





REFLECTIONS
FROM THE
INNER SELF

YAŞAM ŞAŞMAZER



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Wood is perhaps an unconventional medium among Contemporary artists and yet it remains Yaşam Şaşmazer's preferred material. **Yaman Kayabali** and **Myrna Ayad** speak with the Turkish artist and discuss the inner workings of her sculptural practice – from the making of to the human emotions found within.

Berlin, says Yaşam Şaşmazer, "is where I feel much more relaxed; living here has affected me, my practice, my works and my thought very much." For four years, the German capital has become the Turkish artist's second residence after Istanbul. In both cities, she is represented by Berlin Art Projects and in Dubai by Lawrie Shabibi. "Unlike in Istanbul, I do not frown here," she adds. "From your next-door neighbour to the politicians on TV, one faces a constant stress and emotional struggle in Istanbul."

Şaşmazer began travelling back and forth between her native and adopted cities after her first exhibition in Berlin in 2010. Though the city does not boast a spectacular legacy of historic neighbourhoods, such as those of Rome or Paris, it has a profound history. Şaşmazer acknowledges its Contemporary art arena, citing Berlin as "one of the world's art capitals, rich in other artistic disciplines as well, such as theatre, music, cinema and others." Had it not offered this plethora, Şaşmazer says she could not have adjusted so "comfortably".

A PROCESS OF CRAFTING

Born and raised in Istanbul, a city that can be truly chaotic, she began her undergraduate degree in the stone workshop of the oldest fine arts institution in Turkey, Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts, which dates back to the Ottoman era. Though she played instruments and sang and desired to become an opera singer as a child, Şaşmazer says she couldn't see herself on stage so eventually decided to enrol in fine arts. She came to adore sculpting, graduating



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with a Bachelor’s degree in 2003 and a Master’s three years later. Her early career was somewhat hectic – she didn’t have a personal studio and being a student, couldn’t afford one. “When I was living with my parents, I would try to sprinkle mud in the bathtub and cast a mould in my room,” she recalls.

Although Şaşmazer now works with wood, she began her education by learning how to manipulate rough and durable materials such as granite, stone and marble. Figuring out that the latter wasn’t the best choice for her practice and Şaşmazer’s search for a new medium led her to try out a variety of materials such as mud, polyester

