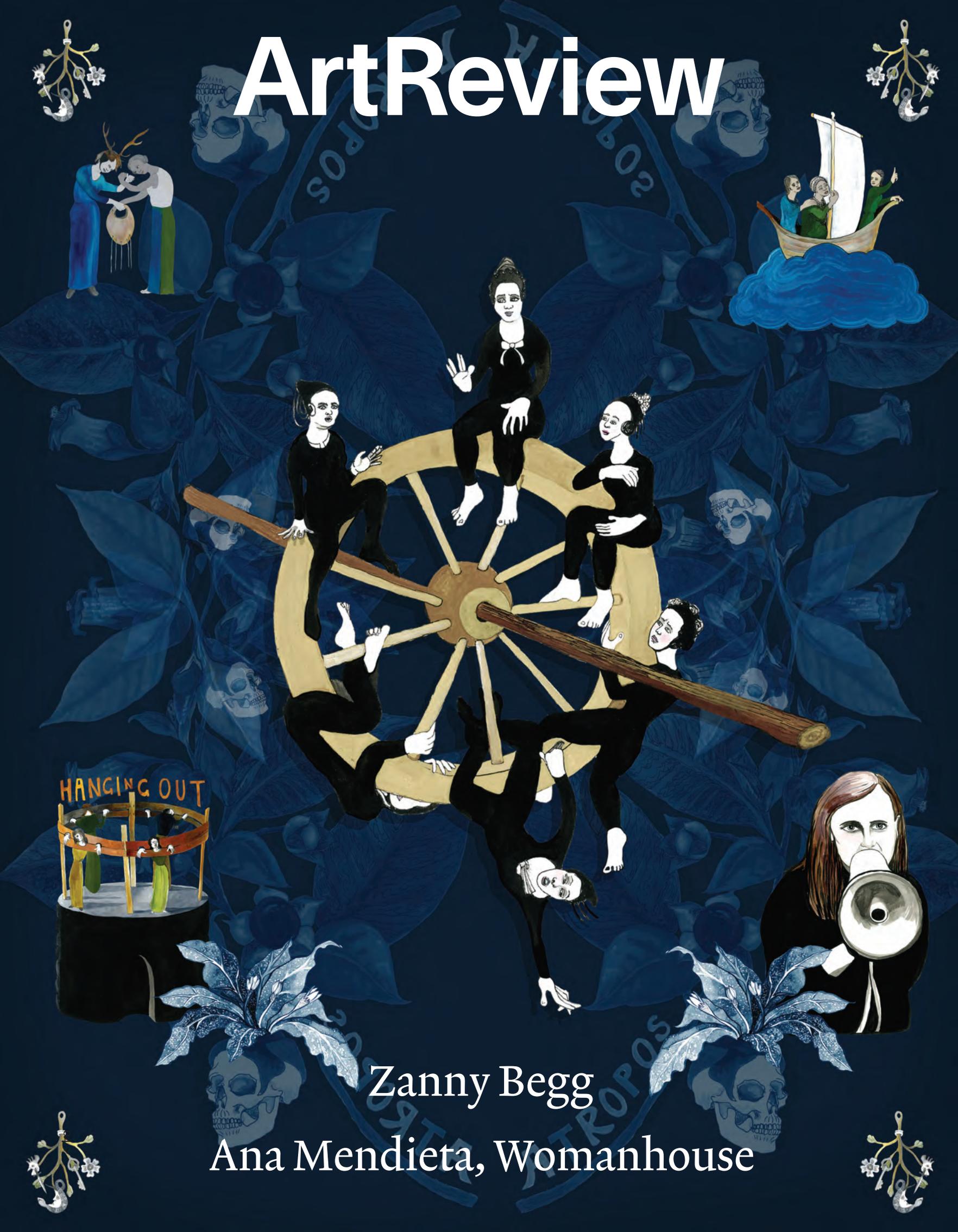


ArtReview



Zanny Begg

Ana Mendieta, Womanhouse

Under the Paving Stones

Istanbul looks back

words and images by Juliet Jacques

Memories and the city

In his book about his home city, *Istanbul* (2003), Orhan Pamuk explores the numerous contradictions that make up its history. Pamuk focuses on the tensions over whether its culture should face East or West, with the Bosphorus strait that splits Europe and Asia running through its heart; and whether it should root itself in its past as Constantinople, the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman capital, or rebuild itself – as the most important city in the country, if not its capital – when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ordered the Turkification of place names and a switch from Arabic to Latin script after he declared Turkish independence in 1923.

