

Leyla Yenirce: Anthropology of Responsibility

w whitewall.art/art/leyla-yenirce-anthropology-of-responsibility

December 24, 2024



Leyla Yenirce has developed an artistic practice defined by layered expressions that connect her works across mediums. Using layers of storytelling and archiving she investigates the politics of visibility by combining current affairs and historical elements with cultural context, then intertwining it all with personal, collective and historic accounts and experiences via a defining female presence, which are finally met with an overlay of fictional components.

Yenirce, born in Kurdistan and based in Berlin, finds her voice in the complex resonant spaces she creates by occupying the in-between and considering the complexities of existing systems, binaries and dichotomies. With a practice spanning film, sound and music, installation, painting, mixed media and performance, Yenirce's individual works, as well as the entire body of work, serve as archives and are presented like collages of thoughts and physical expressions, that are inhabited by central female protagonists.

Describing her work as feminist yet not intended as a form of political criticism, Yenirce investigates cultural dominance structures and directs the gaze very deliberately and with a keen sense of responsibility that's embedded in anthropological concerns. Whether by reading historical accounts, articles on current affairs, **Tolstoy** and a myriad of novels or spending extensive time researching, Yenirce considers points of intersection, and how fictionalized themes of real life can contribute to the complexities of a narrative still rooted in reality, which is an approach evident especially in her latest body of mixed media works.



Leyla Yenirce, "Gold," 2024, Photo by Gunter Lepkowski, Berlin, Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

The Rhythm of Works Felt, Seen, and Heard

The rhythm of her works adds a unique vibration that remains continuously present. This presence is felt, seen and heard in sonic elements, pacing structure, brush strokes and especially in the silkscreen elements, where her hand, body movement and rhythm of working play a defining role. Rhythm is part of her way of working and steeps the practice in an approach authentic to the artist. Yenirce started out as a musician before expanding her practice into the visual arts which created a connection that allows for the rhythm to continue beyond sound pieces, performances and video installations and extend into her work on canvas.

The mark making and the hand of the artist in the works on canvas is as present as the artist's mind across all layers that in combination collage into the densely narrative work. Her compositional thinking presents us with works made of archival imagery, combined with oil paint, spray paint and screen printing. As she draws on archives for in-depth and

very deliberate research, image and narrative collection, ideas and knowledge, she also creates new archives through her work. Using imagery of female Kurdish fighters turns them into figurations of resistance multiple times over: the original person and event captured on camera, within the context and in relation to archives about war, Kurdish history, women's history and world history, as well as contextualized by Yenirce as newly creates layered artistic narratives that will also henceforth become part of archives on Kurdish life, and the art historical canon.



Installation view, Leyla Yenirce, “Eye Level,” 2024, Petzel. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

Drawing on the Complexities of Kurdish Heritage

Drawing on her Kurdish heritage, other throughlines across her works are a permeating and ever-present tension tied to the permanence of war in Kurdish life, imagery about war, linguistic references and components that address not just the cultural significance and ontological meanings of language, but also relate back to the importance of the investigation of cultural dominance structures that we see across Kurdistan and the diaspora.

Yenirce of course explores these structures thematically beyond the Kurdish experience, but she finds and claims an authentic point of departure within this particular set of contextual parameters. The power structures are therefore initially defined and framed by

the Kurdish experience as well as by a feminist viewpoint, and then opened by her creation of deliberate spaces and points of entry for an audience to think beyond this context and elaborate further.

Those spaces – a combination of conceptual pauses and literal moments of visual negative space, which are sometimes more extensive and in other moments only brief and small – invite the viewer to learn and take the thinking as well as the emotional journey further. The pauses at times feel almost too brief, yet they are all we are afforded, and we can make it work. These brief pauses that seem to rush us back to engaging with the content of the works, allow for just enough breathing and relief to manage continued engagement, and to dive back into the thicket of what we are invited or even outright asked to experience and contemplate.

The moments' brevity mimic those of the protagonists who inhabit the works. Yenirce always introduces the protagonists immediately. Always at the beginning and always central. Sometimes the artist herself is present in a figurative manifestation as a child or adult, and we meet Kurdish women, and female Kurdish freedom fighters. They also experience the pauses and share their moment of rest to be more than fighters like the woman reading a book in the work *Campfire* from 2024, but the moment can be cut short at any time, when the war continues.



Leyla Yenirce, “Fuel,” 2024, Photo by Gunter Lepkowski, Berlin, Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

“Eye Level” Unfolds at Gallery Petzel in New York

Campfire is part of Yenirce’s latest exhibition “Eye Level” at **Gallery Petzel** in New York, which follows previous exhibitions at museums and galleries such as **Kunsthau** **Hamburg**, **Kunstmuseum Magdeburg**, **Haus der Kunst, Munich**, **Kunsthalle Münster**, **Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig** and **Capitain Petzel** in Berlin.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

In the exhibition “Eye Level,” we again meet all the female protagonists right away and although they present varying lines of sight, we indeed meet them at eye level. The women create presence and own their spaces. As we are forced to think about war, technology, life and death, the women also share their humanity amongst it all. We see them and respect them at eye level, but separately from how we position their existence, they also exist at eye level, because it represents their only safe zone. Above them: drones and fighter jets. Below them: the flooded villages of their ancestors and families.

