



*THE  
INNOCENCE*



# OF KNOWING

SELMA GÜRBÜZ

A modern antiquarian, Selma Gürbüz employs both ancient and new symbols to spin her visual tales, dreamy settings and enamouring silhouettes. **Ayla Jean Yackley** examines the Turkish artist's indelible, secret world of fantasy replete with human and animal characters.



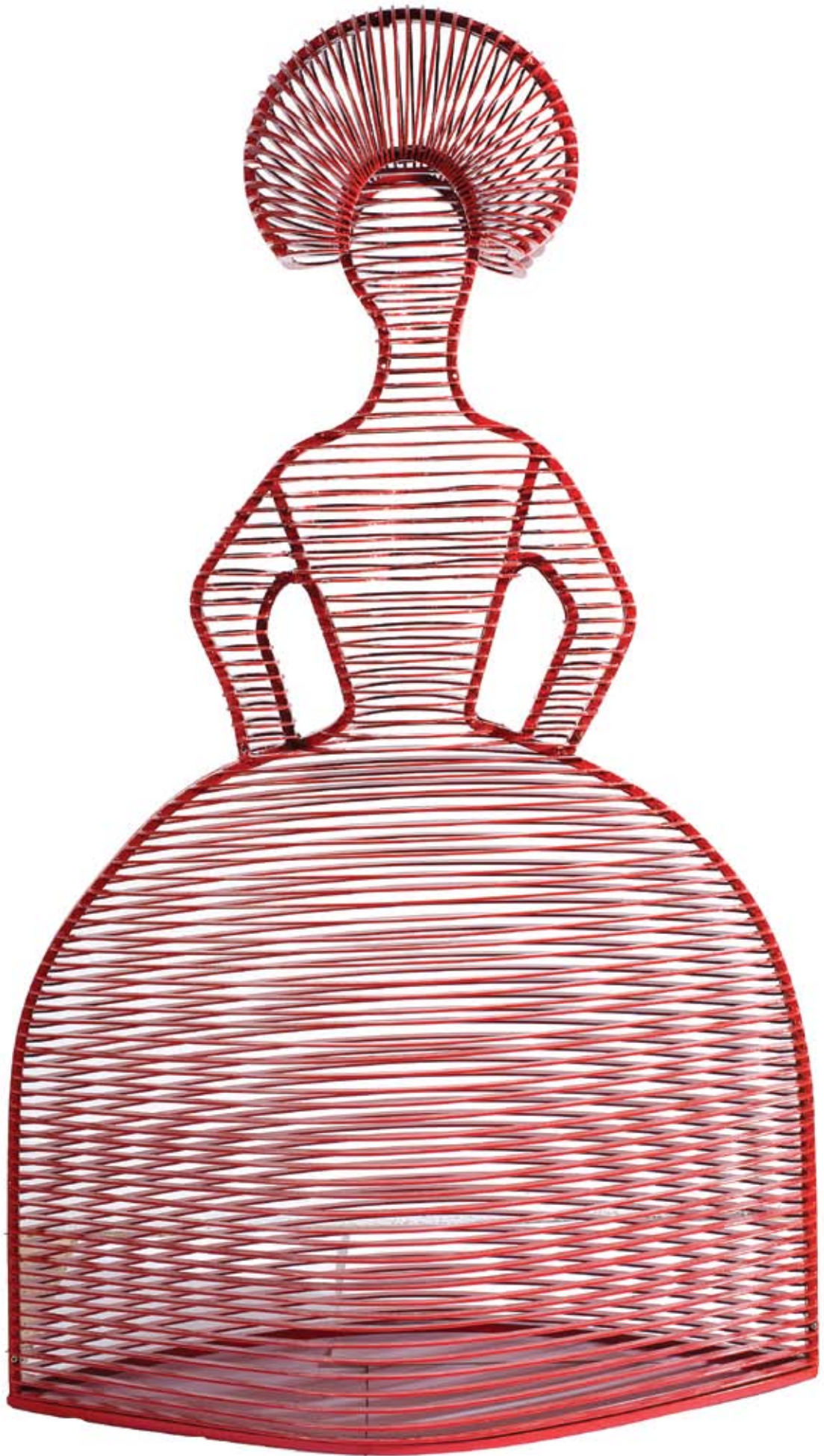
Selma Gürbüz is the illustrator of untold fairytales. Her nymphs, strange woodland dwellers and beasts that are half-man and half-fruit evoke familiar hearthside stories, even though most are characters in legends never recited. *Joueur d'animaux* looks more like the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux than a modern painting from 2006. Made with flat black gouache on a coarse, hessian-coloured canvas, it depicts a leopard-spotted dryad feeding lambs from her fingertips, a bemused smile on her face. The feeling is folksy and naïve until one notices the dexterity and confidence with which Gürbüz handles the brush. *Paradise II*, an oil on canvas from 2010, is a landscape of grazing stags at a forest stream, like an Edwin Landseer. Sheer-white dashes of rabbits haunt the picture, and hidden beneath the sapient trees in the corner of the canvas are two spellbound human forms. An unmistakable tribute to the Ottoman miniature, it also suggests JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth. "These are fables I have created. Sometimes the imagery overlaps with symbols from art history or mythology, imparting both unfamiliarity and timelessness," Gürbüz says. "There is a darkness but there is also whimsy." Duality is her appeal: modern and ancient, familiar and strange, imaginary and real, flat with unseen depths. She manages to express a cliché-free mix of Eastern and Western styles.

