

Art in America

REVIEWS SEPT. 01, 2017

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan

DUBAI,
at Green Art Gallery

by [Anna Wallace-Thompson](#)



View of Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's exhibition *Write Injuries on Sand and Kindness in Marble*, 2017, at Green Art Gallery.

Two hands lay outstretched on a narrow bench, palms facing up, as if in supplication, asking for alms. They were delicate, beautifully shaped; yet the palms and wrists appeared scorched and scarred, with leathery skin resembling a mummified crocodile hide. Their dark sheen was actually from bronze, and the “scars” were in fact the imprints of myriad tiny marble squares, forming a kind of tile-less mosaic.

This idea of imprinting is central to the work of Istanbul-based artist Hera Büyüktaşçıyan (b. 1984). Her second solo show at Green Art Gallery, “Write Injuries on Sand and Kindness in Marble,” drew on the space’s former life as a marble factory. In the show brochure and recent email correspondence, the artist says that places retain the stories of their past, the lives of all those who have inhabited or used them. Memories, geographies, and experiences are cumulatively embedded within the walls, much as pieces of old buildings are repurposed to create new ones in spolia architecture. Büyüktaşçıyan explores these historical traces through a notion she calls “aquamorphology,” which refers to water’s capacity to transform, over time, all that it touches.

In this exhibition, Büyüktaşçıyan, a 2006 painting department graduate of Marmara University in Istanbul, focused on the lives of the locale’s erstwhile marble workers. She invited viewers to consider how invisible hands have shaped our physical and social environments. For marble workers, a lifetime spent polishing marble and refining it with water means that their fingerprints—so closely

allied with identity—are literally erased, sacrificed to the material they work with. That same stone has long stood as a symbol of power, used by rulers over the millennia to showcase their status. Yet the DNA of each worker, carrying their lineage and histories related to their former homelands, is mingled with the marble and the site.

The main exhibition space was largely taken over by *Everflowing pool of nectar* (2017), its eight long sheets of paper—each emblazoned with V-shaped bars of yellow, white, and gray—running down a wall and stretching far out onto the floor. Muted images on the gray and yellow bands depict traditional designs and construction techniques. The work, inspired by the artist’s travels in India, alludes to the marble water courses prevalent in traditional Mughal architecture. These channels, with their constantly moving water, were built to enhance public and private garden spaces, feeding fountains, and pools that reflect the beauty of nature.

Displayed nearby was “The discovery of 36 wells” (2016), a series of drawings in which Büyüktaşçıyan, perhaps reacting to predicted global water shortages, imagines new wells in the form of architectural fragments (severed building facades and balconies, truncated archways). The twenty marble panels of *Chanting if I live, forgetting if I die* (2017), lined up side by side on a raw plank and moved by a hidden mechanism, bring to mind the keys of a player piano, its silent “music” marking the passage of time.

In the context of Dubai, where so much is new and so many luxury towers are being erected, Büyüktaşçıyan’s show was a welcome opportunity to contemplate themes of power and labor, past and present. Centering on industrial spaces and practices, and on flowing water in both its pragmatic and metaphorical aspects, it brought a rare poetry and historical appreciation to a place not particularly known for either.