

# Nilbar Güreş–The Semantic Diversity of Material

A conversation between Artist Nilbar Güreş and Sırma Zaimoğlu

**I would like to start by asking you to mention the places where you have positioned the cultural images of your origin. In my opinion, the way you use these images also hints towards your artistic production. What would you say?**

We all have our world of images based on the cultural diversity that we come from. Turkey is a very mixed geography and we are very different from one another, therefore it is even more impossible to generalise a country like this. But as we know, we are an ancient country with an incredible settlement and culture. The things we think of as dating back to the last five hundred years may as well be much deeper rooted in a way we can't handle when we research further; it turns out to be thousands, tens of thousands of years old. Regardless of where and when these cultures, beliefs and traditions came from, they are more or less dosed by the inhabitants of the region, somewhat according to class codes, in one way or another. I myself did not grow up in an abnormal conservative environment. After all, my father is a Kurdish Alevi; Kurdish Alevis are an isolated society that lives closer to natural religions. The funny thing is that I spent my childhood with conservative people in Istanbul – which is the most modernised city of Turkey.

In this case, we sometimes understand that it is migration and the vessels that actually position us. Going back to my first productions of early 2000, you can see that I am influenced by the dowry of the women around me, the bitter stories of the materialist investments they have accumulated for the marriage establishment, one of the only things that will determine their future social status. But again, you'll immediately notice that I've transformed them and turned them upside down.

**In your work, you often bring down the separations/comparisons of race, species and class. However, we are watching this not as a didactic protest, but rather as a deconstruction that you carry out through medium and composition. How does this fiction come about? How did you start working like this?**

Didacticism is not a technique that has worked well for me, it is more a problem of the upper and upper-middle class. I cannot be sitting, thinking, calculating and producing books anyway because I am not a trained person, I am a self-made person.

This is probably why I work like this; I mean as someone who went against the structure and the order they come from ...

In my opinion, there are more raw ideas and initial responses in my works. The difficulty of my production is not to make the works best suited to the place, the concept, whatever you call it, or the task given there, perhaps. The hardest thing for me is to stay with myself and involve my senses, not to corrode them. The hardest thing is to become emotionally strong, and rediscover what they still whisper to me as time passes, because we artists work and live under terrible pressure like most people. It is always the voice of our instincts that we lose first. I am trying not to be tamed. When I say no to something to a person, sometimes it is months later that I understand why I wanted it that way, but I will have done the right thing.

**I do not want to go on without mentioning your relationship with photography. You say that you use photography as a medium, as a tool, but insist that photography is not an effective branch of art in a contemporary sense. I am sure that your detailed point of view will be inspiring for those who are new to you.**

Photography is the oldest visual mechanical documentation technique. I am not a photographer, I use photography as a tool, like many other artists, to put it directly. I'm not a film director either, but again, like most of us, I sometimes work with video. The aesthetic power of photography is indisputable, but this situation does not make a wonderful shot a work of art. As a result, neither the picture, the photograph, nor the film of a thing that does not have a unique, constructed idea be art. We share the same virtual world with billions of iPhone photographers right now, right? How many of them are visual artists? If we look at it that way, maybe we can understand this better.

When the curfew began in March, when everyone was panicking, I just thought everyone was now a thousand steps closer to my reality. Almost everyone works during certain hours on weekdays and has regular personal time on weekends or evenings. But artists and workers cannot choose their own working hours. It doesn't matter day or night, or on the weekend; my life takes place anywhere behind some walls anyway. So I never panicked, and just because I didn't have to rush now, I was able to concentrate more and concentrate on one thing at a time. I have visited many places for project purposes in recent years, but I could not stay as I wanted, research, concentrate or go back to them. Because we cannot be free in the places and projects we are invited to because of the pressure of production. Therefore, in these pictures, there are palms that I see in the countries I have visited and I could not sit under, and mountains that I could not look up from.



