

# **Nilbar Güreş**

## **Who is the Subject?**

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**OSMOS BOOKS**

# Preface

The panoply of voices gathered in this monograph mirrors the diversity of materials, subjects, and viewpoints that Nilbar Güreş assumes in her work. The range of literary formats – memoir, essay, excerpt – aims to approximate that multivalence.

In the introduction, curator Adnan Yıldız recalls significant personal experiences and public events while growing up in modern Turkey. Yıldız argues that Güreş, “thinking spatially,” understands geographies and localities to be important both for what they are – and the impressions and traditions they impart – and what they could be. These untold stories hold in secret reservoirs, waiting for the artist to conjure them.

Journalist Nil Mutluer approaches Güreş’s work sociologically. Her short text offers an informed feminist perspective on gender and generosity.

Kate Sutton’s lyrical and evocative essay weaves together several of Güreş’s diverse bodies of work, identifying common languages of desire and critique. Sutton is an art critic who delivers new and highly original readings of the poetic capacities of Güreş’s political actions.

Four short texts focus each on a single body of work: Lauren Cornell on *Open Phone Booth*; Kolja Reichert on *Çırçır*; Övül Durmuşoğlu on *TrabZone*; and Nataša Ilić on *Unknown Sports*. Each author transitions the reader from one series to the next while they illustrate the range, variety, urgency, and focus of Güreş’s practice. For instance, just as Reichert isolates one small locale to signify unexpected ways in which larger social structures can become undone, Sutton similarly points out: “There are only five women on the bleachers, but when they cheer [...], it is made to sound like an entire stadium erupting into applause.”

Every author featured in this volume recognizes the artist’s method of exchanging reality for fantasy. With the support and faithful collaboration of Gallery RAMPA and OSMOS Books, *Nilbar Güreş: Who Is The Subject?* invites readers to discover that Güreş’s characters – presented in the guise of extreme fiction – embody the real more verifiably than any historical documentary.

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# Introduction

## Adnan Yıldız

Nilbar Güreş was born in 1977, the same year as the Bloody May 1st Workers Day demonstrations, when at least 34 people were killed in Taksim Square, İstanbul. During her childhood spent between the Black Sea region and Southern Anatolia, the country went through harsh social, political and economical times transitioning from the repressed military regime of the 1980s to a neo-liberal form of negotiation between right wings, Islamists, and old revolutionaries. Güreş was ten when Duygu Asena's novel *The Woman Has No Name* was first published, and subsequently banned despite its commercial success. As a feminist statement, the author was trying to draw a portrait of this new generation: urban middle class women who have their own values and question repressive traditions.

It was 2009 when Güreş first exhibited in the İstanbul Biennial. Her installation was located in an off-site venue, at the old Feriköy Greek School. I still remember experiencing a flashback in that abandoned classroom, with her series of photographs entitled *Unknown Sports* (2008–2009). It felt like going back to my childhood – mostly spent with women – my grandmother, aunts and neighbors, where I observed their world, admired their courage, and shared their secrets.

In this series by Güreş, the women participate in a university gym exercise as if it's May 19th – Youth and Sports Day in Turkey, a national festival introduced by Kemal Atatürk, aspiring to make a commemorative sporty show. But Güreş's fictional scenes could be based on some other national inferiority complex like Eurovision in the 80s and 90s or Olympics İstanbul – which after 5 bid attempts never happened. The props in *Unknown Sports* include all kinds of domestic utensils, from the bakery to the bathroom – a rolling pin, casserole and epilating wax – composed to create a critical narrative about how women survive domestic violence, being repressed and excluded from the public sphere as well as insulted, used, and abused by men, the mainstream media, and other patriarchal forces.

Güreş's work at the 6th Berlin Biennial, another series of large scale photographs entitled *Çırçır* (2010), and her three-channel video installation, *Open Phone Booth* (2011), at RAMPA Gallery's Frieze London booth, broadened the implied subjects to include with her women, repressed classes, minorities who are excluded from their rights, and people who resist. These works also implicate observation with abstraction in a manner that is key to understanding the critical substance of her practice. For my essay in "Cinsellik Muamması" (ed. Serkan Delice and Cüneyt Çakırlar, 2012), I highlighted Güreş's early collage, *Self-Defloration* (2006). It's a "very personal piece" that stands somewhere between a painting and a stage where the moment of narrative performance repeats itself in such a transgressive way, that the audience is left with pure abstraction.

Now, as I attempt to finish this contribution to Güreş's first monograph, when the people of İstanbul have started to resist, it seems notable that what our public gained from the protests was not only their Gezi Park, but also their civil courage. It is the first time in more than twenty years that we have seen so many people invoking their democratic right. Apparently this generation is not afraid of public space.

