

wit, because they travel. You can bear travel only if you are witty.

Let us go back to where we started; “Meclis/Gathering” is in actual fact an alphabet, but it does not have 29 letters...

The alphabet with 29 letters is the alphabet of the Republic of Turkey. This one has 28 letters. It is the Hurufi alphabet. There is an intense element of Hurufism in the Alevi, Bektashi water.

Was it a good or a bad decision to switch from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin alphabet? What is your view of the “Alphabet Revolution”?

Letters may look beautiful when looked at from a distance, but once you begin to write words with those letters, will the alphabet relate to that word, that mood, to your constitution, your culture? It is possible to create great typography with the Latin alphabet, too. Do the word, the sequence of words, the language you form agree with the Arabic alphabet, that is the issue. I am open to all alphabets.

Do you think the Latin alphabet suited our psychological mood?

It seems like it did for a certain period. I am not saying this in order to criticize or approve of that process; I see the 1930s and 1940s both as lost years and as years defined by a certain necessity. When you change the letters, remove them from your life, that constitutes a political decision. And in actual fact, it did not suit our psychological mood. We have to accept that.

If we return to the 28 figures in “Meclis”...

Not a single one of the 28 figures here repeats another, neither physically, nor in terms of posture. We stand side by side, we are the same, but then again, we are not the same. We are one, but only when we get together. We are one, when 28 of us come together. Whether I align them horizontally or vertically, they always correspond to one.

Why do you not imagine your figures, and instead work with live models?

Every human being, every living being leaves a certain trail of magic behind. Each movement of the model represents a different letter in my mind, and each gesture can correspond to an expression. I can only see this in the movement of a living being. I tried to it by imagining them, but after a certain point, they turn into schematic forms and the hands, the mouths, the noses all resemble each other.

How many different models did you work with?

Since the last exhibition, in the last three years, I have worked with 74 different models. Even if they have similar physiques, even a single posture can make an individual different. This renders the lettering different. And that difference is very important, it is something that activates and mobilizes the image in the general plane. When performing the move, the model can also express something that I did not create in my mind. In my view, the model is not like a Western nude, but like a letter. We always perceive the model as a nude, like in the Western tradition. The nude is there in the painting for the observation of the eye. The model is aware of the person who is looking. But in my work, the model is not even aware whether there is a viewer or not. I see the model as a letter.

Do you explain this to your models? Do you tell them, “You are a letter now”?

I do explain if they ask me, “Why am I posing like this?” They also see the examples on canvas in the studio. A few of them said, regarding the frog-posture, “I can’t pose like this.” I asked them “Why?” “I don’t feel well,” one replied. “Then don’t,” I said. “But I’m a model” came the reply. “Don’t think of yourself as a model. You lie down like this in your everyday life too, on your face or back. Imagine I am not here, and you are just lying there,” I said. About 15 minutes later, “you’re right, it is possible,” was the final reply.

Is Elif masculine or feminine?

A letter does not have gender. It depends on the plane you use. It could be both. What counts is that they are superimposed to create a human image. It is not something that progresses through gender.

Do the figures you depict not have gender?

They do, in terms of their forms.

But apart from their form, do they not have pleasures, desires?

No, that is impossible in my painting, I do not make portraits. There can be no expression of crying, laughing, desiring, rejecting, wanting, suffering in the smallest line visible in the faces.

These are necessities for canvas painting. The more profane the image, the more you need such things.

But for instance in “Love” or in “Lovers” we can see desire, pleasure and happiness, or in other words, emotion...

That is a subtle state. The state we have here and portrait painting are two different things. This is not about the dramatic structure of the relationship between the figures, it is about the atmosphere. For the portrait to possess an expression on his or her face is something else, here the happiness is in the atmosphere. It is a spiritual atmosphere. You can’t see a spiritual atmosphere in canvas painting. But you can in William Blake. A spiritual atmosphere exists only if it carries a secret within itself. When you begin to read emotion via the hand, the foot, the face of the figure; that is much removed from my field of work. The most you can have in my painting is a spiritual atmosphere. In “Love” and “Lovers”, which you find different, there is perhaps a neutralization rather than a spiritual atmosphere. But deep down, these too are images, shadows that disappear on the screen like all the other figures. Like the Karagöz Hacivat screen.

Is the distinction between the profane and the spiritual that sharp; or could we say that we have one foot in this world, and one foot in the other?

What we call the other world is here, too. What I mean by going to and coming from the beyond is not leaving this world entirely. It is leaving this world by carrying this world with you, and continuing to feel that you are here. I will repeat the same example; the river flows, and when you bathe in the river, you are not separate from the source. When you go to the beyond, you take your present being with you. I do not mean a going and coming like in a shamanistic ritual. That water will continue to flow like it has done until today. I will go, and others will be added to that. I happened to correspond to a certain point in this water. It was not a very conscious decision. Your breeding brings you there. I received Western education, I read Marxist literature, I was influenced by things that modernity brought, I read, I ate, I drank... But none of this was fully internalized. I sense I am

loaded with a mission brought on by centuries, as if I have to do this. But the foundations of Marxism and the foundations of the tradition that exists here do not contradict each other.

How do you decide that a painting is finished?

I don’t, actually. Even when it is finished, it does not end, its adventure continues. For instance, I made two superimposed figures, and I wasn’t satisfied. You do the technical calculation of how you can put three, four, fifty figures on top of each other, you want to see the adventure. You enter that adventure for a certain period of time; it either works out or it doesn’t. You can return there another time, or you may never return, because another field might attract you and take you away.

How would you like to end this conversation?

When I feel it is necessary, I go and chat with Siyah Kalem, or his circle of friends, have some kumis to drink with them and then come back. (laughs) They whisper something to me, but I can’t explain it to you, I feel it. It is not spoken in the language we know; it is something else. We bathe in the same lake. (laughs)