

Argentea Gallery

A Q&A between Gokhan Tanriover & Anna Sparham April 2020

It is quite hard to believe that it is only a few weeks ago since we met in the gallery to talk through the progress of your current MA Degree show. So much has changed since. How you are approaching the lockdown?

The amount of change we all experienced in the last few weeks has been overwhelming to say the least. Prior to the lockdown, as more and more cases were emerging and the university campus population was decreasing, I purposefully spent the majority of my time in RCA's studios and darkrooms. I wanted to get as much done as I safely could amidst the uncertainty we were facing. That level of practice is definitely not sustainable for a long time, so the beginning of the lock down felt like an imposed, necessary break. Not being able to utilise my time in the spaces I would want or would need required a shift in my focus. The current allowance of exercising outdoors once a day has been vital to sustain both my physical and mental health, allowing a better night's sleep and controlling anxiety.

There is a lot of societal pressure to remain productive in this unprecedented time, either by doing the same work from home or finding novel ways to do it. I have given myself the permission that I don't have to follow this rule to prevent any feelings of guilt that I might have by not being able to work 'productively' as before. I have been spending more time reading, talking to family members, watching movies (including some questionable ones) and playing video games - things you might be doing during a break. I am very lucky to have my health, a fridge full of food and relative financial security for the time being. It has been very sad seeing others in difficult positions, but I am also pleased to be a part of a community that has come together in these uncertain times.

Given you were utilising the studio and darkroom spaces at the RCA so much, how are the limitations on access and movement impacting on your work?

The visible part of my production, i.e. shooting new images in the studio, developing the film and making prints in the darkroom, have all stopped for the time being. Within hours, the campus was completely shut few days before the start of official lockdown. This meant that my materials are out of reach for the time being. There is insufficient space or equipment to continue working in a similar way from home that would allow cohesion of the work.

I am currently in the process of compiling my notes from the photoshoots and test prints to take a step back and observe what I have worked on so far to decide what needs to be done once it is safe to return to work in the campus. I also have more time to look at the long list of statements that each piece derives from, to hopefully allow inspiration for other new pieces.

Rewinding to a different time, tell us about your move here from Turkey. What drew you to the UK in the first place?

I have moved to London twice in my lifetime; first when I was toddler for a few years and then when I was 10 years old. In both instances the move occurred due to my father's job rather than a personal desire. I remember being very excited about the prospect of moving the second time around and wrote down every single English word I knew - the list amounted to no more than ten. Strangely, I had forgotten the English language in just 6 years. The struggle with language still pertains but this time with a very slow amnesia of Turkish and feeling like I don't possess a 'native' language - be it English or Turkish. My family returned to Turkey when I was 19 and I decided to remain in the UK since I am drawn to and reliant on the rich international culture London has to offer.

When and where did you first take up photography? Can you pinpoint a moment when you considered wanting to pursue this professionally?

My relationship with photography started whilst I was a medical student in London. I didn't feel like a typical Imperial College student and felt the need to also surround myself with art and visual culture. Towards the end of my studies there, I modelled for several artists working with different media. Photography grabbed my attention the most, for its immediacy, and I could see what I did in front of the lens had such a direct and indexical impact. Over time I wanted to be the one making the decision about the construction of the visual rather than being a collaborator at best or a prop at worst. I purchased my first DSLR when I was 23.

I was unhappy about the career choice I had made earlier in my life and felt trapped. Studying for a degree that is very much vocational leaves very few choices over what you can do afterwards. I knew that to enjoy my life I had to pursue a profession that I was passionate about and this was not something that a medical degree could offer. I quit my job as a junior doctor when I was 27 and within a few days I started an internship as an in-house photographer. Since then I have never doubted my decision.

Argentea holds editions of your series *Confessionals*, exhibited in group shows and the print room recently. Over the last year I've witnessed visitors really marvelling at the precision of the work. Tell us about how you developed this approach? Did you naturally gravitate to such conceptual still life and studio imagery?

I started working on *Confessionals* towards the end of my penultimate year of my BA in Photographic Arts and hadn't worked with still life previously. The inclusion of text in the form of a confession, on which an image is based, was the starting point. However, the earlier attempts felt as if the image was only used to illustrate the text. I wanted to continue working on this highly personal project but alter how I approached the image construction. The earlier pieces were photographed in my living room but moving forward I wanted to have more control of the lighting and hence the composition. Each object and its shadow needed to have a purpose to exist - for an aesthetic reason and a conceptual one.

The first piece that emerged was *Performing for a Stranger*, - a sequence of 36 images of a clothes drying-rack. The idea formed organically whilst I was attempting to make a single image in the studio, but this opened up additional ways of working within that project and

also influenced my current practice. Using the whole role of film for that particular confession expanded the relationship between the photograph and the passage of time, allowing a more performative approach in my work.

