

## *Ghost Spring*

*Ghost Spring* by Dilara Akay and Derya Akay explores family rituals and how they pass through generations. This mother and son collaboration developed an installation of a cemetery that looks at their own family history and also the wider history of Turkey and how they play out through current events. They reference the “Saturday Mothers” who, with the symbolic white headscarves and red carnations, sat on Istanbul’s Istikal Caddesi for the last 660 Saturdays, silently holding photos of the disappeared, to demand movement on the disappeared. But there are other references to wider histories of Kurdish minorities in Turkey and the Armenian Genocide.

Despite the close relationship of the artists, their work has been based in different geographies. Dilara’s practice has been based in Istanbul and Turkey and Derya’s in Vancouver for the past dozen years. This project is the first time they have collaborated on a project as artists, and it is a rich meld of both of their practices. Derya’s practice is noted for his social gatherings around food, where feeding people is often a central focus. His works attempts alchemical processes with materials and ideas that occur outside and inside of art galleries. Dilara’s sculptural practice in Istanbul consists of metal sculptures and mixed media assemblages which speak to feminist values and ideas. Her performances and public works further explore women’s role in society, speaking to emancipation and participation. The installation looks like neither of their work but shows influences of both. Social actions are where these two practices intersect and *Ghost Spring* plays to both of their strengths. In the project, audience participation is an important strategy, as it is in those interactions that the project really comes into focus.

The installation has the feeling of a funeral. At the opening the audience talked in hushed tones and there was the sense of loss and the social awkwardness you often feel at funerals. The audience self-consciously stood around and small talk at the post-holiday social event fell flat in this environment. One felt you should pay your respects and leave.

The installation space is flanked by large curtains at either end enclosing the space. On the floor four distinct burial styles are portrayed. Just inside the front door a single stone sits flat on the floor, covered with flowers and surrounded by moss. There is no epitaph. Framed by long stemmed pink carnations as well as two potatoes and several lemons, they form a memento mori but are also reminiscent of a natural history display with living plants. Each of the flowers has been laid out carefully and withers through the course of the exhibition.

Beyond that is a smaller grave off the ground, covered in various fabric coverings. A stuffed rabbit atop it next to a water bottle and a satin bib tell us this is in reference

to the Beslan Elementary School Massacre in September 2004 where 1100 people were held hostage for three days and 334 people lost their lives—many of them children. Their mothers leave toys and water at the graveyard for the water that was withheld from them during the siege. A lanyard of red yellow and green tassels lies across the coffin referencing the colour of the Kurdish flag that is illegal to display in Turkey. To the left on the ground is a gravesite surrounded by simple gray bricks but brimming with brightly coloured fabric flowers one often sees in graveyards everywhere. The forced gaiety of the brightly coloured flowers stand in stark contrast to the other flowers slowly withering throughout the space. Finally, in the back is a large tomb covered in rich damasks and fabric works. The name Taybet embroidered in the fabric is for Taybet Ana, a Kurdish mother killed by government troops when she struck out to buy bread for her family. Her body sat out in the open for 7 days, as none could access it due to government snipers. After 23 days she was buried without her husband and children present.

On the walls are four shrines, one hidden behind the curtain, each covered in white cloth and holding a single long-stemmed red carnation that reference the headscarves and carnations of the Saturday Mothers. The white shrouds over the shrines along with the curtains give a sense of ghostliness, but also anonymity. Who are these people buried here? Who are these shrines dedicated to? Why did they die? In a dish is a pomegranate covered with cloves: sweet and pungent.

Family histories spill out in unexpected ways, gestures and habits move across generations, quirks of character and physique. Heredity playing out in many ways sacred and profane, noted mostly in hindsight. Derya and Dilara have embedded their families histories into the details. Accompanying the exhibition is a series of events on consecutive Saturdays that continue these gestures.

The first is a parade at Mountain View Cemetery with noisemakers and flags reminiscent of the Saturday Mothers and the Argentina Mothers that question governments on the disappeared. There is a stop and a moment of silence at the Armenian Genocide memorial before the group proceeds through the cemetery banging their pots and pans and noisemakers demanding a ceasefire. Later we gather in the Celebration Hall where Derya and Dilara serve us a sweet Turkish tea flavored with walnuts. You eat the walnuts after you drink the tea. In the Celebration Hall and its wonderful views of the graveyard, empty except for the occasional dog walker, the sweetness of the tea and the grit of the walnuts stays on your tongue. The melancholy overtakes you as the sad Armenian music plays in the background on a gray January day in Vancouver.

