

## ELGIZ - The Story of the First Contemporary Art Museum in Istanbul/ Turkey



**Front View of the Museum**

Dr. Can Elgiz, an architect-engineer and his wife Dr. Sevda Elgiz, a political scientist started collecting in the 1980s with a great passion. After a major process of learning, seeing and acquainting themselves with art both at home and abroad, they started collecting “for no reason” as Sevda Elgiz puts it, strongly influenced by subjectivity. “We were always interested in contemporary art, and this interest, accompanied by ever-growing curiosity and pleasure, gradually became a way of life.

The more we visited exhibitions, artists’ studios, and fairs, the more we were filled with an irresistible desire to possess the works we loved, to live with them. At first we were able to put each piece in some corner of our home and view it to our heart’s content; but before long our home became too small hence began to put our growing body of work away in various places and storerooms. We realized that without having so planned, we were forming a collection.”<sup>1</sup>

Their passion and the lack of platforms for young curators and artists would years later lead them to found the first non-profit contemporary art museum in Istanbul, an institution whose concept brings together individual choices and social responsibility, the local and the global, life and art. A nurturing ground for Turkish artists and an open door through which the international art milieu could get in touch with the Turkish art world. While the process undergone by the collection in the decade from 1990 to 2000 had a more personal character, in the year 2001, the opening of Proje 4L, initiated rather as an experimental art space/ museum, had a considerable impact on the development of contemporary art in Turkey. Before its construction was even complete, Proje 4L opened in May 2001 with a lecture by Hans Ulrich Obrist. With no other non-profit institutions in Turkey dedicated to contemporary art, they focused on giving space, support and international visibility to projects by young Turkish artists, without expecting anything back in return from the artists practicing the idea of “patronage for contemporary art”. The Museum was not only a space where exhibitions were organized but also a space for conferences headed by international art figures, exhibitions that interlaced experimental art with the country’s sociological matters, art production that challenges conventional ideas, art performances, and exchanges of contemporary art acting as a bridge between art & artists and international museums and collectors, a chance to get national & international recognition to carry the Turkish visual culture in its contemporary form to the international platform and to render it possible for greater mass of viewers to view and interact.

Restructured in 2005 with the title “the Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art,” they abandoned the system of having young artists produce and exhibit work since a number of institutions started offering support much like patronage<sup>2</sup> and started holding exhibitions with representatives of the younger generation. Seeing that in Istanbul a certain system prevailed both in contemporary art and in the institutional events where Modern Turkish Art was represented, the Elgiz Collection considered it necessary to find a new direction hence a different approach to museology. Backed by powerful supporters and sponsors, the exhibitions<sup>3</sup>



**Frank Nitsche, YOO-35, 2007, Oil on canvas, 220x200cm - Courtesy of the Elgiz Collection**

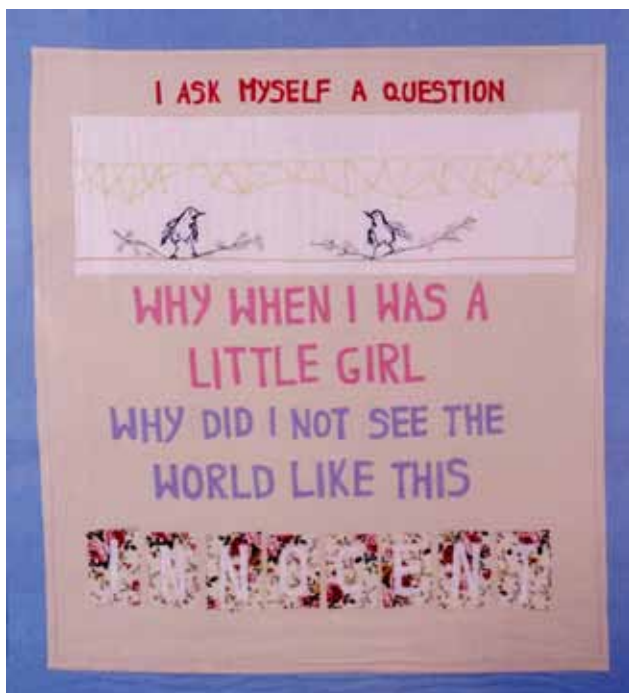
offered a take on art history that was traditionalist in nature; The basic stand of this major collection was not so much the nationality of the artists or the “local” value of their work, but rather their importance in world art. Despite the fact that the collectors were Turkish, and located in Istanbul, their inclination to emphasize world art was perceived correctly by Turkish art circles. Though there was no “before,” the Elgiz collection left marks on the Istanbul art scene which were sufficiently important to influence a number of collectors who came after them. As new art institutions and museums bloomed in Turkish art scene. To build their collection, The Elgiz worked with neither a particular consultant nor art dealer, relying entirely on their own taste/gusto to bring together art works having something special about them. Without regard for the nationality or cultural background of the artists, but purely taking note of the impact of the work, the way it matched their taste, developing a collection of “international” character and thereby shaped an identity. Every private collection at heart emphasizes a kind of a voyage of discovery of the world. Collectors provide clues as to their individual taste through the atmosphere that



