Double Reality 1987 / 2013 Fabric, iron, polyester, 192 x 170 x 171 cm (installation sizes)
and A Promised Exhibition, SALT Beyoğlu, Istanbul, 2013 (bottom and right page)

Cover:
Mystic Transport 1992 20 metal baskets and satin quilts
Mystic Transport 1992 20 metal baskets and satin quilts
Installation views from the 3rd International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 1992 (above)
and When Latitudes Become Forms, Walker Art Center, Minnesota, 2003 (bottom)

Neworientation 1995 Rope, ribbon, hangers, 400 cm (h.)
Installation view from the 4th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 1995
Heimat Ist Wo Mann Isst
1994
3 Spoons, textile, 40 X 40 cm
Installation view from Iskele exhibition, ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), Stuttgart, 1994

Courier
1997
Quilted clothes, personal possessions
Installation views from Courier exhibition, Galerie La Centrale, Montreal, 1994 (above, bottom right) and A Promised Exhibition, SALT Beyoğlu, Istanbul, 2013 (bottom left)
Gülsün Karamustafa, has made significant contributions to the development of a new artistic language in Turkey since the 1980’s. She alluded to the important role she would play in Turkish art with her small, naive and modest paintings completed in the 1970’s. One of those earlier pieces, The “Lacemaker” (1976), was a window into Karamustafa’s world. In the center of the painting is a figure who has migrated to the big city: this figure, with her objects and her home, lovingly decorated with lacework, represented the ‘other’ within civilization, among and inside each of us. Karamustafa has always been intrigued by the ‘other’. Her subjects have included women, transsexuals, immigrants, and those who were forced to migrate; as a way of perceiving those on the inside as well as those on the outside, the observer and the observed. She also used her own image as an instrument of pleasure and power. Material objects and the culture surrounding them became central to her works, beginning with “The Lacemaker” to “Prayer Rug with Elvis” (1986), and references to the fetish objects of a hybrid culture in “Tigerella” (1983) and “The City and the Secret Panther Fashion” (2007), in these Karamustafa documents objects of the new social fabric of a cosmopolitan Istanbul, the melange spirit of the ancient city forced to deal with migration, and the rapidly changing culture of Turkey.
At the root of her work one may recognize the influence of her teacher, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu of Istanbul Fine Arts Academy, the most established art school in Turkey, who supported her in looking beyond the canvas, to the material world around her. In any case Karamustafa was a ‘non-academic’ academic: an outsider who could not relate to traditional painting, abstract art and the ideology of expressionism. Her interests lay in illustration, narrative, popular culture, the city with its past and its present and as she fed off of these sources, the pieces she created would not fit into what a traditional description of painter was. At this point The Lacemaker comes to mind: there is a photograph taken of Karamustafa as she sits among the fabrics she was using to create the wall rugs that would bring a fresh approach into the art world in the 1980’s. In this photograph she is just like the woman sitting lost among her lacework. That image of Karamustafa is an example of how artistic traditions and the definition of what an artist is in Turkey was turned upside down. One cannot deny what a big role the works of Gülsün Karamustafa have played in paving the way for other artists to use new artistic materials and techniques, to questioning the borders between art and craft, to carry gender specific handicrafts (knitting, sewing, weaving...) into a cultural context, in making visible the new ‘taste’ formed by urban hybridization and the acceptance of kitsch as a cultural indicator.

Gülsün Karamustafa, since the 1970’s, has been a leading visionary in mining her own individuality and giving meaning and form to personal freedom in art which has had a great impact on youngster generations of Turkish artists. Karamustafa seems to approach life and art with ceaseless curiosity which may be why she has become one of the most interesting figures in Turkish Contemporary Art.

Karamustafa feels at home with many modes of expression, painting, assemblage, installation and video inviting viewers to experience a sense of belonging instead of estrangement in the worlds she creates. Karamustafa’s pieces are about identity, tradition, memory, cultural transitions and their effects, but as we can see in “Courier” (1991), “Heimat ist Wo Mann ißt” (Your Homeland is not Where You are Born But Where You Have a Full Stomach) (1994), and “The Settler” (2003), these concepts are not presented in order to re-evaluate them, but rather to remember them and to understand the experiences of ordinary people. Karamustafa attempts to stand on the outside as she looks at the effects of cultural transformation; just as in “Memory of a Square” (2005), she tries to express memory itself, for it to be voiced and understood on the myriad of levels influenced by generations or by gender. The societal view of gender is one of Karamustafa’s number one topics; it is a subject that she studies on multiple levels. “Double Reality” (1987), in which she looks at female and male identity and the social process of gender identity, is one of the earliest queer works in Turkish art, “Men Crying” (2001) is one of the few pieces in Turkey that looks at masculinity and “Kültür / A Gender Project from Istanbul” (1996) takes its place among a handful of works that deal with the difficult life conditions of transvestites and transsexuals. The works that Karamustafa has produced around the subject of female identity, from the very beginning, is very diverse; from the deconstruction of the West’s orientalist fantasies to the construction of the female identity in Ottoman times, during the forming of the Republic and in modern day Turkey.

Ahu Antmen


Gülsün Karamustafa lives and works in Istanbul, Turkey.
An Ordinary Love 1984 Textile collage, 190 x 245 cm

The City And The Secret Panther Fashion 2007 Single channel video, audio, 00:13:07

Set photograph, Istanbul, 2007 (above),
Installation view from the project at Mobile Stages exhibition, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, 2008 (bottom)
Men Crying 2001 Three channel video, audio, 00:03:00 (channel I), 00:01:47 (channel II), 00:02:16 (channel III)
Guest director: Atıf Yılmaz
Installation view from A Promised Exhibition, SALT Galata, Istanbul, 2013

The Settler 2003 Two channel synchronized video, single channel audio, 00:05:11
Installation view from A Promised Exhibition, SALT Beyoğlu, Istanbul, 2013
Les Belles 1984 Mixed media on paper, 30 x 30 cm (each)

Promised Paintings 1998-2004 Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 cm (each, above), 53.5 x 73.5 cm (each, bottom)