Women protestors and activists have been significant players in this new political arena with their demand for gender-neutral language, freedom of speech, and political ethics. One of the strongest symbols of this public movement is Osman Örsal's photograph of Ceyda Sungur, the "lady in a red dress" with all her compassion and femininity standing against the police's water cannon. This picture reminds me of a critical threshold in Güreş's work, the way it demands change with its concrete narrative abstraction. When I now see hundreds of thousands of women demonstrating their right to freedom and their children's future, it seems apparent that, whereas the women in Turkey are still repressed, abused, and exploited, "unknown sports" are coming out!

# The Trans Resistance

## Nil Mutluer

The living room of a house.

Familiar to those from here.

Living rooms, couches that are saved for the guests, for the others, meticulously, are the shared memory of the homeland. To such an extent that in some houses, not just the couches, but the guest rooms are separated.

Even if we haven't spoken of it, we are familiar with it: the women host the guests, while what they represent is the men who are sovereigns of the residence.

Is the respect paid to the institutionalization of being a guest shown to women? Could the women's meticulousness towards their living room be shown to what's inside? Could their insides talk to each other comfortably? This is unknown.

If they are going to be guests to each other's inside, maybe they know that there should be tactics.

There is a tally of what is spoken about with the others.

A man is always watching. Even if he is not there, he is there; on the wall through a representation or a stern look in memories.

Whereas women are not there even when they are there. When they transform the space with their bodies, we do not see their faces.

Even if they look chic in their states of guesthood, they lack faces and expressions.

This condition of regularity of the middle-class living room. The familiar, timeless, textureless spaces, couches, people, states of being...  
The feeling of being absent in existence!

We thus became acquainted, sympathetic with each other, with Nilbar Güreş, through the Living Room of the Çırçır series... I don't know if this was my first encounter with her. Because when traveling through Nilbar Güreş's world, the resistance in her works are new with her creativity; while the evoked feeling is equally old, familiar. She lays bare, again and again, the tactical resistance of women who have been othered in the male-dominant language for centuries through subversion. Nilbar Güreş reveals women's trans resistance to being stuck in their class in timeless spaces. Besides, she does this with the feeling and daily experience and knowledge of Turkey. In what she produces, we see not only symbols of the resistance from us, but also symbols and meanings that transcend borders.

The trans structures in Nilbar Güreş's works are not just states of being that subvert meanings related to gender, class, and ethnicity that were dictated by structures. It is also related to material. The place of meta in our lives is revealed when Güreş injects objects with livlihood to expose the transparency of the daily. While laying bare the reality, objects are displaced, genders, meanings... Furthermore, this displacement is not shy of exhibiting its own harmony.

The subversion of the states of being that we learn while becoming a woman, contain a latent humor—a form of resistance in Nilbar Güreş's works. The matters that are injected into our lives as aestheticized “standards” for “being a woman”, such as exercise, upkeep, wedding dress are reproduced with the same references. She resists the sacreds of womanhood such as “virginity” with the same simplicity. She weaves all of these into the daily. She transcends work spaces, exhibition halls to the streets, gyms, villages.

She presents as a form of resistance, the phones “somehow” not having reception in Alevi-Kurdish villages, a state of being that is secretly positioned and implemented by the male-dominant government. The women exist as they are, the tension of spaces and objects are relayed as trans elements.

Whatever happens, women lift the world in Nilbar Güreş's world! They lift their own world with the weight of the world. As a form of resisting the world, they resist within their stuckness. Womanhood, sacredness, space, norm are constantly interrogated in a trans harmony...



# **Nilbar Güreş: Indoor Exercises**

Kate Sutton

**Undressing, 2006**

Video stills of the performance  
HD Video, 4:3, 00:06:19  
Edition of 5 + 1 AP  
Camera: Katharina Fiegl

I.

The figure at the table is eerily serene. Entirely swaddled in veils, the body is abstracted into the rounded mound of a *matryoshka* doll, with its eyes blocked by a swath of paisley. “Aunt Besire,” a voice intones, breaking the silence. Suddenly two arms emerge from within, elbows bent up and over the head in an attempt to unwrap the first layer of fabric. Over the course of the six-minute performance, *Undressing* (2006), the figure slowly unravels the knots and furls, removing pins to the slow incantation of the names of the woman who gifted each veil: “Aunt Münire.” “Fatma.” “Sister-in-law Gülizar.” This is no striptease, nor does it read like yet another polemic on “Women and the Veil”; rather, the piece addresses a specific woman, the women around her, and the ties that bind them – literally and figuratively. Here the veil is not an ornament of oppression, enforced by men, but rather an initiation into a secret conversation between women. Each piece is unpinned and put away, like a story left



untold. When the last cloth is peeled off, what is left is a woman – the artist Nilbar Güreş – who has laid bare her history of intimate exchange with the women in her world.

