
I - You - They: That is Sisterhood. That is "We".
One Hundred Years of Artist Women in Istanbul.

Shulamit Bruckstein / House of Taswir

Published in June, 2022



Image:
Semiha Es (1912–2012)
Untitled, 1970s
Photograph, silver bromide paper 16.5
x 12.2 cm
Semiha Es-Özgün Akbayır Archive

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One Hundred Years of Artist Women

Istanbul art space Meşher very recently presented an exhibition on artist women between 1850 and 1950 in Ottoman Istanbul and modern Turkey. The exhibition was painstakingly researched, visually stunning, epistemically feminine, and brilliantly designed. Not only did *Ben—Sen—Onlar / I—You—They: A Century of Artist Women* radically undermine the official records of modern (Turkish) art history; it also performed a *way of seeing*, undoing central perspective and the phallic order of things: the show exhibited a nonlinear, subversive, atypical way of thinking fragmented by the female gaze. Mirrors, subcutaneous crisscross references, tangents, fractions, institutional mimics, and female formats of knowledge production (the salon, the coffee table, and so on) determined the architectural frame of the exhibition, which occupied three floors of the old building on Istiklal Street.

"Why Have There Been No "

The exhibition *I—You—They* set out as a collective endeavor, curated by Deniz Artun. Unearthing deep traces of female collectivity, solidarity, and sisterhood from inside unofficial networks and private bonds, compiling lists of artist names from private letters, overlooked press clips, dissertation

footnotes, art school class lists, (auto)biographies, group exhibition portraits, and more, the research for this exhibition ventured far beyond presenting forgotten “women artists” from existing collections. To avoid falling into the trap of patriarchal power lineages, the exhibition turned Linda Nochlin’s seminal essay of 1971 upside down. Meşher’s exhibition *I—You—They* deconstructs Nochlin’s central question—“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”—and proves that its presumptions are methodologically fallacious. Instead of poring over written art history and official records, and scouring public and private collections in search of rare female angles, as it is often done in exhibitions seeking justice for underrepresented “minority” positions, Artun and her team focused on singular, accidental finds, private conversations, and family and art class pictures, following the ins and outs of the Istanbul art scene, its webs of friendships, enmities, and love stories in formative periods such as the 1920s, 1960s, and 1980s. They show the art production of (Turkish) women artists in a unique light and in stunning dimensions: *I—You—They* presented 232 artworks by 117 artists gathered from 90 sources, many of them private and unaligned with formal institutions. The exhibition refrained from hierarchical presentations and in many cases abstained from historical references. Many of

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the art works bear only the artist's name, dates of her life span, materials, and dimensions since the production dates are often unknown. A poetic, object-related, associative relationship between works ensues that allows each carefully chosen object constellation to unfold its own poetry and power.

Some Detours via Paris

The centerpiece of the exhibition was a majestic installation with works by the Istanbul artist Nasip İyem (1921–2011), a powerful founding (female) figure of modern art in Turkey whose work was rarely shown in Europe. İyem enrolled at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts painting department in 1936 and graduated in 1944. Like Tiraje Dikmen and other female artists presented in the Meşher show, she participated in the master class of French-Jewish painter Léopold Levy. Levy, who was inspired by Paul Cézanne and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, was a Post-Impressionist who taught at Istanbul State Academy from 1939 until he returned to France in 1949. In addition to encountering paintings by Levy's (female) master students presented in the *I—You—They* exhibition for the first time, it is also fascinating to find traces of the nearly forgotten Istanbul chapter of French-Jewish art history. Post-Impressionism is a common influence in the exhibited works. After a

number of artists who were born in the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century went to Paris in the 1920s, there was a second wave of Istanbul-born artists who studied in Paris in the 1950s. These later became part of the various avant-garde art movements in Istanbul, including artists such as Leyla Gamsiz Sarptürk, who had studied in Paris in 1950 and became a member of the "Group of Ten," an Istanbul artist collective active between 1947 and 1955.



