

INTERVIEW WITH TANER CEYLAN

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After two years of silence, Taner Ceylan exhibited the artworks of the series he started in 2010, the Lost Painting Series, and even more new works in New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery. The exhibition, which made a tremendous impression in the American art world, and stirred quite a bit of curiosity within his Turkish followers, ends in November 26, 2013. We talked about his process between now and then, the evolution of his art, and the New York show.

You had group and solo shows in New York before. But this time you carried out the Lost Painting Series exhibit with the gallery that represents you. How did it feel?

Very good, very delighted. We had a wonderful experience both during the process and the exhibition. The process that led to this exhibition was very vigorous for me... I haven't done much except of painting in my studio for a long time. Along with the excitement that comes with a long break, this exhibition is very different than the ones before. This time, I'm out of Turkey, at the gallery space that represents me; furthermore, with a project that I've been working on for years...

Do you think there is a difference between being represented as a Turkish artist in Turkey and in a New York gallery?

I have executed exhibitions with galleries outside of Turkey before. But of course, being represented is a different thing, and the difference is solely about the gallery you work with. The success of an artist or an exhibition is surely very much related to the artworks in question. But the working principle of a gallery and its relations with the art market, collectors, institutions and museums is very significant to the achievement of the artist or his/her works. In Turkey, however sincere and amicable they might be, even for the best of galleries, it is hard to stand out and attract the attention of the art authorities in New York. You have to be there. It is not easy to be accepted to the collection of a museum in United States or Europe from miles away, merely taking part in art fairs and short visits. We have to acknowledge the importance of geographical factors along with relations you form. If you want to be memorialized within art history, it is impossible to be mentioned in a country that shut down a century-old State Painting and Sculpture Museum two years ago. So, you can definitely see the difference of being represented by a New York gallery, and I hope to see it even more.

And how are the comments and reactions to the exhibition? You faced a new type of art viewer in New York, in the end.

The reactions were amazing. Everyone in the opening was very interested, curious, and a little surprised. It is exhilarating to see that. I was very happy that people were asking detailed questions. We had a reference room at the back part of the exhibition; a room with a lot of resources, from history of the Ottoman Empire to masters of Orientalist painting such as Ingres and Delacroix, and articles in a historical and artistic context. Frankly I didn't expect such an interest and keenness for this research space in United States. It was incredible that the gallery team examined and researched, saying that it was like a library with amazing resources, and that all the viewers spent time in this room without fail. The room also had iPads with a video



created by Beril Bozdere; and that way the audience had a chance to see my workspace and the places that inspired me.

The reactions to the paintings were interesting as well. It is very crucial that the viewer can connect to and relate to a painting even without telling its story. In the end, you have to produce works that are timeless if you'd want to endure in art history. My viewers first look at the paintings, then say they love it, and get surprised by the technique; and then after learning the back story, turn back to the painting and comment more...and that starts a very pleasant and delightful dialogue. I hope this dialogue continues to be so after the show—with the gallery, the collectors, and the audience.

A lot has been written on and talked about, there is even a book, but nevertheless—can you please talk a little bit about the Lost Painting Series?

The Lost Painting Series is a different way of looking at the concept of Orientalist painting. The East has always been gazed by the eyes of the West hitherto, and I believe that this point of view is not realistic at all. The Oriental world has always been shown with a different, exotic realism. I constantly think that the things we see in the paintings of influential Orientalist painters such as Delacroix, Ingres and Gerome, are not real. It is always a splendor, a power, an enchantment of what's shown... But au contraire of what's shown, for instance, with a little research you can see that the Harem harbors, more than naked women themselves, those women's agonies. We are talking about slave girls that were torn away from their families here. However, we are shown smokers and crowds pleasantly going around, spread out...

There is also another East that is depicted, described, and seen today. It is presented with power and splendor, too... But what I mean is, the new East is out there. With the Lost Painting Series I depicted an Orientalism that I see, and believe that to be more real than what's shown, in a contemporary way using the classical painting techniques, inspired by contemporary photography. My paintings may look like photographs taken instantaneously in my studio; but I paint with oil color on canvas, pulling a 300-year-past to the present, and presenting it on the same surface. I also point out that there is no difference between today and 300 years ago, in terms of relations and politics.

In summary, with the Lost Painting Series I am presenting a reality from the Ottoman history that is unmentioned, and (could) not shown. All of the paintings in the series interfere with a story that was not told, or altered in history.

The names of the paintings are usually specific dates in time.

Yes, as I mentioned before, every painting has its foundations in a period, or a story in Ottoman history and Orientalism. And the names come together from the dates of these incidents and conditions. "1553," where I depicted Hurrem Sultan, is the year when Suleiman the Magnificent assassinated his own son. "1881," where I depicted the Pasha with an expression that can sell his soul for politics, power and ruling, symbolizes Ataturk's birth and Ottoman's demise for me. Every one of them has a story to coincide in history.

Your paintings are identified as hyperrealist, although you define them as “emotional realistic.” Can you expand on this definition a little?

To me, there is a relationship between the painting and the painter that wouldn't yield to any external influence. I don't think this relationship can be achieved with any digital technique or photograph. On the other hand, the relationship between the painter and the viewer is so much more than a two-dimensional surface; it is a continuing relationship that is in between those worlds, and that carries on with the connection between the viewer and the painter. Because the painting is the bearer of energy and emotions, and thus is the artist... That's why I identify my paintings as emotional realist artworks. What is fundamental for me is that when looked at my paintings, they are perceived as a gaze, as blood, flesh, or smile, rather than paint.



Are there any major incidents in your life that affected your art and your world?

I have an intercultural identity, for one. I always believed that this affects me at some point. I was born and raised in Germany, and then came to Turkey. This fact allowed me a different point of view in terms of working principle and context. Other than that, to study art in the 80's Turkey and being discharged from the university I was teaching because of a painting I made are interesting points and events in my life. It is very important that my painting has that kind of power and is able to affect a situation like this.

Some people think that the art world is a private and, in a way, enclosed domain. Do you think that art should be accessible, or exist within itself with a structure and crowds?

Art has levels in it. You can't expect an ordinary man to listen to Wagner, or understand the paintings by Bacon. But it is very normal for him to like Pop Art. He can't be indifferent to Andy Warhol's Marilyn. You have to educate your eyes and ears for a higher art. As Ducane Cunduoglu implied, just like you can't propose to society to "eat hamburgers because they're delicious," you also can't ban artichokes because they don't taste good.

I think the accessibility of art is about the education opportunities given to individuals.

You are one of the most internationally renowned contemporary artists. Do you think that you affect Turkish artists with your brave works and courage, and open a path for them?

Absolutely. I am trying to support them as much as I can, too, especially for young artists... I wish to guide young artists as far as I can with my experience, and my life. I support and encourage them as they step up to the stage of art.

Lately there is the case of “all galleries looking for their own Taner Ceylan’s.” Lots of galleries have hyperrealist paintings if you look at the art fairs. What do you think of this?

I want as many young artists to rise as possible, and for them all to be represented by galleries. Hyper-realism is a technique that demands so much discipline, and so much labor. But it must not be forgotten that to go forward and rise upward, there are other things necessary along with technique. That’s why I love being in contact with young artists and support them. How nice would it be to have a Taner Ceylan in each gallery!