Throughout her work, Güreş catalogues clandestine interactions between women, as they attempt to carve their own worlds in the niches and hollows of the system that has been handed to them, to take

**Self-Defloration, 2009**

Mixed media on fabric  
193 × 270 cm (framed)

back their bodies before those bodies can be taken from them. In the artist’s potent self-portrait, *Self-Defloration* (2006, with a second version in 2009), Güreş lies on her back, her breasts slinking off to either side, one leg crooked up to give her hand freer access. Under those implied fingers, a wild red stain seeps into the white sheet below, which has been

spread over the beige mass of an oversized painter’s palette. In no uncertain terms, this heroine has chosen to make her pain her paint.

Despite having trained as a painter herself, Güreş’s current practice spans performance, video and mixed media collage on fabric. The collages began when the artist created a painting on a tablecloth saved

from her childhood home. Not unlike the early works of Mike Kelley, Güreş’s use of secondhand fabric conjures up an uncomfortable closeness, the reminder of someone else’s skin brushed against cotton. It is this subconscious layer that makes textiles such a rich medium for the artist. Whereas a white piece of paper has no history to speak of (for therein lies its virtue),





a black cloth could contain countless covert contexts, an ever murky *id* to be explored with each fresh return. In this sense, textiles conduct a delicate conjuring act, as a means both of veiling and of revelation. No story is ever fully told.

The stories Güreş takes on tend to be those that women wrap around themselves. She begins with her own: the tidy coincidence that her own family name loosely translates to “wrestling.” If one were to extend the analogy, our Güreş is no heavyweight, bashing bulk against bulk; she is nimble and quick, catching one off-guard with secret, unseen footwork. Her works never go after the most obvious target, though they may at first fake in that direction (as with the would-be political commentary of the veils in *Undressing*.) With one or two elegant maneuvers, she lures viewers into dropping their defenses, assuming it’s an even match; more often than not, that’s the moment, they realize she’s already got them in a chokehold.



In the 2008 performance, *Fatih*, the artist claimed the legacy of her own name, with an experiment in symbolic social defloration. She marched through the streets of a conservative

neighborhood in İstanbul, sporting boxing gloves, headgear, and a tulle-tiered wedding dress. Güreş then goaded passersby into stripping off the gown, revealing the skimpy grey

tank top and boxing shorts underneath. The piece was a direct response to legislature that allowed women wearing provocative clothing to be held responsible for any sexual assault committed against them. Güreş’s claim, then, is not just on her name, but also on a kind of brute sexuality, liable under the law. Attempts to “wed away” this threat only rile it further.

*Fatih* is part of a series Güreş calls *Unknown Sports* (2006–2010), which spins women’s efforts at honing their “natural” femininity into a satire of social bodybuilding. For the first of the *Indoor Exercises i/ii/iii* (2008–2009), a young woman clings to a kind of trapeze, while her headscarved companion attempts to apply sugar-wax to the would-be acrobat’s legs. As the women negotiate endurance, pain, precision and depilation, the camera breaks into occasional fits of stuttering, as if emulating slow-motion replay footage at the finish line of a race. The soundtrack is eerily mechanical, made up of alien, scraping noises, like technology breathing. The

pseudo-futuristic soundscape clashes with the setting, an outdated gymnasium, festooned with the signature trappings of an “Eastern” interior: patterned cloth and phallic vegetables, empty teacups and worn house slippers. After this “warm-up,” a second event livens up the soundtrack but reduces the action to just above a *tableau vivant*. It features one figure – her face swathed in fabric – posing on a pommel horse, as beneath her an older woman pokes between her legs with an enormous waxing cloth that resembles a sanitary pad. For the third exercise, a gymnast prances along a balance beam, high-stepping over the stewpot placed in the center. Her feats of agility and flexibility are performed in front of an all-female audience. There are only five women on the bleachers, but when they cheer the end of her routine, it is made to sound like an entire stadium erupting into applause. While humorous, the effect is also a reminder that these would-be competitors are still in the same room with the aesthetic, domestic and familial

obligations loaded onto them by society (The pommel horse gymnast literally wears her breasts on her back, more of a burden than a bounty.) Their labors and contortions may typically be invisible, but they are expected, nonetheless.