I

Artist Women in Avant-garde Movements

Even from a current perspective, the discourse in the various movements of Istanbul's art scene during that period seems truly contemporary. The many Academies of Fine Arts and Écoles des Beaux-Arts that were founded throughout the entire Middle East and post-Ottoman Turkey taught a

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rather homogeneous Western canon of modern painting (many continue the practice to the present day), focusing mainly on Parisian Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist painting techniques. Istanbul artists both then and now, both male and female, departed from this prescribed agenda in autonomous circles, negotiating the relationship between local and global art movements anew. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s, artists created off-spaces for unusual avant-garde approaches, some of which included traditional practices and handicrafts such as tapestry, calligraphy, jewelry, and ceramics as an integral part of their production of contemporary art.¹ The curators of *I—You—They* show the overwhelming extent to which women artists were active in those movements, even though they were naturally underrepresented in public exhibitions—if they were included at all. The exhibition at Meşher rewrites the history of modern Turkish art in various ways. No small part of it is related to the vital role of women artists in the formation and collective fabric of avant-garde off-spaces of

Istanbul's art scene throughout the twentieth century, arguably until this very day.

Goddesses

In this context, the rarely exhibited ceramic sculptures by Nasip İyem, which the curators have placed throughout the exhibition, are formative. A graduate from the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts, İyem studied ceramics at the Eczacıbaşı Ceramic Center in the late 1950s. She then started to create her uniquely characteristic sculptures, many of them showing fully embodied female figures recalling ancient goddesses or female vessels of fertility and power.² The exhibition showed several of these sculptures, which to the best of my knowledge have never been shown in Europe. Six contemporary fertility goddesses take command of the exhibition's middle hall.

¹ In this context it is interesting to note that the tapestry department of Mimar Sinan Academy of Fine Arts under the direction of artist and professor Gülçin Aksoy has developed into a center for the theory and practice of contemporary art over the last decades, a field that has had no place in the official curriculum of the university until today. Professor Aksoy also acts as dean of the traditional painting department at the academy.

² Although Nasip İyem represented Turkey in the Bassano del Grappa International Ceramics Symposium in Italy in 1972, her work was never exhibited in Europe. See the Evin Gallery website, which has a large collection of İyem's work and regularly exhibits her work, often alongside the work of her husband, painter Nuri İyem; <http://www.evin-art.com/en/artists/13-nasip-iyem>.

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Magical in their evocative power, their physical appearance was enhanced by the curators through the use of multiple mirrors.

collects, multiplies and unites, liberates and commands.



II - III

The Female Gaze Diffracts and Liberates

The figures are displayed on a hexagonal wooden stand carrying the ancient vessel goddesses in luxurious mirror showcases whose arches and geometric ornaments reference details of Ottoman architecture. The immediate effect of this central installation is its power of diffraction. The hexagonal mirrors multiplied every single one of İyem's figures into a commanding collectivity of sisterhood while also absorbing and fragmenting every single *other* work in their vicinity, as if to say that the female gaze simultaneously diffracts and

Behold, You Are Beautiful My Love

The entire middle hall of *I—You—They* was dedicated to "YOU" in the title's trio of pronouns. Works shown here revealed intimate relationships *à deux*, lovers, mothers and daughters, friendships, and more. "YOU" here refers to the gaze of the Other—a gaze beyond narcissistic expectations, beyond mirrored reciprocities, coming from everywhere and nowhere, a gaze that calls for response, intimacy, and is binding. "Behold, you are beautiful my love," the famous line of *Song of Songs*, the ancient love poem written for Shulamit, the bride of King Salomon, seemed to be echoed here,

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exhibiting the gaze of lovers, mothers, fathers seizing the visitor from unexpected angles and in unexpected places. The curators of *I—You—They* made a bold reading of the Lacanian distinction between phallic ways of *seeing* (narcissism) and the diffused *gaze* of the Other (love): the gaze of the Other appears here in many instances as the gaze of the *mother*. Even the typically male view on the female nude, the reclining female body, is shown on this floor infused with an indirect gaze, the women’s inner secrets veiled, as if the female gaze were to outlive the phallic eye.

