

Between Continents, Between Futures: A Week of Art in Istanbul

By Keshav Anand

Turkey's sprawling metropolis, Istanbul spans two continents divided and connected by the waters of the Bosphorus. As we cross the bridge to the Asian side en route to Abdülmecid Efendi Mansion—a historic residence nestled in Kuzguncuk that now houses an eclectic art collection—the driver tells me two-thirds of the city's inhabitants live in Europe, and the rest in Asia. The city has always thrived at the crossroads of worlds, but last week this sense of convergence felt particularly intense with the 20th anniversary of Contemporary Istanbul (24–28 September) and the opening of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (20 September–23 November)—alongside numerous satellite exhibitions that spill into spaces across the city.

Housed in Tersane Istanbul, a redeveloped Ottoman shipyard overlooking the Golden Horn that today comprises various luxury hotels, restaurants and boutiques, this year's edition of Contemporary Istanbul welcomed over 50 galleries from 16 countries. Alongside a shuttle service courtesy BMW, boats ferried collectors and artists across the Bosphorus, echoing the fair's promise of passage between cultures. This year's *Focus America* section sought to explore the shifting tides across the Atlantic, but it was the works of emerging Turkish artists that gave the fair its distinctive flavour.



Esin Aykanat Avcı presented by Simbart Projects at Contemporary Istanbul

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At local gallery [Simbart Projects](#)' booth, artist [Esin Aykanat Avcı](#) showed her works *Uyuyan Güzel* and *Ben Biterim O Başlar, O Biterse Ben Başlarım*, where decellularised leaves, stripped of their living tissue, become vessels for new possibilities. Scientific process and poetic meditation fuse here: veins of leaves mirror the human body's own

speak to the bonds and distances that characterise contemporary life. The bodies in the artist's works are portrayed as perpetually seeking a place, uncertain whether they find contentment where they stand.



Nil Yalter presented by 1 Mira Madrid at Contemporary Istanbul

A highlight from the fair was the presence of Nil Yalter, recently honoured with the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. At Contemporary Istanbul she was presented by Spanish gallery 1 Mira Madrid. Yalter's pioneering practice—from her 1974 video *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* onwards—has long placed feminism, migration, and performance in dialogue. To encounter her works in Istanbul, the city of her early years, was to feel the arc of an artist who has continually turned displacement into radical expression.



Lucie Rosická presented by Trafo Gallery at Contemporary Istanbul

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Czech artist [Lucie Rosická](#), presented by [Trafo Gallery](#) of Prague, brought textile-based works that pulse with memory. Velvet and satin stitched into intimate figurations carry the echoes of domestic life. Rooted in the craft taught to her by her grandmother and informed by her residencies abroad, Rosická's works feel like tactile diaries, stitching

textiles, paper, wax, and even ceramics—probing ideas of porosity, protection, and resilience.



Grimanesa Amorós at the Peninsula Istanbul

Beyond Tersane, the fair's reach extends to the [Peninsula Istanbul](#), where Peruvian-American artist [Grimanesa Amorós](#) unveiled *PASSAGE* and *MARITIME*, two monumental light installations. Encircling the hotel's historic clock tower in glowing red, *PASSAGE* evokes centuries of human movement across the Bosphorus, while *MARITIME* suspends a luminous ship-like form in the lobby, undulating like waves at night.



Yasmeen Al Daya at the Gaza Biennale

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The city brims with parallel stories. At [Depo](#), the [Gaza Biennale's](#) Istanbul Pavilion opened under the title *A Cloud in My Hand* (19 September-14 November). Curated by [House of Taswir](#), Gazan artists, unable to travel, collaborated remotely with international peers, producing works that speak across absence. Formats range from mobile phone dialogues to poetry evenings, reimagining exhibition-making

celebration and Depo's urgent improvisation was palpable—but in different ways, both underscore art's role in shaping collective futures.



Juliette Minchin at Zeyrek Çinili Hamam

Meanwhile, at Zeyrek Çinili Hamam, a 500-year-old Turkish bathhouse, Paris-based artist Juliette Minchin stages *Where the River Burns*, a site-specific installation of wax and tin that plays with the hammam's layered history. Moving through the marble and wood rooms and Byzantine cistern, visitors encounter wax draperies like discarded skins, tin relics resembling rivers frozen mid-flow, and fragile drawings echoing celestial maps.

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Stéphanie Saadé at the 18th Istanbul Biennial

And then, the 18th Istanbul Biennial. Curated by [Christine Tohmé](#) and titled *The Three-Legged Cat*, its first chapter unfolds across eight venues in Karaköy. The works of [Nolan Oswald Dennis](#) and [Stéphanie Saadé](#) stood out: Dennis' kinetic forms breathing in sync with viewers' presence, postulating decolonial futures where “many worlds exist,” and Saadé's *Pyramid* series layering garments from infancy to adulthood into uncanny monuments of time. Here, the themes of preservation, futurity, and collective survival tie back to questions raised by artists elsewhere in the city. The week wove a portrait of a centre at once local and global, saddled with histories and complex politics but determinately optimistic and alive with possibility.