

IDENTIFY YOURSELF
an essay on
MELİS BÜRSİN & SUAT ÖĞÜT

BY
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I recently attended a wedding in Shawano, Wisconsin, a small, rural town in a northern part of the United States. The reception was held at the beautiful lakeside home of the groom's family. Taking a break from the festivities, I found myself wandering around the property, and came across a sign in the front garden with the following words written on it in Spanish, English, and Arabic: "No matter where you are from, we're glad you are our neighbour".

Shawano is about as small town as you can get—it's a drowsy collection of a few roads and buildings set amongst green trees and fields that make up a serene and pastoral lifestyle. I grew up in one of these towns, and like any village or hamlet, if you stay there long enough, you come up against the ambivalent dynamic of its inhabitants' hospitality toward and suspicion of people who, as the saying goes, aren't from around there. Last fall, a majority of Wisconsin voters favoured Donald Trump for president, a man whose xenophobic tendencies are evidenced almost daily in his public remarks and through his administration's policy decisions. To stumble across a literal sign of acceptance and neighbourly kinship in a place that helped vote the man into office was both heartwarming and encouraging.

Fear of the other, however, is not a quality that is unique to small towns in any particular place. More often than not, people, wherever they are, tend to define themselves in opposition to the ideas they have of other human beings rather than their actual reality. In doing so, we build up identities with fragile underpinnings. Instead of our environment shaping who we are, we effectively identify ourselves.

This year, for Istanbul's 15th Biennial, artists will showcase work centred around the theme of *a good neighbour* (*iyi bir komşu*), highlighting the importance of transnationalism and intercultural experiences. In a decade of such great global movement, it is a timely motif. Home, if we are to come anywhere near understanding that concept, cannot be defined without taking into account those in and around it. Elusive notions like identity can only come into focus with the help of the people we interact with on a daily basis. And, though the dynamic of the foreign interacting with the familiar is one of humankind's oldest, it is an unfortunate fact that we don't always welcome people into our communities with

such kind gestures as the one mentioned above. These experiences have always been the source of much tension, kindness, cruelty, reflection, and therefore, expression. With more and more artists living in places other than where they were born, it is only natural to see these issues reflected in their artistic practice. I had the chance to talk to two artists with transnational backgrounds whose work blurs the lines of concepts like identity and home to reconstruct what both of those things mean in today's world. Their projects, whether stark or subtle in delivery, help us understand the idea of 'the other' as much as they help us understand ourselves.

Melis Bursin, a native of Turkey, has lived in various countries throughout her childhood and her work deals with the very same transnationalism that has left an indelible mark on her life. Currently residing in Canada, the artist started her career as a traditional photographer and has since moved on to work with film and other visual media.

Throughout most of Bursin's work, there is a strong ambivalence regarding things like character and sense of place. Having only ever spent a few years at a time in any one country as a child, her work is imbued with a kind of elusive nature. Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than in her series of lithography prints, called *Ottoman Miniatures*. The prints show scarves ranging from high-end fashion brands to traditional folk varieties overlaid with collages of tulip photographs. Each scarf represents the first females elected to the Turkish parliament, with their names and where they were from written in Arabic.

"I wanted two conflicting perspectives", the artist explains. "On the one hand, the Tulip Era, which defined the Ottoman Empire's obsession with that flower as the height of elitism; on the other hand, Atatürk's 1935 selection of 18 women who were chosen from different regions in Turkey as representatives in Parliament."

The origins of the idea of conflicting perspectives are not hard to guess at. Even a cursory look at Turkey's past (and present) reveals its place as a geographical and cultural Janus, always inhabiting one interstitial space or another in the history of the world. Having been raised in a Turkish family, yet one that was always on the move, the resulting characteristics of duality are inescapable ones for the artist. The country is, as she puts it, "a fallen empire stuck between East and West". "As far as I'm concerned", Bursin states, "it has always had an identity crisis. The West won't fully embrace it, nor will the East ... My work tries to recreate the dialogue of being stuck in between and questions what identity is".