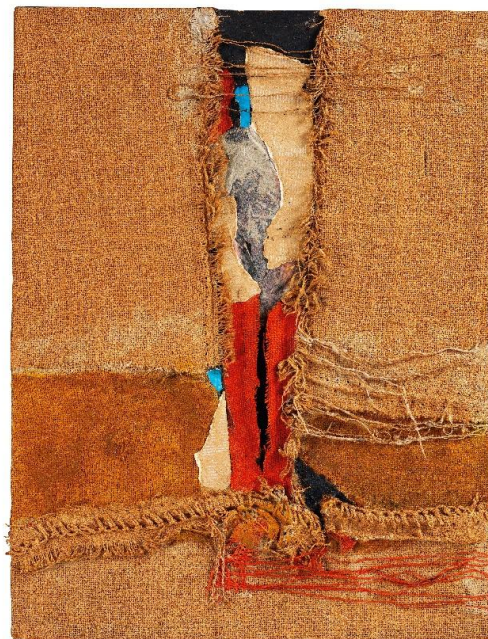


IV

Wounds of Incision

In stark contrast, the wounds of incision, the tearing out of intimacies, the robbing of secrets, and the violation of the integrity of body and mind are boldly expressed in the works by Seta Hidiş (1922–2012) that were

also exhibited on this floor. Hidiş uncannily reflects the slash series of Italian-born artist Lucio Fontana in a female mirror. Fontana began to perform his slashed monochromes in the late 1940s, cutting the skinlike surface of a monochrome painting with a knife, often from both sides, cutting a gash across it, destroying the surface of the canvas. Whereas Fontana is interested in a *concetto spaziale* (spatial concept), in how a monochrome surface “reacts” to a deep cut, the (textile) work by Hidiş exposes the violence of the phallic gaze.



v

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I See You / I See Myself

Most visitors began their visit on the ground floor of the exhibition. In the huge window facing Istiklal Street, *I—You—They* presented the enlarged replica of a work by ZERO artist Gencay Kasapçı (1933–2017), an “infinity spot” presenting half a globe covered with a myriad of color points set on a mirror glass facing the street. Any flaneur walking up and down Istiklal Street could not but catch a glance of herself when passing the window of Meşher. Kasapçı’s work was never shown in this large size during the artist’s lifetime, and the enlarged posthumous replica of the original, small-sized model still holds up a promise: although the work of women artists has remained hidden, veiled, and invisible over the last one hundred years, the future of the female avant-garde is huge and very much alive.

The exhibition then explored the artist’s self: “I” as in *I—You—They*. I as in “I see you” (“I desire you”). I as in “I see myself.” I as in any imperative of narcissism: “look at me! This is the way I want to be seen.” Here we find the “I/eye” looking into the mirror. Here we got a sense of the artist’s self in a maze of different mirrors, entering the world of artistic self-representation: the portrait, the self-portrait, the artist and her model, sculptured busts of male and female models presented behind the mirrored glass of

museum vitrines. We saw subjects of power, strongly confident, hilariously funny, subtly erotic, ordinary, or sublime; matters of identity, politics of national belongings, visual ways of representation are at stake. The phallic gaze in the eyes of women artists: central perspectives, bodies of desire, looking at oneself, Narcissus’s mirror.



VI

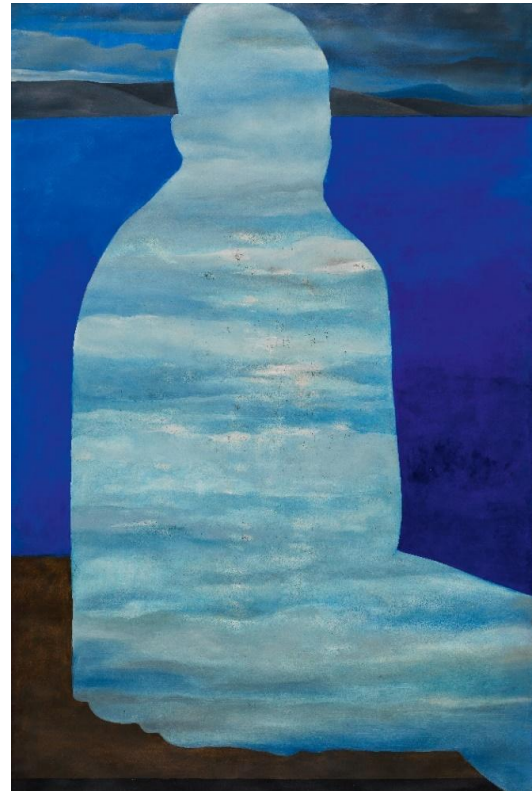
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Bodies Escape from Their Canvas

In this context the attention given to the *critique of representation* is interesting. In some of the works, the artists' gaze turns altogether blank, entire bodies "escape" from their canvas, their outlines and shapes may vanish, turn motionless, or become as blue as the sky, as in the work of Can Ayan (1954–2016) or the early work of Belkis Mustafa (1896–1926).



