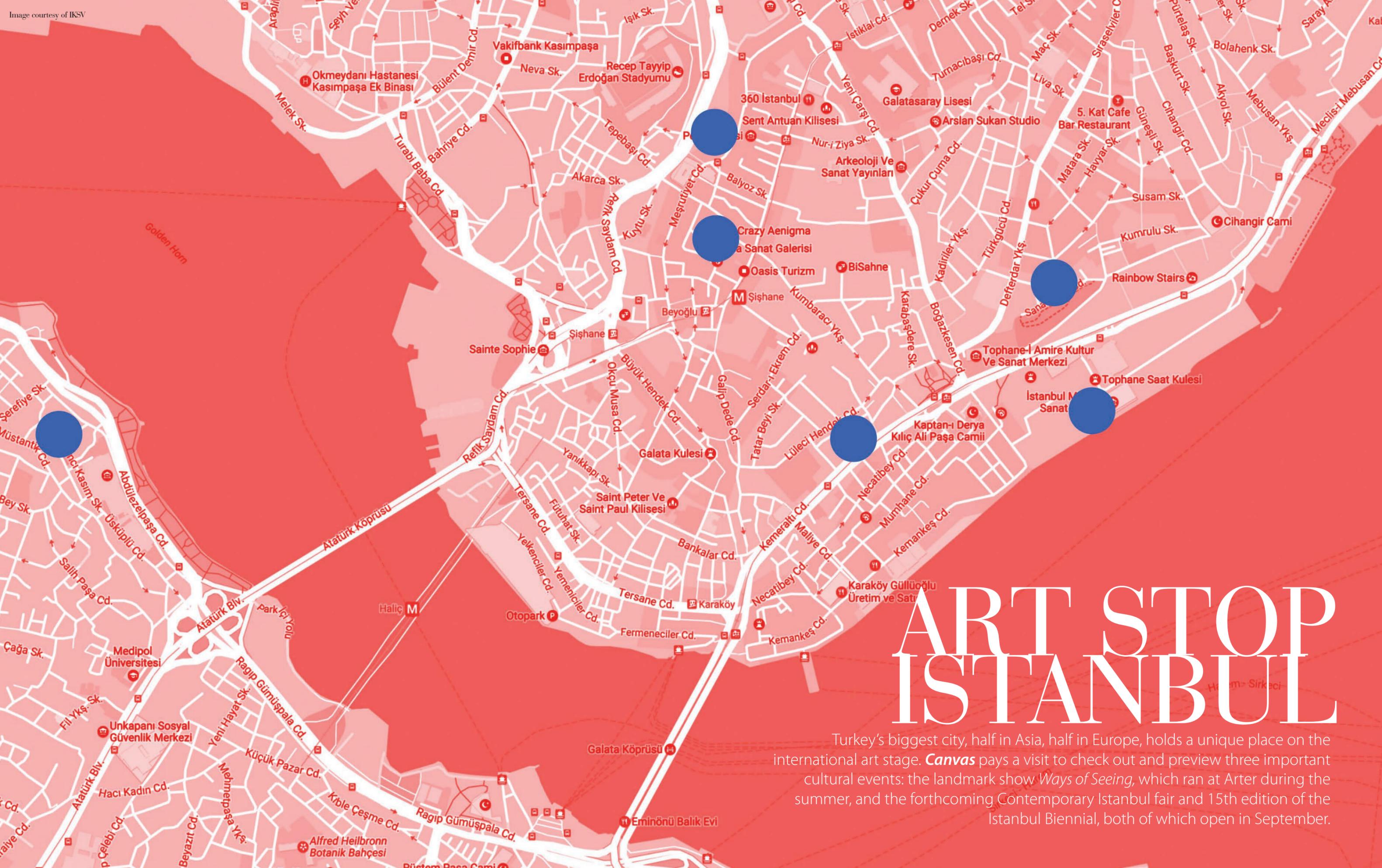


Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

**THE RISE
& RISE OF
BEIRUT
CHAPTER 1**



ART STOP ISTANBUL

Turkey's biggest city, half in Asia, half in Europe, holds a unique place on the international art stage. **Canvas** pays a visit to check out and preview three important cultural events: the landmark show *Ways of Seeing*, which ran at Arter during the summer, and the forthcoming Contemporary Istanbul fair and 15th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, both of which open in September.



