

Nancy Atakan and Kalliopi Lemos

Projecting the United States of Womanhood

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Nancy Atakan & Kalliopi Lemos, *Necklace of Time*, still from double channel digital film, 7 min., 2020

An abandoned, ruined house in the forest hosts two women in their 70s. Wearing long dresses and large, Byzantine armour-like jewelries, they separately walk outside the house, listen to the trees, and touch the river passing through the forest. They seem serene, open and thoughtful. Their steps are slow, suiting the pace of the forest. Observing nature, they collect moments as evidences of beauty. Two women's paths cross by the broken stairs of the house. They smile at each other, hold hands and walk in. While lighting the candles, they seem peaceful and supportive. They sit on a table which has ornaments with embroidered words on and replace these with the beautiful gemstones on their large necklaces. One of the women takes a ruby stone out of her necklace and instead puts the ornament with the word "birth" on, that is handed to her by her companion.

Birth, death, divorce, artist, betrayal, trust, sickness, joy, love, ageing... These are the words embroidered on the ornaments. This scene makes me think that we, women, do this for each other. We feel lost, feel pain, concern or joy about something that we cannot name. We go to our mothers, grandmothers, sisters, neighbours, friends, partners, go to writers, filmmakers, storytellers... Their words and experiences help us to write our own stories.

These two women are artists Nancy Atakan and Kalliopi Lemos, and the scene I just described is from their video, *Necklace of Time*. Atakan and Lemos, friends for many years, come together this time to collaborate on their exhibition (until 28 March) at Pi Artworks London. "It is still as it always was" consists of sculptures, textile work with embroidery and patchwork, and an artist book besides the video. As you enter the gallery, you feel the unapologetic openness about personal experiences of the artists, as these experiences' significance has not been compromised but placed in the centre of the show.

Atakan is an American living in Istanbul and Lemos is a Greek living in London. They have moved to their new homes many years ago, went to universities, launched their careers and built their families there. Hence, migration becomes a central theme for the exhibition. Migration between identities, between cultural realities and different stages of womanhood... On the opening performance, Atakan and Lemos delivered a heartfelt performance by reading a text that they have written together, which

sounded like a love poem for the next generation of women. Afterwards, they invited their daughters to read the text from an embroidered fabric book. And finally, they asked the audience to read it aloud. The gallery was filled with messages of the artists that are about passing through time, beauty, identity and nature.

It’s not all love and light. Atakan says that dealing with the heavy reality of female beauty is also questioned through their work. “You go through different stages one by one as decades pass. You get angry, as you may experience harassment or objectification. The attention to your physical appearance becomes increasingly uncomfortable. But after the age of 50-55, you start asking the question: Where is the attention? This question has a huge weight. All through your life, you are expected to be a good woman, beautiful, well-groomed, loyal, useful for the society, to be a good mum and grandma. You find yourself living under the shadow of these expectations.” Lemos and Atakan realized that they went through similar journeys. “We decided to make this collaborative work, as artwork is a way of documentation. We are documenting our ageing and creating this work as a model for life.”

The two artists draw from their personal heritage and highlight the importance of women as familial and local storytellers. Both Lemos and Atakan make works inspired by their grandmothers and mothers, who were born in different countries from where the artists’ currently reside, and spoke different languages. Lemos' monumental installation *I Am Home* is a dress, raises from an old carpet, standing tall like a tree that is strongly connected to its roots. “‘I am home’ is not the same as ‘I am at home’. It means ‘I became home’. I recently feel this more and more. I use carpet and other materials that my grandmother owned, who was very instrumental in my life.” Atakan’s *Ponder Series* is also made of a heirloom; an American patchwork that her grandmother created as a wedding present to her parents. Atakan rearranges this historical piece and adds deconstructed wedding vows those are mostly big promises, ironically, only expected to be kept by the female member of couples.

The artists’ personal stories, of course, become political and therefore are powerful. They claim a new form of beauty in a safe space between young and old, lost and found, home and far afield, and struggle and support. The exhibition goes beyond delivering its promise to be an artistic dialogue between two women. It almost projects the united states of womanhood, showcasing notions and experiences that every woman can relate to, regardless of their age or background.

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Gülnaz Can is a bilingual freelance journalist and writer based in London mostly focusing on arts, politics and gender. Having 12 years’ experience in news broadcasting in Turkey, Gülnaz writes art reviews and interviews for publications such as The Guardian, Aesthetica, The Protagonist Magazine and This is Tomorrow.

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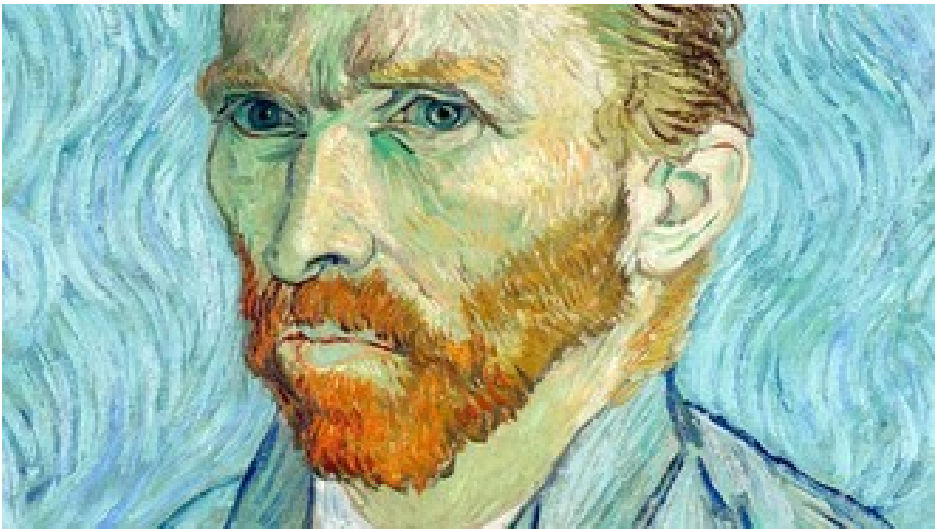


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- 2. Nancy Atakan & Kalliopi Lemos, Necklace of Time, still from double channel digital film, 7 min., 2020
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