### NEW TAKE ON 'ORIENTALISM'

This latter-day Synthetist joins natural and emotionally represented images with singular and focused use of line, colour and form. There is a strong whiff of Paul Gauguin, his cloisonnism and Eastward-looking mysticism. The French artist's naked woman lying on the bed in *Manao Tupapau* is a nearly identical rich brown to that employed by Gürbüz in *Duchess* (2010). The women share a 'come hither' expression and magical undertone in Gauguin's leering spectres and Gürbüz's Romany costume. "Gauguin looked at geography beyond the West. His figures are of his own discovery but he transferred them to the canvas using Western ideas of light and colour," Gürbüz says. "The

Opening spread: (Detail)  
*Paradise II*, 2010. Oil on  
canvas. 190 x 270 cm.

Facing page: *Woman in  
Red*, 2010. Iron.  
153 x 90 x 24 cm.





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Orientalist viewpoint is tantalising, depicting what you have not witnessed. Fixing that relationship between East and West may be the point at which my art is pushed forward.”

The impact of other European painters from the late 19th and early 20th centuries is also apparent, including Pablo Picasso’s tribal masks, Marc Chagall’s wispy people and Hermann Scherer’s high-contrast woodcuts. Even Seurat’s pointillism can be intuited through Gürbüz’s liberal use of large dots to make human forms, such as in *Adam and Eve* from 2005. With *Two Lions* (2006), Gürbüz delves further back to Roman mosaics. She plunders the iconography of devotional painting by masters like Lucas Cranach The Elder with her bare-breasted Virgin Mary in *Madonna* from 2010.

#### INNOCENCE OF KNOWING

The cast iron *Las Meninas* from 2006 is a rendering of Diego Velázquez’s 17th-century masterpiece of the same name. The sculpture’s black enamel finish transforms the Infanta Margarita, giving her a new back story. She maintains her natural, child’s innocence, but on closer glance her expression also reveals a doe-eyed awareness of the life that awaits her, the innocence of knowing. This notion rings true in much of Gürbüz’s work. The fairytale may seem benign at first take, but scratch a little deeper, and millennia of myth and tradition are revealed. Like *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, her stories are scary for children and dark human drama for grown-up readers.