VII - VIII

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Semiha Es (1912-2012)

In other works, the position of the artist's "model" is hilariously reversed: instead of female models posing for male artists, male soldiers looking at female nudes were seen through the lens of a female artist, such as in the brilliant photograph by the artist Semiha Es (1912–2012).



IX

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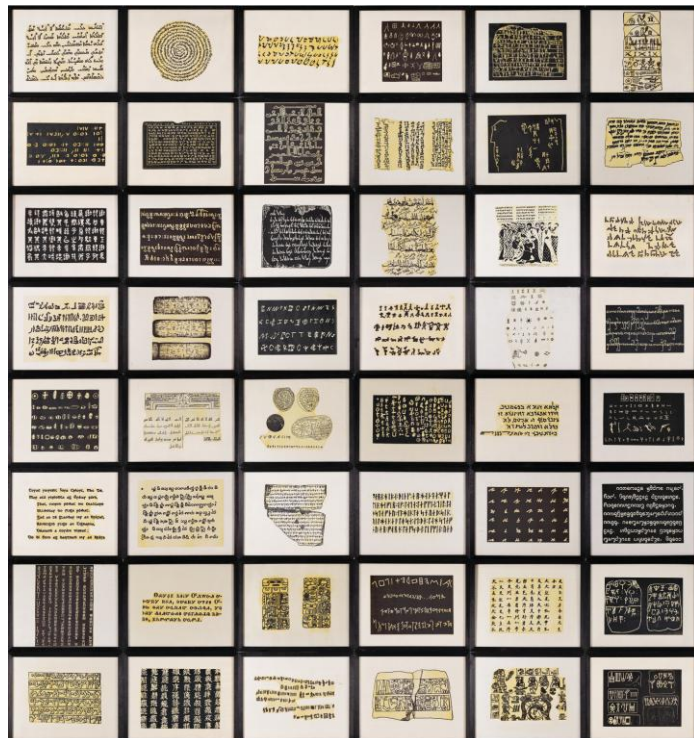
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Ancient Letters Undead

A powerful critique of representation is expressed in the large scriptural piece by Şükran Aziz, *Dead Languages* (1997), which was presented in the center of the ground floor. Modernity has taught us to give “clear and distinct” meaning to anything written (Descartes), modern reasoning avoids indeterminate, mystical, multidirectional, emotionally invested practices of reading. Modern science in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries and the Enlightenment strove to emancipate from the medieval world of fairy tales, folk narratives, and ancient wisdom that have been the domain of women ever since. Even poetry and large parts of religious traditional literature, formerly at home in (male) Houses of Wisdom, now become storytelling in the (female) domain of the modern private home. Aziz’s *Dead Languages* resurrects ancient letters, defends their secrets, and proclaims



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ancient wisdoms undead. The artist defends the secrets of letters and visualizes what may no longer be pronounced, translated, and interpreted in a clear and distinct manner. She shows us a perfect future in which ancient letters are no longer dead, works of women artists no longer obscured, and ways of seeing that are no longer from a single perspective. Her gaze connects ancient and postmodern visions, shattering one-dimensional perspectives and introducing poetry, indeterminacy, and a radical critique of identity and representation.