Opposite page: Ghada Amer. *Shahrazad*. 2009. Acrylic embroidery and gel medium on canvas. 167.6 x 200.7 cm. HAK Collection

This page: Gustav Metzger. *Historic Photographs: To Crawl Into*. Anschluss, Vienna. March 1938. 1996–2017. Black-and-white photograph on PVC and cotton cover. 315 x 425 cm. Photography by Murat Germen. Image courtesy of the artist's estate

LOOK AGAIN

Often seen as being on a crossroad, a hybrid of East and West, Istanbul is not only plugged into the regional contemporary art scene, it has also risen in the ranks of global art hierarchies. Never was this more apparent than in Arter's last show, *Ways of Seeing*, curated by the international power duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented.

Words by Nadine Khalil

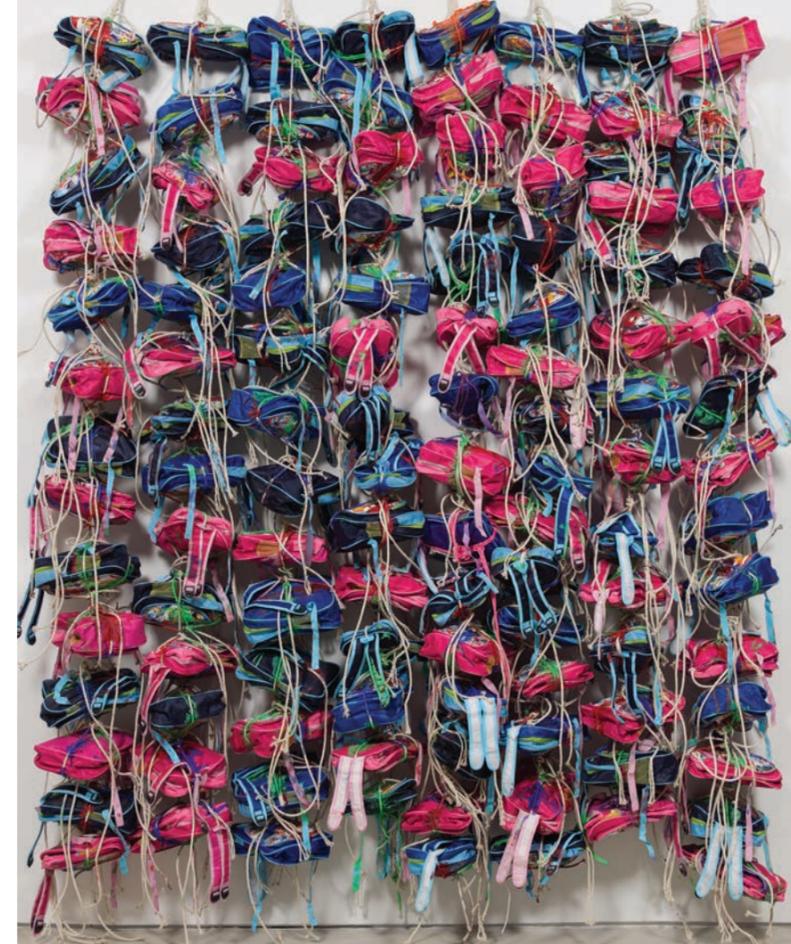
In Istanbul this June, amid an uncertain political climate, the sense of how the city's vibrant, eclectic art scene has become more outward-looking was compounded in time and space. The Pera Museum held an exhibition on Moscow Conceptualists, entitled *Doublethink: Double Vision*, in reference to George Orwell; inspired by David Lynch's lithography, Galerist put on *Dark Deep Darkness and Splendour*; and Pi Artworks featured a solo show by German-Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna, *Angst Eats Soul*. Even more striking in its cosmopolitanism was Arter, opened in 2010 by the Vehbi Koç Foundation (VKF), one of the biggest charities in Turkey, and which has since shown works from the family's art collection featuring prominent Turkish artists and international artists, as well as solos by Marc Quinn, Mona Hatoum and Mat Collishaw.

