

Istanbul
by Duygu Demir

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Nilbar Güreş

Nilbar Güreş is an oddball in the best possible sense. Her drawings, collages, performances as well as photography and video dismantle cultural, social and sexual constructs in theatrical settings that border on the surreal. Targeting patriarchal norms, she visually expresses her resentment of the taming of bodies, the denial of sexual desire and a host of other intangible constraints and arbitrary deprivations. The works are not graceful, but neither are they clumsy; purposefully uncomfortable, the mise-en-scènes she produces subvert the image of the well-mannered woman and the uncomplicated serenity of the domestic environment.

Unknown Sports (2008–10) is a series comprised of video, photography and public actions. Set in a kind of domesticated gym, its point of departure is the question of which sport best represents a woman's daily experience. The gym itself evokes the exhibitionist tendencies of a male-dominated competitive environment bordering on the primal, where muscular strength and athletic ability are prized. The patrons of Güreş's gym, however, demonstrate different types of exercise, ranging from personal grooming to housekeeping.

Her cast of characters is as important as their carefully composed absurdist poses. Working mainly with women, the artist creates controversy not only by staging private acts within public spaces, but also through the juxtaposition of her models, who come from dramatically different social backgrounds. Güreş fosters unlikely pairings from family, friends, distant relatives and neighbours as well as activists and volunteers from various women's groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations, bringing together participants who are usually separated neatly into societal compartments, literally as well as figuratively.

Her own performances, staged in central locations or conservative neighbourhoods in Istanbul and intentionally during their busiest hours, feature the artist herself undressing to transform from bride into boxer, or hybridized between a runner preparing to sprint and a provincial housewife. Taking her cue from Article 29 of the Turkish Criminal Code related to unfair provocation – in which a woman is considered an accessory to a crime or may be arrested for wearing a miniskirt because it is seen as an aggressive act – Güreş unquestionably sets out to provoke.

At other times, the shooting locations she chooses provide readymade compositions. For her project *Open Phone Booth* (2007–11), the artist chose her father's hometown, a Kurdish-Alevite village in East Anatolia. Taking a more documentary approach, she turned her observations of the grim living conditions into a series of photographs and a three-channel video. She spent long periods of time in this village, sharing the difficulties and isolation of an infrastructurally disregarded area where water shortages, power cuts and the lack of a telephone network hinder everyday life. The latter disabled ties with the outside world completely until the development of mobile phone technologies; now, instead of going to the mayor's office, villagers go to hilltops in search of a mobile phone signal. By following these villagers, sometimes across green mountains and sometimes blanketing snow, she illustrates the daily ramifications of a greater political problem between the Kurdish community and the state.

An activist as well as an artist, Nilbar Güreş's practice is rooted in an awareness of injustice. With heartfelt intensity, her confrontational yet carefully composed works push the suppressed and the willfully ignored a little closer to the surface.



← *Wish*, from the series *Unknown Sports*, 2009, mixed media on paper, 70 × 100 cm

↑ *Gülten is Calling*, from the series *Open Phone Booth*, 2011, C-print, 50 × 70 cm

↑ *Performance in Üsküdar*, from the series *Unknown Sports*, 2009, book, egg and bread

→ *Overhead* from the series *TrabZONE*, 2010, C-print, 150 × 100 cm

↪ *The Living Room* from the series *çırçır*, 2010, C-print, 120 × 180 cm

