

Defne Ayas on the work of Füsün Onur

“When I describe my formative years,” you said, dear Füsün, “I am thinking about myself as someone dismissive of authority, someone who did not want to be bound by limitations, rules, and laws. I was a genuine rebel, a misfit, a true troublemaker. I questioned everything, including God and all my teachers. What is freedom, justice, and being unbound?”

Your story begins in the 1940s and continues into the present. It is the story of a *Cumhuriyet kızı*, a daughter of the Republic, who is possessed by her beloved Istanbul and a relentless passion to create. “I knew I was an artist from an early age. I knew that I wanted to be a sculptor,” you told me when we met, thanks to the liaising of dOCUMENTA (13) and SAHA.

Your father recognized your gift as a child and gave you Plasticine and clay to play with, materials that you used later to model structures that won awards in high school, at the American Academy for Girls. The school was well-known for its unofficial mission to prepare “proper wives” for the secular establishment, but it was there that your art teacher Miss Blatter encouraged you to pursue the arts. This set you on the path to winning a Fulbright scholarship to study philosophy at American University in Washington, D.C., and to spending years at the Maryland Institute College of Art. You said that in the States you devoured the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche and started experimenting with notions of self-destruction.

To this day, these philosophies continue to influence your detachment from art making, leading to the occasional purging of your work into the waters of the Bosphorus to make room for new thoughts and sculptures. How liberating that must be! What I recall most fondly from our meeting is when you told me how your parents’ friend asked you to make a copy of one of your works and how you refused on principle, deciding instead to take a job as a cashier! Working freed you from committing a “sin” or a “crime,” that is, from making derivations of your work.

“Sculpting,” I’ve seen, happens at your home studio, in the basement of your quaint *yalı* house, where you often test or “perform” your works against the backdrop of the waters off your home’s dock. Works materialize first in your mind and only later in the stuff at hand: you visualize their forms, then identify their most poetic aspects, and then finally locate the materials that can communicate them. Rather than spend money and energy on art supplies and time with fabricators, you make much of this work yourself or with your big-hearted sister İlhan. Your relationship to her so symbiotic, your connection to the materials so intuitive. Once you conceive of your sculptures in your mind, you handily and, at times, serendipitously locate the materials in or near your home. You told me that objects may appear out of nowhere, as if you simply asked them to manifest themselves. Disassembling your own work and distancing yourself from traditional sculptural materials came about as early as 1975, and what an oeuvre you’ve made since then, one filled with concatenations of objects and materials—bells, chairs, glass elephants, beads, flowers, photographs, tulle and lace, Plexiglas, foamcore, cellophane, paper, wood, metal, cables, wires, baby dolls, vases, cartoon angels, and countless other objects from everyday life—all artfully handled. At times, you keep intact these objects that become your materials, and at others, you completely transform them. Arte Povera was not on your radar, you told me, at the time of its emergence, nor have you ever courted the idea of dismissal as a source of power in art. Rather, you carefully studied the modernist lineage of assemblage and found-object sculpture and mastered the art of borrowing, giving yourself the authority to use any material that suits your purpose.

Your tender sculptural intelligence also belies a sotto voce pursuit of musicality. And that is certainly intentional. You said you can neither sing nor compose but love music so much, because it allows you to augment time, which cannot be done in sculpture. You are the first to note that your career as a “composer” “who sculpts” began only in the late 1990s. Or rather, your relentless questioning of time and space have led

you to be seduced by music's many elements. Rhythm, sequencing, structure, vibrations, density, weight, repetition, variation, you name it. This is perhaps why the materials never completely cohere or alchemize in your often fragile compositions, because it is the inherently unstable connections between the ordinary and the musical that you are so spiritually after.

Why, you asked me in 2011, are we all trying to get a hold of you now? I doubt that your rediscovery has less to do with the evolution of your art in its own chronology than with time having shown us over and over how timeless you yourself really are, dear Füsün. History moves in circles. You have been hailed as a rule-breaker. And you've nearly vanished from the limelight. You have said yes to yourself and no to the world so many times that over and over we return to you and to the timeless currents of the Bosphorus.

Defne Ayas, Berlin, 2021