"The collection has over 1,200 artworks," says founding director Melih Fereli, as we sit in his office a few hours before the opening of *Ways of Seeing*. "Though it's not about name-dropping, in that we don't have a Jeff Koons or a Christopher Brown. Only about half of the collection comprises works by Turkish artists, with the rest hailing from the Balkans to the Middle East, from North Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean." Coming from a background in classical music (most notably as a tenor with the London Philharmonic Orchestra), and then as general director of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts for eight years, Fereli – who is now working on the foundation's new contemporary art museum, due for completion in 2019 – is well-placed to comment on the development of the Turkish art scene. "Artistic output in Turkey from the mid-1960s onwards addressed similar issues to those with

which artists were grappling globally, and that's what our collection reveals."

Bardaouil and Fellrath (known universally as Sam & Till) would agree that these cultural connections between Turkey and the wider world are longstanding. Take the starting point of their exhibition, which refers to John Berger's 1972 seminal text on visual culture, *Ways of Seeing*. In another book, *About Looking* (1980), Berger analyzes *Woodcutter in the Forest*, a painting by pioneering Ottoman painter Şeker Ahmed Pasha. "The forest is depicted in what seems to be a traditional European linear perspective, but Berger notices that there is no sense of distance," Sam explains. "Everything seems to exist on the same plane. So the parameters of 'there' and 'here,' 'now' and 'then' collapse, with Berger saying this is because the painter was trying to reconcile two traditions: the European one with that of the Ottoman miniature, in which there is no sense of time, and of things moving forward. That's how the artist created his own language."

The exhibition takes this point further. The 70 artworks by 33 artists also challenge temporal classifications, spanning from 1,000BC (Anatolian figurines from the Bronze Age) to 17th-century Dutch maps, 18th-century Orientalist paintings and contemporary mixed media pieces. The majority are being exhibited in Turkey for the first time and not only do they combine different styles and narratives, they also reconfigure our perceptions. There are optical tricks and trompe l'oeil, where there is confusion between the art object and its illusion. For example, an original 16th-century Iznik ceramic vase appears behind the screen of a projected 19th-century replica made by Italian craftsman Ulisse Cantagalli – but it's the projection that looks like the copy, and



Clockwise from bottom left: Curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath; James Casebere. *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8*. 2010. Framed digital chromogenic print mounted to Dibond. 177.2 x 219.1 cm. Photography by Ken Adlard. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery. © James Casebere; Hassan Sharif. *Back to School*. 2015. School bags, acrylic paint and cotton rope (46 pink, 39 dark blue, 29 blue school bags). 290 x 245 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York. Vehbi Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection. © Estate of Hassan Sharif; James Turrell. *Alta (Pink)*. 1968. Cross corner projection. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Canvas

not the other way around. Then there are Chris Bond's camouflaged 'books' wedged into the wall, which are sculptural paintings on canvas, and not actual books at all. "They blur the boundaries of what a book is (a vessel of words) and a painting (vessel of images)," Sam explains.

Nothing is what it seems. Andreas Gursky's *Bangkok VIII*, a photograph of oil and garbage floating on the Chao Phraya River, looks like a rather seductive, abstract painting, while Kim Tschang-Yeul's hyperrealist *Waterdrops* appear so sculptural in their three-dimensional simulation that you half-expect them to trickle down the painting. It's hard to believe they are flat until you get close. Sam & Till say that the aim of the show is to invite the viewer to always have a second look and not take familiar objects at face value. "You think you know what you are seeing at first, but you look again and all of a sudden, the piece becomes completely different," adds Till, facing a single silicone crutch by Mona Hatoum, which, placed in a corner, seems to decry its lost function.

