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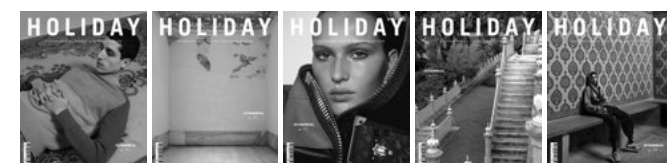
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NO. 391 COVER

This issue has five different covers. *From left to right:* Mehdi wears pullover by Loro Piana, photo by Felipe Romero Beltrán. Wall by Mario Sorrenti. Angelina Kendall wears total look by Louis Vuitton, photo by Robin Galieue. Beylerbeyi Palace's garden by Jean Marie del Moral. Steinberg, photo by Mario Sorrenti. Reproduction of any part of this publication, including all logos, titles and graphic elements, is strictly prohibited without prior permission from the publishers. All rights reserved. Copyright March 2023 by Holiday Deluxe.



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BOUCHERON

PARIS SINCE 1858

The Mechanical Fictions of SERVER DEMIRTAŞ

● *Like clay figures having life breathed into them by an ancient god, the humanoid silicone sculptures in Server Demirtaş's Istanbul studio start to inhale deeply, smile shyly or open their mouths in a wordless scream as the artist walks around the room plugging them in to wall sockets in the space he calls his "sanctuary." As a young man in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Demirtaş studied painting at Turkey's State Academy of Fine Arts—now Mimar Sinan University, just down the hill along the city's Bosphorus waterfront—and worked with the influential abstract artist Adnan Çoker, who served as an important mentor. Demirtaş first made his own mark in Istanbul's art world with large-scale abstract sculptures and site-specific installations created from PVC and corrugated cardboard. But for the past two decades, he has devoted himself to devising intricate kinetic sculptures and building by hand all of the motorized machinery that allows what Demirtaş calls his "mechanical fictions" to express themselves in ways both poignant and playful.*

How did you become fascinated with making kinetic sculptures?

I prefer to call them "moving" or "active" sculptures, actually. But it was exactly 20 years ago that I built my first machine—the first I made as a sculpture, I mean. At that time, I was already making them to make money, to make paper ornaments to put on cakes, wedding invitations, party decorations, that kind of thing... I'm not a mechanic, but I learned some things from my father, who was a master technician. Then one day, Adnan Çoker said to me, "Server, you should make art out of what you're living with; you're living with machines, make sculptures out of them." What can I say, that affected me a lot.

The first one I made as art was *Purple Flower of the Machine* [*Makinenin Mor Çiçeği*, 2003], a wall-mounted sculpture with compact, battery-powered machinery. When someone approached it, the scent of a fragrant flower would blow out. Another of my early works was a pair of scissors walking over a projection of water [*Makaslar/Scissors*, 2004]. These were kind of experimental studies.

Later, I made a man out of wires with a mechanism underneath a platform that made him lean himself back against a wall in a bored manner [*Duvar/Wall*, 2012]. This is how my excitement with moving sculptures really began. Then there was my first breathing sculpture [*Nefes/Breath*, 2012], inspired by a Man Ray photograph of a reclining nude. This is when I first started working with silicone; the soft material allowed me to make the sculpture's chest rise and fall in a realistic manner. Since then, I have gone back and forth between lifelike sculptures and more robotic ones, like a curious pair of disembodied eyes or two slow-motion boxers.

Your work has been conceptually linked to the early automata created by the 12th-century Muslim inventor Ismail al-Jazari and later by Leonardo da Vinci, both of whom were famed as artists as well as engineers. Are you consciously influenced by these great historical figures?

I first became acquainted with Leonardo in middle school, when I watched a documentary film about him on TRT [Turkey's national public broadcaster, and at the time the country's only television provider]. His love for life and for art, and all the things he was able to explain through his art, impressed me a lot. I had a troubled childhood, and when I discovered Leonardo, I found the opportunity to set a direction for myself.

Interview by Jennifer Hattam

I started making copies of Leonardo's works, and when my teacher saw me so eager, he set up a painting studio where I could work.

