

ART PROFILE

Ali Elmaci

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16 January 2023 | 3,366 Reads



Ali Elmaci: *Dagger My Heart*, 2023. PLEWELL Documentaries. Image courtesy of the artist and PLEWELL

Through twisted myths and smirking faces, **Ali Elmaci's** paintings illustrate social conundrums with bold-coloured humour.

One-eyed gazes beam like headlights on a dark highway, massive emias grin as big as caves out from which bats could fly. In Ali Elmaci's vibrant paintings, erratic figures with childlike enthusiasm face hyperbolic scenarios – think banana attacks, chihuahua bites or gruesome pincers. Colours burst and landscapes pop.

The Istanbul-based artist's paintings of pin-up-viewed characters are energised by an anarchic exuberance, a pop absurdism that blends the MTV-guest of contemporary life with tragedies comparable to the gargantuan plot twists in Greek mythology. Some nudes and others dressed in modern life's familiarity, Elmaci figures occupy a cinematic space – there are grand gestures and glorious lighting. "I look serious or even have subjects in my paintings, as if I try not to be too didactic," he explains. "Humour is a great way of softening my statements." Indeed that unbridled abandon, his vigorous artistic dynamism that are admired by authorities, collective hyperboles and the epicness of rudeness towards hijackers. Villed by a cartoonish approach to figuration, such sociocultural topics are covered by heavy make-up and hilarious narratives, yet like a drag queen's witty number, the same only makes the punchline more pungent.

In his solo exhibition, *Kiss My Lips, Dagger My Heart*, at Istanbul's Pleweli gallery earlier this year, the artist summoned cues from Spaghetti Westerns, over-the-top news content, social media cacophony and the canonical Western art history. A series of portraits show proxy cowboys and fifty underwings donning leather's bangles, their slugs hypothesised gases locked on our eyes. We cannot look away from the excesses by on their shiny faces. Elmaci adds to the paintings a sculptural layer with shotguns framing each canvas. Like haunting objects at a thrift store, they creep into our contemporary logic and poke at our need for a void. The artist named the portraits *2020m My Day No Güneş Geleni İnce Nisur In Your Violence How Beautiful Your Compassion* (2022-23), based on a line from a popular 1960s Turkish pop song.



Ali Elmaci: *Beri Oğuzdemir Tan* (I Know Not by my shadow), 2022. Oil on canvas, 90 x 90 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and PLEWELL

Color and nostalgia are indeed formative trails for Elmaci, who was born in a small village near the northern Turkish city of Sinop in 1976. He moved to Istanbul right after high school and after a decade of working at odd jobs, he enrolled in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University's painting department in 2004. The highly academic formal education reminded him why he liked to paint in the first place. "I already had drawn a path in front of me, because I was painting as a child before I could read or write," he recalls. Circumstances had delayed his art education, but he knew that painting was his way out. "There have been thinking about why I am so obsessed with large gazing eyes in my work," he admits. The artist has lately come up with his explanations: "I like every child in Turkey. I grew up with the picture of Atatürk in my classroom during school as an and there was always a picture of my father together in our living room because he was always away – these two eyes always followed me." He considers the figures somewhat as auto-portraits because the eyes are mostly based on his own.

In one of the show's many anonymous paintings, *Elmad Kız My Lips, Dagger My Heart* (2022), a blond woman lies on the grass with an expression which could have been considered 'heartless' in any other artist's painting. In Elmaci's universe, however, her expression's contentions, an over-the-top smile contoured by a makeup veneer. A bunch of chihuahuas are nibbling on her skin while she is frozen between helplessness and pleasure – she lets the canines do the chewing, she pretends it hurts or takes the joy.

Elmaci's impetus for conceiving the right dosage of narrative absurdity and optic abundance is to begin with a cause. "I always start with issues that bother me," he explains about his approach to a blank canvas. "Because whenever I feel troubledness around me, I want to turn that into a painting." An observer of shaky social equilibria, political turbulences and cultural shifts – as well as our kindness for all – Elmaci crafts oil-on-canvas juxtapositions staged like film stills or family portraits. Clashing between technological refinement and ill-movie boundaries, his paintings communicate with the viewer through their belated absurdities. Bright colours, theatrical postures and heavenly backgrounds merge and eventually explode into kaleidoscopic moods.



Ali Elmaci: *Dutbalan Güç*, Kabini Nerevizi (I Kiss My Lips, Dagger My Heart) (2021). Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and PLEWELL

In three paintings, each titled *Kendi Sıkıntı Beni Sıkıntı* (Turkish: You're Not Here Alone) (2021), a mermaid, a watermelon and a pumpkin – each receive their self-portraits with eyes and mouths carved by sharp knives. A lush, otherworldly nature backdrops each setting: the landscapes explode with sharp sunlight, aerial pin roses and gusting warblers. On the forehead, the fish have sharp canines and into solemnity. The watermelon's red inner renders a proud expression; the pumpkin's design seems softness to the beautiful rose next to it.

Elmaci has been working at the same studio for the last 12 years in the Yıldırım neighbourhood of Istanbul's Kadıköy district. "I find peace being at the studio," he says about his 75-square-metre refuge with its five-metre-high ceilings. He usually shows up in the afternoon and makes sure to spend at least eight hours there, occasionally staying until dawn breaks, while thinking in most mood or writing on old TV screens or film canisters in the background for white noise. He starts every painting with a photograph for which his friends and colleagues sit in outfits in which he dresses them. The painter's inexact narratives the artist pens before starting to paint. "I first paint the figures without any specific gender or age," he explains about his early steps. "But I rather focus on what kind of authority each character has within the setting." The photographic quality of the paintings reveals their with an energy on the brink of an explosion: both protagonists and antagonists, they fill in multiple roles of the hero, the villain and the Greek chorus.

St Sebastian is an icon to whom Elmaci constantly returns in his oeuvre. He last show had two versions of the ill-fated Christian saint, who has been depicted throughout Western art history as a victim in the hands of pagans. In the artist's lens, the young man is neither tied to a tree nor gets permeated by any malicious arrows. Escaping from his last Adonis trends in one painting, which is titled after the show, the hunky blond saint exercises upwards like a ballerina while bananas gently pose his muscular body. "My Sebastians are manipulative," Elmaci says, turning the myth upside down. "Rather than being real victims of authority, they are 'playing' the victim while they are attacked by candles or bananas, and they have no wounds," he concludes.

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