

m-est editor / September 28, 2016 / content, on artists

I can stand it because I am strong

I can stand it because I am strong: I ate my own placenta [1]

İz Öztat

*I am not bad at all as I am nothing.
I don't show my class or my nationality off my face.
In the evenings, I secretly open the cage
And nurse two gazelles. [2]*

I am one of those gazelles, writing upon drifting through İnci Eviner's retrospective exhibition *Who's inside you?* at Istanbul Modern that brings together works from forty years of her practice. İnci has nursed me as an artist, as a mentor, as a surrogate mother, and now I wonder through her life as a spectator.



İnci Eviner, *Something Bad Happened to Me*, 2016, HD video installation with stereo sound 6'53", loop.

Entranced along İnci's line that has a dimension between one and two, I find myself in a labyrinth, a Toufician one with a false threshold: "prior to it one is outside the labyrinth, past it one has always been in the labyrinth and can thenceforth be outside it only through it." [3] I write through the labyrinth, inside the language that İnci has persistently struggled to sketch.

"Struggle" is not a coincidental choice of word for it is where the artist situates her practice: "...you search for a *tongue* [4] and nourish it inside you until you can give it a form... Your identity as an artist is a life-long struggle in which you are accountable for heavy responsibilities as much as you are for freedom." [5] Within İnci's struggle, the "tongue," the fleshy muscular organ in the mouth that is used for tasting, licking, swallowing and articulating speech keeps coming back as a quest for a transgressive female subjectivity.



İnci Eviner, *Nonverbal 2*, 2014. Ink and charcoal on paper, 70 x 100 cm.

Something Bad Happened to Me (2016) is the most recent video in the exhibition for which İnci says, "Singing a song, I wanted to defy the system with both joy and sorrow. It was something I felt deep inside me after so many women were murdered." [6] A woman positioned on the left of the split background sings, "They threw the Woman's Tongue into the garbage... / Now the centuries will cover it." [7] On the right of the split background, a shiny pink tongue with limbs and hair occasionally escaping from its slits performs an exorcism. *Nonverbal 1* and *2* (2014) [8] are accompanied by a text written by the artist: "At this moment I can see what

is happening there. A woman has raised her hand, she ponders her eyes.” [9] What is witnessed but cannot be expressed with the tongue is the violence that crosses out the female subject.

European Union (2009) is a drawing with a female figure wearing a recovery cone and bearing two stars—one on her body and one on the cone that she cannot see. The recovery cone keeps her tongue from noticing and licking her wounds until she heals. In *Kissing The Beast* (2013), does the invisible tongue reach out to lick the paws of the beast? At the bottom left corner of *Harem* (2009), a woman bites the arm of another woman—the tongue devouring the other. Appearing sometimes as a surrogate, sometimes as an invisible part of the female body, endeavors of the tongue evoke a question asked by Judith Butler, “How is survival to be maintained if the terms by which existence is guaranteed are precisely those that demand and institute subordination?” [10] The female subject emerges, survives, and articulates her own agency by revealing how power acts on her body and by reiterating that power in her own acting.



İnci Eviner, *European Union*, 2009. Ink on paper, 29 x 21 cm.

Excavating the tongue from the garbage, manipulating it to find a voice, using it to lick and to heal, daring to insert it into the paws of the beast, devouring the other with it to survive are what I take away from İnci’s search for a tongue. Through her struggle, I learn that a woman can stand the world because she has a tongue and knows to eat with it her own placenta.

Throughout the forty years of her practice, İnci has persistently negotiated the human lifespan—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood shadowed by the specter of death—as a struggle to survive by both owning one’s vulnerability and bearing the world with strength. In the text that appears with *Framed Childhood* (2006), she writes, “In Merve, who was looking out a window that opened onto the center of the paper, I saw the fragility and the dreams of a girl and the ways in which life would punish her for them.” [11] Childhood as epitomized in Merve’s face keeps coming back in later works, *Guard of Botanic Garden* (2014) and *Runaway Girls* (2015) as the *memento mori* of longings.

