

SPEAKING

IN

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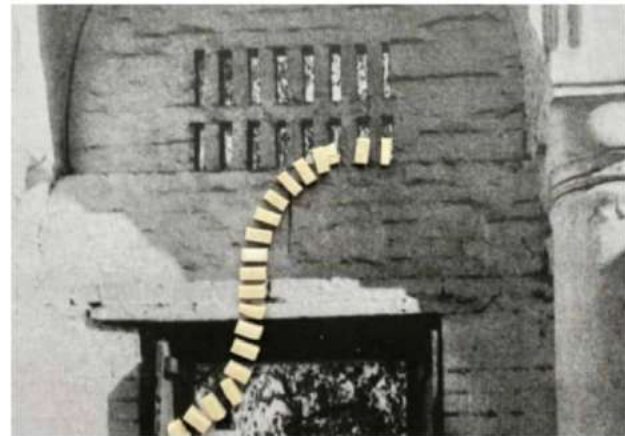
HERA BÜYÜKTAŞÇIYAN

BY HG MASTERS





*Infinite Nectar*, 2019, stills from video installation, created in curatorial collaboration with Hajra Haider Karrar: 10 mins 54 sec.



A marble hand appears on screen and then floats above a grainy, colorless photograph of a city's rooftops. A woman's voice speaks, explaining she is trapped inside this marble body, her "pale, petrified fingers exhausted from their centuries-old sleep." As the marble hand clears rows of stone cubes to reveal another photograph of old wooden balconies, the voice explains, "My fingertips follow the line that consists of an infinite number of points . . . gathering fragments of time and space for my own imagined universe." Then the video cuts to contemporaneous footage of bright pink fabric that covers the black-and-white tiled floor of a derelict, yellow-walled courtyard.

These stop-motion animated opening scenes of Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's 11-minute video *Infinite Nectar* (2019) begin a poetic travelogue through Sikh history in Lahore and the wider Punjab region. The marble hand that guides us belongs to a sculpture of the last Sikh queen of Punjab, Maharani Jind Kaur (1817–1863), who was imprisoned and exiled for inspiring resistance against the British colonial regime after the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845–46). Büyüktaşçıyan recorded the footage with her collaborator, the writer and curator Hajra Haider Karrar, at two surviving Sikh places of worship in Lahore, the Gurdwara Shaheed Bhai Taru Singh and Gurdwara Chhevin Patshahi. These sacred spaces are physical remnants of the large population that once lived in the city before the migrations and violence of the 1947 Partition. In today's Pakistan, the gurdwaras remain contested by hardline Islamists who revive historical disputes with the Sikhs, and are encroached upon by local land mafias. Yet Büyüktaşçıyan was drawn to how "with these certain facts, time freezes and becomes petrified." For her, the gurdwaras are examples of sites that embody "the material memory of unstable places."

Five thousand kilometers away, Büyüktaşçıyan grew up in a parallel historical reality in the city of Istanbul, which, like Lahore, was a multifaith, multiethnic capital at the turn of the 20th century. With both Greek and Armenian heritage, Büyüktaşçıyan is a member of two small Christian communities that have survived more than a century-and-a-half of turkification campaigns that

began in the late 19th century and encompassed the 1915–16 Armenian genocide; expulsions and population transfers of Greek communities during the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923; as well as postwar waves of pogroms, minority taxes, property seizures, assassinations, and enforced assimilation campaigns that continue today.

And although traces of the old Constantinople's Orthodox communities have become barely visible within the contemporary megalopolis of Istanbul, the coexistence of historical periods remains legible in its buildings, from the crumbling brick marketplaces to old stone churches in varying states of concealment or disrepair, and gabled wooden houses that survive between rows of modern concrete apartment blocks—edifices inscribed with the names and origins of the city's waves of arrivals and the departed. What Istanbul and Lahore share today are the ethno-nationalist forces attempting to erase certain historical layers, including reconverting religious sites—as Turkey's hardline Islamist government did in 2020 with the Hagia Sophia, originally built as a church in the 6th century, as well as the 11th-century Chora Church.