The autobiographical nature of the series is compelling as you view the images, read the text, then re-view the images. Can you explain your thinking behind and your relationship with word and image as a concept? How do you ideally want viewers to approach the work?

Growing up, I was often undecided whether Turkish or English was my 'first language' as I had gained and lost my handle on both at different parts during my childhood. Perhaps that is why visual arts and photography specifically fascinate me as a communication tool: its ubiquity and its subjective interpretation.

Each piece in *Confessionals* starts with a recollected memory that is transcribed on paper using text but as a lens-based artist my focus is on the image constructed from it, or specifically the print as the material object. I chose not to display the text with the image on the gallery wall, as they would compete for the attention of the gaze. There is a clear hierarchy between the word and the image but only from an aesthetic point of view. Conceptually, both are dependent on each other as the text partially anchors the image within its sea of multiple interpretations.

For me it is important for the viewer to approach the image as well as the text but without me directing this choice. There is definitely an audience that actively chooses not to engage with the text, and I respect that, but there is also a section of the audience that would only choose to engage if they could find out more. The text is not there to fully fix the image's interpretation but to guide it.



Father (2017)

When we last met you talked about your obsessiveness in forming the finest details in order to be truly satisfied with them. Could you describe something of your work process in creating this series?

After the first step of recollection of a memory that is paired with a current thought or behaviour pattern, I made several sketches of different possible ways of visualising that confession - what object(s) would best signify it and how that object could be placed within a studio setting. I tend to make such sketches over and over again until something clicks. For instance, when I was planning the *Father* piece I knew I wanted to photograph a picture frame but through sketching what it potentially could look like, I realised the empty frame with its shadow could look like a football goal post to allude to a cliché homosocial bonding activity between a father and a son.

When I set up in the studio and start shooting, I photograph many variations and often once I reach a composition that I am pleased with I repeat the same shoot two or three times if I find small details that distract me. As an example, *Gender Appropriate Toys* has several versions with slightly different angles between the wall and the floor, between the camera and the wall, as well as using different wooden sticks of differing thickness and length. Once I select which image to print from my contact sheet, I expose my paper to two different light filters to have a better control of the highlights and shadows of my print as I have areas within the same image that are pure white and pure black.

I have my own subjective preferences of course, but which images have proven the most popular in the series would you say – whether through personal comment or purchase?

I was pleasantly surprised when *Gender Appropriate Toys* was selected as the poster for my BA degree show and featured in Der Greif's Guest Room exhibition curated by Charlotte Cotton. I was not expecting a photograph of a stick to grab that much attention. The same piece has also been popular in purchases alongside *Contemplating Religion*, *Secret Eater* and *Back Garden Mosque*.



Contemplating Religion (2017)



Back Garden Mosque (2017)

The RCA's decision to stage an on-line MA degree show must be very disappointing, and I know there is pressure on them to reverse this decision. However, as it stands could you tell us something about your MA project *Evidence of My Sexual Misdemeanour*?

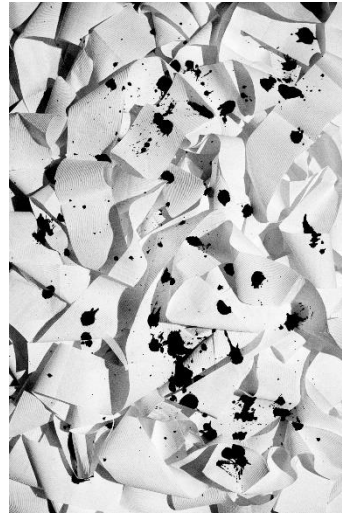
I have spent a section of my first year at the RCA researching for my dissertation '*Evidence of my Sexual Misdemeanour: A Gendered Performance for the Abysmal Archive*'. I was looking at the compulsory military service for men in Turkey as a rite of passage into a sovereign masculinity rife with nationalism. Despite homosexuality being decriminalised during the Ottoman rule, within the military of the Turkish Republic the expression of homosexuality is seen as incompatible with its values and threatens its core strength: the homosocial bonding. The military doesn't actively seek gay men to exclude them from service, however an individual can self-identity to evade conscription. This declaration is then legitimised by the military through series of tests and collection of evidence. The applicant performs for the camera and a military audience as the evidence of their sexual misdemeanour is constructed.