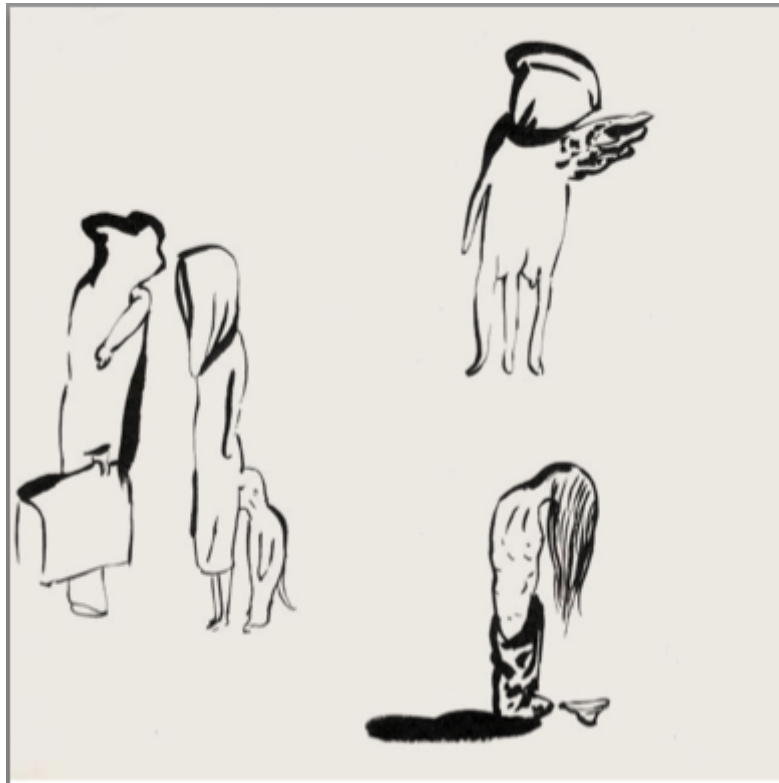


İnci Eviner, *Framed Childhood 1*, 2006. Digital print, 50 x 67 cm.

Adolescence hides in the panties and is the reservoir of explosive sexual energy that is suppressed by society. To accompany *Dirty Laundry* (2011), İnci writes, “You should leave space at the inner seams of your dress and especially of your panties. So that you have a place to hide when your eyes touch the ones of another.” [12] This space to hide and to explore the suppressed is marked in works that cover a large span of time, such as *Somebody Inside* (2002), *Women with Dropped Panties* (2002), *Uncanny* (2005), *Baby Woman* (2005), and *Lost Panties* (2009). In all of these works, the panties are pulled down and taken out; the adolescent gaze of their owner fixed on them to comprehend the manifestations of this gesture.

Adolescence comes to an abrupt end in this geography as the family swallows the individual body. Yet, İnci’s *Family* (2000) is incompatible with the norms—improper and perverse. Men are either missing or are turning their back on the audience to address a higher power. Smoking mothers are angry for their own lost childhood and daughters are seeking affection in love dolls. In *Runaway Girls* (2015), those who can survive are the ones who escape the family, norms of the society, and the surveillance, with the aid of other bodies that carry, hold, protect, nurse,

and transform them. If they stay, they have to be strong enough to defend themselves. In *Don't Worry, You'll Be Fine* (2005), a woman stands above a bleeding body. Did she have to kill in self-defense?



İnci Eviner, *Somebody Inside*, 2002. Ink on paper, 30 x 30 cm.

And some just cannot insert themselves into the world. “As if these reds were without a place / One could never make a home in them,” [13] İnci writes along with a series titled *Suicide, Funeral 1-2-3* (2004). She bears witness and resurrects them with a song in *Something bad happened to me* (2016): “I am not well / Look at me, see what I am doing / I’m hanging myself by my hair.” [14]

In the end, İnci says: “It took a long time for me to learn being both vulnerable and strong.” [15] I met İnci somewhere in that life span as I started my graduate degree at Sabancı University, where she was teaching as a visiting artist for a semester in 2006. I was just back from studying in the United States, recently wed. I was vulnerable. That summer we did the “Grand Tour” together, traveling to Munster, Venice, and Kassel. Then, she guided me towards joining the PhD in Art Practice program at Yıldız Technical University, which she headed at the time. She introduced me to Kadir Has University’s Fine Arts Department, where I worked as a lecturer for two years. She intervened and held me as I struggled to jump over a threshold. That was nursing—aiding one to create the material conditions for independence, while carrying on a challenging dialogue about artistic process.



İnci Eviner, *Family*, 2000. C-Print. 66 x 92,5 cm.

Since we met, I have been closely witnessing her process and coming across some of the sketches as they were lying on tables, sometimes peaking into older works in the drawers while she was moving things around in her studio. As I navigate through the labyrinth of the retrospective, the boundaries and the temporal distance between individual works lapse and I experience all of her gestures as one. To make a retrospective of one's own, İnci revisits the architectural layout that she articulated for *Co-Action Device: A Study* (2013), where she carried out a forty-day performative research with student participants on a stage that she set up in the Greek School as part of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. This experiment in “the school as an art form” came into existence in the months following the Gezi Uprising and was an attempt to articulate a shared space in a public setting. The cocoon-like spaces, walls and platforms of different heights used in *Co-Action Device* to “provide the students with a living space as well as a studio and stage” [16] are now used in the retrospective to stage İnci's works from different moments in juxtaposition.

