

## Fatma Bucak reinterpreting the great archetypes of the Mediterranean.

*By: Dr. Martina Corgnati*



**Untitled III**, Allegorio Della Colpevolezza - Passato series, 2010, Digital archival pigment print, edition of 7, 40x32.4cm - Courtesy of the artist.

For many years Fatma Bucak (Iskenderun, Turkey, 1982) has been reinterpreting the great archetypes which belong to the origins and traditions of the Mediterranean. In her intense photographic and video work, not only does she summon back to life their dramatic and narrative power in the first person, but she also causes them to intimately and subversively betray their origins so as to instil them with new possible meanings and interpretations.

Bucak herself represents a mixture or crossroad of cultures, traditions, misunderstandings and possibilities for new developments; born in a small town in the Eastern part of Turkey, she belongs to the heavily constrained Kurdish minority, and to a family who, at that time, did not hide its discord with the institutional power of the country. The result of all this was a difficult childhood, her father being imprisoned several times and their village completely destroyed. Her art reflects

these stressful, even shocking, conditions of her youth although, as every real form of art, it transcends them and embraces a more universal and comprehensive sphere of resonance. Once moved to Istanbul with her family, now converted to a more traditional style of life, Bucak showed a remarkable thirst for knowledge and studied philosophy. Finally, she got a grant to develop her art skills in Italy. Today, she lives and works between Turin and London. Her recent work embraces performance, video and photography and, to a certain extent, also literature when we consider the titles of her pieces - often in Latin. These titles bring important references to classical and renaissance worlds to the fore, where they often collide with iconic force against the sometimes silent, sometimes monumental, force of the images. For example, the classical resonance in *Melancholia*, the title of two series of photographs produced over several years, is evident to an even great extent in *Father and Esso* (he/it), which are titles of recent pieces belonging to the latest series of images devoted to the theme of basic, fundamental family relations.

In order to make her pieces, she usually creates a "setting", a natural theatre, in which she acts and performs as the first interpreter of her "drama". Normally speaking, the action takes place in the empty, cold winter countryside in Piedmont (the area surrounding Turin), where her naked and little body, lost in the hostile, "gelidus" (iced, frozen) nature, conveys a powerful feeling of fragility, abandonment and inadequacy. In these images, such as *Ego et Lanx Nigra*, *Malum est in insidiis* and *Tabernaculum*, one cannot avoid thinking of Francesca Woodman who, thirty years ago, used a similar strategy in her photographic self-portraits. Recently however, Bucak decided to "return to the scene of the crime", in other words to the empty, arid landscapes in eastern Anatolia where she was born and where she staged a number of performances together with other individuals (men, and in one particular instance, a woman). In these performances, father, mother and companion all become part of an ancient and ritual tragedy which, in fact, could not look more actual and up-to-date.

Playing with images that have an extraordinary visual impact, the artist recreates and re-enacts the ancestral and "archaic" drama of a daughter's relationship with the powerful, fearsome Biblical and Koranic father

figure. More generally, she also conjures up the mythical Greek and Mediterranean father and, at the same time, addresses a woman's profane but also sacred relationship with man, represented by the heavy stone from the ruins of an ancient church abandoned to the injuries of time. Once part of a church, the artist bears the weight of the stone on her shoulders, while the male figure, holding his hands, looks away and waits, his back turned to the scene. The title of this piece, *Esso*, refers back to an old and little known film by Luis Buñuel, *El*, made in 1952. It was dedicated, not by chance, to the obsessive desire of the main character, a deranged and paranoid man, to possess and control "womanhood". But, what for Buñuel develops from Freudian thinking and psychoanalysis, for Bucak has its roots in grand archetypes and, therefore, more radically in myth. Elsewhere, the combination of this small figure of a woman with a bright red head of hair (daughter), curled up at the feet of a stern-looking man dressed in black (father), creates a powerful effect. Here they are surrounded by an empty landscape, a stony field of dried, lifeless sunflowers. The artist is wearing a white dress, her face covered by her hair because only "the others" have a face. She represents the guilty woman, the young woman, a scapegoat who has to bear the burden of responsibility for this sort of original sin that renews itself with every new generation as it shifts back and forth from East to West, without an identity, with only thick hair to hide and disappear behind. She is "all" women and, of course, "no one".