I have gained access to one of the tests used: the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – an internationally well-known psychological screening test comprising of single statements that are responded with a Yes or a No answer. The parameter that the military especially focus on is how gender-conforming the applicant is as they view perceived femininity as a threat to the institution's foundation. I photographically respond and react to the statements from the test with the intention of expressing and constructing an identity on the gallery wall. This persona residing between fact and fiction aims to confront an imposed institutional identity of the gay man in contemporary Turkey and offer one of a multitude of queer identities as an alternative.

This new work presents an aesthetic continuity with *Confessionals*. Would you like to say anything about that process of evolution – from one project to another?

There is a connection to text/language in both projects: *Confessionals* narrates an autobiographical memory and the new work is a response to a series of written statements. Both projects comprise of darkroom prints made from 35mm black and white film, of objects arranged in the photographic studio. The aesthetic is similar as there are images with inky blacks and stark whites but with the main difference being the vantage point. Looking down at the object as if it were part of a forensic enquiry forms the majority of the compositions in the new work.

There is also an increased performative nature in the making of the photograph, be it through repeated actions such as dropping a piece of fabric over and over again or with interventions such as removing a tooth from a cow jaw bone or splattering ink on draped toilet paper. The purpose of these interventions and repeated actions is to convey a construction of evidence and of a persona. The project is more to do with identity politics linked to a state institution rather than an enquiry into my own personal memories and identity as it was with *Confessionals*.



Both *Confessionals* and *Evidence of My Sexual Misdemeanour* deal with deeply private issues in your life. How difficult was it for you to use them as subjects for your art knowing that they will be both seen and scrutinised?

As an introvert it feels very natural to be working around a personal subject matter and it does allow me to talk about things that normally don't come to the surface in our daily conversations. I struggle with making 'small talk' with people in social situations yet I am probably too comfortable to talk about deep private matters, whether or not they are taboo subjects. I was more cautious with *Evidence of My Sexual Misdemeanour* in the beginning as the subject goes so much beyond me and I need to approach it in a mature manner. As an openly gay man living overseas, I feel a sense of responsibility to opening up a dialogue around the imbalance in gender politics that is occurring in my native country without fearing repercussions from the state.

I've been reflecting a lot lately on how, in respect of the historic significance of Covid-19, many existing photographs will be viewed with fresh eyes and offered new interpretations both now and in the future. The images of toilet rolls from your current work for example kept creeping into mind these last few weeks. I wondered if the virus had impacted on your work directly in this way – have your choice of objects remained detached from current associations?

In a very short amount of time, collectively we have made new associations with very banal daily objects and occurrences - such as the toilet paper or a commute to work. These associations are rooted in a very acute sense of nostalgia of things that we lack right now and the fear we are facing. I can't look at that particular image in my work for the time being since its visual consumption is so different right now and this new association is overpowering. I do think that once we return to our normal lives, we will quickly face a collective amnesia and hence why I am not keen on actively making new pieces that its reading may become tethered to our current situation.

Who would you cite as your creative inspirations, both historically and presently?

The oeuvre of Sophie Calle has fascinated me ever since I commenced my photographic studies. The ease of using her private life to drive her projects and its authenticity is admirable. She doesn't see them as private moments but rather universal banal occurrences: death of family members, rupture of relationships and so on. For me it is important for artwork to be relatable at a human level.

The conceptual art movement of the 1960's is another big influence; artists such as Sol LeWitt who didn't have an interest in inherent narrative or descriptive imagery but maintained that the idea behind the work is just as important. In 1971 he stated 'if the artist carried through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product'. I make most of my decisions before touching the camera and the act of photographing; especially with sequential images, it is as much a performance as it is a method of visualising.

I have been very fortunate to have Tom Lovelace as my personal tutor during the first year of my MA as he empowered me to be more confident in my intention and the output of my work. His practice oscillates between photography, performance and sculpture, inspiring me to think beyond the photographic medium.

We are all bracing the difficulties that Covid-19 has borne the world; the fragility of the art sector included. However, can you feel optimistic about pursuing your work in time? How do you think this period might, if at all, alter your practice in the future?

The timing of this crisis made its impact very specific; I am in the last few months of my MA degree and working on a body of work that requires consistency. Almost overnight I am not able to do this - a feeling that is quite paralytic. Perhaps if I were in-between projects, I might be of a mindset to develop something new within these imposed limitations. I don't want to lose focus on what I was working on and I am not at a stage where I am willing to make a compromise on my methodology. I am optimistic that I will continue with the work in the same manner as before, eventually. However, this situation has again given me a taste of what being an artist beyond the backing of an educational institution is. You become hyper-aware of other opportunities out there such as community dark rooms, collectives, artist residencies and so on; they have always been there but their presence and importance is highlighted. I am very much looking to make use of those opportunities; art practice beyond graduation looks a lot less daunting now.