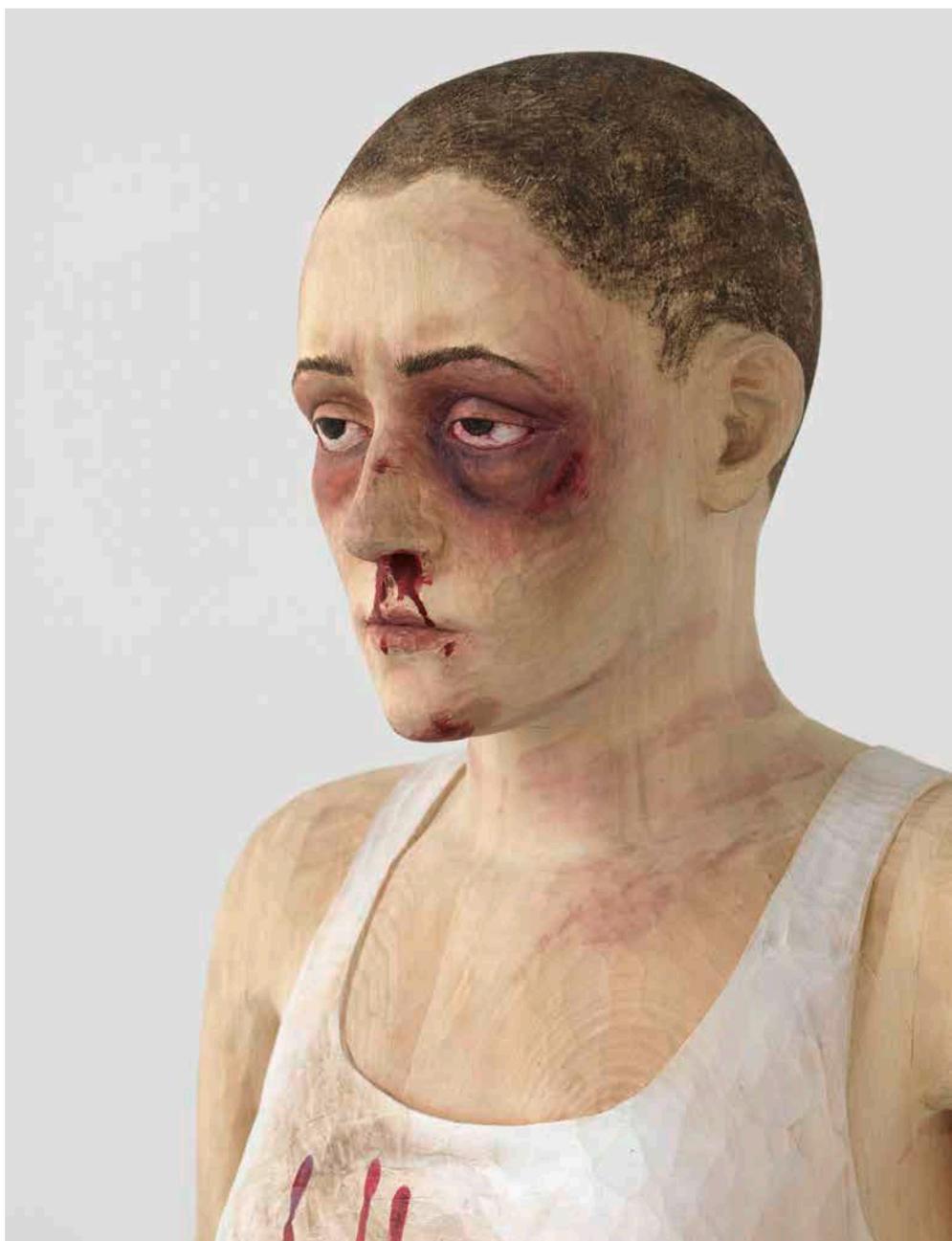
and silicon. This eventually led to linden wood, which is her primary choice due to its colour and texture. “I did not want my sculptures to evolve into hyper-realist figures. You can avoid that with wood,” she notes. Şaşmazer clearly indicates that wood provides a positive barrier, which enables the realisation of an expressionist quality – a trademark of her works. “With wood, you have the ability to determine the boundaries of realism,” she adds. “I can leave chisel and handsaw marks on my sculptures and leave some parts unrefined, which conforms to my artistic practice. It’s ideal for me.”

The boundaries of realism in Şaşmazer’s work are apparent. She acknowledges her figurative

Opening spread:
Taming The Darkness.
2013. Mixed media on wall
and wooden sculpture.
167 x 43 x 47 cm.

This page:
Escape. 2013. Wood.
175 x 56 x 53 cm.

Facing page:
Sleep. 2013. Wood. 37 x 58
x 128 cm. Image courtesy
Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.



“We are all afraid of our monsters, but they are a part of us and I think we all want to accept them.”

style, and yet, amazingly, her pieces are not based on actual people. “I decide their posture, gesture, character and faces according to what I want to achieve in the piece,” she says. While her new works are life-sized, the child sculptures, which first propelled her onto the international arena, were larger than life. Şaşmazer carved them larger “to emphasise their uncanniness”. Fascinated with “the dark side of the human psyche and digging the thing that we call ‘the soul’”, her early works focused on children, whose “inner darkness and conflict” she sought to bring to life. As such, fairy tales, monsters and other creatures are presented to reflect on and envisage a child’s fears.

A preference for wood aside, Şaşmazer does not refrain from experimenting with other media. In fact, her technique requires her to. She

begins by creating a sketch, followed by “necessary” preliminary models out of plasticine or mud, “since working on wood is an irreversible process that does not allow for much improvisation.” These models are then cast in bronze in several editions in a process that allows more experimentation. More importantly, however, the bronzes offer a different visual effect compared to wood, and sometimes, she says, “they differ from the final work”. Carving the wood is the fastest component of the procedure, she says, and takes one to two months, during which time, she works on multiple pieces at once.