And yet, the artist seems content with the idea that finding answers to that line of questioning may never clearly come into view, and that perhaps they shouldn't. Her work reflects an intercultural dialogue she is inextricably a part of, as well as how she is changing—and being changed by—the neighbourhoods she and others like her have called home. Bursin's three-channel video work, entitled *The Three Graces*, focuses on three Turkish women who have relocated to Houston, Texas. In alternating sequences, these women sing traditional Turkish folk songs and lullabies in their homes while their images are spliced in with panoramic landscape shots of the Texan geography. The work was inspired by

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LAKE TEAR, 2012/2016
film stills, continuous colour



Yeşim Ustaoglu's films, whose characters are often stuck between the past and present in a society with cultural amnesia. It is at once nostalgic and exceedingly awkward to hear such songs in the video installation while gazing at a landscape entirely foreign to the words behind the melodies.

Relating the work to her personal and intercultural background, Bursin states that *The Three Graces* helped her "create a discourse around a lost identity, or one that has shifted." She elaborates that she "discovered that there were different layers to reconstructing a 'home'," going on to say that "identity is environmental and self-constructed, so when your environment shifts you're left in this 'in-between' area where you choose what to leave behind and what to adapt to".

Belonging and identity have always been slippery subjects for the artist. "For me", she says of her upbringing, "home is where I can feel connected to a place. My Turkish identity came from a lack of a home and having to establish that for myself. It's been a process of becoming okay with not belonging."

The artist could not be accused of lacking self-awareness. In fact, the acute consciousness of her upbringing and identities are what fuel her expression. These processes necessarily involve efforts to appropriate and to acclimatise. "I don't think you forget your culture so much as you readapt it to survive", she says. "I know when to be more Turkish and when to be more American. I don't think I've found a way to surpass it, I just found a way to survive."

Bursin's career may be seen as an attempt to do far more than just survive, however. Speaking to how her work can influence people, she notes how difficult it can be to bridge the cultural gap. "It is very hard for people who have no sense of history or world issues to really understand where the other person is coming from." When asked about why she moved to Canada, she states that it was because "It doesn't impose itself on you. It embraces individual cultures living together."

You can easily feel her own embrace of diversity in her eclectic artistic practice. Her work crosses lines and defies or warps tradition, as in *The Three Graces*, either by augmenting or reinventing it. You can feel the threads of modernity stretch back through to their origins over an obtuse emotional geography.

"If I let a drop of water fall into a river, you can't see it anymore. It hasn't disappeared: it spreads and takes a different form. Does that mean we become a river?"

So opens Bursin's video work *Lake Tear of the Clouds*, a project in which she set out to find the highest source of the Hudson River in New York. The Spanish poet J.E. Cirlot speaks of rivers as standing for "the irreversible passage of time and, in consequence, for a sense of loss and oblivion". The film is morose at its core, dealing with the longing for home and the desire to rewind time and grasp what we know is forever gone yet refuse to stop seeking. By the end of the film, however, there is the inescapable feeling of something having been gained, as so often is the case with such journeys. It is a paradigm of how meaning is constructed, destroyed, sought, and built up once more.

"Ultimately, you have to find your own way. Art is one of the few spaces where thinking and seeing differently is encouraged", the artist states. "I am a firm believer in critical thinking. That is what I would hope to engage others in." *Lake Tear of the Clouds* can be seen as representative of Bursin's work in general, with her practice being one of sifting through the different journeys she has been through to find something ineffable yet vital. Naturally, those journeys are hers to own.

While Bursin is changing the artistic landscape of North America, another artist who is a Turkish native is making waves on the other side of the Atlantic. Suat Ögüt, a native of Diyarbakır, currently lives in Amsterdam and has built an artistic practice that revolves around themes dealing with political

exile, identity, and belonging in order to reconstruct the narratives surrounding the immigrant experience in the Netherlands and Europe.

