

ARSLAN EROĞLU

Swimming in that River

If we were to write an essay for his exhibition catalogue, we could have said, “The paintings of Arslan Eroğlu are gateways to mystery,” and it would not have been an exaggeration. We have known him for ages, and not only his painting, but his words are also gateways to mystery. Once we take a step into that world, our mind cannot tell where the gate stands, or for that matter, who we really are. But once we return, the “painting” fits into its proper place. What we call “place” is in fact a vast piece of land, and time alone is a lengthy history. But who is the subject? To use Eroğlu’s metaphor, it is a river that keeps flowing. The pretext being his work exhibited at Artbeat, we mounted an expedition to Arslan Eroğlu’s studio, and scratched the surface of the mystery.

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Where shall we begin this adventure?

AE: From September 12 (12 September 1980- The third and most devastating coup d’etat in the history of the Republic of Turkey). September 12 made me paint a lot of paintings. When we could not do a lot of things we could before; and when we tried to explain to ourselves “how things turned out like they did”, we sat down and painted. Once you begin to ask questions about the past, you do not stop at political questions; questions about your personal adventure and about painting begin to come as well... It was not only the September 12 regime that made us feel unsettled. You criticize the system you are in, the education you received, and what that system called “the right path to follow” in the context of painting. And you depart from where you are.

And departing from the “picture” you arrived at, to use your phrase, at the “plate”. Did you experience a break with the past?

The actual breakpoint is academic education. What took place later was a return to my proper self. The outcomes I have arrived at did actually exist when I went to the

Academy of Fine Arts. At the academy you encounter the doctrine of painting imposed by Western modernity. Moreover, it is a highly distorted and deficient version of it that is dumped on you. A man arrives from a city in Anatolia, from Samsun in my case, with no knowledge or formation in the field of art; and suddenly encounters the work of Botticelli, church frescoes and begins to learn from them. Drawing, sketching, painting... But there is always a frame that is being drawn on behalf of you. That is, the doctrine of painting that modernity has forced upon us from as far back as the Renaissance. The academy loyal to the Kemalist version of modernity... You learn about painting, art, and the artist from within capitalist doctrine, without separating it from that whole. And once you realize this and begin to criticize it, you again criticize it from within that doctrine. You find yourself in the midst of a tonne of “-ism”s. Passing through a tonne of “-ism”s, we have made it from the 70s to the 2000s; but all these new forms, the installation, conceptual art or the happening, all these forms are presented within the frame of a painting.

But you did encounter pre-modern art as well, didn’t you?

What we call capitalism, or modernity begins long before the 1800s, the industrial revolution or the French Revolution; it begins when the eye begins to perceive nature as a lens. And that means the early Renaissance, the 1300s. That is where we should have Modernity begin. In this context, modernity begins when the West, just like the lens of a camera, begins to transfer nature onto a surface in representative form. It begins to examine nature as the object of science. Science enters the service of certain social classes, and is developed as the property of these classes and becomes a market. And in art history, from the Medicis to the patronage of the church, they all create a market. Museums are established and new fields emerge. But the main issue is how the eye perceives nature and transfers it to a surface, the perception of perspective that began in the 1200s, the 1300s, during the early Renaissance period. That’s also what I am fighting against. And when we look how it was in the Eastern Mediterranean, we encounter a different approach. In this sense, I return to sign painting; the job I used to do before I came to the academy. What is sign painting? Arranging letters on a two-dimensional surface. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the shapes of letters correspond to various cultural images. The arrangement of letters on the surface of a signpost and the painting I am doing now are the same thing. In 1966, when I was still in primary school, my master showed me this: “My son, this is how you bring letters together, you carve this one out, and you put this one next to the other one...” This is what I still continue to do. What I have just said, what I call the Eastern Mediterranean, is in fact a tradition that extends as far east as Japan. In other words, a picto-grammatical representation.

When you mention a signpost, we today think of the Latin alphabet, whereas the Arabic alphabet reminds us of the art of hat, or Islamic calligraphy. What is the relationship between hat and “sign painting”? What role does the alphabet play in this relationship?

Whether you use the Latin alphabet or the Arabic alphabet, the main issue remains the same -arranging letters side by side in a two-dimensional field. There is no perspective. Just like an image on a movie screen, or even like an image about to disappear. The inner, special meanings of the letters come after this. In Hurufi logic, hat may have a different definition



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