The lapse that folds the retrospective into a single knot happens where her video installation *Harem* (2009) meets *Darülaceze Drawings* (1977). At the very beginning of her practice, instead of drawing nudes in the studio at the State Academy of Fine Arts, İnci chose to observe people at the Darülaceze, a public hospice for the elderly and disabled. Sketches of the imperfect bodies expressing their vulnerability are overlaid to allow a glimpse into the chosen beginning of İnci's practice. From there, she digs the tunnels that bring her to the Cartesian space of *Harem* (2009) as represented in Melling's engraving. Against this background, female bodies defy their given institutional setting as they resist domestication in collective rituals.



İnci Eviner, Don't Worry, You'll Be Fine, 2005. Ink and collage on paper, 161 x 107 cm.

In an interview published at the time of the opening and at the artist talk accompanying the retrospective, İnci asked: “I am curious about what the reappearance of these works will mean for the younger generation.” [17] In answering the question in relation to the history of contemporary art in Turkey, I was tempted to revisit one of the dominant narratives of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s articulated in a dialogue by Erden Kosova and Vasıf Kortun, published in *Offside But a Goal: The Scene in Turkey* (2005) [18]. In the section that focuses on works concerning gender, Erden Kosova writes, “Cultural manifestations of women whose lives are being intensely regulated by patriarchal social values, and women artists’ works to be mentioned in our conversation would surely give hints of such pressures through content and form in different ways. This is why women artists whose lives are awfully banalized and regularized would not resort to transgressive statements and practices. This has been a position that is spared only to the ‘bad boys’ who don’t respect even the presence of the father.” [19] Clarifying that they are not intending to take an essentialist position about woman’s nature, they extend the discussion towards how the Republican cultural structure strongly opposed to the representation of “gender queerness.” [20]

Revisiting this narrative at a new phase in the life of Turkish Republic from inside the labyrinth of İnci’s practice, I wonder if not taking the presence of the father seriously is the only way for transgression. Meandering through the retrospective

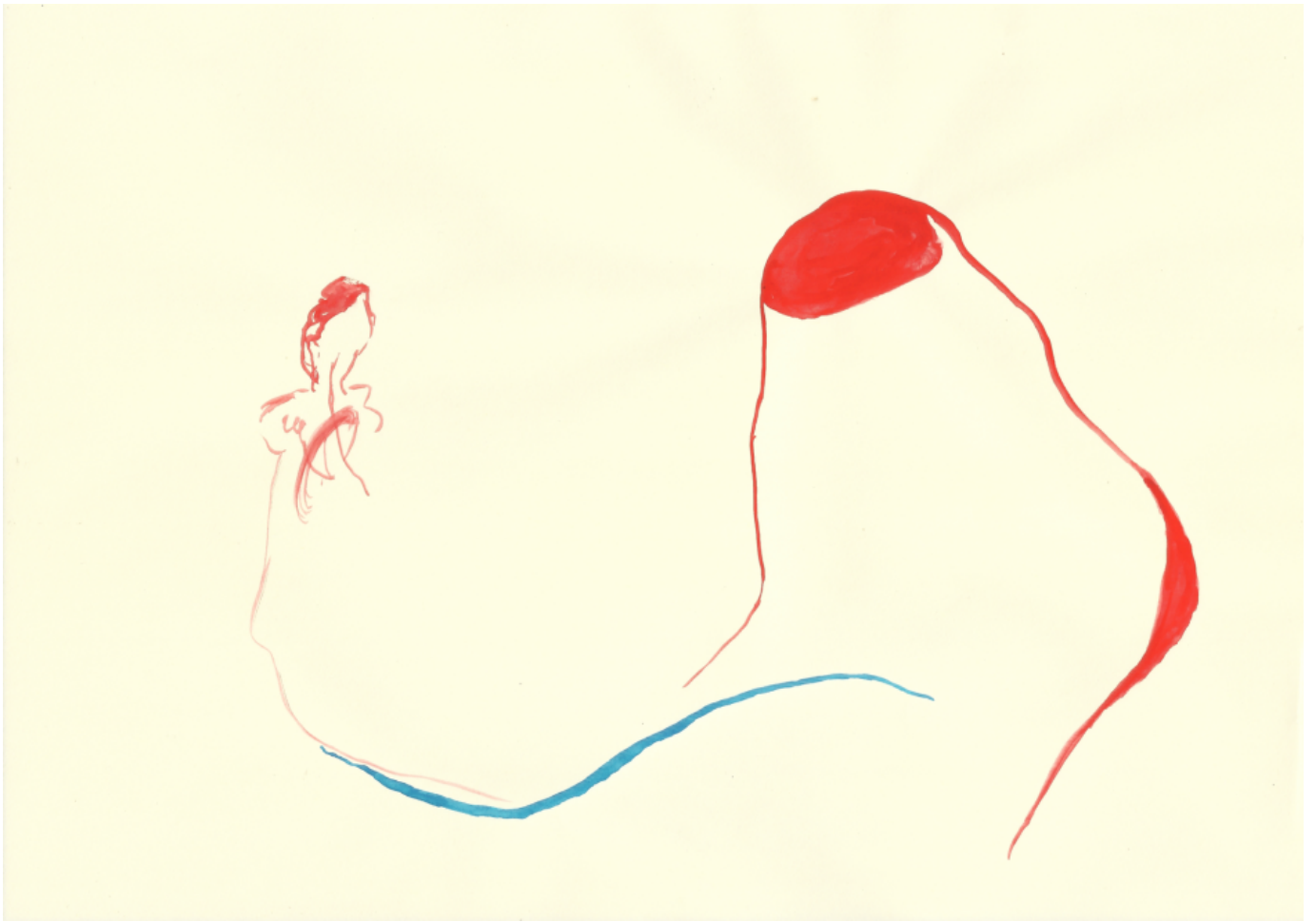
suggests multiple methodologies of transgression that confronts and defies “the father” with an insistently articulated personal tongue. As Kosova and Kortun suggest at the end of their text, “It is possible to suggest other genealogies and discursive groupings.” [21] Maybe, the retrospective nurses other narratives for the younger generations who will have to produce in the presence of a perpetually mutating, ever suffocating but never disappearing father.



