

BY Kolja Reichert, 2010 for the catalog of 6th Berlin Biennial

Nilbar Güres, 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 name “Güres,” means “wrestling,” and on the day Mahmud Ahmadinedschad visited Istanbul, Güres, appeared in wrestling gear in the Bes, iktas, business quarter. The reactions of passersby, ranging from amused to puzzled, became part of the work. On another occasion, Güres, wore a wedding gown and boxing helmet. With the help of onlookers she stripped off the gown, and walked through the city in boxing shorts. By transgressing regimes of visibility in public space, Güres, makes them visible and up for discussion.

Güres’s collages of drawings and textiles rely on handwork, a domain generally assigned to women. Motifs and symbols from the oriental pictorial tradition are crossed with modern poses and (homo-)erotic scenes—the extension by pencil and needle of spaces of enactment that presents identity as open and freely malleable (Unbekannte Sportarten, 2008–09). Güres, enacted the motifs in performances in a gym with women balancing on cooking pots or artistically exaggerating beauty rituals. Sports, as a male-dominated field where social conceptions of success and recognition are played out with the body, served as a template for heroizing female experience in patriarchal structures. The photo triptychs testify to sovereignty that is cynically fractured by the exaggeration of clichés.

The series of photographs *Çlrçlr* (2010) was produced for the Berlin Biennale in a house on the edge of Istanbul that once belonged to Güres, ’s relatives. A patriarchally defined site, it represented a microcosm of social structures. It is soon 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 orientation, and educational standards, Güres, conducted a temporary occupation of onetime 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 of 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 transformations.