

## Artist Tulu Bayar: Shifting from Traditional to Digital Photography

By [Alexandra Israel](#)



*Tulu Bayar in her studio. Courtesy of the artist.*

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Artists are often at the forefront of new ideas, and their work can offer new ways to see the world: where it has been and where it is going. In conjunction with her current

solo show at Amos Eno Gallery in Brooklyn, Turkish-born U.S.-based multi-media artist Tulu Bayar speaks about how the shift from traditional film to digital media impacted her artistic process that investigates materiality, medium, and social constructs of religion and gender.

At a time when relations in the Middle East are tense, we revisit one of her works about water shortage in the region. We also speak about her long career as a professor in art and how students approach their work-life balance in new ways that pay more attention to their mental health.

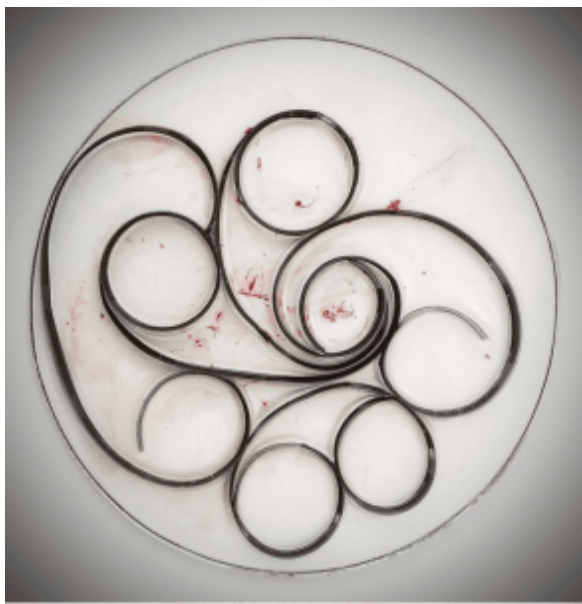
**You were trained in film and photography in the 90s, which means you have experienced great shifts in how to work with the medium—from wet film to digital and the revolution of editing and retouching digitally. How was this shift for you?**

Tulu Bayar: The shift from traditional film to digital media in the 90s had a transformative impact on my artistic process. Digital technology provided me with the freedom to experiment in ways that were previously impossible with traditional film. The instant review, editing, and manipulation of images on a computer screen opened up new creative possibilities for me. From digital photography, I moved to video editing and digital sound design. These skills all helped me create multi-sensory installations.

Rather than seeing this transition as a strict shift, I view it as a natural flow in my artistic journey. I consider myself an artist unbound by specific media, positioning myself on the borderline of two languages and cultures. This perspective reflects my sensitivity to flux and transition. My work embodies a hybrid language, allowing for

cross-border examination and the incorporation of otherness. It's characterized by fluidity and multifaceted expressions.

The flexibility gained from working with digital and analog mediums, combined with conceptual approaches, enables me to seamlessly navigate between the two. For example, in my latest work, 'Twine,' I employed both analog and digital processes extensively. Source photographs were digitally created and printed from my photographic archive in both Turkey and the USA. Subsequently, inkjet prints were employed to produce Citra Transfer Prints on cotton paper which is a very hands-on process. The final touch involved treating the prints with a liquid paste derived from soil, sand, water, and vegetation gathered from various geographical regions of the USA and Turkey. The resulting coloration, such as red, brown, and gray brushstrokes, varied due to the differing ratios and materials used in creating the paste. This entire process represents an environmentally safe hybrid between analog and digital methods.



