

Dogged Disclosure: Melike Kara

by Milan Ther

Melike Kara's exhibition *Köpek* at Peres Projects in Berlin includes photography-as-architecture (custom sized for the gallery walls), along with paintings and sculptures. Together these elements weave a semantic web related to the ways in which art, utterance, and identity are subject to mechanisms of social hegemony by intertwining the artist's personal identity with her practice.

The paintings, depicting figures in blue hues and pale skin tones, set against white or black backgrounds, are placed on top of the black-and-white, made-to-measure photographs covering some walls. The painted figures' indeterminate gender, ethnicity, and age mirrors their undefined relationship to the monochromatic realm they inhabit. The empty backgrounds are in stark contrast to the specificity of the photographs, which depict sites in Turkey and Germany. In one we see a Turkish market in Cologne; another shows a large rock that is a site of pilgrimage for the Alevi in southeast Turkey; yet another depicts Kara's great grandmother's gravestone. These photographs show a range of proximities between the artist, her family, and historically defined minority communities—groups that have experienced pressure in the form of persecution or stigmatization in Turkey or Germany. This disclosure of biography signals a departure within Kara's work.



1 2 3 4 5 6
Melike Kara "Köpek" at Peres Projects, Berlin, 2017
Courtesy: Peres Projects, Berlin

The figures in the paintings are involved in social activity. They fight, coerce, search, ponder. Their formal interweaving produces bodily architecture, with their gesturing and touching hands functioning as structural joints. *why it matters* (2017) shows eight figures, arms extending across the bodies. One figure's hand makes another figure's pondering facial expression, while two others shake hands, and a third couple appears to put something into or pull something out of each other's mouths. In *naked words* (2017) eight figures deploy another drama of gestures, touching each other's mouths and bodies. In *mental notes* (2017), the smallest painting in the exhibition, a larger blue figure looms over a red-fading-to-violet face while squeezing its mouth, physically shaping it. This relationship, emblematic of the social mechanisms in all the paintings in *Köpek*, suggests that there is always an element of force between the expressing and the receiving party. Evidently, these figures populate a world of rhetoric and power—a social ground in which they express themselves, and force, pull, and shape the language of others. While they manifest little difference in visual appearance, sameness does not signify cohesion. Rather, they depict membership in the social body as a continuously negotiated act, fragile and vulnerable to force.

Through the juxtaposition of the photographs and the paintings, *Köpek* generates two modes of identity. One documents geographic sites as part of the foundation of identity, and the other depicts expression of identity as a struggle. In this sense, identity becomes a battleground for the ability to publicly claim existential territory. Kara seems to suggest that identity, as an expression of the links between individuals and the spaces they occupy, is enforced and regulated. In the end, this battle does not succeed in erasing the ground against which it is set, but shifts public discourse toward narratives of intolerance that serve the interests of one group by restraining access to existential territory for another group.



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In *Köpek*, however, there is hope. The title is taken from the Turkish word for "dog," often used in a derogatory sense. The dog sculptures in the exhibition, made from lime-washed wood, rest or sit in pairs or alone. Plants spring from some of their backs, similar to how acanthus leaves ornament Hellenistic pillars. They alter the visitors' navigation of the severe architecture on Karl-Marx-Allee, serving as a quiet act of consideration in an otherwise difficult climate.

at Peres Projects, Berlin
until 3 November 2017