

# PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

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## Upfront and personal

Controversial Turkish artist Taner Ceylan pulls no punches with his 'emotional realism,' as *Gareth Harris* discovers



**W**ith Taner Ceylan, there is no tip-toeing around the issue of what it means to be Turkish today. The 47-year-old artist makes impressive, often erotically charged photorealist works that broach delicate topics around Orientalism and national identity. These meticulously fashioned pieces include the painting "1879" (2011), which depicts an Ottoman noblewoman posing serenely in front of Gustave Courbet's epochal 1866 painting of female genitalia, "L'Origine du Monde". "1879", a prime example of so-called hyper-realism, set a record price at auction for the artist in 2011, fetching £229,250 at Sotheby's London.

Seeing where such radical canvases are produced comes as something of a surprise; Ceylan, who was born in Germany and moved to Istanbul aged 16, labours for two to three months on each work in his nondescript home-cum-studio in the affluent Istanbul suburb of Florya. Surrounded by a throng of needy cats, the artist photographs his muses (a fashion blogger and one of his assistants are among his favourite models), blocks out the figures precisely on the canvas and fills in the imposing outlines, creating images of melancholic Ottoman princesses, quasi-mythical entities made of men and animals, devastated male lovers, and twisted, disfigured odalisques.

"I am making emotional realism which makes my work different from other 'hyper-realists' such as [US

**Ceylan insists that his approach is distinct: 'Sexuality is very important for me but I don't rely on clichés'**

artist] Chuck Close, who I adore. You must show the subject; the spectator must not see the paint," he explains.

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But there is more to Ceylan than his aesthetic efforts. He spoke out earlier this year against a ban on social media after the Turkish government vowed to “wipe out Twitter” in the run-up to local elections. Ceylan also took part in the protests last summer against the planned redevelopment of Gezi Park in central Istanbul, describing the fray in Taksim Square as a potential Utopia: “Religious people, transsexuals, conservatives, the communists, everyone shared the space.”

Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is reportedly keen to build an Ottoman-era military barracks in Gezi Park. For the artist, this nostalgia for a new neo-Ottoman empire is, put bluntly, delusional. “The government wants the Ottoman Empire to be seen in a very pure way, it wants to bring back to life aspects of empire,” Ceylan says, arguing that “the blind acceptance of Orientalist portrayals” feeds into the government’s vision for contemporary Turkey.

“The Orientalist gaze was not constructed solely by the outside world. It has been created and developed within the geographical confines of the region itself. It is this antiquated depiction of the ‘other’ that served as an impetus for the Gezi resistance,” he says. Artists such as Delacroix, Ingres and Gérôme presented distorted, idealised views of the east, Ceylan contends. “It is easy to be blinded into a state of colonialist naïveté by their mesmerising paintings.”

“1879” is a clear example of this subversion. And for an exhilarating rewrite of Turkish history, look no further than the work “1881” (2010), which portrays an intimidating, fez-wearing pasha smoking a cigar. “His eyes show that he is prepared to do anything, especially for money,” Ceylan says. The London-based academic Serkan Delice goes so far as to say that the protagonist “embodies a highly sensual, stimulating and carnal Mustafa Kemal” (in other words, Atatürk, the founder of the republic of Turkey, who was born in 1881). This mixture of insolence and menace won over artist Marc Quinn, who bought the work at Sotheby’s London in 2010 (the painting fetched £121,250 with buyer’s premium).

But not everyone appreciates these fervent re-imaginings. Ceylan faced death threats in 2011 after “1879” featured in a Turkish national newspaper. “The threats might have been made by conservative religious factions, or even from someone in the art world,” he says, softening his concerns by stressing that “art is at least taken very seriously here”. He calmly relates how the government even provided three bodyguards at the time, and appears composed about rattling so many cages.

His same-sex, erotically charged, fleshly scenarios are a milestone too far for certain factions in this secular state. Hearing about his first brush with the authorities is gripping and oddly disconcerting, largely because the row centered on a painting of Ceylan making love with another man – namely himself (“Taner Taner”, 2003). The piece was inspired by an age-old social custom whereby only families are permitted to enter certain Turkish tea houses. The graphic work, first shown in a non-profit art space, Karsi Sanat Calismalari, in Istanbul in 2003, was spotted by the US curator Dan Cameron who included it in the 2003 Istanbul Biennial. But Ceylan was subsequently dismissed from his post at Istanbul’s Yeditepe university.

How Turkish curators and collectors will react to his new “Golden Age” series, due to go on show at the ArtInternational fair later this month in Istanbul, will be a litmus test for the city’s evolving art world, which seems progressive and retrograde at the same time. One of the works, “The Skin of the Moon” (2014), depicts a mythological half-man half-beast centaur figure receiving fellatio from a crouching figure.

The heady, mischievous piece is available with Paul Kasmin gallery of New York, which signed up Ceylan in 2012 in the face of stiff competition (he was formerly with the local dealer Galerist, but the artist observes that “Turkish galleries do not have international reach”). “Most important Turkish collectors own Ceylan’s non-erotic works,” says Necmi Sönmez, an Istanbul-based independent curator. The artist also has institutional backing: last year, Istanbul Museum of Modern Art acquired “1553” (2011), which depicts a bloodied Hürrem Sultan, the wife of the 16th-century ruler Sultan Süleiman the Magnificent. Paul Kasmin will also present two recent drawings, “Cyparissus” and “Persephone”, which were shown at Art Basel Miami Beach last year. Ceylan’s first sculpture will also be unveiled at ArtInternational; in the studio, a maquette for the bronze statue “Moon Tale” shows two men entwined.

Whether this homo-erotic focus could become hackneyed is a point of debate (after all, the artist as agitator is hardly an original stance). “[Ceylan’s] style is emotionally charged and yet realistic, and his subjects of gay male sexuality set him apart from the prominent tendencies in contemporary art in Turkey,” says Nazli Gurlek, guest curator at Borusan Contemporary in Istanbul.



**Ceylan working on his sculpture 'Moon Tale' in his Istanbul studio**

Taner Ceylan,  
Paul Kasmin Gallery

Ceylan naturally insists that his approach is distinct. “Sexuality is very important for me but I don’t rely on clichés. In the 1980s, sexuality dominated the art scene through artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, and David Wojnarowicz. There was very little homo-eroticism in art after this period, possibly because New York is a conservative city,” he says, adding that “playing” with art history is his objective. Indeed, astute references to Claude Lorrain, Paul Delvaux and the 19th-century Russian artist Ivan Aivazovsky dot our discussion; Ceylan’s “Divine Ego” painting from the “Golden Age” series shows a masterly grasp of the themes and techniques of Hieronymus Bosch. And contemporary colleagues? “[Jeff] Koons is very important, he makes art for our age: his “Rabbit” sculpture [1986] is the symbol of the 20th century. But you cannot call his art deep. I try to make art that can be deeply felt,” he concludes, in all sincerity.

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