Subtitled *Memories and the City*, Pamuk's take discusses a regional-specific melancholy, known in Turkish as *hüzün*, looking at Istanbul's lost past through the eyes of four writers, from Turkey and elsewhere, none widely translated but all influential on his journey towards becoming his country's first Nobel Prize for Literature winner. What emerges, via his accounts of Western authors who visited, and of domestic ones who agonised over which Western cultures to assimilate, and how much, is a *literary city*: which is not just to say writers are shaped by Istanbul, but also that Istanbul is shaped by its writers.



above The Bosphorus

below left Book at the Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar Literature Museum

below right Orhan Pamuk bust at the Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar Literature Museum



In 2011 the Ministry of Culture & Tourism established the Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar Literature Museum in the sixteenth-century Alay Köşkü pavilion, near the Ottoman sultans' main residence at Topkapı Palace. Modernist poet, novelist, essayist and politician Tanpınar (1901–62) was one of Pamuk's inspirations; busts of Tanpınar and Pamuk are displayed, alongside a picture of 40 writers at a 1928 Congress to initiate a Turkish literature, and many other images, books and artefacts, with a space for discussions, performances, workshops and ceremonies.

Artists and their pasts

At Istanbul Modern – the city's largest contemporary art institution, run by a private foundation backed by the Eczacıbaşı family – there is an exhibition titled *Artists in Their Time*. The last major show before the centre closes for a complete redesign by Renzo Piano, as part of the \$1.2 billion redevelopment of Istanbul's Galata port district, it takes a line from Tanpınar's best-known novel, *The Time Regulation Institute* (1954), as its starting point: 'I am neither within time nor completely outside of it'. Its theme is artists' relationship with their present, and how they

bear the weight of the past and the pressure of the future. The exhibition features a number of Turkish artists, such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, one of the few Turkish filmmakers well-known abroad, and photographer Ara Güler, whose nostalgic images permeate Pamuk's *Istanbul*.

The show provides a route into Turkish modernism, with two of its most influential painters, Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–91) and her son Nejad Melih Devrim (1923–95), being prominent. Like many Turkish artists, Zeid studied in Paris, before her love life tied her to the Middle East, via her marriage to Iraqi ambassador Prince Zeid bin Hussein, although she continued to display abstract works such as *My Hell* (1951), exhibited here, in France. Devrim looked almost exclusively to the West, being included in Sidney Janis Gallery's exhibition of *Young Painters in U.S. and France* in Manhattan in 1950, after he settled in Paris. His *Abstract Composition* of 1949 is described here as the 'earliest-known abstract painting by a Turkish artist', suggesting that Devrim – also subject of a retrospective at Galeri Nev – influenced his mother's style as much as she influenced his. (Not to mention that abstract Islamic art of the Ottoman period, a feature of Istanbul's architecture and sites of worship, was an inspiration for many Western modernists, and for Zeid.)



above Galata Bridge

below Graffiti at a university in Kadıköy celebrating Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai



top Work by Sarkis at Istanbul Modern

above Yüksel Arslan's *Capitalist Production Process 1 (Private Property)*, 1972, at Istanbul Modern



Other works here owe more to the written word. Sarkis, born in Istanbul in 1938, also worked in France; his art focuses on remembrance, and the neon text in his *Sculpture with a Monkey Skull Dancing in front of Sarkis' Big Times*, made for his Istanbul Modern solo exhibition in 2009, refers to stages in his art career. Meanwhile, fellow *Istanbullu* Yüksel Arslan has a wider focus, internationalist in the Marxist sense: *Capitalist Production Process 1 (Private Property)* (1972) looks at first glance like a classic portrait of class exploitation, but the standardisation of the workers' faces and the coins that replace the factory owners' heads betray a French Surrealist influence, although Arslan's caustic imagery puts him closer to the movement's brutal Communist poets than its (often less visceral) painters. The theme is broad – perhaps too broad – and it's not always evident how the featured works reflect artists' ambivalence towards the concept of time. It does, however, provide a sense of how Turkish artists' points of focus have shifted over the last century.