These clear nods to centuries of Western

painting still boast elements of archaic Persian art, especially in the flatness of the two-dimensional images. Adrift in backgrounds of autumnal colours – part of Gürbüz's favoured palette representing "Byzantine light," as she calls it – her images are absent of shadow and perspective. In particular, Gürbüz cites as an influence *Siyah Qalam*, or "black pen," the arcane school of 14th- or 15th-century Persian draughtsmen who created 65 paintings and drawings in manuscripts at Topkapı Palace in Istanbul.

*The Winged*, an ink on paper work from 2004, is a jumble of four translucent female figures wearing dresses made of branches and adorned with birds. While it hints at *La Danse* by Henri Matisse, the otherworldliness of the apparitions connects the black-and-white panel to the mysterious demons and nomads who populated the *Siyah Qalam* albums. "Siyah Qalam was far more 'modern' than art in Europe at that time," Gürbüz says. "There's a documentary aspect of *Siyah Qalam* that I like, that it relates an occurrence."

## A DIFFERENT WORLD

So it is natural that this narrative art would appeal to Gürbüz the storyteller. At her first show in 1986, the audience in Istanbul was captivated

by Gürbüz's folklore, says Nuran Terzioğlu, who owns Galeri Apel in Istanbul and represented Gürbüz for years. "We all sensed that she had created a different world. She told stories that she had imagined [and] she used objects and pieces unique to that world," Terzioğlu explains. That solo show was just two years after Gürbüz finished studying painting at Marmara University's Faculty of Fine Arts and, prior to that, at Exeter College in southwest England. The school is near Exmoor, an ancient landscape of forest, rolling hills and jagged rocks, a place brimming with legend. Motifs in Gürbüz's work – lambs, birds, hillside creature – are commonly found there. The mythic Green Man, a British folk figure of the personified forest, can be seen in *Untitled* from 2003.

As a young girl, Gürbüz had not contemplated art as a serious pursuit, although she and her three sisters did oil paintings in a home full of books and music. "I was very inward-looking, an extremely shy and sensitive child," Gürbüz says. Reading Jean-Paul Sartre and listening to Bob Dylan made her long for independence, and she left for Britain to study business, but her studies failed to ignite her, and she skipped classes to explore London's great museums. "I was exposed to different cultures in these

Facing page: *Meninas I* and *Meninas II*. 2006. Iron. 124 x 90 x 38 cm and 90 x 65 x 27 cm, respectively. Image courtesy Rose Issa Projects, London.

Below: *With Wings*. 2004. Ink on paper. 120 x 300 cm.







Facing page: *Poet*. 2011. Oil painting on canvas. 155 x 200 cm.

Above:  
 Left: *Faded Costume*. 2004. Mixed technique on paper. 256 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the Istanbul Modern collection.  
 Right: *Self-Portrait*. 2004. Mixed technique on paper. 256 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the Istanbul Modern collection.



## Her iconic chimerical animals and phantoms are woven in black against flax-coloured wool in the Konya style. These are not images for the fainthearted to tread upon.



museums and I found art," she says. "I discovered myself in England. Some will say, 'I was born to make art,' but it was never like that for me," says Gürbüz.

### ISTANBUL STUDIO

The peripatetic Gürbüz has travelled widely through the Middle East, Europe, India and Japan – all the while stopping at museums – but the retiring artist now spends much of her time at her fifth-floor studio atop a steep hill in Beyoğlu, the city's emergent cultural heart. On view from her eyrie is the Bosphorus Strait, the waterway that bisects Istanbul between two continents. Just outside her window is the shell of a derelict building, bypassed in the district's drive towards gentrification. "All of Istanbul's texture, its history is right there. Seeing Hagia Sofia, Topkapı Palace, Süleymaniye Mosque everyday is very important for my work," says Gürbüz, 51, and with an apple-shaped face and a slender, athletic frame from years of yoga practice that she first took up in India. On a bright September morning, she is wearing tinted cat-eye glasses and her short wavy hair is neatly pinned back.