Güreş explores the near-surreal landscape when cultural expectations of house-and husband-keeping are removed, in *Çırçır* (2010), a series commissioned for the Berlin Biennial. The series takes its title from a town perched on the outskirts of İstanbul. There, in accordance with the traditional family structure, sons inherited their own apartments, while unmarried daughters – including two of the artist’s distant aunts – were relegated to live in upstairs bedrooms, prisoners of their ring-free fingers. When massive road construction veered near the village, however, this system found itself uprooted as well. *All* residents – regardless of gender – received government-issued payouts, which meant the women could now keep their own house, husband or not: mistresses

**Wrestling, 2009**  
 from the series Unknown Sports  
 Mixed media on paper  
 50 × 70 cm

not only of their own fates, but also of their own furniture.

Güreş's photographs reimagine the village as if it belonged exclusively to women without men. She prods at their daily routines to uncover their unseen

rituals. Behind the camera, one senses the gaze of both the eager anthropologist, but also of a tender sympathizer and potential cohort. A *Family Portrait-Hidden Women* (2010) appropriates a sociological trope by lining the women up beside the road as if to

scrutinize the species. Unusual suspects, they range in age, with the generation gaps gauged by dress: long skirts and patterned headscarves alongside bright blue tennis shoes and dyed magenta hair. *The Living Room* (2010) serves as a foil for this first portrait.



**Sisterhood of Religions, 2011**  
 Mixed media on 40 year old  
 Turkish Telekom paper, triptych  
 27.5 × 33 cm (each)

It placidly stations four figures on different components of a drab sofa set, which has been draped with beige furniture covers that stretch over the women as well, so as to leave only their stocking feet visible. Lurid silk dresses are laid out across the hidden figures, in loose approximation of the bodies beneath the sheet, assigning an available sexuality to the otherwise formless masses.

This game of hide-and-seek carries over into *Sefine* (2010), which focuses on an older woman standing on a plastic chair out by the woodpile. Her head is thrown back, eyes closed as if basking in the sun, though there is little light in the garden around her. She holds her fur coat open, but because she stands in

profile, the body underneath remains blocked off to viewers (After all, it isn't for them.) This precious fur reappears in the gleeful *Playing with a Water Gun* (2010). One character – who appears to be the same Sefine, her coat now resigned to a hanger – hunches in the nook between a wardrobe and the wall, a tangerine-colored plastic water canon tucked to her side. On the other end of the wardrobe, a second figure ducks under the doily rug, which has been tugged over the body, a futile camouflage. After all, playing at war has never been a particularly “feminine” occupation.

II.

While rarely explicitly political, Güreş proves a master of the unexpected maneuver.

Just as the roll-call photo of the women of *Çırçır* could contain so much underlying subversiveness, the artist's work often makes the strongest statements through simple powers of observation. This is true of even overtly contentious subject matter – the lesbian lovers of *Wrestling* (2009), the pissing pony in *Sisterhood of Religions* (2011), or *New Flag* (2011), which offers a wistful revision of the Turkish flag, replacing the crescent and the star with the soft shell of a head scarf, and the petals of a flower, pressed into an asterisk. Güreş speaks for communities in cultural isolation merely by plotting the reference points of their stories, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Along the way, she often



