

Hot Coffee #15

Q and A with a Turkish-American artist Tulu Bayar

by Nina Chkareuli-Mdivani

In her new body of work for the exhibition *Twine* at Amos Eno Gallery (<https://www.amoseno.org/>) Turkish-American artist Tulu Bayar visually culls together an identity made up of two, eastern and western, paradigms embodying distinct halves of her life. As an immigrant Bayar carries the sense of being the Other with her, not being fully at home either in the U.S. or in Turkey because she simultaneously exists within two historical and geographic continuums. Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha looks at the Otherness as an integral part of post-colonial intellectual project; to him Otherness as a rigid attribute, something that is fixed in time, memory, and representation – it is something that stays. To examine this ambivalence between belonging and alienation Bayar merges two emblematic cities of the new and old worlds, creating a utopian city of her own and asking if they indeed could coalesce into one. Eschewing compartmentalized thinking of genre and media Bayar moves freely in-between photography, moving-image, drawing, sculpture and installation. In this Q and A we touched on this and other points.



Portrait of Tulu Bayar, image courtesy of the artist

Nina: Imagine you are in your favorite coffee or tea spot. Where is it? What are you drinking? What are 3 objects that you see?


Tulu Bayar: Sitting at one of the busy tea and coffee houses by the sea in Istanbul's Istinye neighborhood, with a view of the mesmerizing Marmara Sea, I find myself transported to a world of sensory delights. The view of the Marmara Sea stretches out before me, its shimmering waters offering a sense of tranquility. As I sip on a soothing cup of Turkish tea, I indulge in the delicious

simplicity of a fresh simit, the Turkish bagel-like pastry, coated in sesame seeds. The crunch and warmth of the simit complement the gentle warmth of the tea, making for a delightful combination. My gaze drifts away from my cup to the world outside the café. People stroll by, both locals and tourists, their conversations mixing with the sounds of seagulls and the gentle lapping of the waves. The atmosphere is lively, yet relaxed, and the view of the sea provides a serene backdrop to it all.

A stray cat, a common sight in Istanbul, saunters by, its curiosity piqued by the tantalizing aroma of simit. I can't resist tearing off a piece and offering it to the feline, which purrs appreciatively. Amidst the comings and goings of the people, I also notice a humble fisherman's boat anchored nearby. It's a reminder of the neighborhood's rich maritime history and a symbol of the enduring connection between Istanbul and its surrounding waters. The boat's owner, a weathered fisherman, is busy displaying his day's catch – a variety of freshly caught fish and seafood – on a small cart.

In this tea and coffee house by the sea, I find myself immersed in an authentic and sensory experience and cannot help but admire how past and present harmoniously coexist.





Installation view of Twine at Amos Eno Gallery, New York. November 2- December 3, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist

Nina: How is *Twine* different from your other shows?

Tulu: The new work is continuation of my past work conceptually. Cultural narratives always play a significant role in my creations. This time, instead of drawing from the rich tapestry of history, and aiming to reinterpret traditional motifs and symbols in a contemporary context, I use a lot of layering of existing photographs and video footage. The photo transfer technique that I heavily use in *Twine* symbolizes the imprint of memory on the self, and the images themselves become a collage of moments that have shaped my path. This work offers more linear narrative than non-linear narrative, employing multiple layering with a lot of familiar contemporary American and Turkish cityscapes and countryside.

Nina: What is its main concept, idea, inspiration, reference point? What mediums have you used for the works?

Tulu: I maintain a multidisciplinary practice that weaves through photography, moving-image, drawing, sculpture and installation to produce reflections of immigrant experience. I consider myself as an artist who is unbound by the media, driven by the concept. My artistic journey navigates the intricate intersections of diversity, the immigrant experience, hybrid identities, and the concept of "otherness." Through a dynamic fusion of multimedia elements, I endeavor to dismantle boundaries and reshape perceptions creating a visual dialogue that speaks to the complexities of dual existence. Drawing from personal experiences as well as broader social narratives, my work becomes a canvas for the myriad stories that define my immigrant experience.