The Artist Women's Desire

The ceramic coffee table by Seniye Fenmen (1918–1997), set into the main wall like a shimmering green eye facing the bust of a female communist soldier from above, was a subtle yet brilliant curatorial comment on the issue of representation. Just as the dizzying multiplicity of images deflected in the mirrors enclosing the two large museum vitrines in which various life-sized busts of male and female models were shown, mirrored, and multiplied. Some of those busts were famous sculptors themselves, now



XI-XII

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cast and fixed by the gaze of the female artist's desire.³

They—That Is Sisterhood—That Is “We”

On the upper floor of the exhibition, the visitor encountered an endless wall of paintings, drawings, calligraphy, and handcrafts, whose intimacy and Baroque exuberance resembles a gallery of family portraits. Presenting women artists in dense salon-style or Petersburg hanging with no regard to hierarchy or fame, rather focusing on the domestic theme of “flowers” instead, the atmosphere resembled one of a private salon or lavish home. Setting foot in this gallery called to mind the famous literary salons run by Jewish women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Henriette Herz (1764–1847) or Rachel Varnhagen (1771–1833), whose private homes became a magnet for writers, poets, artists, and scholars from the emerging Enlightenment scene. What was so special about their hospitality? What was it exactly that they had to offer? A place on the threshold of the private, a place for personal exchange, for intellectual freedom? A place for poetry and art, for spontaneous encounters, for secret love, sisterhood, and friendship? A semipublic space in which the

host creates her own set of rules, creates her own community, with members who are male and female. It is not by chance that the political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote one of her most celebrated books on the powerful figure of the female *salonnière* Varnhagen.⁴ Let us not forget another essay by Arendt, “We Refugees,” the one she wrote when she had just arrived in New York, after escaping the German fascists in 1943. “We” in that essay is soft and indeterminate, diffuse, a word that overcomes boundaries. It is as suggestive and empathic, inclusive, and anarchic as the “We” that emerges on this upper floor. “Sisterhood,” writes Deniz Artun in her introductory essay to the show, “is what makes us ‘we.’” Who are we, then? One large and thorny vessel made by the artist Füreyä Koral (1910–1997) stood in the middle of this hall. It is ready to take on all the floral works it faces. But was this majestic show presenting 232 artworks by 117 artists gathered from 90 sources really about gender? Or did it instead pose a question of great urgency about language and representation: How do we undo the absence of “We” that resonates from any collective pronoun of “They,” from any pronoun of

³ The bust of Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, for example, was sculpted by Mari Gereckmezyan (1913–1947) in 1945.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (1957); a revised edition with the title *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* was published in 1974.

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exclusion? Is it our task then to turn the “They” of exclusion and exteriority into a strategic place of hospitality?

This show, *I—You—They*, deserves to travel the world. It is a matter of sisterhood as an act of solidarity in the very act of showing art.



XIII

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List of Images:

I

Leyla Gamsız Sarptürk (1921–2010)
Nude
Oil on hardboard
50 x 70 cm
Private Collection

II-III

Left: Nasip İyem (1921–2011) Untitled, 2002 Terracotta
45.5 x 14 x 19 cm
Evin Art Gallery Collection
Right: Exhibition View

VI

Eren Eyüboğlu (1907–1988)
Reclining Woman with a Blue Dress Mixed media on
plywood
26.5 x 38 cm
Bilge Collection

V

Seta Hidiş (1922–2012) Untitled
Collage on hardboard 69.5 x 53 cm
Private Collection

VI

Yıldız Moran (1932–1995)
Echo, 1952
Reflections of Norah Caussen and Yıldız Moran London
3 pieces; each 80 x 80 cm
Ed. 6+1 A.E.
Yıldız Moran Archive

VII-VIII

Can Ayan (1954–2016)
Self-Portrait with Cobalt Blue A-B (diptych), 1988
Oil on special paper
153 x 205 cm (total width)
Aydın Ayan Collection

IX

Semiha Es (1912–2012)
Turkish Brigade in Korea, 1950–1951
Photography, fine art print on
Hahnemühle matt fibre
15.5 x 24.5 cm
Semiha Es-Özgün Akbayır Archive

X

Şükran Aziz (1949–2019)
Dead Languages, 1997
Mixed media on canvas
48 plaques; each 30.5 x 38 cm
Fuat Yalın Collection

XI-XII

Left: Seniye Fenmen (1918–1997)
Untitled
Ceramic
Ø: 90 cm
Döne Otyam Collection (Exhibition View)
Right: Various Works / Exhibition View

XIII

I - You - They: A Century of Artist Women
Exhibition View. Photo: Hadiye Canagökçe

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