

## ARTICLES

### ONE ON ONE

**Nazif Topcuoglu's 'Innerscapes' running at Dubai's Green Art Gallery from 11 January - 5 March presents recent works by the Turkish photographer. Canvas speaks with the artist about his artistic process, inherent symbolism and creative influences.**

**Unlike your previous works which portray adolescent women in highly theatrical backdrops, the photographs on show in *Innerscapes* depict underplayed background and seemingly mature subjects. What sparked this evolution?**

The narrative in my earlier works centres on young women - students mostly - who are discovering the world, reading about it and exploring it. This series shows them grown up and confronting personal, social and political problems of everyday life. Now that they have graduated *per se* and are out in the world, what they find is not what they expected, so they are questioning everything around them. There are two thematic groups in this exhibition: the images depicting one or two subjects such as *A Pre-Raphaelite Picture*, *Dragon* and *Turquoise* tackle personal issues of intimacy and introspective questioning in young women, while other works such as *Guerrilla Girls* and *The Hunger* which feature a group of women, deals with broader subject matters pertaining to their surroundings. On the one hand, they are looking at their own identity and ability to adapt to the real world, while on the other, they are trying to change the world to fit their own beliefs.

***Guerrilla Girls* portrays a group of women in rebellion attire surrounding two younger girls who have seemingly been captured and are down on their knees with bags over their heads. This work was clearly inspired by an event of protest and revolution. Why do political events such as the Arab Spring influence your *oeuvre*?**

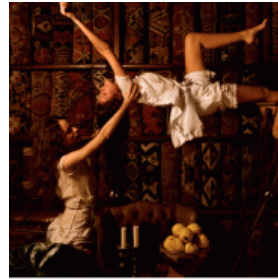
I am child of the 1960s and have always supported the people's protests and revolutions. Through the depictions of these young girls questioning the ways of the world, I am showing my support for the youth and I am standing with them in their quest for change. I cast women in my staged photographs because they are obviously the more oppressed of both genders. Here, I am giving a voice to those who receive unjust and discriminatory treatment. I am showing my support of feminism but also of all oppressed minorities and people. I use younger women because, to me, they represent the hope of change for the future.

**How do you select the models for your work?**

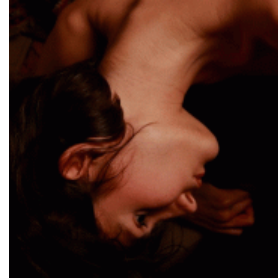
I find it very difficult to find models actually, especially in Turkey. They are usually amateurs and come to me on their own by word of mouth. I then set up casting calls where I have the models try different angles and gestures and also take some test shots. During the actual shoot, the models generally follow my direction but at other times they improvise and come up with interesting gestures. I prefer the natural look and don't search for women who aspire to be movie stars or fashion models. They also need to be interesting and get along well with each other, especially for a group shot. I cast them just like one would do for a film; there are leading actresses, supporting roles and extras. Most of them are still in school or University. My models have a pure and innocent identity and my work is about protecting that identity before they become adults, enter the work force and take on a new, more 'business' look. There is a spontaneity in being young and wanting to try something different and I try and capture this.

**The theatrical period backdrops have become a defining feature in your prints. Why are you drawn to such lavish settings?**

I have always felt like a 19th-century artist. It actually isn't a definite period that inspires me specifically, but I feel nostalgic about the past in general so I tend to recreate some elements from it in my works. These



(Detail) 'Magic Carpets'. 2010. C-print. 116 x 175 cm.



(Detail) 'Dragon'. 2009. C-print. 140 x 100-cm.



(Detail) *The Hunger*. 2011. C-print. 124 x 143 cm. All images courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

staged environments also hark back to my childhood. For example, my *oeuvre* comprises many photographs captured in libraries because my house was full of books as my mother was a professor.

**There also seems to be a storyline imbedded in each photograph.**

I do have stories and narratives in mind before a shoot. For group shots, I prepare drawings and cut-outs so each model knows how to pose. I also let subjects improvise within the framework of the story. As with other artists, sometimes positive accidents happen during the creation process. When I am working with a single subject, or just two, they obviously have more room to try different things. For example, the final result for the work, *Dragon*, was not planned. We were just experimenting and I noticed her prominent vertebrae, so we focused on that. I tend to lay bare the model's imperfections so if they have a scar or blemish, I incorporate that into the image and storyline.

**The subjects in your photographs project feelings of conflict and tension. What led you to portray such sentiments and how have you used your models to convey this in your work?**

That's a good point. When I look for models, I look for intelligence and state of mind and I also look for people who know each other and can get along with each other. I prefer, rather than just one pretty girl, to have two or three girls who know each other, come as a group and work on the same wave length. Like the picture with the books by Proust, those girls were very friendly with each other and were from the same acting school. In another picture, I chose two sisters to work together and in *Virgin Suicides* (2009), (the photograph with the pomegranates) they were really close to one another and could easily work together. I tell the models that I want participation, improvisation and feedback because I want them to be part of the process. The tension might also come from me. I am a tense person and I am not out to just make pictures of pretty girls.

**Your titles are very poetic. How do you go about choosing them?**

The title is the only hint for the audience in terms of grasping the true narrative behind my work. The titles I come up with usually depend on if the work was planned and staged or if the subject improvised spontaneously.

**What future projects do you have underway?**

I would like to exhibit and stage my work more outside of Istanbul. I'm interested in staging my photographs in Beirut, Cairo and also Dubai. It is crucial, however, that I find the right location as well as the right subjects.

By Rebecca Anne Proctor and Tala Chukri

[share](#) [print](#) [send to a friend](#)