*Tulu Bayar. Traces #22: 9" diameter, 1/3" depth, Photographic film, resin, India ink, glass etching medium. Courtesy of Strata Gallery.*

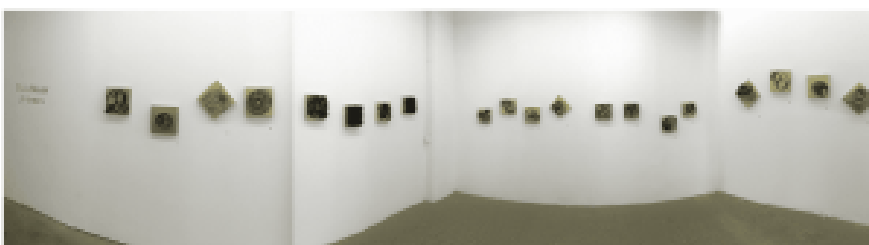
**In your exhibition “Traces” the wet film itself becomes the subject installed in circular sculptures. What did it mean to show this material in this way in 2021?**

Tulu Bayar: “Traces” draws upon my decade-long exploration of drawing with photographic film and employs meditative repetition to communicate the idea of oneness: all binary concepts share and are connected to one source. I first started to use photographic film as a sculptural form in the early 2010s. In contrast to an examination of the physical, my work focuses on the spiritual essence of wholeness and mysticism that is deeply rooted in Rumi’s teachings. “Traces” is composed of several mixed-media works meticulously created from photographic film, ink, and resin. Each exhibits an exploration in calligraphic abstraction, performance, drawing, and ebru. Ebru is a traditional Turkish marbling art that is made with special ink on water.

**A follow-up question. Many believe there is another major shift in photography and image-making with AI. Software like Midjourney comes to mind and the actors strike over rights to their images if they should be used to create new content. What are your thoughts? Have you started working with AI, or does that not interest you?**

TB: While my work is currently focused on being tactile, multi-sensory, and detail-oriented with a preference for handmade elements, I acknowledge the pragmatic aspects of digital technology. I find value in what technology offers both in my studio and in general. As of now, I haven’t ventured into using AI, but that doesn’t rule out the possibility in the future. It’s too early for me to make a definitive judgment on incorporating AI into my artistic process.

In today's rapidly advancing technological landscape, dismissing any technological advancements is inevitable. It's essential to experiment with technology and find responsible ways to engage with it, taking charge of how it will impact our work. Analog photographers were initially skeptical of digital technologies, but over time, discussions about their legitimacy have faded. Photography, by its nature and history, has always embraced new technological advancements, inheriting and evolving with each wave of innovation.



*Installation view. Tulu Bayar: 20 Letters, 2016. Black and white photographic film, resin, maple board. Dimensions: 10" X 10" X 3" each. Courtesy of the artist.*

**Much of your work advocates for Muslim women in different ways, both by educating audiences to understand that the Muslim faith is not monocultural and varies but also by expressing some of the difficulties individual women face, as with your installation "20 Letters" (2016). I have many questions, you were in the U.S. during the 9/11 attacks and currently you live in Pennsylvania, how has islamophobia changed, in/decreased, and spent much time in Turkey, how have women as a group fared there and how do you follow the developments?**

TB: My installation "20 Letters" served as a response to conversations where religion is manipulated as a pragmatic political tool and becomes a focal point of identity politics. This work consists of 20 small mixed-media boards created from photographic film, maple board, and resin, exploring text and calligraphic abstraction. Each board

represents what is interwoven and concealed in the daily lives of Muslim women, offering a visual manifestation of short essays written by 20 women about the hardships they face due to their Muslim identity in the West. The progressive voices of gay, straight, black, white, and brown Muslim women from the United States contribute to this work. Their stories were first photographed on black and white photographic film, arranged on maple boards in patterns reminiscent of Ebru, the Turkish marbling technique. The scrolled films both hide and reveal these women's stories, keeping them anonymous and echoing their state of mind between confrontation and silence.

I am not a religious person, but I have found myself consistently categorized as "Muslim" in the United States due to my national origin, especially during and shortly after the 9/11 attacks. This categorization was imposed on me from both the right and the left. Despite living in the U.S., I approach religion similarly to how I did in Turkey. I have never worn a hijab, and I freely wear a bikini to the beach. My stance on religion remains unchanged, and I react when forced into a narrow categorization that promotes monoculturalism.