The studio is a converted apartment and retains the warmth of a home with hundreds of books ranging from art history to modern fiction on the shelves of a small library. In an interior room, tall rolls of the hallmark handmade rice paper she imports from Nepal stand next to a cache of metal sculptures and stacks of the prolific artist's canvases. *The Poet* from 2011 rests against one wall. A lady holding a slim volume enjoys anonymity, her face obscured by the shade of a willow tree. Her skirt is made of eyes, like the Pharaonic



Eye of Horus or the *nazar* amulets that Turks pin to babies' garments to ward off bad luck. The subject could have been painted by Renoir, but the symbols make it unmistakably Gürbüz's. She calls her two assistants *hattats*, or calligraphers. They help her produce the work and keep up with increasing demand from collectors and galleries. Her oil paintings sell for between \$60,000–90,000, while the price for ink-on-paper pieces can reach \$95,000, according to her representative.

The artist has had nearly 50 solo shows. In October 2011, Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi opened *Mind's Eye*, a solo show featuring both oil on canvas and ink on paper works. Gürbüz has participated in group shows across Europe and in Egypt, Korea, Japan and Argentina. She has also served as the art director on two Turkish films and designs sets and installations for the theatre, including shadow-puppet productions in Japan and France.

## SHADOW PLAY

Karagöz and Hacivat, characters in traditional Turkish shadow theatre, might serve as the basis of Gürbüz's sheet-metal sculptures from 1998. The black birds, trees and felines are an assortment of grotesques, the stuff of forgotten fables. These early models are a far cry from the cartoonish figures in Keith Haring colours that she is making

more than a decade later: horizontal, voluminous hoops of metal, such as *Healer* and *Woman in Red* from 2010. Gürbüz has also been impelled to produce carpets, perhaps the best-known and oldest form of Turkish craft. Her iconic chimerical animals and phantoms are woven in black against flax-coloured wool in the Konya style. These are not images for the fainthearted to tread upon. "She is producing first-rate pieces, due to her discipline and focus on her work," says Nezi̇h Barut, who counts Gürbüz's paintings and sculptures from the span of her career as part of his large, eclectic collection of Turkish and international work. "She has very clearly displayed over the past 25 years a steadiness, endurance, creativity and strength," helping her pieces to gain in value, he says.

Gürbüz's work is in several other private collections, including that of Oya Eczacıbaşı, chairwoman of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, according to her biography. Among public collections, the British Museum in London, Galerie Maeght in Paris, the Painting and Sculpture Museum in Ankara and the Istanbul Modern own examples. "She is one of our most important artists and has already established her art-historical significance in Turkey," says the gallerist Terzioğlu.

Each stretching more than two metres high, *Faded Costume* and *Self Portrait*, both mixed

Facing page: *Adam and Eve*. 2010. Oil on canvas. 115 x 200 cm.

Above: *Two Lions*. 2006. Gouache on handmade paper. 94 x 174 cm. Image courtesy Rose Issa Projects, London.

All images courtesy the artist unless otherwise specified.

media on paper from 2004, are among the most striking works of art on the walls of the Istanbul Modern. The former is of a witch whose face is concealed by a head of grey hair, with two bright-eyed black cats perched on her shoulder. Her dress is decorated in dozens of terracotta-red pomegranates, a take on the Ephesian cult image of the many-breasted Artemis. In the companion piece *Self Portrait*, Gürbüz is elfin in a frock made from tree branches that snake up her body like veins. Swallows alight, lured by the lute she plays that has grown out of her hand. The piece is sculptural, like the carving of the oak lintel of a fireplace, helped by the highly textured Nepalese paper that peers through the branches of the dress. These sister pieces are an inky window onto Gürbüz's dark, ironic and enticing realm. Very much the works of a modern antiquarian, Gürbüz's paintings are timeless fables, texts without the words. ©

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