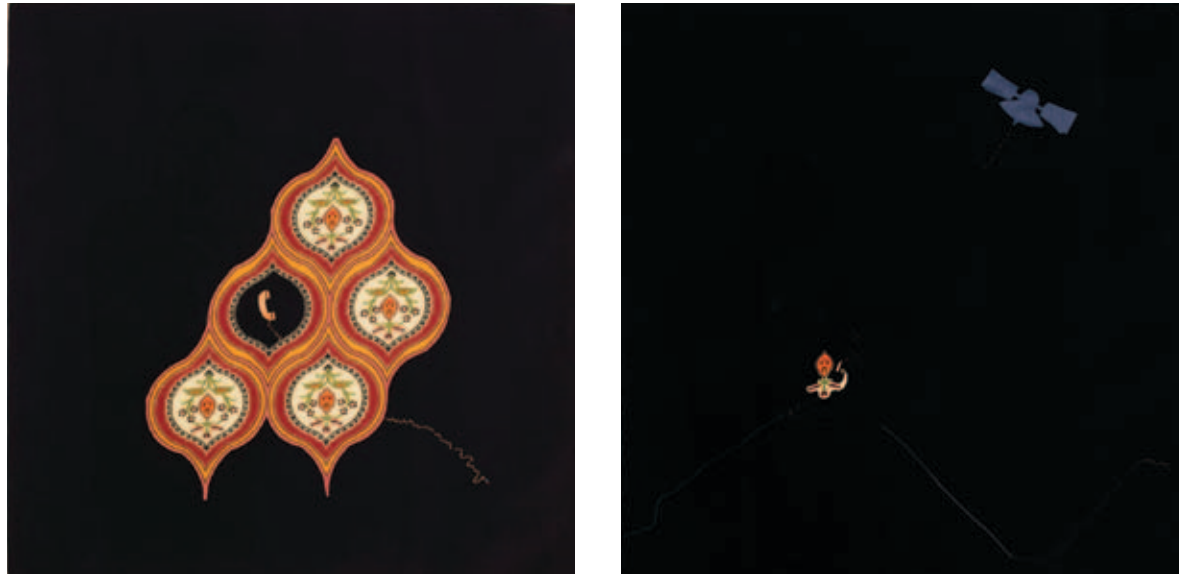




**New Flag, 2011**  
Mixed media on handmade paper  
43 × 51 cm



**Open Phone Booth, 2011**  
Mixed media on fabric, diptych  
79 × 78 cm (each-framed)



uncovers facts that trump all fiction.

One such story, *Open Phone Booth* (2007–2011), is set in the East Anatolian village where the artist’s father grew up. The village is known for a mixed population, drawing from the ethnic minorities of Kurds and Alevis, both of which are burdened by particularly heated histories within Turkey. The federal government has been less than subtle in their methods of persuading this joint community to consider relocating to out beyond

Turkey’s borders; services like water and electricity are spotty, and there is no regular telephone service to the village, other than a single (now defunct) connection installed as a token gesture in the 1970s. Mobile phones have stepped in as a means of communication to the outside world, but with no cellular towers in the near vicinity, residents have to trek to the highest points of the surrounding hilltops to catch a signal.

Güreş spent more than a year tracking how this kind of detour in the neighbors’ daily

routine has come to transform village life. She formatted her observations into a three-channel video, ushered by two small collages on black cloth. The imagery in these collages is spare and gracefully deployed. The first features an orange telephone, embedded into an onion-shaped panel of an embroidery design. A trail of thin stitches dribble down and outside the pattern, as if a long, disconnected cord. In the second, a small, rounded figure raises a telephone to its ear, a half salute to the grey satellite orbiting above.

**Webcam-Sex Queer Solo, 2012**  
from the series *Black*  
Mixed media on fabric  
72 × 78 cm (framed)

The accompanying video is structured remarkably like a collage, with multiple seasons and storylines rotating through the three screens. For each segment, Güreş makes deft

use of isolated characters or props. In one scene, a lone figure trudges up a hillside in winter, his boots sinking into the snow with a satisfying crunch. Another man appears

on the trail: “Brother where are you going?” “I need to make a phone call,” replies the first. In another scene, the camera merely lingers on the single telephone pole, its



**Webcam-Sex Queer Couple;  
Anal Fisting, 2012**  
from the series Black  
Mixed media on paper  
87.5 × 116.5 cm (framed)



**When the Spirit Rises to the Space  
& Spirit In the Space, 2012**  
from the series Black  
Mixed media on fabric, diptych  
97 × 81 cm (framed-left)  
104.5 × 93.5 cm (framed-right)





severed wire dangling. Later, a mother reaches the peak only to be routed to her son's answering machine. These glimpses point to stories left untold, layered like the veils in *Undressing*.

III.

At the same time she was working on *Open Phone Booth*, Güreş began a series of mixed media collage on black fabric. As with the film, these tapestries evoke a deep-rooted estrangement and longing, but the vocabulary draws from a decidedly different lexicon. The two large *Webcam-Sex* collages, entitled *Queer Solo* and *Queer Couple; Anal Fisting* (both 2012), pair overt titles to otherwise evasive compositions, laced with dark humor, scatological references and off-kilter eroticism. Half-sets of stage curtains appear drawn to either side of the images, a nod to a kind of meta-staging. The place of the audience, however, is filled by the hungry observers of the open laptops, whose cameras are trained on the private burlesque taking place before them.

In *Queer Solo*, a character of indeterminate sex squats over a steaming, rainbow-colored puddle, a clump of daisies cheerfully sprouting from somewhere between its legs. The sheer fabulousness of the act is literally overshadowed by a bare light bulb, dangling with a kind of gawky naked-ness, somehow more shame-inducing than the performer's exposed behind. *Queer Couple; Anal Fisting* introduces the unlikely duo of a plucky, anthropomorphic blossom (stemming from what appears to be a human scrotum) and its larger-than-life companion, a rotund figure with one leg caught in a high kick, a jaunty top hat hovering above the bouquet of posies it has for a head. To the far right, a bed remains quietly made; this sex, it would seem, is for the purposes of broadcast entertainment, of intimacy both indiscriminate and indiscreet.

