

Cold TURKEY

Fear and Loathing in Istanbul: Joobin Bekhrad discusses the art of **Nazif Topçuoğlu**.

Having removed his signature Sartre-esque spectacles and reclined comfortably into a plush chair, Nazif Topçuoğlu takes another sip from the glass of single-malt whisky before him. Had I known he would be drinking, I would have gone for a lager, at least; however, fearing I should appear uncouth, I make do with a tepid latte. This is my first meeting in person with the architect-cum-photographer, who, the last time we spoke, was most likely overlooking a sparkling Bosphorus vista from his Istanbul flat. Only a short while ago, he had told me of his ambitions to relocate to Toronto – much to my surprise – and now, interestingly enough, we've become neighbours.

Upon first glance, he exudes the air of an Anatolian pseudo-philosopher, with his inquisitive gaze and mane that Nazım Hikmet would have doubtless approved of. In his native Turkey, he's been at times branded a pervert and a paedophile. Like countless other Turkish artists whose oeuvres have been questioned and put under a lens in recent years, he's just – to paraphrase The Animals' Eric Burdon – a misunderstood soul whose intentions are good. And a very talented one, at that.

Naturally, our conversation begins with all things Istanbul and Turkey. Despite my enthusiasm about Turkish culture, Nazif seems less optimistic. These days, when discussing Turkey, the subject of politics is inescapable, least of all the subtopic of Prime Minister Erdoğan, who seems to be the new person everyone loves to hate. As we draw parallels between present-day Turkey and pre-Revolution Iran, I reflect on the visions of Atatürk and Reza Shah Pahlavi, and wonder whether or not they were all in vain; but, as soon as our banter takes on too strong a political flavour for my liking, we return to the crux of the matter: art – and Nazif's, in particular.



Nazif is now in his sixties – a fact he continually reminds me of, remarking with a tinge of sadness every now and then, 'I'm old, you know?'. He studied architecture initially, (although he never practiced) before turning his attention to fashion photography, wanting to follow in the footsteps of the David Bailey-inspired photographer in the 1966 film, 'Blow Up'. Since 2003, he has not only exhibited his distinctive photographs in Turkey and around the world, but has also authored numerous books (albeit in Turkish), among them the wryly-titled 'Photography Isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny'. Spending his time between Canada and Turkey, he's currently represented by Istanbul's Galeri Nev and Dubai's Green Art Gallery. However, with the socio-political climate back in Istanbul becoming more and more uncertain, Nazif's plan is to imminently base himself in Toronto completely.

Over the years, Nazif has come to be known for his trademark style of photography, which he has mastered in a number of distinct, yet linked series of works. One need not be a connoisseur to spot a Topçuoğlu; Nazif's works literally scream out from afar with their recurring subjects, settings, and hues. Like some of his contemporary compatriots, such as Nilbar Güre and Halil Altındere, as well as the Iranian photographers Soody Sharifi and Melika Shafahi, Nazif endeavours to capture moments in time. These 'moments', however, are anything but spontaneous and are rather figments of the artist's imagination, which he tries to translate into physical images. They are at times surreal, as well sumptuous, in their use of lush and vivid colours and cozy interiors – and are often mistaken for having deliberately sensual and erotic overtones. His subjects are almost exclusively young, attractive girls, often decked out in school uniforms and miniskirts, or other provocative attire, who, to those unfamiliar with Nazif's outlook, usually seem to be up to no good. 'People see what they expect to see', he tells me, before launching into a diatribe about the perverseness of the

(Above) *Circus in the Library*. 2013. Lambda C-type Print. 120 x 180 cm.



*La Nuit
Americane.*
2013. Lambda
C-type Print.
160 x 120 cm.

Turkish male psyche. ‘Turks see a girl in a skirt, and think, let’s f**k!’

The use of such ‘sexy’ subjects and seemingly suggestive poses is what the artist calls ‘icing on the cake’. In other words, he employs them only to catch the attention of his audiences, rather than in an attempt to produce add an erotic dimension to his photographs. An only child, Nazif grew up in a house filled with books, yearning, he says, for the companionship of a sister or two. His mother, a prominent lawyer, was an outspoken advocate of women’s rights, not unlike the artist himself today. In many of his works, female subjects are reading books, representing Nazif’s libertarian idea of confident, independent Turkish women.

