

Fresh View on the Orient

A Selection from the Contemporary Turkish Photography

Although contemporary Turkish photography is little known outside of Turkey, its history is nearly as long as that of photography itself. Within the East, always mythic in Western eyes, Constantinople, Anatolia, and other regions of the Ottoman Empire gained importance for Western travelers in the 18th century. This is partly because of the impression that people in the East had a very different lifestyle, especially on the Aegean coast, which also has important ruins of Hellenic, Roman, and Byzantium periods. In the 19th century, during the Ottoman Empire, most of the photographic influences came from abroad. Soon after Daguerre's invention of photography in 1839, Anatolia and Istanbul also hosted the first visits of these orientalists. Travelers documented the ancient buildings as well as the unfamiliar aspects of life and architecture through engravings and oil painting. French photographers like Ernest de Caranza and Maxim du Camp, and British photographer James Robertson, one of the first war photographers, came to Istanbul and other parts of the Anatolia to take photographs of this region, especially the archaeological treasures. Their impact on creating an awareness of the photographic medium and the opening of the first portrait studios cannot be underestimated.

Sultan's Photographers

In the second half of 19th century İstiklâl Caddesi – formerly known as Grande Rue de Péra – in Beyoğlu witnessed an enormous increase in the number of photography studios. Italian Carlo Naya, Greek origin Basile Kargopoulo, Pascal Sebah – later with French Policarpe Joaillier – the Armenian Abdullah brothers, and Swedish Guillaume Berggren were amongst the most important studios in Istanbul. This enormous growth could come from the tradition that whenever there is a successful business idea it will be copied immediately. At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Palace supported these studios by commissioning them to document life and architecture in Istanbul and some other cities in Anatolia. They were asked to make albums of photographs which were distributed abroad to show current life and culture in the Empire. Even though images of faces of animals and humans were not allowed in Islam, the Sultans commissioned some of the studios to take their portraits, and even honored some of them as their official photographers.

Amateur photography clubs

After the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish Republic sent young artists and architects to Europe as a state policy to further their education. During 1928, Sanâyi-i Nefîse Mektebi, the first Fine Arts Academy which was opened in 1881 by Mr. Osman Hamdi, painter and an archaeologist educated in Paris, was converted into a modern Fine Arts Academy, now Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (Istanbul). At this period Şinasi Barutçu, a future important figure in Turkish photography, was also sent abroad to continue his education in graduate studies, and attended some photography courses and joined photography clubs there. After his return, he gave lectures at Gazi University (Ankara) and several public places, and established the first amateur photography club in Ankara in 1950. At the end of the 50's other amateur photography clubs like IFSAK (in Istanbul) were amongst the first established institutions in the field of photography. Together with other organisations, they created the main movement in (Turkish) photography. Even today, after 50 years, these organisations are of great influence to young enthusiasts.

Press Photography/Photojournalism

Press photography has always been one of the main developing forces of photography in the world. Because of bad sales and advertisement, the attention to the content of photographic images never became a strong tradition in Turkey. Still there were some strong names who've established themselves through good international connections such as Ara Güler (b.1928), Gökşin Sipahioğlu (b.1926, founder of SIPA Press in Paris) and Ergun Çağatay (b.1937). It wasn't until 2003, when World Press Photo initiated a 1,5 year long seminar on press photography, a new group of journalists got supported to set up more serious structures like Nar Photo Agency, which is the first Turkish photography collective that's also recognized internationally.

Start of Photography Education

Starting from the late 70's, photography departments started to be established in universities. Mimar Sinan University (Istanbul) is the first to start photography courses in 1977. Apart from some advertising photographers most of the instructors came from an amateur tradition and were self-taught photographers. Even though these photography departments are mostly technical based than art, they are an important part of the maturing photography scene in Turkey.

