonian cuneiform on a tablet that prefigures the Biblical tale of Noah's Ark and which fascinated Büyüktaşçıyan during trips to the British Museum.

“[Memory is] a space set far away, like islands in the sea.”



Facing page: Installation view of *The Recovery of an Early Water*. 2014.

Above: *The Wave*. 2014. Mixed media. Variable dimensions.

The dominant sculpture is a precarious-looking dock. Its uneven planks of wood undulate and creak loudly, and Büyüктаşçıyan describes them as “the connection point between land and sea, between yesterday and today, uniting life and death.” Rolled-up carpets, together bearing a pastoral landscape, are a surrogate for household possessions hastily packed by soon-to-be refugees. Often her creations are site-specific, and here Büyüктаşçıyan had the gallery very much in mind: SALT Beyoğlu occupies an apartment building that once belonged to a prominent Greek banking family before race riots in 1955 heralded the precipitous decline of Istanbul’s non-Muslim communities.

The relationship between land and sea was also at play in Büyüктаşçıyan’s first solo exhibition, *The Land Across the Blind* at Galeri Mana in 2014. The show took its name from Istanbul’s origin myth, in which the Greek king Byzas is told by an oracle to build a colony across from “the land of the blind.” Byzas chooses the point where the Golden Horn meets the Bosphorus Strait, surmising that the Chalcedonians dwelling directly opposite were surely blind not to have chosen the superior spot, where he founds Byzantium in 657 BCE.

STATE OF CHANGE

The Land Across the Blind also speaks to a contemporary malaise afflicting Europe’s largest city. Istanbul’s residents are deeply unsettled by the city’s metamorphosis, which includes a crop of skyscrapers, bridges and other mega-projects that have blotted out the 8000-year-old city’s once-immutable skyline alongside a government ‘urban renewal’ plan to raze 50,000 “at-risk” buildings.



Above: *Passage*. 2014.
Bronze, wood.
38 x 17 x 10 cm.

Facing page:
Installation view (above)
of *Main Balcony*. 2014.
Iron cast. 137 x 160
x 79 cm and (below)
Tetraplegia. 2014.
Found stereoscope,
bronze, wood.
75 x 145 x 75 cm.

Photography by Ali
Yavuz Ata. All images
courtesy Green Art
Gallery, Dubai

Büyüктаşçıyan used historical photographs, drawings and installations to transform Galeri Mana, a two-storey former flour mill located in the rapidly gentrifying port district of Karaköy, into a waterfront dock. The ground floor's windows were covered in blue film to give visitors the sense of being submerged underwater. Dominating the otherwise sparsely utilised space was an oversized balcony, seemingly dropped into the depths. In making the viewer feel small, it was intended to give a child's perspective. It also reminds us that change in Istanbul is constant. "We don't see what lies beneath the water. The disappearance of architectural heritage is akin to its burial at sea," Büyüктаşçıyan says. Up a flight of stairs above the waves, she built another dock, similar to the one at SALT. There is something jarringly unstable about Büyüктаşçıyan's moorings. They might disappear at any moment.

Büyüктаşçıyan describes memory as something inaccessible, "a space set far away, like islands in the sea." From the *Island of the Day Before*, at the 14th edition of the Istanbul Biennial this autumn, seeks to memorialise the final

students at the Galata Greek Primary School, shut for two decades as Istanbul's Greek population dwindled. The community has since legally reclaimed the Neoclassical building and opened it as an arts centre, where Büyüктаşçıyan works on programming and efforts to preserve the city's Greek heritage.

STORYTELLER

Keeping the record is part of Büyüктаşçıyan's role as storyteller, in which she seeks to give physical form to narratives, especially of those living on the margins. "For me, she is a storyteller who processes extensive research on historical and cultural narratives and lights up forgotten memory," says Başak Şenova, a Turkish writer who met the finalist in 2013 while serving on the Henkel Art Award jury, which selected Büyüктаşçıyan as the competition's Turkish finalist. They have since collaborated on a number of projects. "Hera's projects are always research-based, and she has an outstanding talent for making associations between her dominant themes and the indications of each venue and geography that she works in."



“[Hera] is a storyteller, who processes extensive research on historical and cultural narratives and lights up forgotten memory.”
Başak Şenova

As a child, Büyüктаşçıyan struggled to speak Greek with her mother’s relatives, finding the words would “stick in my throat like fish bones.” This would provide the formal and conceptual template for 2015’s *Fishbone*, her first solo show in Greece. The Athens gallery State of Concept is in a former glove shop and retains a display table that has been used in several shows before Büyüктаşçıyan’s, making it ideal for an artist preoccupied with memory and the past. The main installation is a repeated series of wooden bars laid side by side, each with a small pair of cast feet, which form the fishbone. They start at the table and trail off through the gallery space like an unfinished conversation in Greek.

WATER RUNS DRY

Water and the impact on human nature caused by its paucity were on Büyüктаşçıyan’s

mind when she traveled to Jerusalem in 2014. From a roof in the Christian quarter, she spied a football-field-sized empty lot that her research revealed was once the Roman-era Hezekiah’s Pool, a reservoir left to dry up in recent centuries amid a long-running dispute over its ownership. The area is locked, and those living along its edges have no access. *The Recovery of an Early Water* in the *Jerusalem Show VII* would be just a swathe of blue cloth draped over wooden trestles, but its setting loaded the work with political and historical weight as it retrieved long-suppressed memories to the surface. “As I set up the installation, people from the surrounding houses streamed in, kids began to play, mothers came to chat, as if they were all gathering along a river’s edge,” Büyüктаşçıyan said. “Even when water is merely imagined, it has the power to remove barriers.” The same is true for art. 🇮🇵