His series are also chronological in a way, reflective of sociocultural changes and phenomena particular to Turkey. In his early works, girls are autonomous and free-thinking, as per one of the dreams espoused by the nascent Turkish Republic in the 1920s; however, as they grow ‘older’, they come to be chastised for their ambitiousness by other girls who, according to the artist, were once like them, yet, who have conformed to, and settled for a less-than-ideal reality.

‘Girls go to university, only to come out and realise there’s no place for them in [Turkish] society’, he laments, commenting on the reality of an increasingly conservative Turkey and Atatürk’s failed dream of emancipating women.

Despite the fact that almost all of his photographs are taken behind closed doors, and, for the most part, feature no nudity, producing them has often been trying for Nazif. Though still enjoying the status of a secular nation, Nazif is quick to remind me that old habits die hard. ‘You’re always afraid ... you have to make sure the girl’s angry brother or father won’t come banging on your door tomorrow’ he tells me. If only that were the extent of Nazif’s tribulations, though. The artist says that audiences in Turkey, on the whole, just don’t seem to be as interested in contemporary art – and his, in particular – as he is. As Nazif sees it, the majority of Turkish art collectors buy predominantly for investment purposes, or because a certain style of art is in vogue. Due to the shifting political climate, he continues, Turkish audiences have become less interested in his work, which, one might argue, provides a stark contrast to the rather conservative narratives being trumpeted by the Justice and Development Party. ‘Turks have a herd mentality ... and Turkish artists are so afraid to stray from the norm’.

One remembers the 2010 riots in Istanbul’s Tophane district, when gallery-goers were pelted with frozen oranges and gassed with pepper spray by an angry mob who found the nature of certain artworks disturbing, to say the least. ‘[Ordinary people] don’t care about art,’ he remarks nonchalantly, ‘and the seculars ... they’re so boring’.

Though the plan is to eventually relocate to Toronto, Nazif



(Left) *Norwegian Blue*. 2012.
Lambda C-type Print. 120 x 170 cm.
(Below) *Selfie*. 2013. Lambda C-type
Print. 120 x 160 cm.



expects no quick ‘solution’ to his difficulties as a Turkish artist; and, judging by his remarks, one can almost say that the worst of his tribulations are yet to come. For all its shortcomings, the Turkish market is home to a considerable percentage of his potential buyers, while Canadian galleries abound with art that is cautious not to diverge too far from conventional Canadian expectations. Even though there’s nothing particularly ‘Turkish’ about Nazif’s works (aside from the odd Persian carpet and Turkish kilim), the artist still has to deal with the reality that he’s unknown and underappreciated in Toronto, and that gallerists in such a conservative market are – for now, at least – less than enthusiastic about exhibiting his photographs.

That being said, though, Nazif predominantly looks at Toronto as a place where he can focus on his practice without the drama and anxiety of a Turkey that seems to be increasingly departing from the dream of Mustafa Kemal. Though he has distanced himself physically from Istanbul, he hasn’t by any means cut his ties with the burgeoning art market there, and indeed entertains hopes for future progress in the international art hub of the UAE. As well, he is still actively producing work, with an upcoming solo exhibition at Green Art Gallery this spring, which will focus on the education of women in Turkey and its gradual decline in the face of a waxing tide of conservatism. In one photograph, two redheaded schoolgirls anxiously clutch onto a cabinet of curiosities, replete with sundry

stuffed birds and faux florae, with eyes hungry not for lust or pleasures of the flesh, but rather knowledge – something the artist likens to a sort of forbidden fruit in this series. In another, a scantily clad girl reads a book while hanging suspended on a couch mimicking the pose of a wooden mannequin on a nearby bookshelf - perhaps in the artist’s attempt to highlight the strangeness and awkwardness of the act - and elsewhere, one witnesses a trio of seductive and seemingly puzzled belles atop each other in an ornately decorated room brimming with old books, looking as if in a place they shouldn’t be.

Taking a final swig from his glass, Nazif rubs his eyes, brushes back his hair, and places the Sartre spectacles back on his nose. Giddy with whisky, he has to pop down to the loo, yet again. ‘I’m old, you know?’ he repeats, laughing, waving a farewell hand. With all his dry humour, ‘Oriental’ resignation, and resolve, I’m sure the old fellow will do just fine. **HBA**

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