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Fight back or flee repression? These Turkish artists chose Berlin

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The paintings are destructive and disturbing. On one of them, a black heart holds out a crying face in the foreground with little skulls dangling on it. The work by Turkish artist Bugra Erol, entitled "Stone Heart," is part of the exhibition "Mind Your Wishes" on show until July 8 in the Berlin gallery BERLINARTPROJECTS.

Like many other Turkish artists, Erol, born in 1986, has sought refuge in the German capital. "All I wanted was to run away," he told DW while walking through the gallery. The atmosphere in Turkey had become too repressive for him: "As artists, we reflect

what's happening around us. But as a reaction to the daily disasters occurring around us, many of us feel the need to withdraw from reality." And according to him, many young people feel the same way: "On the one hand, we feel an urge to fight back. But on the other hand, we're aware of the fact that we are mortal, and that we want to be happy."

In Turkey, an exhibition to which Erol had contributed was stormed twice, with the justification that religious feelings had been hurt. "The government supports these people," Erol claims. "Here in Berlin, there's freedom. And I'm here because I want to make use of that freedom."

Artists under pressure

Marie DuPasquier is the curator of the exhibition. Since 2006, BERLINARTPROJECTS has been supporting uprising artists, many of them from Turkey. The gallery aims to offer a meeting ground between Turkish and international artists.



DuPasquier gave strong support to Turkish artists in July 2016 after they had cancelled their participation in the art fair "Contemporary Istanbul" following the failed coup attempt. "We wanted to express our solidarity, and to make a statement that art in Turkey must continue," the curator explains.

Actor and performance artist Caglar Yigitogullari arrived in Berlin one month ago, after working for the Istanbul state theater for 15 years.

He has now received a three-year artist visa. "Censorship and self-censorship have always been practiced in theaters," he says, adding that things got much worse after the city administration took control of the theater budget. "From then on, they have tampered with everything, ranging from the repertoire to the stage props."

Theater artists initially tried to adapt to the situation. But the Gezi protests in 2013 marked a turning point. "Back then, Turkey ceased to be a democratic country. People are all afraid." Three directors with whom he had worked were sacked.

"I don't want to be a part of that system," says the actor. And he doesn't want to return to Istanbul.

The actor is supported by the artist initiative Tara, founded by Petra Diehl, Yesim Yalman and Mürtüz Yolcu. "We observed that art was losing its value and that dancers were being attacked," they explain, which is why they are now organizing concerts and festivals in Germany while helping Turkish artists deal with paper work.

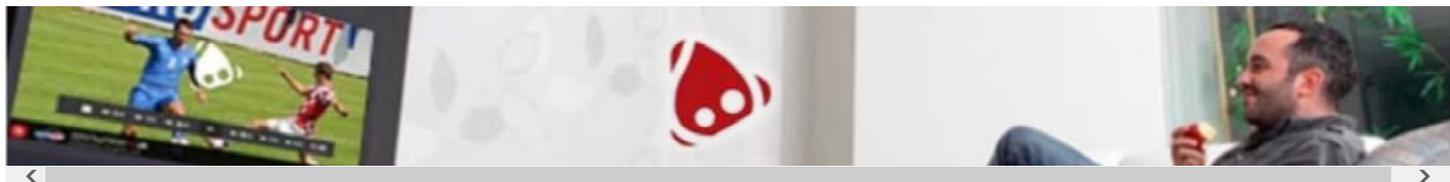
Cartoonist Serkan Altunigne also moved to Berlin a few months ago. He had been working for the renowned Turkish satirical magazine "Penguin" since 2002 until he saw himself forced to close it down. In the preceding years, sales dropped from 80,000 to 15,000 as the magazine wasn't able to compete with social media. On top of that, it had to pay high court and lawyer fees resulting from numerous lawsuits. "We were once sued for having depicted the culture minister as he was sleeping, and another time, for a cartoon of Erdogan as an animal," he explains.

On one occasion, the editorial office was set on fire by a furious religious mob. The staff then moved to another location which they kept secret.

"On the one hand, such an atmosphere tends to inspire artists, but on the other hand, it's too hard to withstand the pressure," he says, adding that precisely one month after the failed coup attempt, he and his wife drove to Berlin. What will happen once his artist visa has run out, is unclear. He however knows that he doesn't want to go back to Turkey either.

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