SHADOWS AND DUALITIES

In 2013, Şaşmazer spent most of her time in Is-



tanbul, which resulted in her latest solo exhibition at the splendid venue of Tophane-i Amire. The exhibition, *Metanoia*, took its name from a term coined by Carl Jung in reference to mid-life crises and how people tend to self-heal and reform. The title is also a reference to Şaşmazer's unique style, which features additional elements in her works such as backdrops articulating the shadows of a sculpture. This idea is nested in Jung's archetype of shadow as the reflection of the demon within a person. As a result, the sculptures in this exhibition were haunted and enslaved by their shadows, which are larger than the works themselves. "As we know from Jung's shadow archetype, shadows are everything that we have but don't want to have," says Şaşmazer. "We are all afraid of our monsters, but they are a part of us and I think we all want to accept them."

Looking at the turbulent and tortured figures, one wonders if the sculptures from *Metanoia* reflect an inquiry into her inner self. "They are born out of my own stories, thoughts or conflicts," she admits. "Making sculptures or art is a way for me to discover myself, the human psyche and the

This page:
Fear Of Reason. 2013.
Wood. 76 x 62 x 41 cm.

Facing page:
*(...) but he explained it all,
about not wanting to die
without any scars, (...) and
wanting to know more about
himself*. 2012. Wood.
168 x 46 x 28 cm.



world. And psychology is the best way to understand the 'human being'. I am obsessed with our dual nature." Though the exhibition's starting point is the artist's own personal histories, she maintains that they represent a wider "phenomenon in human psychology which we cannot limit to a single person". Although her work attempts to emphasise that each individual may address their own psychological darkness, it does not refer to collective fear and emotions, which is also evident in her sculptures of children. As opposed to the sweeping generalisations of children as innocents, she constructs an alternative childhood, which presents psychological and social problems, along with the social codes and roles imposed by adults.

Şaşmazer says that there may have been a variety of artists who have influenced her practice, however, in her quest to carve out her own personal style, she has tried to refrain from direct stylistic influences. Nonetheless, one work in *Metanoia*, *The Fear Of Reason*, is a direct and conscious reference to Goya's notable etching,

The Sleep Of Reason Produces Monsters, the painter's nightmarish impression of Spanish society. "This is perhaps one point in which my narrative meets with Goya's in terms of our interest in fear and the darker side of human psychology," she explains. "I address a collective fear as well as a collective unconscious."

MIRROR IMAGES

Although figurative, Şaşmazer's works present a tendency to result in a number of interpretations. "I think as I'm getting older, my theme is delving deeper," she admits. One work, part of a group entitled *Doppelgänger*, which consists of five sculptures, features a half-naked, battered woman with dark bruises on her face and blood dripping from her nose. "The social and political conditions we live in trigger violence, both psychological and physical," she says of *Doppelgänger*. "I decided to focus on adults after *Doppelgänger* and entered a field that is darker and more complex; it is an adult's world." At first sight, one can read this work

This page:
In Front Of. 2013. Wood.
176 x 40 x 49 cm.

Facing page:
Gruesome Bear. 2011.
Bronze and coloured patina.
45 x 15 x 11 cm.

All images courtesy Berlin
Art Projects, Berlin/Istanbul,
unless otherwise specified.



“I depicted a psychological inner conflict in the form of physical violence but it does not always have to be physically violent.”

in the context of male violence towards women, yet Şaşmazer aims for something else: she refers to Edgar Allan Poe’s *William Wilson*, a short story exploring the theme of the doppelgänger, which was narrated alongside the work through a pair of speakers. The work’s chronicle is, in fact, self-harm, “the physical violence a person inflicts upon him or herself as a result of an internal conflict,” she explains. “I depicted a psychological inner conflict in the form of physical violence but it does not always have to be physically violent. Sometimes self-critique may be just as violent as this.”

This interview happens at a time when Turkish politics are heated: the vestiges of last year’s Gezi protests and a huge corruption scandal that was eventually overcome by the Turkish government. Does such social and political turmoil affect her art? “Yes, but this may not be immediately appar-

ent, as I do not choose to directly refer to social or political events. It is impossible not to reflect on the impact of social movements in works as dark as these. I am very much affected by what is going on,” responds Şaşmazer.

Like many other Turkish artists in Istanbul, Şaşmazer attended the protests and acknowledges that the events had a profound effect on her. “However,” she says, “I don’t know how this will affect my art production yet. I don’t think that serious changes happen very quickly. I am 100 per cent sure that these events will be expressed in my art at one point, but I don’t know when and how this will happen.” 🗨️

For more information visit www.yasam-sasmazer.de, www.lawrieshabibi.com and www.berlinartprojects.de