A New Generation

In the second half of the 80's, new photographers like Şahin Kaygun, Nazif Topçuoğlu, Orhan Cem Çetin, Manuel Çıtak, Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Emine Ceylan emerged on the photography scene. Because of their more engaging attitude, they had an important influence on the following generation. Some of these names were self-taught, for example today's most known Turkish film director Nuri Bilge Ceylan [b.1959, director of '*Distant*' (2002)], who was known for his vague and surrealist black and white photographs, and Orhan Cem Çetin (b. 1960), who is still one of the leading intellectual figures in Turkish photography, were both members of Boğaziçi University Photography Club. Some were educated in other disciplines of art, like ground-breaking photographer and film director Şahin Kaygun (b.1954 – d.1992) that passed away at a very young age and one of today's most



appreciated documentary photographers Manuel Çitak (b.1962), who were both educated in graphic design. Likewise, well known for his black and white scenes of Istanbul and his dinner parties, Arif Aşçı (b.1958) left his painting career for photography, believing that painting was dead.

Boom of Travel Photography

In the beginning of the 90's, travel clubs established mostly by travel photographers, started to emerge. These clubs organized commercial trips combined with photography lessons. The most well known of these is Fotoğrafevi, established in 1989, which still has a gallery on the İstiklâl Caddesi in İstanbul. The interest on travel photography has increased and expanded to exotic places in the world – like India and Cuba – and this was followed by a boom of documentary photography starting from the late 90's onwards. Because of the novelty of traveling, photographers who do get the chance tend to look at Turkey with a touristic eye.



Emergence of new initiatives in the late 90's

Even though there were more influential institutions besides the amateur photography clubs, a special credit must be given to Pamukbank Photography Gallery. This gallery was established for cultural purposes of the Pamukbank under the advisory of Paul McMillen, advertiser and photographer, in 1997 and was active until 2002. With its exhibitions of early and contemporary international photography, Pamukbank Photography Gallery has been an important photography institution. More than a commercial gallery, it gave a contemporary vision to a new generation of photographers. Geniş Açı Photography Magazine was another important initiative for ten years – between 1997 and 2006 – with its exclusive interviews by the New York, London, Paris representatives, exclusive interviews and portfolios of important figures in the history of photography and contemporary photography shown in a high visual clarity. And the discovery of young talents was also one of the most important influences of Geniş Açı in Turkish photography.

A new growing spurt

Starting from 2000, internationally renowned photographers like Anders Petersen, Alex Webb, Antoine d'Agata, Lars Tunbjörk, Stanley Greene and many others came to Turkey to give workshops and to exhibit their work as a part of the photography festivals organized by IFSAK, still the most famous of the amateur photography clubs in Turkey. These rendezvous had considerable influence on the young generation of photographers. In the same period, the first modern art museums, established by independent entrepreneurs and families, opened their doors. The first and the most prestigious to date is the Istanbul Modern, opened in December 2004, that has a photography gallery under the direction of photo historian Engin Özendes. Contemporary photography in Turkey is now trying to find its way into a broader practice. This delay is mostly because of the lack of international connections in the past, the very late start of serious education, and the non-existence of institutional support. We can say that nearly all the improvements of Turkish photography came from abroad, starting from the opening of studios, development of photojournalism and the education of today's photographers. Even though there has been a huge interest at amateur level, more serious photography had to wait for a long time. Yet there is a growing number of new photographers working in various genres on a more professional level. In the next couple of years you will in no doubt hear new names coming from Turkey. Some of them we've displayed in the next couple of interviews.

Nazif Topçuoğlu

The most established name among the photographers that will be presented in these couple of pages, Nazif Topçuoğlu has been in the Turkish photography scene for more than 25 years. Born in Ankara in 1953 and educated as an architect, Topçuoğlu has completed two masters degrees, one in architecture in METU (Ankara) and one in photography in the Institute of Design (Chicago). When he returned to Turkey, he worked as an advertising photographer for some time and from the end of 80's onwards exhibited and held teaching positions at various universities in Turkey. And in the last few years, he has been exhibiting widely internationally. Apart from being a photographer Topçuoğlu is also known for his writings on the history and criticism of photography. He has published 3 books, *'What makes a good photograph?'*, *'Photography is not dead, but just smells funny'* and *'Photographs Only Tease!'* in 1993, 2000 and 2005 respectively.