Yenirce considers positioning, composition and gestures and bestows them with utmost importance. Not only in connection to art historical research and references, that are quite tangible in her works, but notably also for the deeply conceptual considerations that create significant points of relation between protagonists, narrative and audience, as well as the beforementioned narrative layers composed out of archival imagery and artistic presence.

The F-16 fighter jets and flooded villages speak to the conflict Türkiye inflicts on Kurdistan. The presence of references to the controversial Ilisu Dam project, built and finalized by Türkiye in 2018, is very personal to the artists, as her ancestral lands have been affected. The dam has flooded about hundreds of villages from below, as rising water levels overflowed the banks of the Tigris River and submerged regions where people have lived for millennia. We see the women with binoculars amongst drones and the fighter jets above them, and below them we see the sunken village, flooded into oblivion. The graves of many ancestors had to be moved, and the realities of war, loss and struggle continued for the Kurdish population.



Installation view, Leyla Yenirce, “Eye Level,” 2024, Petzel. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

An Artistic Language Tied to Chaos

Tied to the continued presence of struggle, is another significant component of Yendirce's artistic language. Chaos. A chaos that is simultaneously organized yet stays true to its nature of disorder and confusion, which at first glance and thought may seem oxymoronic. Her works across mediums often follow a structured thinking, and often the structure of music. Intro, main section, outro, always connected by various throughlines, whether truly linear or abstract. But it all starts in chaos, and also ends in it. Or is it really just all circular? Is there even a beginning or an end?

Circularity recurs and moves along many works in the artist's oeuvre, including the recent work *Binocular*. In this work we are asked to consider the target by taking on the gaze through the binoculars of a fighter. The largest circle also represents the arm radius of the artist and again makes her hand's presence felt. But beyond that, we are asked to consider other circles: the eye and who sees whom, and what; the target, and by extension war, violence and power structures; the uterus and the position of women in existing power structures. As previously mentioned, the artist directs our gaze and does so very deliberately to consider various vantage points while we all remain on eye level with the protagonists.



Leyla Yenirce “Bird,” 2024, Photo by Gunter Lepkowski, Berlin, Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

Symbols Draw Viewers into a Matrix

Just like chaos, symbols are part of Yenirce’s language. We are often drawn into a matrix. We see visualized systems via charts, references to computer technology, and Sumerian language. The grids of symbols pick back up the relevance of composition and gesture, as well as the exploration of structures and systems of cultural dominance. The Sumerian script, familiar to the artist through her Yazidi background, signals the written word, while her brushstrokes evoke associations of inscription or signature.

The written word, language and sound resonate throughout Yenirce’s work, whether on canvas, on the screen, or performed live. By combining the portraiture of female Kurdish freedom fighters and archival material with the spectral sonic landscape of her music project *Rosaceae*, Yenirce again explores archives of resistance alongside cultural, spatial, and structural systems of dominance. For her latest show, the artist debuted the new album, “Souvenirs,” which she composed during a residency in Paris in January 2024. During her stay, the artist visited the **Sacré-Cœur** cathedral in Montmartre, overlooking the city, which reminded her of the dam construction, subsequent flooding and forced relocation of ancestor graves to the tops of neighboring mountains in 2019. With tracks like “Rue Norvins,” “Sacré-Cœur (Telma’s Song)” or “Serê Çîya,” Yenirce continues to add a sonic perspective and a deeply resonant voice to her storytelling.

How do you remember? What do you take with you when you leave? Yenirce uses the album title “Souvenirs” to seek commemoration, ancestral connection, and community. What can constitute a souvenir? How do you change your thinking about memory and memorabilia? Does the meaning shift when one can never return? The album cover includes a self-portrait of the artist en route to her brother’s wedding, once again merging the artist’s personal history with larger geopolitical realities and anthropological consideration. The album’s vinyl copy also includes a text written by **Mazlum Nergiz**, printed in Kurmanji, which brings together multiple of Yenirce’s points of consideration, including language, sound, structures, heritage, memory, violence and chaos (due to the suppression and illegitimacy of Kurdish language and cultural expressions in the region) as well as communion with ancestors.

[You can listen to *Souvenirs* digitally here.](#)



Installation view, Leyla Yenirce, “Eye Level,” 2024, Petzel. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

The Multifaceted Layers of a Transcending Practice

Leyla Yenirce connects many multifaceted layers within her transcending practice. The narratives are complex and contain a multitude of references and expressions drawing on autobiographical and collective histories and experiences. Some layers require research and conceptual thinking to gain an entry point, others offer emotional points of connection, yet others give access via visual cues, and all hold space for ontological communion. Politics of visibility – especially explored through a feminist lens – ultimately provide a throughline that connects everything in the artist’s oeuvre. She creates visibility for the past, the present and provides a path into the future that we are ready to approach at eye level, whether from a vantage point afar or from within. Within the framework of an anthropology of responsibility, she brings everything full circle. “For Kurdish people, everything always happens simultaneously – life and death, weddings and war.”