Al-Jazari was born 300 years before Leonardo, he was doing all kinds of incredible engineering for the Artukid royal palace in southeast Anatolia 200 years before the Renaissance even started. So when Leonardo was alive, he probably got hold of al-Jazari's book [*The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*]. It's hard to know how much it affected him, but we can deduce from what he wrote that Leonardo was very impressed, that he was nourished by him. It's as if the interests of his predecessor passed into him. And without them both, I would never have had the inspiration to do what I do. My works are all based on the mechanized automaton, driven by motorized wheels; they're not computerized at all. I still use some of my father's 90-year-old machinery in my workshop.

Leonardo was the man who awakened me. He was so versatile; he designed parachutes, he designed a bridge over the Golden Horn in Istanbul for the Ottoman sultan. I wish it had actually been built. So Leonardo was my first teacher. Then my father, of course. And then Adnan Çoker.

Do you have any influences among living artists?
For me [the Dutch artist] Theo Jansen is number one; he's the master of moving sculpture.

What is the process of creating a new sculpture like for you? Where do you start?

I'm always collecting a lot of photos, doing a lot of research. I have a lot of curiosity and I naturally observe. While talking with you, talking to someone else, going around, a lot of things go through my head.

There are many ideas, but they are not fully cooked yet. Then I see something, and something happens, something clicks: a man passes by with a wheelbarrow, say, and he immediately connects with those old ideas, fills in the missing place.

Right now, for example, I want to make a sculpture of this woman in a photo. She's leaning against a wall, there's a cigarette in her mouth, she's a woman who has reached a certain age, who has lived through everything, good and bad. I also have another idea about a woman singing to farm animals and the animals responding, there's something about that relationship that interests me a lot, but I haven't found an artistic solution for it yet. It took me two years to make my life-size silicone horse [*At/Horse*, 2017]; I had the idea, but technically I was lacking the skill to make it. I made the horse when the right time came. Your projects mature like this.

Typically, I start by sketching out all the movements on cardboard, then experimenting to see what happens with each action individually. The forms I first sculpt from clay, then cast in silicone instead of bronze.

Your works seem very universal. Are they influenced in any way by your life in Istanbul or things that are going on in Turkey?

Frankly, social issues do not interest me very much. I have a piece with climbing girls [*Kaçış/Escape*, 2015], these three girls that are climbing up a wall until there is nowhere to go anymore, and then they slide back down. It's like an endless cycle, they can't get out. They are Syrian [refugee] girls, but maybe it's not just Syrian girls, maybe it's me climbing that wall, too, I don't know.

I'm inspired by people I see, thinking about what they might have experienced.

We have all experienced something. Who you are and what you do today is a continuation of that. Where is 10-year-old Server? Did he go away somewhere? No, he's in here [points to his chest]. It's the same with you. I'm trying to understand myself, to connect with other people, with my sculptures. I want to establish a dialogue, to share whatever emotions we experience.

What is it about the medium of mechanized sculpture that you think can help facilitate a better connection with or understanding of the human experience?

Take this sculpture I did of an old woman opening her mouth [*Çığlık/Scream*, 2020, which was included in the fifth Mardin Biennial in 2022]. You know the French artist Louise Bourgeois? She made the giant spider [*Maman*, 1999]—it is a spider but it is also a work about gender issues, and about the poisonous things within. This was a woman who hated her father for 90 years; she was still talking about this three or four years before she died. There is a book, *Mumbling Beauty*, with photographs of her as an elderly woman. When I saw the one of her with her mouth open, the stones fell into place. I started working on this piece right away. But while I was working, my father became very ill, and I started to see the effects of that on his face and his hands. This is the work that resulted from that. That's the background. What am I trying to say? I could have done something still and sad, but I think the movement establishes a more direct contact with the audience. It tells my story more intensely.

In a previous interview, you said you were a "pessimistic" artist—why do you describe yourself that way, and how is that attitude visible in your work? They got that wrong. I am not a pessimist. Yes, life is bad, life is hard, there are bigoted people in this country who are spitting on art, getting angry with it, not valuing it. Perhaps I have a pessimism about them, or about the fact that people can't earn a living here. But if I were pessimistic about art, about myself, I would not be able to work. I am actually very optimistic. My work comes from my curiosities; I am still like a student of life, learning as I work. I finish one work, and the next day I'm wondering what I'll make next.

