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Turkey

Istanbul biennial hires provocative curators, but where's the political art?

Scandinavian duo Elmgreen and Dragset say biennial offers a nuanced perspective on the country, but Turkish artists admit need to censor their work



● An exhibit by Gozde Ilkin. Photograph: Sahir Ugur Eren

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Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Istanbul

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In recent years the Istanbul biennial has grappled with subjects such as the city's anti-authoritarian [protests in Gezi Park](#) in 2013 and Europe's migration crisis. In 2009 the biennial's manifesto said "politically neutral art is a means of policing the art world".

The 15th edition of Turkey's most important contemporary art event, which opens on Saturday, is curated by the celebrated Scandinavian subversives Elmgreen and Dragset, and takes as its theme "what makes a good neighbour".

However, despite Turkey's increasingly tense relationship with Europe, [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's wide-ranging crackdown](#) in the wake of [last year's attempted coup](#), and his country's role in the civil war in Syria, politically controversial art is almost entirely absent. Across its six venues, mention of the president, his AKP party or the tens of thousands of people detained since the coup attempt is noticeably muted.



● Michael Elmgreen (l) and Ingar Dragset (r). Photograph: Muhsin Akgun



Elmgreen and Dragset vigorously deny they have practised self-censorship. They acknowledge an absence of anti-government slogans or artwork incorporating overt activism, but say contemporary politics has infiltrated in more subtle ways, and that taken as a whole the biennial offers a more nuanced perspective on the country than that usually afforded in the international media.

“It’s a little flat if art gets reduced to being a direct response to very populist politics, and very simple answers on very complicated matters,” says

Elmgreen. “I don’t like the situation in [Turkey](#) but I also don’t think the mindset ‘we have an issue, we better call some artists here and they can just respond to it like a jack-in-a-box’ is helpful either.

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“These direct responses from art to many political situations often do very little good in the political arena. It can be good art but it’s often very bad politics.”

Dragset draws a distinction between the art world and geopolitics: “Art is not there to react the same way as politicians or the media, using the same simplified populist language,” he says.

It is also the case, he says, that the Turkish art scene is still looking for a language of resistance and a way of expressing opinions in an increasingly controlled society. “The voices are quieter at the moment and maybe this exhibition does reflect that,” he says.

Both artists say they have been sensitive to the political climate faced by Turkish artists.

“I get upset by that very Eurocentric, self-obsessed idea that the whole world should work the same way as us, because it’s just not the reality,” says Elmgreen. “We cannot be so arrogant that we disrespect artists working in the 75% of the world.”

Those works that do touch on subjects such as authoritarianism, resistance and the repression of women for the most part focus on other countries, and are by international artists.





● Latifa Echakhch's exhibit. Photograph: Sahir Ugur Eren



One of the most political pieces is by the Moroccan-French visual artist Latifa Echakhch. It features two concrete walls painted with a flaking mural of the protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park in 2013, the decay symbolic of the pessimism that followed that moment of defiance.

Also featured is a video by the Kurdish artist Erkan Ozgen of a deaf boy from Syria acting out some of the traumas he has witnessed. A new work by the Brazilian artist Victor Leguy was made in collaboration with refugees, many from Syria, who were living in Istanbul.



● Erkan Ozgen's video work. Photograph: Sahir Ugur Eren



Elmgreen and Dragset, who are gay, say the biennial is a celebration of diversity. Works on subjects including the queer community and feminism are in themselves a statement, they say, in a country where traditional religious attitudes are encroaching on secular society.

Like almost all cultural events in Turkey, the biennial is run by an independent private foundation, and only about 6% of its funding comes from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

The authorities could interfere if they felt the need, but the festival's director and the curators say there was no government input or censorship in this year's event.

Nonetheless, several of the 10 Turkish artists involved in this year's biennial openly speak of the difficulties of working in Turkey. Politics was present in their work, they say, just in subtle, layered ways.



● Gözde Ilkin's tapestry-style work. Photograph: Sahir Ugur Eren



“Of course, automatically we all now self-censor ourselves,” says Gözde Ilkin, whose work here features tapestry-type amalgamations of old family photographs. She breaks down in tears as she talks about the aftermath of the Gezi protests. Many people she knew were arrested or moved away, she says, and the artistic community fractured as people became afraid and stopped talking to each other.

“But we have started to create layers in our our work, so that what is happening in Turkey is there, but it is maybe not so obvious,” she says. “Voices have been crushed but artists will always find a way to speak.”