Elements from the *Queer* collages drift into the dark *Artist's Home-Studio* (2013), which opts for a murky background of ribbed, blue-black fabric. The work is

spread out horizontally, in non-narrative sections addressing aspects of the psychological labor of creativity. In one such section, a set of disembodied hands, swathed in the sleek white gloves of a magician, coaxes a fountain of wonders and potions from an overturned hat. This bit of magic is flanked on either side by more or less coded references to thoughts of sex and suicide, alternating as motivation and distraction. For example, to the far left, a slender tree stands straight up in a sliver of orange sunlight, sending its blood-red roots into a pool of water below. On the right, a hair dryer tepidly dips its nose into the same waters, its electric tail snaking ominously across half the composition to a plug outlet. The trauma embedded in this imagery is cauterized by the explicitly theatrical elements (once more, a curtain sets this stage), let alone the comical depiction of the artist at work in the right-hand side of the composition. Still, when transposed to the artist's studio, the need for intimacy that played out in

the *Webcam-Sex* collages is recast as a kind of personal burlesque, a push-and-pull between forces of desire, distraction and creative production.

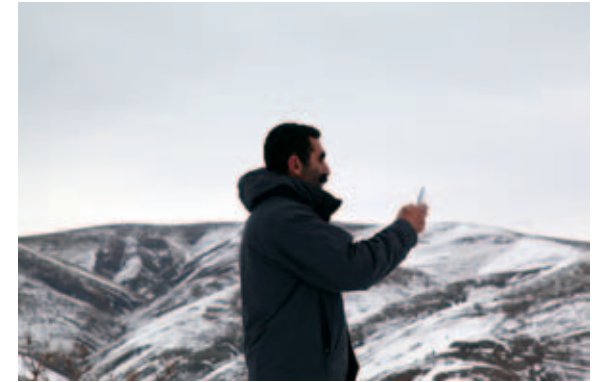
When considered against the sticky affirmation of *Self-Defloration*, this self-portrait-as-studio is bittersweet, suggesting that Güreş has refined her chokehold beyond mere footwork into something so formidable and fearless that even the artist herself is no longer immune. In the process, Güreş's specific maneuvers echo those of her subjects, individuals and communities who have found ways to exist outside social norms, subverting conventions around gender and sexuality, or seizing upon modern communication as a method of self-preservation. Indeed, communication need not be limited to "modern," in its most operative sense; as Güreş shows, fabric is a vastly undervalued medium, capable of operating both as a veil and as a means of revelation. Arguably, *Undressing* is punctuated by the same

interplay of the concealed and the revealed that takes the stage in the *Webcam-Sex* collages – or for that matter, any work addressing the desire for intimacy in the contemporary moment. This is why, while the *Artist's Home-Studio* may compare the work of the artist to a sleight of hand, the wrestling metaphor is the one which most faithfully describes the dance of control and surrender at the heart of Güreş's practice.

# Open Phone Booth

Produced over four years, *Open Phone Booth* (2007–2011) was inspired by visits to the East Anatolian village where Nilbar Güreş's father grew up. The artist recalls arriving at the village, and of its clear, if unacknowledged, cultural and ethnic topography: "I got out of the airport taksi and I knew I am in another place even though it is not designated as such. The language was Kurdish, songs on the street were Kurdish, people talked to each other Kurdish, I was the tourist there." The separation of Kurdish life in Turkey is evoked vividly in her comments, as is her sensitive relationship to her community of origin. The role of the artist-as-tourist, as a visitor in a country within country, as a person who both belongs and is, simultaneously, set apart, permeates the photographs that constitute the *Open Phone Booth*. Alternating between candid, intimate portraits, panoramic vistas, and fictionalized interventions into the landscape, the series depicts stark lack of infrastructure – from irrigation to telecommunications – that structures local life there. *Cemile is Calling* (2011), a large-scale photograph, depicts an undulating expanse of verdant, low hills interrupted by the figure of a woman who crouches in the forefront of the frame: perched on a craggy, moss-covered rock, she is turned away from the natural beauty and tuned into a conversation on a cell phone. She listens intently, rubbing her fingers together, as if sparking a fire. The tension between local scenery and global communication appears both utterly normal and yet, at the same time, the way the woman seems to flatly ignore the sweeping landscape around her subtly evokes a disconnect between a natural infrastructure, and a networked one. In *Haydar and his Friends* (2011), it is winter, the trees are barren, the hills are snow-covered, and a man stoops his head as he taps out a text message, while a friend reclines nearby. Picture after picture of solitary figure holding their digital device in a high place makes the viewer realize the locales are not chosen for their scenery, but rather because they're the Wi-Fi zones, which are few and far between. In *Still Life-I* (2011), tin buckets appear on either side of a frozen stream with a cord strewn between them – the artist's erection of a faux irrigation system, a protest, demand and wry joke in one. In *Telecommunication-2* (2011), the artist has sunk an old, disconnected phone into the snow; with the head disengaged, it appears as if it's an open phone line, a metaphor for the line of socio-economic translation that Güreş is carving out.