I also navigate between grotesque and crafty aesthetics. Grotesque presents

both familiar and alien, but breathes in the borderline of the familiar and strives for transformation. In my case I am imagining a world that is free of categorizations, labeling and boxing. The philosophy of Rumi, wholeness and oneness resonate with me and inform my artistic practice. I am, of course, talking about a spiritual influence, not a religious one. I am interested in the Sufi philosophy: metaphysical interconnected nature of beings and forms and how individual differences reside within communal existence.

The work mirrors USA's idealization and exploitation, as it grapples with financial distress and gentrification amid a Turkish cityscape or a picture-perfect countryside backdrop. And there is tons of mimicking, imitation and wannabe attitude coming from Turkey, sometimes without understanding the full context, ups and downs of capitalism and its echoes.





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Nina: How do you position yourself as an artist? Do you feel more as an American or you feel more connected to your home region?

Tulu: Like many in the States, I negotiate my identity on the borderline of two languages and cultures. My heightened sensitivity to flux and transition opens a gate for a dialectical worldview where I constantly relearn to exist. In my work, I aim to use a hybrid language, code-switching, symbols and glosses for my native and adopted cultures that allow for cross border examination, allow for insertion of otherness in tandem with emergence of a fresh narrative. That otherness is not confined by categorizations and strict lines; it is porous, translucent. Reworking the photographic scenes, layering and heavily editing them run parallel to my constant vacillations between my Turkish and American identities. I am increasingly pleased with this fluidity and hybridity. Such hybrids have been profoundly productive historically with a lot of potential new world views, with new internal forms for perceiving the work. In this reappropriation and reconstruction act while creating the work, the contingent sites of meaning or in-between spaces emerge, making identities fluid and multifaceted.

Nina: What role does feminism and the female body play in your work?

Tulu: Growing up in an extremely patriarchal culture, bell hooks' words provide clarity in my thoughts and encourage me not to rely on binary thinking. I was introduced to her work during my undergraduate years back in Ankara, Turkey. Since childhood I was yearning for a language to talk about my shared

experience and I appreciated hooks's wisdom then. Her modern, inclusive feminism that centered Black women resonated well with me and I appreciated how she provided clarity and accessibility to intersectionality, identity politics and representation. While still considering her as my solace when I first emigrated to US as a young middle - eastern woman , lost in white America, searching for validity and a language of understanding, it was after then that I started to appreciate some of the differing views from hooks:

bell hooks suggested that Laverne Cox wearing blonde wigs was her feeding into the male gaze in an honest conversation about race, gender and pop culture between the two at the New School in 2014. Cox responded, "It's one of those things where I'm sort of like, here I am. If I'm embracing a patriarchal gaze with this presentation, it's the way that I've found something that feels empowering. And I think the *really* honest answer is that I've sort of constructed myself in a way so that I don't want to disappear... I've never been interested in being invisible and erased. So a lot of how I'm negotiating these systems of oppression and trying not to be erased is perhaps by buying into and playing into some of the patriarchal gaze and white supremacy."

Female figure is quite visible in my prints. And yes, highly aestheticized female figures feed into the male gaze. (I laugh) Through the act of including a female figure in my creations, I reclaim authorship of my narrative and assert my own agency. However, I try to shy away talking only about the attainment of power. Having a lot of power can be very dangerous. Most of the time contemporary art includes women's attainment of power. Very few talk about what happens after having that power, for women too. Maybe my female character is there to subvert power. Maybe there to provide a model for how to deal with the inner worlds of the women.





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Nina: You are an educator in addition to being an artist. Do you feel that these two fields are interconnected for you?

Tulu: I am a teaching artist. Both fields inform each other for me. Teaching is reciprocal in the sense that I am also learning a lot from the everchanging new generations about the culture I physically and mentally occupy. Teaching is emotional just like art-making and both teaching and art nurture and challenge minds.

In both of my teaching and studio practice, I am guided by an innate curiosity: In the studio, I assemble disparate elements, ranging from salvaged images, photographs, photographic films, old drawings and maps to repurposed textiles and cultural belongings, and imbue them with new life. This process of amalgamation serves as a metaphor for the mosaic of human existence – fragments coming together to form a coherent whole. In my teaching, I share the

same philosophy and careful attention to individual differences while striving for unity, harmony and inclusion in the classroom.