**Azade Köker**, Exploded Still Life, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 270x348cm - Courtesy of the Elgiz Collection.

exudes from the totality of the works they have brought together. The Museum Permanent Collection consists of works of by influential Turkish and international artists, such as Ömer Uluç, Fahrelnissa Zeid, Abdurrahman Öztoprak, Tracey Emin, Jan Fabre, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, Peter Halley, Paul McCarthy, Julian Schnabel and Robert Rauschenberg. The eclectic content of the collection allows the viewer to enjoy a comprehensive journey through the major contemporary art movements of the last two decades, while promoting the globalization of Turkish art. There is a particular interest in young artists; whether foreign (Sarrah Moris, Jonathan Meese, Lisa Ruyter, etc.) or Turkish (Ergin Çavuşoğlu, Mustafa Kunt & Özlem Günyol, Murat Germen, etc.). Numerous artists have been acquired by the collection at the very outset of their careers. With the integration of new works by

young artists the Collection maintains its dynamism and prevalence. The new space of the museum is established on 2000 Sq./m of exhibition space. Aside from the main hall, divided into two sections featuring on one section the permanent selection of the collection, on the other a changing exhibition area with again a selection from the collection. The selections for the main hall are made by different national and international curators on different themes. There are two project rooms, a glass open archive room: "Archvarium" and a conference room. The project rooms are commissioned to young Turkish talents to give them a chance to exhibit their work, in some cases, for the first time. Many young artists and curators from different nations apply with their Project portfolios and the projects are evaluated by the museum advisory board according to the rigid criteria such as; the research and ideas of projects and



**Tracey Emin**, *Another question*, 2002, embroidery on blanket, 182x182cm, - Courtesy of the Elgiz Collection.



**Abdurrahman Öztoprak**, *Painting 397*, 2002, mixed media on MDF, 51x40cm - Courtesy of the Elgiz Collection.

their exhibition suggestions; The maturity of the artistic creativity and the power of the message that is desired to be conveyed by the artist, is it well-expressed? Do the mediums or materials the artists suggest meet or help bring out the message clearly/efficiently? Is it well thought of? Is it a coherent proposal in its totality? Does it fit in the framework of contemporary art? How authentic, original & innovative are the ideas/techniques suggested? How they propose to set it up? The Archvarium, open to visitors, is an archive room in which galleries, collectors and art enthusiasts can browse through submitted artist portfolios and contact artists of their interest. The conference room hosts lectures focused on passion for collecting. There is also a newly constructed 1500 Sq/m open air exhibition area on top of the museum, the only open air exhibition space in Istanbul that provides a changing exhibition platform for young and established artists. The first exhibition on the terrace started in June 2012 with artists less than 40 years of age, a second exhibition will be held in October with the Works of artists over 40 years old. The artworks consist of installations and sculptures made of different materials, and pose a new platform

for the encounter of the Turkish sculptors with national and international visitors. This Project will be repeated yearly in May. Most recently, the museum became one of the first members of the virtual touring site entitled [www.duniaa.com](http://www.duniaa.com); the world's reflection on the digital platform, brings together the museum in "3D". The visitors of the web site can wonder inside the '3D' museum space as if they were inside the museum, study the art works in depth and get information about them.

#### Endnotes

1. Sevda and Can Elgiz Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, İçerdeki Dünyalar (The Worlds Within): Collection Issue, Sanat Dünyamız (Our Art World), No. 103, Summer 2007, p. 125.
2. Especially the Borusan Art Gallery, Garanti Platform, the Pamukbank Photograph Gallery, Aksanat and the Yapı Kredi Kazım Taşkent Gallery.
3. One thinks of 'Selections from the Sakıp Sabancı Museum Collection of Painting', Sabancı Museum 2007; 'Observation-Variety-Interpretation', Istanbul Modern 2004; and 'Beyond the Modern', Santral Istanbul 2007.