

The Storyteller: An Interview with Hera Buyuktasciyan

by Elizabeth Wolfson | Aug 24, 2012



Hera Buyuktasciyan. "Missing Cuckoo." Installation, mixed media (cuckoo clock, 50 handkerchiefs). Istanbul, Turkey. 2008. Courtesy the artist.

“All my life I have been the secondary memory, somehow.” This is one way Istanbul-based artist Hera Buyuktasciyan describes herself; another is as a story-teller. For the purposes of her creative practice, she prefers this combined identity, for it enables her to channel the power of memory while also freeing her to play with the memory’s basic components, to isolate certain elements and boil it down to its signifying essence. “When you tell the story it’s not your story, it’s someone else’s story, so you don’t carry the responsibility of the whole thing,” she explains.

As a memory storage unit, Buyuktasciyan is the repository for an awful lot of pain. There is no way around this fact:

coming from a family that is Greek on one side and Armenian on the other, her family history bears the imprint of the pain and terror suffered by Turkey's minority populations throughout the twentieth century. Buyuktasciyan describes how, throughout her childhood, her Armenian grandmother and her grandmother's best friends, a group of five women, would gather weekly and retell the same stories of their painful past, indelibly marked by their experience of the Armenian genocide. "From their childhood up until they died," she recalls, "they would come together to have coffee. And every week, without exception, they used to share the same story with the same words, same sentences. This was really amazing me a lot. It's not the story but the way they did the storytelling. It's like it's stuck in their mind, and the memory is a kind of instrument, which is playing non-stop in the mind."



Hera Buyuktasciyan. Photograph, c-print. From "Worthy Hearts, Vol. I." Art and Cultural Studies Laboratory (ACSL), Yerevan, Armenia. 2011. Courtesy the artist.

These early experiences of absorbing her family's painful memories like a sponge have left Buyuktasciyan incredibly sensitive to the emotions—whether of suffering or joy—of others. To listen to her describe the process by which many of her projects were created is to realize that she functions like a Geiger counter or a medium of sorts,

measuring and recording the emotional tectonics and internal worlds of those around her. This ability is evidenced in projects such as the series of photographs and installation that comprise her project *Worthy Hearts, Vol. I*. The series was completed last year while she was on residency in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Struck by the contrast between the extreme poverty suffered by the city's residents and their "rich-heartedness," their hospitality and generosity of spirit, Buyuktasciyan was inspired to return to an older project, created in the wake of her grandmother's death in 2008, involving golden eggs. Buyuktasciyan used gold-covered eggs, the symbol of rebirth, to channel, and perhaps transform, the sense of worthlessness her grandmother and her girlfriends had developed as a result of their childhood experiences of violence and terror. "I was thinking that they had this fragile identity, as young girls they were very fragile. So I decided to gift this work to them. I called this it "Worthy Hearts." To be worthy of something. But they never thought they were worth anything."

In Yerevan, Buyuktasciyan recognized that same sense of self-worthlessness in the people she encountered, weighed down as they were by the burden of their poverty. "I asked people to hold this egg, and I asked them, 'What do you feel when you hold this egg?' My aim was to see how people felt holding such an object, and how they refer to their own worth, self-worth. Because the color of gold shows something really valuable, something expensive, fragile, delicate, beautiful. Many of them—it was very painful for me to hear them—but many of them, especially this lady [pictured below], said "I'm not as beautiful as this egg, so I'm not worthy to hold it."



Hera Buyuktasciyan. Photograph, c-print. From "Worthy Hearts, Vol. I." Art and Cultural Studies Laboratory (ACSL), Yerevan, Armenia. 2011. Courtesy the artist.

As a member of two Turkish minority communities, Buyuktasciyan understands well the power of shared pain and shared memory to bind individuals together, to forge and cement communities. However, rather than feeling at ease within any of the various communities to which she does or could belong, Buyuktasciyan has often felt isolated, alone, out of place. Describing, for example, her feelings of difference, as a Turkish Armenian, from the “Armenian Armenians” she met during her two-month stay in Yerevan, she says, laughing, “Wherever I go, I’m a type of Other. I can’t escape that!” For this reason her work not only plunges the power of stories and memories, but investigates the nature and meaning of community as well. “What does it mean, a community?” she asks rhetorically. “What does it mean to become part of a community; is it necessary or not? It’s not only about an identity-based community. A bazaar space, a gallery, an opening, creates a community also. Wherever people come together, it creates a community. But at what point do you become a part of it? And you feel isolated from that, when people reject you. What does it mean, is it necessary to be a part of that or not?”



Hera Buyuktasciyan. From "Worthy Hearts, Vol. I." Mixed media (500 gold-leafed eggs, wooden table). Art and Cultural Studies Laboratory (ACSL), Yerevan, Armenia. 2011. Courtesy the artist.