LAUREN CORNELL





















Pole That Is To Say Sculpture-1, 2011



Pole That Is To Say Sculpture-2, 2011







Still Life-2, 2011



Still Life-1, 2011





Top: Ermiş and Hasan, 2011  
Bottom: Visit Me-2, 2011















Looking for the Image, 2011



Identity, 2011









Gülten is Calling, 2011



A Day of Sacrifice At "Delil", 2011





## Çırçır

Nilbar Güreş declares war on the prevailing relations between the sexes by playful means, her weapons ranging from sewing needles to boxing gloves. In drawings, collages, performances, videos, and photographs, she overstates the norms of the majority society, countering them with hybridized enactments of female identity. In doing so, she challenges the renaissance of traditional role models in Turkey as well as the Western fear of Islamic symbols, which the artist sees as becoming increasingly instrumentalized by xenophobic parties. The series of photographs entitled *Çırçır* (2010) was produced for the 6th Berlin Biennial, in a house on the edge of İstanbul that once belonged to Güreş's relatives. A patriarchally defined site, it represented a microcosm of social structures, as it was soon to be vacated to make way for a tunnel construction. Urbanization is ambivalent here. While dwellings used to be divided up among sons, parity payouts enabled daughters to emancipate themselves from the family. With women of widely differing cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and educational standards, Güreş conducted a temporary occupation of once male domains. The collaborative play before the camera results in a precise measuring out of the maneuvering space of identity, of ideas of the "own" and the "alien," as well as the cultural shaping of images. The photographs testify to respect and trust, and set a strong example of solidarity against a backdrop of far-reaching social transformation.

KOLJA REICHERT























On the Bottom, 2010































The Living Room, 2010











# TrabZone

Remembering is a performative exercise in Nilbar Güreş's work, since it involves an imminent desire to change what is remembered while translating it in the form of an artwork. Each person remembers differently; it is an idiosyncratic and singular mark that belongs to the person in question. Güreş remembers spatially. She has a deep painterly relationship with the spatial, even though her work is mainly read in terms of her problematization of gender constructions in a post-feminist perspective. That is precisely why landscape and geography are key factors in her artistic practice, appearing as pivotal narrative agents in her re-enactments. The sites she travels to in particular series have personal associations from her past. As such, the title *TrabZone* (2010) is no coincidence, for the artist takes us on a special journey to a certain zone in the personal unconscious of her childhood, one marked by a particular city in the Black Sea region of Turkey, Trabzon. This is not only an attempt to reclaim the space of her memory, but also to construct an imaginary geography trespassing any rationalization. Black Sea humor has a special part in the folklore of the collective unconscious in Turkey. As one of its main cities, Trabzon is notorious for its fanatic attachment to religious and national values. Being as such, a place with many paradoxes; strongly attached to a Turkish Muslim identity, it was also one of the historic centers of Pontus (during Hellenic and Roman times), whose inhabitants are known as the very first converts to Christianity. Today, one of the strongest associations of the city is the fact that it is the hometown of Ogün Samast, the boy who assassinated Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist which serves as an unforgettable symbol for the fraternity among the peoples of Anatolia. In short, Trabzon is a tense and intense city, a perfect setting for the artist to humorously force her viewers to look beyond the usual patterns in which they have been taught to think.

ÖVÜL DURMUŞOĞLU

















































# Unknown Sports

A young woman is exercising on uneven parallel bars while having her legs waxed by another woman, dressed as a house cleaner. A woman is performing a gymnastic balancing act atop a pommel horse, inappropriately dressed as a housewife, her head covered, while another woman attempts to go under her skirt with what appears to be a sanitary pad, but that is, in reality, a cloth piece from an old bed sheet used for waxing. A young woman is standing on a balance beam wearing sport clothes, but her large breasts, covered by a bra, are located on her back. These scenes from Nilbar Güreş's series of photographs in *Unknown Sports* (2009) are set in a gymnasium, where sporting equipment is adorned with tablecloths, traditional carpets cover the floors, and small household objects clutter the space. Güreş's approach in this series exemplifies Mieke Bal's definition of theatricality as *mise-en-scène*: "a form, medium, or practice [...] in which the object of cultural analysis performs a meeting between (aesthetic) art(ifice) and (social) reality" (from "Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide," 2002.) Against the backdrop of changing gender roles in contemporary Turkey, Güreş produces striking visual representations that challenge the traditional patriarchal order. Routine institutional practices of classification and spatialization – along with systematic sanctions, repetitive exercises, control over deviations, and the taming of bodies – are what constitute the "normal," a designation that conceals its disciplinary and technological character. In *Unknown Sports*, there is nothing normal about normality. By performing domestic and beautification procedures, the protagonists of Güreş's photographs also choreograph the maneuvers of integration of immigrant Muslim women, dictated by European multicultural standards in which economic exploitation is converted into problems of cultural tolerance. All told, the series *Unknown Sports* (2006–2010) includes works of photography, performance, video, collage, drawing and painting – the artist's largest and most diverse body of work to date.