These large, silent, indecipherable images are home to ancient Biblical and Koranic stories. But the artistic challenge lies in the review, in the treason because these stories, have been altered, changed, revisited and discussed so much so as to have compromised the original significance of the sites. For example, now it is the daughter (not the father) who performs the bloody sacrifice of the lamb at the altar. As her frowning father turns his back on the scene, she bears the weight of the holy stone before the man and it is she who in *Via Lactea* allows her mother to drag her by the hair, like a corpse in a wild pilgrimage, across the cracked terrain of the steppes. Where is she leading us to? What is the destiny, the necessity, the meaning of such a terrible, inhuman, destructive nagging sacrifice? It appears that our civilization is not asking these questions loudly



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and strongly enough. We, all of us, still find it easier to put the blame on “the other” without even knowing what “other” are we talking about. Nowadays, after the collapse of all ideologies, we do not face why we are performing (allowed to perform) these types of sacrifice, while the artist embraces the responsibility and assumes for herself the ritual part of the victim.

Fatma Bucak is one of the most original and courageous women artists who has emerged from the Mediterranean area. She is able to blend the peremptory presence of the sacred texts with the intensity of the classical Greek tradition and harness the energy of real experiences to the narrative biography of a young woman who has crossed many worlds on her way through life. This

same intensity builds up the specific atmosphere of her videos. For instance, in *Almost married – How to notify my father of my intention to marry an Italian man*, produced with the help of Regione Piemonte and directed by Fatma Bucak and Sergio Fergnachino, she tells the story of her family through a critical aspect, the “marriage strategy”, which in traditional society, such as hers, does not belong to individuals but to the family clan. As Bucak states: “My photographic work is drenched with tormented representations of myself, squeezed under the heavy weight of traditional arranged marriages and prenuptial virginity. I could never show these photos to my family. Davide and I know that this situation cannot go on for much longer. The need to

break the news to my parents is impelling. We have to inform my father, stuck between desire for progress and traditional ties, of our intention to get married and start a family. Next summer we will announce our wedding plans, however, before then, I would like to spend some time both with my relatives in Istanbul and with those who still live in the Eastern village. My Kurdish family is like a large tribe and, as in every tribe, most of the decisions concerning single individuals are made collectively, following ancient principles. My family's contradictions are an honest mirror of what Turkey is going through in her mid-air suspension between her two souls - between the Western world and the Middle East (Orient). At the end of this itinerary Davide will reach me in Istanbul where we will officially announce our engagement."

Her attitude is sometimes tense and dramatic, and sometimes ironic. On the contrary, her recent *After a coup d'état* when my father and his comrades were communist professors in Eastern Turkey, which obviously also contains a strong autobiographical reference, choose a dramatic, even disturbing tone. In this piece, the artist once again returns to earlier events and swims upstream along her roots. Plunging headfirst into the past, she zooms in on the remains of a dilapidated house in an equally run-down village that has been deserted by all its inhabitants except for a single dog. The dog is an ambiguous creature, in the West it is man's affectionate "best friend", in Islam it is considered impure and contemptible. What does its presence mean in that place that bears the slightly sinister scars of devastation? Kneeling among the ruins the young artist slowly begins to cut her hair while the seemingly restless spirit of another camera explores, one-by-one, the disfigured rooms and the ravished surroundings, hovering close to the ground to remain invisible from the windows. This is an old trick widely used by people on the run, who learned to make themselves invisible in their own homes from people spying on them from outside. Fatma Bucak does not explain anything in this work, she is silent, she says nothing. But, there is a father – not just a father, her actual father – reflecting persecution in a distant village, the gaping silence of the ruins and the symbolic expiatory notion of the strike. Is it really possible that someone speaks about these



**Padre III, Melancholia II series, 2010**, Digital archival pigment print, edition of 7, 90x72.5cm - Courtesy of the artist.

things nowadays? Is there anything of our times in work like this? Someone might consider the work simply the legacy of a distant past. Of course, time does not flow at the same speed everywhere, and, in some places, the hands of the clock even seem to turn backwards. So, this work is not simply a "denouncement" - that would be too banal, too slight for Fatma Bucak. Her work never stands on one layer but on a series of strata, each of which stands for a possible level of meaning, which reveals the immense vitality of the archetype expressed in the "right" language and which through a precise form of concentration can be roused from its ancient but light slumber. The archetype of this artist is primarily one of suffering in the first person, an immensely fragile "feminine", but one who has nevertheless the strength to stir up many ghosts from different epochs until they sink again in front of our eyes and in our conscience.

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