Turkey has a multifaceted representation of Islam, with a growing number of practicing Muslims. In my upbringing, Turkey was more secular, with religion being more spiritual and less political. However, the landscape has shifted, and religion has become more political and less spiritual over time.

**Your video work "Settlement" (2004) features a Jewish and a Muslim woman who both live in the same area in the Middle East, in a place where water is scarce, sharing a jug of water. With the current political climate, it seems apt to revisit it now. Please tell me more about this work to further highlight the complexities in the region.**

TB: "Settlement" is a multi-channel video projection that delves into the intricate dynamics of water scarcity in the Middle East, particularly among Jewish and Muslim communities sharing the same land. It is from the early 2000s. The project features two women, one Jewish and one Muslim, engaging in spiritual cleansing rituals unique to their respective faiths, all while peacefully sharing a jug of water.

The essence of the work lies in its exploration of the profound connection between water, land, and the political complexities of the Middle East. Growing up in an environment where water scarcity was a persistent issue, I aimed to shed light on this often overlooked and under-discussed problem with this work. While acknowledging that water scarcity is not the sole challenge faced by the region, I wanted to emphasize its symbolic and historic significance, making compromise and agreement challenging for both communities.

"Settlement" meant to serve as a commentary on the silent but impactful role of water in the political landscape of the Middle East. By highlighting the shared spiritual importance of water in both Jewish and Muslim faiths, I intended to shift the focus towards the peaceful coexistence that water could symbolize rather than being a source of conflict. In doing so, I hope that the work invites viewers to reflect on the broader issues at play and encourages a deeper understanding of the complexities within the region's socio-political climate.



*Tulu Bayar. "Settlement," 2-Channel Projection. 8:44 min. Courtesy of the artist. Date: 2004*

**What do you teach at Bucknell? How has the student body and its interests changed over the time you have been there?**

TB: I teach visual arts at Bucknell, focusing specifically on photography, video, and occasionally installation courses. Additionally, I oversee independent studies with advanced students who pursue individual projects. Teaching provides me with instant gratification, witnessing the significant progress students make from the beginning to the end of the semester.

Since I first started teaching years ago, I have noticed shifts in the student body and their interests. As each generation comes through, their priorities and interests evolve. Currently, there is an observable trend where students prefer spending less time in the studio and more time on self-care and rest. The impact of COVID-19 has brought mental health issues to the forefront, along with heightened awareness of social, political, medical, and monetary injustices. Students now demonstrate increased sensitivity to these issues, and this is reflected in their artwork and their approach to class assignments and readings.



## **What artists inspire you, and how do you build community with other artists?**

TB: I draw inspiration from various aspects of life, and my artistic influences come from diverse sources. Notably, my students excite me, and visiting other artists' studios is a source of inspiration. Attending open studios and participating in well-regarded artist-in-residencies also play a crucial role in shaping my identity as an artist. In terms of building community with other artists, I am affiliated with several professional organizations. Additionally, due to my academic connections, I often receive invitations to serve on review committees and jury exhibitions. Participating in these panels has not only allowed me to establish lasting relationships with fellow artists and art professionals but has also provided insights into the concerns and interests of other artists. Learning about the materials and media they use is an integral part of this process.

I prioritize forming long-term and genuine connections over engaging with multiple communities that offer transactional relations. My interest lies in fostering deep relationships, and I find fulfillment in being part of small, intimate, and authentic communities.

## **Congratulations on your solo show in Brooklyn, Twine at Amos Eno Gallery.**

### **What's next?**

TB: Thank you! Following the de-installation of the exhibition at Amos Eno Gallery, my next focus will be on handling the logistics for my upcoming exhibition at Ferda Art Platform in Istanbul, scheduled for winter 2024.