"I think it is important to be able to transform geographic and cultural boundaries which address issues of identity and belonging", he says of the mindset that enables his artistic vision. "It seems to me that the personal experience of living in different

countries gives us the possibility of narrating and grounding our existence. This allows us to cross borders, become observers, and to record and present our memories."

Having grown up in Turkey's South-east, moving to Istanbul, and then to the Netherlands, Ögüt is compelled to do just that. If his artwork feels slippery, that's because it's reflective of his own discomfort with the idea of identity being set in stone. "I don't believe that identity is fixed or should come from somewhere. But what I do know is that I am surrounded by the questions based on identity, memory, recent history, invisibility and (art) criminality, which are somehow related with the circumstances where I grew up or where I have lived and live currently."

Wanting to interweave the histories of Turkish immigrants and the political history of their homeland, Ögüt began to search for those who moved out of the country due to their political ideologies not being in step with the Turkey of that era. Besides this, he says that he "wanted to represent the broad geography of the migration". Considering the European countries that took part in the legal framework regarding guest workers from Turkey provided a way for him to represent the overall scope of his idea, and so he found a political immigrant in each of the nine countries that took part in those deals. The immigrants' origins were diverse, but here they are collectively referred to as 'Turkish'. "That is how the project *The First Turk Immigrant of The Nameless Heroes of The Revolution* began", he recalls.

The central part of the installation, titled *Chapter I*, is set on a metal trailer and features the bronze busts of the immigrants in focus, which are themselves set atop rough,

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particleboard platforms. The heads give off a stately aura while the platforms are a bit more vulgar, a nod to the fact that you won't find such figures in any country's official history. *Chapter II* consists of postal stamps made in the image of each of the individual 'Nameless Heroes', as if they were well-known persons in Europe during the 1970s. All the official communication throughout the project, logistically or otherwise, contains the imagery of the stamps and is included in the exhibition.

As a whole, the project acts as a mobile monument that serves as a tribute to the workers and political refugees as *unsung heroes*, abandoning home for foreign places and yet still finding ways to hold on to hope and stay active in the political sphere. In more ways than one, they act as role models for Suat, and as inspiration: figures that not only encourage those who have immigrated, but whose lives and stories give some sense of place and identity to those who come after them.

When asked about how his transnational background influences his work as an artist, Ögüt says that at some point, mobility gave him "the chance of observing the gaps in representative powers in different ways and emphasising that it plays a crucial role in his work. The artist explains that he "would describe it as if I were in a long-term relationship with those cities where I am and was an inhabitant. The notion of belonging is a large issue which I also question in my practice".

One of the more tongue-in-cheek projects Ögüt has undertaken, and which also revolves around the idea of belonging, is his work *Business Card*. It's simply a card that serves as just that, his business card, yet it is modeled to look like a residency permit you would come across in Belgium. The artist wanted to play with the idea of needing a permit to live, work, and otherwise exist somewhere, and to transform a bureaucratic document into an artistic statement. Looking at the card brings forth an uncomfortable smirk from the viewer, the recognition of someone toying with and maybe even mocking an institution's need for them to be documented as 'other'. It also speaks to how we form new identities through the ones that we are sometimes assigned, appropriating everything from symbols to vernacular to bureaucratic forms and making them our own.

Even if his artwork sometimes hits the negative aspects of living abroad on the nose, it equally seeks to honour the happy circumstances that come out of the same experiences. In 2014, Ögüt helped found the non-profit *Corridor Project Space* in Amsterdam, which, after every exhibition the space hosts, features an event called 'Meyhane'. True to traditional Turkish form, people gather around a long table to share their ideas and thoughts. For him, this allows for a necessary space in which cultures can mingle and people have a chance to demystify those foreign to them. "In my opinion, in order to take the future back in our hands and ground our time, we all have to take the initiative to create a dialogue and share our thoughts. In that way, we can collectively support each other and reach a consensus. [Meyhane] is a basic setup, but I believe it is a good occasion to share our cultural tradition with both the local and international public in the Netherlands."