In the 1990's Topçuoğlu started to produce still-lives and portraits of girls with vegetables, embroideries, old photographs and engravings, which were in a way questioning the modern, Eastern, Ottoman and Turkish identities. With dramatic lighting and richness of color and details as in the classical paintings, these photographs were the initial products of Topçuoğlu's constant preoccupation with time, memory and loss.

In the second half of the 90's there came the offal issue in Topçuoğlu's photography. First in black and white, then in color still-lives and finally in staged photographs with girls. Especially the *'Offal with Girls'* (2000 – 2001) series gained too much attention and started a debate on exploitation of young girls, which was a point Topçuoğlu always tried to stay away from: ***"I do photography because... I need to produce the images which are provocative but not exploitative that I would enjoy looking at."*** In these photographs the girls are in resistance, never passive. They oppose to what is imposed on them in the male dominant society and represent the youth, life and a certain kind of power, which can be seen as positive powers against manhood, repression and death. In a way, the situations depicted in the 16th century paintings of girls and death are reversed in these photographs.

Then came the *'Readers'* series in 2002. This time the number of girls has increased, they left the offals and violence, and started to read books in solidarity to become more conscious of themselves, life, sexuality, gender roles, etc. Mostly in old-fashioned libraries, the girls in high school costumes are depicted in strange actions while trying to read books. New photographs were added to this series in 2003 under the title *'Recent Readers'*. Topçuoğlu argues that girls with books are seen as strange as girls with offals, since only a small portion of the population reads and illiteracy is at a higher level among women in Turkey: ***"Another and more specific aspect of the recent 'Readers', is its pre-occupation with the contradicting positions of women in Turkey. When employing the representations of youth as imagery, one has to deal with the issues of gender roles and male gaze. In these photographs, unlike the more common examples, a respectful stance towards the female has been taken. The subjectification of the female youth as a gender-free ideal, inevitably involves her intelligence, beauty, energy, and struggle as the major concerns of this work."***

Depicting himself as a romantic 19th century photographer, Topçuoğlu continues to construct images featuring young girls in his recent series *'Curiosity&Experience'* (2004 – 2006) and *'New World'* (2006). As Katerina Gregos puts forward in *'Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography'* (Phaidon, 2006) ***"Topçuoğlu seems to almost yearn for a nondescript imagined past where women would have occupied a more empowered and privileged place in society; hence the distinctly romantic, nineteenth-century sensibility pervading all his images. Despite the old-fashioned mise en scene, however the subtexts in Topçuoğlu's photographs remain purely contemporary: from the issue of gender politics to questions of voyeurism and desire associated with the male gaze and, above all, the problems of representing women."***

Nazif Topçuoğlu is represented by Flatland Gallery (Utrecht, Netherlands) and Galeri Nev (Istanbul, Turkey), www.naziftopcuoglu.com

Alp Sime

As one of the noteworthy names among the new generation of Turkish photographers, Alp Sime was born in Istanbul in 1970. Since his mother is a painter, he was interested in painting from a very early age, and his interest on photography – sounds familiar – is developed through playing with his father's and brother's cameras. After graduating from the high school, Sime has gone to the States to study economics, but after 2 years decided to study something related with arts. He immediately prepared a portfolio from his drawings and photographs to apply to an art school. After applying to several universities he decided to continue his education in the graphic design department of the Boston University. During his education he extensively worked on creating designs by using collages and typography, and this approach gave him a different point of view. His interest in photography became more serious in this period, he took several lectures on photography and started to work on it in a more disciplined way. After spending 10 years abroad he returned to Istanbul in 1998 and has been staying there since then.