NATAŠA ILIĆ























Pommel Horse, 2009











The Art of the Rolling Pin, 2010



Fatih performance, 2008





İNDİRİM

HAC KAYIT MERKEZİ

AKEL

İstanbul's Fatih district is well known for its religiously conservative inhabitants. The day of the performance was a Muslim religious holiday. In the performance Güres is getting undressed and encouraging passers-by, especially women, to take off her bridal dress.





Kadiköy is one of İstanbul's shopping and business districts. In this performance I am using a book and an egg. If I were to run, I would have to step against the egg and the book. The book's cover shows ornamentalations which make it look like a Quran, but in fact, the book is a fairy tale book. While performing, a plain clothes policeman wanted to arrest me and the onlookers were keen to take me to court for violating their morality.











Üsküdar has a long religious tradition. Here, I am using the same fairy tale book with its cover that looks secular and the egg that would get crushed if I were to run. Under the pressure of the bystanders my performance was brought to an end.





Üsküdar performance, 2008



Üsküdar performance, 2008





Beşiktaş is a shopping and business district of İstanbul. On the day of my performance the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was visiting the Turkish president Abdullah Gül in Beşiktaş.













Beşiktaş performance, 2008

## Biography

Nilbar Güreş (İstanbul, 1977) received a B.A. in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Marmara University, İstanbul, and an M.A. in Painting & Graphics from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. Some of the major exhibitions Güreş has participated in include “Signs Taken in Wonder”, MAK, Vienna (2013); “Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment”, ARTER, İstanbul (2013); “Rosa Arbeit auf Goldener Strasse”, Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien, Vienna (2012); “Dream and Reality”, İstanbul Museum of Modern Art (2011); “What is Waiting Out There”, 6th Berlin Biennale (2010); “Where Do We Go From Here?”, secession, Vienna (2010); “What Keeps Mankind Kind Alive?”, 11th International İstanbul Biennial (2009); and the travelling exhibition titled “Tactics

of Invisibility”, which was exhibited at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna (2010), TANAS, Berlin (2010–2011), and ARTER, İstanbul (2011). Her solo shows include “Nilbar Güreş: Nilbar Wien-Na” at Galerie Martin Janda, Vienna (2013); “Undressing”, MuseumsQuartier, Vienna (2011); “Self-Defloration”, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2011); “Nilbar Güreş”, at RAMPA, İstanbul, and at Iniva, London (2010–2011); “Nilbar Güreş: Window Commission 2010”, Rivington Place, London (2010); as well as “Unknown Sports. Indoor Exercises”, at Salzburger Kunstverein (2009). In 2012, Güreş completed a residency at International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York, supported by BMUKK, Vienna.



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Texts © the authors

Published in 2013 by OSMOS Books  
in collaboration with RAMPA Gallery, İstanbul

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be reproduced in any form without the written  
permission of the publisher.

Nilbar Güreş would like to thank all who feel  
involved in this book.

Editor  
Cay Sophie Rabinowitz

Copy Editor  
Arianne DiNardo

Design  
Garrick Gott

Design Assistant  
Yoshie Hozumi

Typeface  
Optimo Theinhardt

Paper  
135gsm Symbol Tatami White  
90gsm Cyclus Offset

Printed and bound by die Keure, Bruges

RAMPA  
Şair Nedim Caddesi No: 21a  
Akaretler 34357 Beşiktaş  
İstanbul, Turkey

OSMOS  
50 E. 1st Street  
New York, New York  
10003

First Edition Monograph  
Cloth bound hardback  
7.3 × 10.25 inches  
156 pgs, 92 color

North American Distribution  
D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers  
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor  
New York, New York 10013  
[www.artbook.com](http://www.artbook.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Güreş, Nilbar.  
Nilbar Güreş: who is the subject?  
/ Güreş, Nilbar;  
p. cm  
Includes index  
ISBN 978-0-9883404-5-9  
1. Photography. 2. Performance Art.  
3. Nilbar Güreş, 1977 -- I. Nilbar Güreş, 1977.  
2013

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