When I caught up with Büyüktaşçıyan in early November, I asked her how she had become interested in the history of Punjab and the region's pre-Partition architecture. She explained that she had been drawn to its legacy as a divided and contested region. In 2016, she became fascinated with the architectural structures that she saw while visiting major Punjab cities. In Amritsar, she visited Jallianwala Bagh, a park where the British military had massacred several hundred Sikhs in 1919, and observed how the bullet holes in the surrounding brick walls were framed in squares of white paint. "All these particles are created when something is destroyed," she reflected in our conversation. Her observations on the waves of construction and demolition, the expansion of cities and the migration of populations led to her photographic-collage series *Deconstructors, Volumes I–IV* (2017), which was shown at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2018. In the images, she overlays the flowing paths of painted white mosaic-like tiles—suggesting the movements of

people, memories, and time—over and through the contemporary urban landscape, mixed and layered as it is with the ruins of historical places and new buildings in cycles of construction and destruction.

The "deconstructors" in Büyüktaşçıyan's works are not only the figures who inhabit and remake these urban environments, but also the artist herself. For her, the practice of deconstructing is linked to storytelling, which, she explained in a livestreamed conversation with Haider Karrar around her exhibition "On Stones and Palimpsests," at Dubai's Green Art Gallery in September 2020, allows her to "deform what is perceived in general and to free it by giving it a new narrative." This is particularly difficult when dealing with historical subjects that are, in her words, "hidden or that are not easily spoken about" in certain contexts. And into that more liberated space, the artist herself injects "particles that are gathering within my own memory" that allow her to distill an enormous chain of events into "something more graspable and more digestible." The imagined, poetic narration of Maharani Jind Kaur from *Infinite Nectar*, for instance, which she performs, allows her to enter the personality and share this historical narrative.

"What the ground carries and preserves" became the focus of Büyüktaşçıyan's third project related to the history of Punjab, which formed the centerpiece of "On Stones and Palimpsests." *Reveries of an Underground Forest* (2019) is a room-filling



Detail of *Reveries of an Underground Forest*, 2019, carpets, dimensions variable.

Installation view of "On Stones and Palimpsests," at Green Art Gallery, Dubai, 2020. Photo by Anna Shtraus.







Installation view of *The Recovery of an Early Water*, 2014, blue construction net, dimensions variable, at Patriarch's Pool, "The Jerusalem Show VII: Fractures," 2014. Photo by the artist.



*The Pool of Befe/After (The Recovery of an Early Water Drawings)*, 2014, print, pen on paper, 21.5 x 35.5 cm.



*Solomon's Pool (The Recovery of an Early Water Drawings)*, 2014, print, pen on paper, 21.5 x 35.5 cm.

installation of beige, rolled carpets, standing on their ends, with their surfaces scarred by abstract patterns. Originally created for the Toronto Biennial of Art, *Reveries* draws on the colonial history of Toronto, as European settlers displaced Indigenous communities and destroyed the old-growth forests, using the trees as columns to support the modern city's streets. She reflected how "these 'support systems' within architecture that have often been created as a reflection of nature itself—pillars, wooden beams, or tree trunks—are structures that do not only carry a space but also associate with the notion of being rooted." The historical images she saw of felled tree trunks propping up city streets also reminded her of stacks of rolled carpets, which, on a visit to Toronto, she had seen piled high in stores in the Punjabi community, linking the early formation of the city to the later migration of South Asians to North America.