The core premise of the show is that every aesthetic decision is itself a political act, one necessarily conditioned by historical circumstances and social positioning. Take Walid Raad's 2010 *Scratching on Things I could Disavow*. Blurry shots of paintings reflected off the glistening floors of Doha's Mathaf museum serve as a subtle critique of museological practices and the way in which a history of modern art is constructed. In a similar vein, Vik Muniz displays just the back of a supposed Picasso painting, *Verso (Woman Ironing)*, to reveal details and labels that would normally be unseen by museumgoers, designating provenance, the paths the work has taken, how many times it has been framed, etc. There is also a healthy dose of gender politics, as in Hassan Sharif's evocative pink and blue backpack installation, *Back to School*, colourfully hinting at socially ascribed roles. And in a provocation of the male gaze, Ghada Amer intricately embroiders a series of nude women (*Shahrazad*) in what seems to be expressionist splashes of paint, while Cindy Sherman

ironically stages herself with the exactitude of neoclassical portraiture (plus a distorted blown-up nose), in *History Portraits*.

Despite the blatant transparency of some of the works, the nuanced thread running through the show is that sight isn't the only sensory instrument on which to rely when it comes to art. This is perhaps most evident in James Webb's recorded, bloodcurdling *Scream* (courtesy of a staff member at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, where Picasso's *Guernica* hangs), which is meant to embody the essence of a painting without the viewer actually seeing it. Equally impressive is Fred Sandback's vertiginous installation of lines of yarn stretched vertically from floor to ceiling, where, in an altered sense of gravity, you lose sight of the boundaries between the work and its surroundings. And in a curatorial coup, James Turrell's seminal light piece, *Alta (Pink)* is featured, where light magically becomes form in an alternative reading of space. "Seeing is that moment of encounter between the surface of the work, the top layer of the artistic process and your gaze, which is always preconditioned by what you think you know. That's the moment when the dialogue begins," Sam remarks.

Such interaction with the work reinforces the viewer's agency, reversing the gaze towards the art object and back again. This is especially striking in Jeppe Hein's folded, revolving mirror (*Rotating Mirror Object II*), where one's fragmented reflection forms the artwork, as well as in Gustav Metzger's photographs of historical tragedies (Jews scrubbing a street in Vienna in 1938, shortly after Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria, and the 1990 Al-Aqsa massacre in Jerusalem). Covered with fabric and placed on the floor and on the wall (*To Crawl into... and To Walk into...*), you can only make out them out by manipulating your posture – thereby also becoming part of the work in a performative gesture. Ultimately, the realisation dawns that you cannot fully 'see' or comprehend the scale of the tragedy being portrayed.

Presented as they are in such a carefully crafted flow, the works invite us to be present and encounter the art on our own terms. Fundamentally, the show questions the idea that a work doesn't exist unless it is seen. It's as if the curators are saying that art is that which is encountered again and again. It needs to be seen and re-seen, and it is never static. "Artists spend so much time in perfecting their craft... They are highly skilled technicians and often solitary, working with colour, texture and light to alter the physical appearance of the things. Through this process, they bring new meaning and change the ways in which we see the world," Sam says.

By not reducing the exhibition's narrative to a limited geopolitical framework, Sam & Till have succeeded in building an overarching yet distilled show that encompasses a multiplicity of perspectives well-suited to our time, and especially to a city like Istanbul. A rereading of Berger is more relevant than ever today, and can be extrapolated from the art context to show how divergent points of view can, and should coexist. "This is an exhibition that's also about the rights of visibility, saying that there are so many ways in which you can see something. And that they are all equally valid," Sam asserts. A powerful statement, and one to heed in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised and intolerant. 🗣️

The exhibition *Ways of Seeing* was originally commissioned by Arter, Istanbul where it was on view until 13 August 2017. It will move to Villa Empain at the Boghossian Foundation in Brussels, where it will run until 18 February 2018, with a selection of new works.