Yoğunluk, an arts collective working in Istanbul who brought an eerie site-specific installation to the biennial, say their apolitical approach is the only way they can operate.

“No gallery would show my work if I was making political art, that I am totally sure,” says the artistic director Ismail Eğler. “Art in Turkey, in my opinion, it is getting superficial. And in this biennial, it is so obvious that it is on purpose that you cannot see politics in the art, otherwise they wouldn’t let it go ahead.”

Zeyno Pekînlî, the Turkish artist and academic who is curating the biennial’s public programme, says many artists and intellectuals have moved abroad because they felt their work wasn’t being valued in Turkey.

“But a lot of them stayed and those who did are even more hardworking than before, so the arts scene has become even more vivid,” Pekînlî adds. “Events like the biennial are more important in people’s lives because it means we can keep thinking and keep discussing.”

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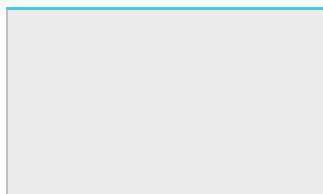
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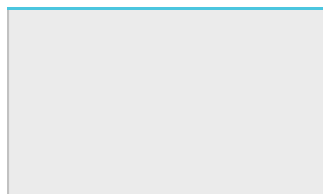


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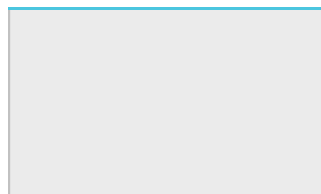
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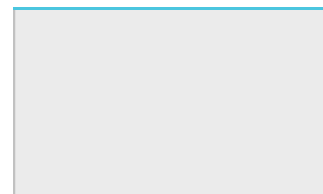
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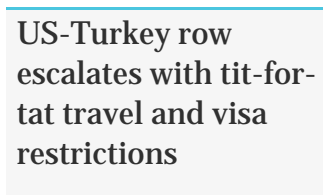
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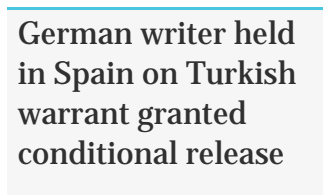
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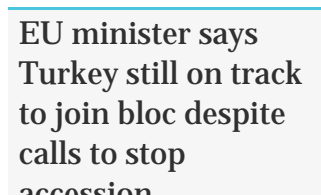
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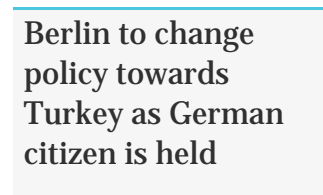
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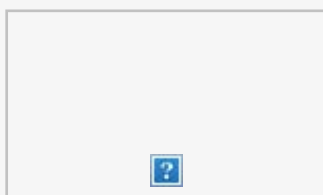


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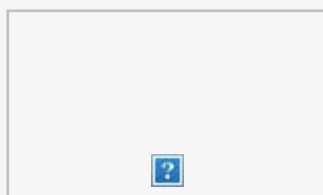
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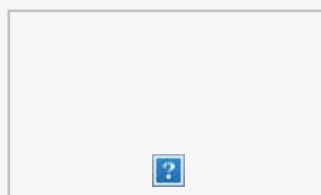
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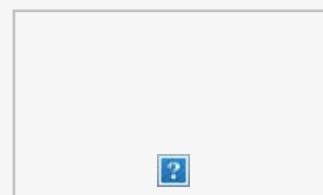
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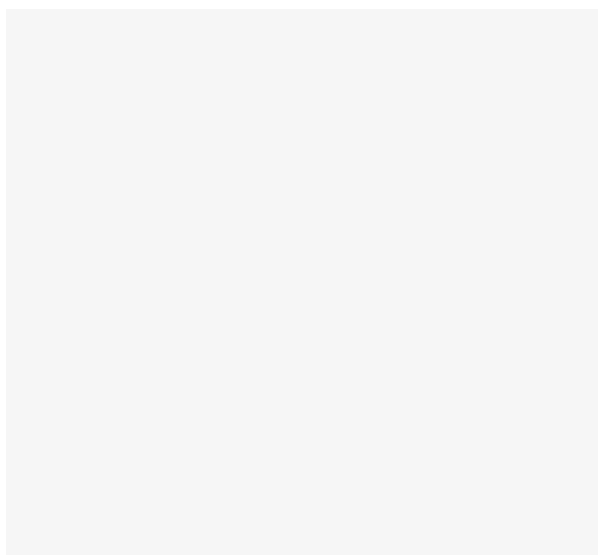
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