İnci Eviner, *Lost Panties*, 2009. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.

I also respond to İnci’s question as a subject who has been shaped by her interventions in life as an artist, a woman, and an educator. İnci places me in a labyrinth in which figures conjoin as they struggle for freedom in an increasingly segregated society: A hand reaches into a woman to grabble what is inside; a body explodes to find its wings; unmournable bodies find refuge under a carpet; a squirrel takes over the leg of her host; a mutated new citizen creeps in; a creature running backwards swallows its own head; agoraphobia is overcome with a call from the mountains; a head finds joy while becoming a hand; what is sacrificed becomes a part of one’s own body; a subject gives birth to many mutated others... Her line guides through the cumbersome collective memory and the schizophrenic national psyche into the hypocrisy of globalization down to the failures of progress and pull up towards bodies that resist by inventing their own movements for survival.

Edited by Özge Ersoy



İz Öztat, Untitled, 2016. Watercolor on paper, 21 x 30 cm.

Endnotes:

[1] Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva* (New York: New Directions Books, 2012), 29.

[2] İnci Eviner quoted in *İnci Eviner Retrospective: Who's Inside You?* (Istanbul: Istanbul Modern, 2016), 70.

[3] Toufic figures in as an untimely collaborator, whose thought traversed the labyrinth as a form that structures the realm of *undeath*; that informs the experience of lapses at the missed entrance and that enables a dialogue in which the living can ask the dead, “Where are we now?” Jalal Toufic, *Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1993; 2nd ed., Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2003), 76. Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming* (CA: Atelos, 2000; 2nd ed., Berlin: e-flux journal-Sternberg Press, 2014), 231.

[4] Here, the artist uses the word “dil”, which means both “tongue” and “language” in Turkish. I prefer to translate it as “tongue” to maintain the visceral qualities of the organ as well as its potential for verbal expression.

[5] Nilüfer Şaşmaz “İnci Eviner ile Söyleşi: Tamamen Açık Bir Sergi”, *Istanbul Art News*, June 2016, 15.

[6] *Ibid.*, 15.

[7] İnci Eviner quoted in *İnci Eviner Retrospective: Who's Inside You?*, 46.

[8] The title in Turkish “Dile Gelmeyen” would be literally translated as “what cannot manifest in the tongue/language.”

- [9] İnci Eviner quoted in *İnci Eviner Retrospective: Who's Inside You?*, 62.
- [10] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 19.
- [11] İnci Eviner quoted in *İnci Eviner Retrospective: Who's Inside You?*, 140.
- [12] Ibid., 70.
- [13] Ibid., 150.
- [14] Ibid., 46.
- [15] Nilüfer Şaşmazer “İnci Eviner ile Söyleşi: Tamamen Açık Bir Sergi”, *Istanbul Art News*, June 2016, 15.
- [16] Elif Kamışlı (ed), *Co-Action Device: A Study* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2013), 32.
- [17] Nilüfer Şaşmazer “İnci Eviner ile Söyleşi: Tamamen Açık Bir Sergi”, *Istanbul Art News*, June 2016, 15.
- [18] Erden Kosova and Vasıf Kortun, *Offside But a Goal: The Scene in Turkey* (2005) is a reader published in the context of the Romanian Pavilion with Daniel Knorr and Marius Babias for the 51st Venice Biennale, 2005.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Ibid.