How has the art world and the situation for artists in Turkey changed since you were a young artist at the academy?

In our era, when I started to make new paintings and sculptures after school was over, there was a conceptual group of artists like Şükrü Aysan, Serhat Kiraz, Ayşe Erkmen, Ahmet Öktem. There seemed to be something new, a new breakthrough happening. Some of them were very successful, but the sculpture market at that time was bad. I had to throw out a lot of my old sculptures.

I do not think that artists in Turkey are very different from Western artists at the moment. The only difference is that Turkish artists have nothing to feed them financially. How can someone paint if they are depressed because they cannot pay their rent? If I took an artist from here to Paris, I think he'd do very well there after a few years. But under the living conditions here, the family conditions, the economic difficulties, the costs of materials—flexible silicone is a very expensive material, for example—and the difficulty of finding materials, artists cannot develop, they cannot grow.

I read the other day about how Germany has started giving €200 for culture to people when they turn 18, so they can buy books or records or do other cultural activities. This is a wonderful thing. We don't have anything like that; the government here gives no help to artists. Artists here are not lucky, so the competition can get ugly.

But there are some opportunities. I'm not someone who is very interested in the market, but the number of art buyers has increased, the market has grown. The situation with sculptures is not like it was before; they are being sold now, so are paintings. The number of collectors has grown. There are many young collectors now; they travel to the West and visit museums, they go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Louvre. There is prestige for young businessmen who own art, who are interested in art, who can say, "Oh, I have a Mehmet Gülerüz [painting], you have an Adnan Çoker." So I find that positive.

The current economic and political situation has driven a lot of artists and other people to leave Turkey for other countries where they feel they can work more freely and earn a better living. Do you ever think about joining this migration?

More than 20 years ago, I went to Indonesia and lived in Bali for a few months. I was thinking I would open a small shop there to sell baklava and Turkish coffee. But I had to come back. Other than that, I haven't thought about going anywhere outside Turkey. I don't plan to migrate.

To be born and raised in Istanbul [like I was] means something. Being in Istanbul has always been something necessary to nourish me. When I did my military service in Urfa [in southeastern Turkey], I missed the sea of Istanbul. Everywhere there was like a desert. I love this place. But I am buying some land near the Aegean coast. The city feeds me, but I am tired of not seeing trees.

There are also artists and museums in Istanbul; the festivals always come here. Although now things are changing. It took 15 years to open a modern art museum [Istanbul Modern] in Istanbul, and now the Baksi Museum has been built in Bayburt. [Businessman] Erol Tabanca has opened a museum in Odunpazarı [the historic center of Eskişehir]. There was a biennial in Sinop. There is a theater festival, a music festival and big exhibitions happening in Mardin now. I think Mardin will be a completely different place in a few year's time.

But going around Istanbul, the Bosphorus, the islands, its archaeological ruins, its mosques, its other temples—everything adds something to your dough. If I were in Ankara, I wouldn't be able to nourish myself the same way, I wouldn't be the same Server. If I hadn't been born in Istanbul, I might not have been this type of artist. Just as Leonardo da Vinci, al-Jazari and art history are inspirations to me, I think that being in Istanbul has a nurturing power that we do not realize.

Do you see yourself as a Turkish artist? An Istanbul artist? How do you identify?

I don't explain it that way at all. Istanbul artist, İzmir artist, woman artist, one-armed artist, artist with no legs... I don't like that kind of thing at all. Art belongs to everyone. Everyone is an artist. I mean, everyone has a sensitivity in some way; maybe you have a beautiful voice or you can dance well—everyone has something. I don't believe anyone who says there is nothing. It's just undiscovered, it's sleeping. They may not practice it, they may not commit to it, but it's there. THE END

"If I hadn't been born in Istanbul, I might not have been this type of artist. Just as Leonardo da Vinci, al-Jazari and art history are inspirations to me, I think that being in Istanbul has a nurturing power that we do not realize"

Armet & Jans