Carpets, Büyüktaşçıyan noted, are often what migrants bring with them when they leave home for a new territory. The traditional Punjabi silk embroidered carpets known as Phulkari are abstracted depictions of farmlands that allow families to symbolically carry their homes with them. The patterns of these textiles, as well as maps and images of Toronto's development, informed the abstract, mosaic-like marks that she burned into the carpets of *Reveries* with a soldering pen. The carpets stand upright, she said, so that they bring a kind of human-like presence and a symbolic resistance. "Despite its static and concrete silence, this piece has a relationship to sound," she added. "Each piece resembles a rhythmic chord that unfolds hidden voices and connects us with the seen and unseen."

The idea of absence, particularly how it is expressed through the built urban landscape, has run through Büyüktaşçıyan's projects since the early days of her practice. For *In Situ* (2013), created at the Istanbul residency space PİST, she evoked an Istanbul

neighborhood's memories of the Pangaltı Hammam—which had been demolished in 1995 and replaced with a hotel—by layering thousands of rectangular blocks of soap in the pattern of street stones on a floor covered in blue fabric. Neighborhood residents told her that the smell of soap permeated the surrounding streets, reminding them of the old bathhouse, as if it had returned.

The importance of water to not only the physical infrastructure of a city, but also to the memories of its inhabitants carried over from the bathhouse to the Old City of Jerusalem. There, in 2014, her project for the Jerusalem Show VII, organized by Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art and held at locations in the Old City, took place in the empty area of what used to be the Patriarch's (or Hezekiah's) Pool. The reservoir system was constructed in the 8th century BCE during a war with the Assyrians to direct water into the walled city. Inspired by the blue construction fabric draped over the market stalls of the city's narrow stone streets, Büyüktaşçıyan created a blue river of fabric that ran from the balcony of a building down onto wooden supports placed on the dried-up site. In her mind, she "was trying to manifest something that was invisible for a long time, and let it flow backwards." Like many of her works, *The Recovery of an Early Water* (2014) and its related drawings, in which she depicts blue rivers of liquid pouring out of the earth or buildings or even religious icons, evokes a vanished element of a place, while also revealing the ways in which it is still present, in the construction of the buildings around the empty reservoir, for instance. "In a way this is like bending time—allowing you to experience many times at the same time—and to try to read today from that point of view," she says.

Like Jerusalem, Istanbul is one of those cities where the modern city coexists with remnants of its medieval and ancient pasts. In Istanbul's Maltepe district, part of the sprawl along its Asian coast, lies the remnants of a cistern and church from the 9th century CE, the Monastery of Satyros, built by Ignatius, the patriarch of Constantinople. Its ruins, discovered in 2001, are today known as the Küçükyalı Arkeopark. In and around the domed interior of the subterranean cistern, Büyüktaşçıyan installed a snaking coil of turquoise ship rope that resembles an imaginary creature. The work's title, *Rising . . . A Small Height from the Ground* (2016), refers to a poem dedicated to the gardens of the area by the 11th-century Byzantine princess and author Anna Komnena, while the rope recalls the seaside village that the area used to be. "Spaces are like living organisms, breathing no matter if they are abandoned or have lost fragments that leave traces for us to be able to read."



Installation view of *Rising... A Small Height from the Ground*, 2016, 28-meter-long, site-specific installation, at Küçükyalı Arkeopark, Istanbul, 2016. Photo by Domenico Ventura.

Büyüktaşçıyan collects physical traces in the form of stone, brick, or ceramic fragments for her series *A Study on Endless Archipelagos* (2017–19). She takes these small shards and attaches miniature bronze-cast feet to them, transforming them into anthropomorphized figures that stand on scraps of wood like an assembly of people from different walks of life. These bronze appendages have appeared in her works at different moments over the previous four years: in *Tetrapelgia* (2014), they carry an old stereoscope perched on an inclined board, while *The Stranger in My Throat* (2015) features a disembodied procession bearing wooden slats that spill out from the drawer of an old desk and form a fishbone-like spine across the floor, evoking, for Büyüktaşçıyan, the moment when a "particle of language is about to flow out—perhaps a half-remembered Armenian consonant or an idiomatic turn of phrase."