Creative freedoms

If to the visitor Istanbul may seem obsessed with its past, then the artists and activists I met were obsessed with its future, precisely because it looks so bleak. Since Occupy Gezi – an effort to save one of Istanbul’s few parks, involving an array of groups including environmentalists, students, anarchists, football fans, Kurds and LGBTQI people – launched widespread protests against Erdoğan’s autocratic rule in 2013, there has been a clampdown on dissent, which intensified after the failed coup of July 2016. Last year, Erdoğan made himself president in a constitutional referendum held in an ongoing state of emergency, won by the narrowest of margins, with 1.5 million unstamped votes. During that year, many academics, authors and journalists have been imprisoned or exiled, drawing international condemnation: 38 Nobel laureates recently signed an open letter quoting Erdoğan in 2009, saying that ‘the old Turkey who used to sentence its great writers to prison... is gone for ever’, and demanded that he release writers jailed after the coup. Pamuk, tried in 2005 for discussing the Armenian genocide and mass killings of Kurds, and later fined 6,000 liras, did not sign, surely aware that adding his name would secure a long prison term.



above and below Works from Elmas Deniz's *A Year Without a Summer* at Pilot Galeri



top Office of Useful Art, dedicated to a perceived crisis in contemporary museology, at SALT Galata

The only exhibition to confront this directly had just finished when I arrived. This was at Depo, in support of the not-for-profit gallery’s chairman, entrepreneur and patron, Osman Kavala, who was arrested in October for ‘attempting to overthrow the constitutional order’ after returning from Gaziantep, southeast Turkey, where he was starting a cultural centre for Syrian refugees. He was accused of organising the Gezi protests, assisting Kurdish activists and acting for US and European interests. This occurred as Erdoğan attempted to shore up his religious base in a country that, since Atatürk, has based its politics on secular principles. Erdoğan changed Turkey’s time zone to align it to the Middle East and Russia; he has also pursued war at Syria’s border, where there is a large Kurdish population, clamped down on Pride (although LGBTQI organisations still put on events) and generated a climate of fear unknown since the military dictatorship of the early 1980s. In an expression of solidarity with Kavala, artists congregated in Depo to write letters to him, hold reading sessions and make work in shifts. Having started the initiative with no expectations, it’s unclear what the institution will do next, but it may be that the campaign to release Kavala – a benefactor of several projects, including the high-profile If Film Festival (which had invited me to the city to judge its ‘Love and Change’ political documentary section) – galvanises Istanbul’s art community into more coordinated resistance.

Going underground

There are plenty of smaller galleries that still function despite this climate, in which opposition from religious groups to opening nights (with their visible drinking) is supported by authorities keen to criminalise and shut down sites of dissent, clearing space for property developers. Elmas Deniz’s second solo exhibition at Pilot Galeri, *A Year Without a Summer*, is named after a meteorological event that followed a volcanic eruption in Indonesia in 1815, and it encourages its audience to reconsider how humanity relates to nature. Deniz places the language

of advertising over a video of Sri Lanka, asking how capitalism could turn such a magnificent landscape into a luxury item; her 2017 artist book *Flying Plants, Dogs and Elephants*, silk-printed on paper made of elephant dung and hung on Pilot's walls, invites readers to contemplate the beauty of everyday interactions with animals and vegetation.

OJ (Orange Juice) Art Space aims at introducing young and emerging Turkish artists to the European audiences who continue to visit the city (especially during the Istanbul Biennial, the most recent of which was curated by Elmgreen & Dragset and ended in November). Post-internet artist Pinar Marul's first solo show, *Unknown*, is inspired by UFO researcher and conspiracy theorist Maximilien de Lafayette, drawing on science-fiction and cyberpunk films and literature in its presentation of sculptures of decontextualised, defamiliarised human organs, made



above Work by Pinar Marul at OJ Art Space
below Osman Dinç at Pi Artworks



top Pinar Marul at the OJ Art Space
above Poster for LGBTQI film screening

from hosepipes and other manmade materials (which might also be read as an oblique comment on the political climate). Another Turkish sculptor, Osman Dinç, has an exhibition at Pi Artworks, in a building in Karaköy with a small gallery on each of its five floors. I left too early for *Light Theory*, a performance art piece by Museum of Innocence director Onur Karaoğlu about the lives of three gay men in contemporary Istanbul, but as the artists, curators and LGBTQI activists I met told me, this city has too rich a counterculture, and too diverse an artistic community, to allow Erdoğan and his supporters to turn contemporary art into a nostalgic object of *hüzün*.

Juliet Jacques is a writer and filmmaker