

Art in America

JANUARY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Nilbar Güreş: *Haydar and His Friends*, from the series "Open Phone Booth," 2011, C-print, 42½ by 59 inches; at Rampa.

NILBAR GÜREŞ

Rampa

Spanning performance, video and photography, Turkish artist Nilbar Güreş's previous bodies of work often dealt with constructing gender identity within patriarchal cultures. Her current series of photographs and videos, titled "Open Phone Booth," focuses on a small village in the Eastern Anatolian region of Bingöl, Turkey, where her father grew up. Belonging to an ethnic Kurdish and Alevi religious minority, the villagers face frequent interruptions of basic services such as running water, electricity and telephone networks. The phone lines connecting the remote mountain village to the rest of the world were severed during political clashes between Kurdish rebels and the Turkish military in the 1980s and have never been reconnected. Without land lines, the residents have to search for cell phone signals, wandering about in the region's highest peaks. Considering the rapid economic development in Turkey's rural provinces over the past several decades, the fact that the village's phone lines have remained inoperable for so long suggests a systematic disenfranchisement of this minority community by the government.

Projected onto three walls of the gallery, a multi-channel video presented the villagers' cell phone conversations. People trek to the mountaintop on footpaths over rugged ground. Some are unable to find a signal, while others lose calls prematurely. We hear them speaking in both Turkish and Kurdish to relatives who have migrated to larger towns, expressing longing for those departed and also asking for certain necessities. "Some bread, a flashlight and some batteries, immediately," requests one man, standing on snow-covered terrain in the dead of winter, the mountain backdrop

showing unplowed roads. In another shot, the mountains now covered with wildflowers and buzzing insects, we see a woman complaining about a burst water main. The video sketches out a parallel between the monumentality of the peaks climbed by these villagers and the scale of the inconveniences they face.

As viewers, of course, our enjoyment of these rustic images' picturesque beauty may obfuscate the villagers' physical hardships. It's reassuring, then, to watch them also find pleasure in the scenery, making our appreciation of the landscape feel a little less touristic. At one point in the video three men are seen in a moment of repose on top of a snowy mountain, basking in their surroundings. Listening to a Kurdish folk song, played off a cell phone, each seems to be lost in his own internal reality.

A selection of roughly 20 photographs presents some of the scenes from the video and offers a greater variety of views onto this village. One of the photographs, titled *Clothier-Backstage*, lends further insight into Güreş's relationship with her subjects. The artist uses a flash and a staged backdrop of aluminum siding to capture two women clothed in wigs and scarves. The image appears more like a play in progress than a slice of daily life. It suggests that the other scenes Güreş has captured in both the video and the photographs may be composed with the active collaboration of the village residents rather than through their passive acquiescence. In potentially casting daily life as a performance, complete with representations of its hardships and rewards, Güreş draws a connection between this newest work and her previous explorations of gender and identity.

—Berin Golonu