These questions prompted Buyuktasciyan to try an experiment at the opening of the *Worthy Hearts* show in Yerevan. Stacking five hundred gold-covered eggs in a Jenga-like pyramid in the interior of an over-turned, off-kilter table, she asked viewers to take an egg from the pile. She was curious to see how they would choose their egg, and what would happen when the pyramid began to collapse. Describing the results, she recalls, “Many people were trying to be very careful about it, and some were picking from the bottom, and they all were collapsing. But then other people were building it up again. I just left it to be performative, to be part of the piece. And then I thought, this is the meaning of a community, a group of people, or any system that’s created within life. If you as an individual can stay alone, when you picked it [an egg] carefully, if it stays, the whole system can stay and you can stay as an individual on your own, with your own [sense of] worth. But if you pick it from a certain point, the whole system can collapse also. This is something that works about all types of communities.”

More recently Buyuktasciyan had the opportunity to revisit these concerns, this time through a multimedia

installation in the lobby of **SALT Beyoğlu** titled *The Afternoon Odyssey*. Combining sound, video, and performance, the piece drew on the recent outcry instigated when a very old Greek language newspaper, *Apoyevmatini*, which has been in print since 1925, announced that it was going to fold due to lack of revenue. As news of the newspaper's plan to shut down spread, a Turkish student started a Facebook group rallying support for the paper, declaring that the paper belonged to all of Istanbul, that it was an important part of the city's history and culture. Hundreds of Turkish Istanbul residents, who couldn't read a word of Greek, began buying and subscribing to the paper, providing the funds it needed to continue printing.

Inspired by this outpouring of support, Buyuktasciyan again returned to yet another older work (she often returns to either the subject or form of older works, continuously exploring her own history as an artist) that involved using minority newspapers to make paper boats. For the installation at SALT, she obtained eighty-seven back issues of the paper (one for each year that it has been in print) and invited visitors to use the papers to make their own paper boats. She describes how in the processes of making the boats, visitors who remembered making them as children showed others how to do it, creating an impromptu community of paper ship-builders. Afterwards many left their boats behind, but rather than disappointing Buyuktasciyan, it reinforced her understanding that the work's significance rested within the visitors' experience, not the objects they created. She collected and saved all the leftover boats, and will use them to create a new video work, a final extension of the project begun by *The Afternoon Odyssey*.



Hera Buyuktasciyan."The Afternoon Odyssey." Performance and sound installation, SALT Beyoğlu. Istanbul, Turkey. 2012. Courtesy the artist.



Visitors folding boats as part of "The Afternoon Odyssey."

Leaving and returning; escape and exile; belonging and isolation; division and connection. These apparent opposites, which in Buyuktasciyan's works are never mutually exclusive but rather always constitute each other (even as they seem to contradict one another), lie at the heart of these explorations of identity, community, memory, place and history, both within the context of Buyuktasciyan's own history, in Istanbul and Turkey, and within other geographical contexts as well. Last year, as part of an artist-residency program co-sponsored by Istanbul's [5533](#) gallery and Stockholm's [Slakthusateljerna Studio Association](#), Buyuktasciyan spent five weeks in Stockholm. The residency enabled her to continue her investigation of the practical and symbolic functions of water, boats and islands in people's lives. In the past year, Buyuktasciyan has moved to one of the islands known in English as the Princes Islands; the islands lie in the Marmara Sea, a short ferry ride from the heart of Istanbul. As a result of this move, her life now revolves around ferry schedules (the islands are only accessible by boat, there are no bridges) as she moves back and forth between her home and the city. As a result, her work in the past year reveals the artist's obsession with the question of islands, an outgrowth of her interest in communities: how are people like islands, why do we fantasize about them, and why do some people love islands while others abjure them?



Hera Buyuktasciyan. "I Land." Video Installation . 2 min video, mixed media. Slakthusateljerna, Stockholm, Sweden. 2012. Courtesy the artist.



Hera Buyuktasciyan. "Distance Bridging." Installation, mixed media. Slakthusateljerna, Stockholm, Sweden. 2012. Courtesy the artist.



Hera Buyuktasciyan. "Ö' Observatory." Multi-piece installation, mixed media.
Slakthusateljerna, Stockholm, Sweden. 2012. Courtesy the artist.

Her exploration of these questions resulted in a number of exploratory pieces, exhibited in Stockholm, which, inspired by her Scandinavian context, utilized sparse and simple techniques to create the kind of interactive and performative installations that she has come to specialize in. "Water, it makes connections," she explains. Perhaps thinking of her own experience, not only as a current island-dweller, but as a Greek-Armenian artist from Turkey, who is now very often moving back and forth between her hometown and cities in other regions, she adds, "And it's not only used to be exiled or leave somewhere. It could also be used to come back to the dock again."