Sime participated several group exhibitions and opened his first personal exhibition in Boston. After his return to Istanbul he opened *'Ramora'* in 2002, and recently his new exhibition *'İstanbullu'* (İstanbulian) travels in Greece, first opened in Athens in November 2006, and then Xanthi in April 2007. Even though *'İstanbullu'* carries the name of a city, Sime does not consider himself as a photographer working on a city. He does not try to understand the city, at the same time does not feel any responsibility to the city and it is not his intention to make a visual explanation of the city.

Sime works totally in black and white, this is partly because he is color blind – which he recognized after taking photography seriously – and he also thinks black and white photography calls upon the memory of its audience. ***"I think people usually do not have sharp and colorful memories, and in memory every object is a little bit shifted to something else. In my photography images are not in color -that is one shift- and also they***



are usually not very sharp and they are blurry. I guess I am sort of recalling the viewers memory and dreams in my images.” When he describes his moments of taking photographs his explanation sounds logical. He thinks, his sort of dark imagery shows certain elements coming from his subconsciousness. While walking in the street he usually recognizes something, an image appears before his eyes and becomes isolated in his visual area. He is concentrated on this image and takes the photograph. This all sequence takes place usually within a second and is directly related with his subconsciousness, and the image captured is not happening coincidentally but subconsciously.

Alp Sime is represented by The Photo Agents (Istanbul), www.thephotoagents.com

Silva Bingaz

Born in Malatya (a city in Eastern Turkey) in 1967 as the daughter of an Armenian family, Silva Bingaz has been involved in photography seriously just for the last few years. Working professionally as a dentist, she took a course on photography at the age of 27 but it was 4 years later when she visited a group of Kosovian refugees that she got interested in photography at a higher level. Until 2001 she continued photographing **“being unaware of the current trends in photography, without a special focus and education”** which is a common attitude in the Turkish amateur photography scene. Bingaz’s first body of work was a slide show titled ‘Where if not at home’ (2001) which led to another story of an Iraqi refugee woman Beyan, on which she worked for three years.

The cornerstone in Bingaz’s photography career is the workshop held by the Swedish photographer Anders Petersen during Istanbul Photography Days organized by IFSAK in 2002. This workshop and several others following this led to a drastic change in Bingaz’s work and upon Petersen’s advise she concentrated more on herself, her environment, surroundings, family and friends, and taking photographs became a usual fraction in her daily life. Since 2002 she works on a long term project called ‘Coast’ which she describes as follows: **“All the pictures in ‘Coast’ are taken near the thin and long line that separates sea and land. Holiday areas, filled lands, small shores... But ‘Coast’ is not about sea coast. It is about love, affection, death, moment, things that change every moment and things that don’t; it is about the coast between the heaviness and the lightness of existence.”**

Bingaz depicts her camera as a magic wand which her models cannot run away from. There is a natural relation between herself and her models, so that they do not resist her fiction, feel what she desires and put on a dynamism very close to reality. Combining this vital spirit quickly with her fictional view is important for her while taking photographs. Being in that dynamic space, the concordance of the mood of her models and the space are the essential elements in her photography.

Very much influenced from her own complicated life and currently working on a book project, Bingaz’s photography is an extraordinary example in contemporary Turkish photography and continues to evolve day by day.

Silva Bingaz is represented by The Photo Agents (Istanbul), www.thephotoagents.com

Ali Taptık

Ali Taptık, born in Istanbul in 1983, started attending photographic workshops at IFSAK at the age of 16. **“In 2001 I started to guide foreign photographers like Anders Petersen and Antoine d’Agata. This allowed me to get in touch with the photographic world outside of Turkey.”** He realized that because of the amateur nature of the courses he wouldn’t be able to grow any further and made a decision to leave the organization and to find another photographic education in one of the universities. Quickly he came to understand that what he already experienced at IFSAK was also the case for higher education. Lack of good photography lecturers made him decide to follow a 4-year course on Architecture at the Technical University in Istanbul.