Exhibition view, *The Sea Said Okay*, Photo © Galerist, Istanbul

**Can you talk about your approach to social roles? Unfortunately, many artists completely detach themselves from their personal bonds when criticizing norms of their origin; which appears orientalist and raw to me. Therefore, I would like to expand on this.**

Real artists who live like themselves already find it difficult to adapt to any role because of their lifestyle, of course, I don't know what kind of artists you are referring to. Because nowadays, what we call an artist has become a product that poses in hip places with a glass in hand or in a white cube, turning up in every zoom meeting with their black, serious and expensive jacket. This type of artist imitates the image aesthetics of the potential of the buyer and pretends to share the values of the same class as them, thus making themselves feel close to the buyer and facilitating their consumption. The use of orientalism is also a method to help avoid meddling, surviving with a top-class shell; It is also a method to be a 'positive energy artist' who is stylish and available at any time, open to anything at any time. It's hard to know how people feel as long as any transformation is possibly real. After all, it is a world of art which is frequently used by those who want to climb up. This is the purpose of some people, I hope those who wish so will achieve this. If you ask me, I would personally be more interested in self-destructive artists; those who are avoided, feared, those who do not mix well with the crowd are the most original people in my opinion.



**What is the reason for using textiles, especially dowry materials? What is the context you bring them together in?**

Textiles and other materials show many semantic diversity, each material usually comes with its unique story. As an artist, I believe things and their meanings come to me. Sometimes, on the contrary when you research or go through it a lot, this meaning is never revealed. I personally take everything related to art very seriously. Its production, the feverish structure that moves with smoke behind it, and all its costs. I know that sometimes I have naive ideas, it is because of my pure belief in art. I guess those who see this state of mine send me fabric or gift me personally. Because I am a person lost in my own world, I am sure there are those who look at me with pity. The artist determines the context of using dowry or textiles for each work. It is impossible to make a common sentence for all works, but the first thing I do is free them from their original context and reinterpret them.



Exhibition view, *The Sea Said Okay*, Photo © Galerist, Istanbul

**We come across trans figures and compositions in your production. Likewise, you have many works that can be read related to feminist context. I wonder if your issue is with gender, with trends or with norms?**



Feminism, queerness, veganism, consciousness of the right to life and all responsibilities for freedom or existence clinging together in the most organic ways is the reason behind their reflection in me. As long as I can remember, I have had a passionate state that can be regarded as overdose, because I never separated these things from each other. Now I am 43 years old and these are well visible as a chain. First, they will be extreme to everyone and then they will be adopted. I am satisfied.



Nilbar Güreş, *The Sea Said Okay*, 50 x 70cm, Oil on canvas, Photo © Galerist, Istanbul

**Despite your painting education, you did not paint for a long time until recently. Could you tell us the reason? Do you think that your artistic disciplines have an impact on your paintings today?**

I have never painted before as a professional, or in a way I have deemed satisfactory. The paintings in the exhibition *The Sea Said Okay* are my first paintings. Of course, everything we put our noses in affects us. Since I have been making photographs, collages, videos and sculptures for the last ten years, these paintings now appear as such aesthetics and products of such a world. Since these paintings are works of today, they will interact with the photographs or the videos of tomorrow. This is a highly unpredictable and exciting adventure for me.

**In a previous interview I remember you telling me that your art is your activism – which makes me wonder; what are the questions and issues have been occupying you?**

It may sound strange but believe me when I say an exhibition made without asking anyone's opinion or communicating with anyone is not easy today. When I first created these paintings, no one except one person was sure of them. I insisted I was going to show them and this was it. It is important to be able to suppress it this way. I find it tragic that the artist, who is finally able to remain in solitude at a time when everyone is insecure, became more aware of what they want more than ever. When death reminds itself, everyone shrugs off. What I think about the most lately is my freedom. The thing that imprisoned me behind four walls suddenly transformed when I could finally do what I wanted.

**Is there anything you would like to add?**

The future will never be as we order or desire it to be today.

**Sırma Zaimoğlu** (b.1992, İzmir) is an independent art advisor, the curator and director of the Corpus Gallery and Publishing House in Istanbul. She graduated from the Department of Art Management, took roles in project management in various institutions. Based on her independent research, areas she worked on are Turkish Art Market, Gender Studies in art and art publishing.