At the next event a week later at grunt the artists serve Turkish coffee with homemade halva and the guests turn their cups onto their saucers when they are finished for Dilara to read their fortunes. People sit around the installation in small groups, again reminiscent of a funeral, speaking in hushed voices while waiting for their coffee readings.

I get one of the first readings. After we turn over our cups, we each wait for the cup to go cold. Dilara turns over my cup and reads my fortune. The coffee is all gathered on one side of the cup. The other half is white. Dilara reads this as a Yin and Yang and talks of my life being balanced between my busy work life and my more sedentary home life. She also looks at the saucer that has dark centre surrounded by light like an eclipse. She explains this represents a change coming or a surprise or something held in secret.

Dilara continues to read coffee cups as Derya continues to brew and give out small cups of Turkish coffee. The audience drinks and turns over the cups, holding them in their hands as they wait for them to cool, waiting for their reading.

At the last event Dilara and Derya prepare Noah's Pudding, a special dessert made from legumes, grains, nuts and fruits. It gets its name and story as being the last meal Noah made on the ark, using up the remains of dried foods in the stores. In Turkey it's a celebratory dish served to neighbors and friends while clearing out your cupboards at the beginning of the New Year.

It's delicious with many different ingredients so each spoonful holds a new surprise. This is the third selection of food the artists have fed to us in these events. The sweet Turkish tea with walnuts we drank and ate at the cemetery, and then the homemade halva we ate with the Turkish coffee for our fortune reading, and finally this Noah's pudding.

We also gather to play a fortune telling game from a book that Dilara received from her husband's grandmother. Written in Ottoman script, it had been unreadable to the family for years. Originally thought to be a family heirloom, further research revealed it to be a popular fortune telling game published by a local newspaper in the late 1920s at the very period when Atatürk changed the language from Arabic script to Latin lettering. It is 1001 Fortunes with a chart to allow the reader to pick numbers that reveal a fortune. Dilara has had it translated first into modern Turkish and then into English and Derya reprinted it in a small edition of 15.

The fortunes are funny, witty; some are esoteric but sometimes downright mean. The numbers are still written in script instead of roman numerals, so it takes some interpretation to figure out the format. As well, the book is written back to front in the Middle Eastern style rather than the Western front to back.

The idea that this popular fortunetelling publication was mistaken as a family heirloom is humorous, but shows how many things that we pass down leave room for misinterpretation or reinterpretation. In *Ghost Spring* the artists use their own family history as a surrogate for all our families. Burial practices are unique to individual cultures, and archaeology, the science that tells us of the past, is broadly defined by what previous cultures did with their dead more than how they lived. The remains of cultures are so often the remains of funeral practices long past and we are left to interpret how they lived through how they died.

But in *Ghost Spring* we are not just talking about one family or one culture, but how cultures intersect and what gets spoken of and what is only passed on in whispers if at all. In Turkey The Saturday Mothers demand their children will not be forgotten and their protests over many years show a tenacity and devotion to having the truth come out. The Armenian Genocide is still not recognized as it is: a genocide. And Kurdish people continue to be restricted and criminalized. Each of the graves in the Akays' graveyard speaks to an unspeakable event or events.

The symbolisms of the food, coupled with the actions at the events, seemed to tell the bigger story. Our moment of Silence at the Armenian Memorial at Mountainview before we moved through the graveyard with our noisemakers and flags. The sweet walnut tea that sits somewhere between beverage and dessert. The halva and Turkish coffee at the fortune reading. The coffee grounds acting as conduits for action as people's futures fall out before them. And finally the Noah's pudding and the fortune readings of the family book. Derya's reprinting of the book reinstates it as a family heirloom—it has become what it once stood in to be. Within an archaeology of the present, meanings shift and move through this exhibition whether you know the references or not. But like archaeology, that is often 10% perspiration and 90% speculation, we are left to our own interpretations.

Glenn Alteen