If the small bronze feet carry fragments of forgotten things on the cusp of being remembered, Büyüktaşçıyan has described the many ways that materials and spaces physically contain memories. In the artist-book *Write Injuries on Sand and Kindness in Marble* (2017), created for her 2017 exhibition of the same title at Green Art Gallery, Büyüktaşçıyan describes her idea of "aquamorphology," about the "fluid, aquatic





Detail of *A Study on Endless Archipelagos*, 2017-19, tiles, cement, brick, bronze, wood, dimensions variable.



Detail of *The Relic*, 2016, bronze, 76 x 20 cm.

nature of memory” that, like water itself, “can simultaneously purify, divide, connect, heal, and destroy.” In the same volume, she and artist-curator Haig Aivazian have a conversation in which she pointed to the Hagia Sophia’s marble thresholds, which, over the many centuries, have worn down so that they now appear “melted or liquefied,” like “an embodiment of the flow of time.” Here, stone adopts the properties of water, allowing it to flow, like the ribbons of stone-like particles that cascade through city scenes in *Deconstructors*. As she would later remark to Haider Karrar about that series: “I associate stone with a sense of a wound, because a wound becomes petrified with time and then something activates it. You scratch it and it begins to bleed and flow; it’s the same as how we excavate all these sites.” Histories and memories that were once underground suddenly come to the surface again, transcending the efforts of people to conceal them.

Thinking about spaces like the Hagia Sophia, which has had many lives and occupants over the centuries, much like the city around it, Büyüktaşçıyan adopts a long perspective. “In order to ‘read’ the true memory of a place, one must move back and forth along its various histories and timelines between past and present,” she told Aivazian. Carrying that sentiment forward in her exhibition “Write Injuries on Sand and Kindness in Marble,” she explored Green Art Gallery’s former life as a marble factory. *The Relic* (2016), a pair of bronze hands and forearms covered in impressions made by marble tiles, is laid out on wooden slats partially covered with marble tiles, like a work in progress. The work imagines the physical intertwining of human bodies and materials that occurs in any construction. The erasure of the natural grooves on the hands—which are actually cast from the artist’s—alludes to a legend about the builders of the Taj Mahal who lost their fingerprints while sanding the marble surfaces of the inlaid stones.

The incorporation of human bodies into architecture has its corollary with how architecture of the past is folded into our modern lives. Specifically, Büyüktaşçıyan is interested in the practice of “spolia” architecture, in which pieces from older buildings and monuments are reused in new constructions. It is a hallmark of many places with long histories of stone architecture. The modern city of Bergama, situated north of İzmir along Turkey’s western coast, for instance, has been built around the ancient hilltop fortress of Pergamon and many homes sit on top of ruins. Büyüktaşçıyan’s explorations of these areas where spolia architectural structures are still visible gave her the sense of the city as a palimpsest, constantly being written over by waves of civilizations. These processes are channeled in her series *Lithic Verses* (2020), for which she collages archival photographs taken during late 19th-century German archeological missions—which led to, for instance, the Great Altar of Pergamon being expropriated to Berlin in 1879—with rubbings of stone structures, so that they become amorphous forms floating on a white background. Combining horizontal, vertical, and even subterranean-looking perspectives, these collages suggest the coexistence of the many epochs of Pergamon-now-Bergama, becoming what the artist calls an “uncanny formation [and] a cartographic reflection of lost and forgotten physical and mental spaces.”

While Büyüktaşçıyan is drawn to spaces with complex and contested histories—including “what the ground remembers” or what memories are evoked in the remnants of built structures—it takes the artist-as-storyteller to reanimate them. She also believes “mentally we all have these landscapes.” The past, as something we live with in the present, can be brought back to life in ways that have ramifications in politics and society, as well as for ourselves. As French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), memories are like micro-films that “can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of the imagination.”



*Lithic Verses*, 2020, archival print, graphite on paper, 38 x 51.7 cm. Photo by Kayhan Keygusuz.