Attempts to foster intercultural dialogues like these play their part in putting into relief the identities we have constructed for ourselves by putting them to the test in very

real, direct ways. It is one example of how Ögüt's practice seeks to call into question the things we take for granted regarding our conception of ourselves, and it is how he is able to offer compelling perspectives on those points.

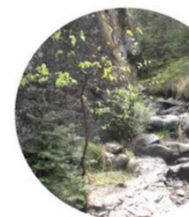
Human beings are categorical, pattern-seeking creatures. We tend to assign labels to things, and we feel better for having given external stimuli a definitive and known quality, but we're not so good at following through. We put finite borders around countries, and think little of what or who is on the other side. We delineate grammars for languages within an equally delineated geography and pay almost no heed to vernacular clines. We impose black and white categories to the highest possible degree on as many things as we can.

That is why the liminal and the vague are so important, especially when it comes to identity. Those blurry, in-between spaces that have so much potential to not only upset, but to foster understanding and nuance. The people, places, and things that defy one easy categorisation or another will always seem a little foreign to us, whatever side of the border we find ourselves

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on. Naturally, we define ourselves in opposition to these foreign things, yet we so infrequently consider just how misconstrued or inaccurate our assumptions can be about them.

Artists like Melis Bursin and Suat Ögüt fill a much needed role in our lives: they remind us how vital it is to sit with and consider the things that happen and exist in the in-between spaces of our daily lives, and they do this in unexpected, jarring, and sometimes uncomfortable ways. What people do cling to while forming their identity—things like nationality, ethnicity, language, and the like—too often manifests in nationalism, hostility toward cultural pluralism, or ethnic prejudice. The reflection that comes from analysing these concepts through critical art is of paramount value. And the artists who do this invite us to question who we are, while making no qualms about just how difficult that process can be. And as people like Melis Bursin and Suat Ögüt show us, at the end of the day, we are the ones who identify ourselves.



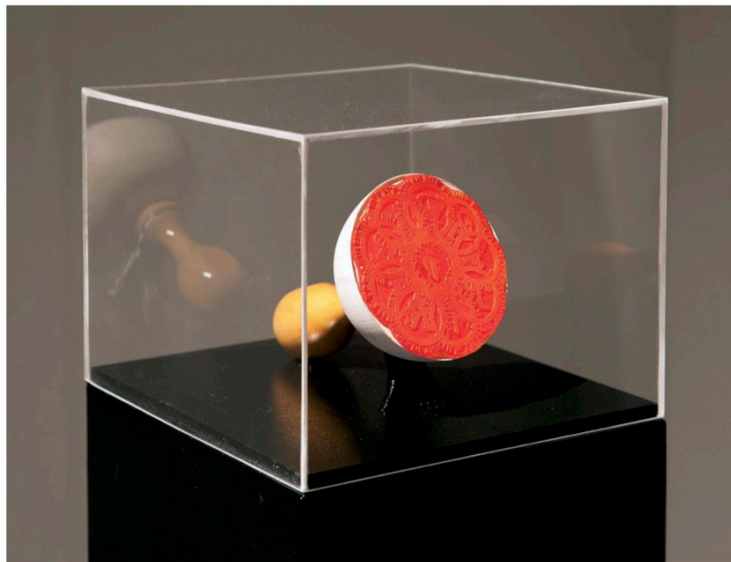
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LAKE TEAR, 2012/2016
film stills, continuous colour





SUAT ÖÇÜT, THE FIRST TURK IMMIGRANT OR THE
NAMELESS HEROES OF THE REVOLUTION
CHAPTER II, 2012-2013
digital prints on envelopes and stamp

SUAT ÖÇÜT, THE FIRST TURK IMMIGRANT OR
THE NAMELESS HEROES OF THE REVOLUTION,
CHAPTER V, 2012-2013
stamp, 10 x 10 cm



SUAT ÖÇÜT, BUSINESS CARD, 2014
double side color print on plastic, 8 x 5 cm. edition of 250

SUAT ÖÇÜT
BUSINESS CARD, 2014
installation detail of info desk at Unfair Amsterdam