During his years at the university he never lost his social photographic intend. Always interested in the people he was designing for, he conflicted with the distance and arrogance architects can have when approaching their subject. **“Most of the research I conducted was by photographing an area, talking to people and getting closer to understanding the inhabitants of the place. When presenting my ideas I would use photography and collage techniques instead of making a model.”** Besides the work he made for school, he documented his own surroundings by photographing his close friends. Aware of the remedial side of the discourse he had created with his friends, he struggled with finding a balance between his emotional intend and that of his subject. Using medium and large format cameras to work with gave him the time to slowly understand his subjects better and at the same time allowing himself to process his own position within the experiences he was going through.

In 2004 he was invited to a 3-month master class in Nordens Fotoskola, Sweden. Halil Koyutürk, a photographer who fled to Sweden during the 80’s because of his too socialistic ideals, created the opportunity for 12 young photographers to go to Sweden and follow lessons with











Anders Petersen and other Swedish photographers. These 3 months had influences not only on his approach in photography but also his post-processing became an important element in how he presented his work. A strong example of his approach is 'Kaza ve Kader' (Accident and Fate) that he worked on for 3 years. In this work you get a glimpse of the dramatic and the intimate within his life in Istanbul. Taptik uses colors and darkened borders to invite the viewer to have a look into his diary of friends, memories and places. Sometimes his world looks back at you but never aggressive, always subtle, he sketches himself an emotional path out of his personal chaos, opening ways to mature and keep his perspective at the same time. After he had a motorcycle accident in July 2007, breaking 6 ribs, he went out with a large format camera and carried it throughout the city to photograph. **"It wasn't easy but the pain helped me to focus my attention."**

Ali Taptik is represented by Gallery X-ist (Istanbul) and Atelier de Visu (Marseille), www.alitaptik.com

Canan Şenol

Born in Istanbul in 1970 Canan Şenol was never involved in doing anything in the arts. After finishing her studies in economics she started working. But outside her marriage and her work she had interest in painting, and to have something for a hobby she started following evening courses at Mimar Sinan University. **"Besides my own group of classmates there was another group who were trying to enroll into the art academy by following preparation classes. I felt that I was just as good as them and pushed the teachers to allow me in one of those classes."** After becoming top of her class, she decided to join the Marmara University Fine Arts Academy leaving her safe life behind.

During her 4 years in this university she focused her studies on painting. Because of the slow realisation within universities that painting, video, sculpture and photography departments should interact, she never got exposed to any other art form. After finishing her education her interest to experiment with film and photography and other art forms got more intensive.

In a way, missing the exposure to other forms of expression gave Şenol the drive to experiment. By teaching herself video and photography allowed her to be free and work without constrictions. Her interest in digital photography started as a practical one. **"Not having to rely on film development and other third parties that could see my work, gave me a feeling that I didn't have to worry and hold back."** Her strong statements and critiques are never mildly and the work she produces can be of such provocative nature that within the Turkish society there could be a strong opposition to what she is trying to convey. The aesthetics of her work is a raw and sometimes even of an amateurish one. In a way her choice for simple solutions allows her to keep producing her ideas and maybe even let people not take her work that serious.

Although she would never identify herself with photography, in 2004 Geniş Açı Photography Magazine did an article on her censored exhibition in Germany. **"In 'Once upon a time...' I got inspired by looking at my own child playing with her Barbies and Action Man dolls. I decided to use these doll as actor's within a dollhouse setting to portray a disturbed family construct."** The use of these innocent genderless Barbies are in such contrast to the violent sexual acts and death that as a viewer you grasp by images that are revealed. The beauty is that all these conceptual layers are translated through the directness of the photographic medium.

The divide between the photography world and art is still a debate held within Turkish media. But for Canan Şenol it seems there are no borders. Her work mixes different media and worlds together. She is currently working on schizophrenia as her topic, using video stills and photography projected during her performance.

www.canansenol.com