

Ayşe Erkmen
Emre & Dario

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A piece of furniture sliding across a room, a plate falling from a table and shattering, hollow knocks breaking the silence—these uncanny happenings are thought to be manifestations of a *poltergeist*. Both unsettling and familiar, this enigmatic figure has its roots in German folklore, with its name composed of *Poltern* – to bang, crash, or make noise—and *Geist* – spirit or ghost. At times terrifying and at others comical, it seeks to navigate its existence among the living. Thus, more than a mere disruptive character, the poltergeist stands as a metaphor in popular culture for the pervasive fears of “otherness” and the “unknown”, which continue to shape the collective imagination.

This ghostly reference appeared in a brief description of Ayşe Erkmen’s artistic practice: “In the manner of a ‘poltergeist,’” it reads, “she juxtaposes, displaces, re-engineers, and invades a space” (Fulya Erdemci). For more than five decades, Erkmen (b. 1949, Istanbul, Turkey) has developed a body of work that resists easy categorization. Spanning mediums, scales, and temporalities, her practice is deeply rooted in the subtleties of the places and contexts where her pieces take shape. Often disrupting the ordinary through poetic gestures, her work seamlessly blends humor and critique, delving into recurring themes such as presence and absence, dislocation and adaptation, and belonging and estrangement.

Erkmen’s work *Emre & Dario* (1998), on view at GROTTO, was originally conceived for the exhibition *Iskorpit*, held at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 1998. The 12-minute color video with sound features the artist’s son, Emre, dancing to *Istanbul (Not Constantinople)* – a 1954 song made famous by Izmir-born, Paris-based Jewish-Turkish-Mexican singer Dario Moreno (1921-1968). Against a stark white backdrop, Emre, dressed in a 90s outfit of a black t-shirt and jeans, moves with contagious joy to the upbeat melody and catchy refrain of the song, played on a continuous loop.

Istanbul was Constantinople
Now it’s Istanbul, not Constantinople
Been a long time gone, Constantinople
Now it’s Turkish delight on a moonlit night

A summer hit in both France and Turkey, Moreno’s cover – a French adaptation of an eponymous English song – romanticizes Istanbul’s transformation from Constantinople, portraying the city as an exoticized backdrop for a fictional love story steeped in Western fantasies and orientalist tropes. In Erkmen’s work, the song’s looping refrain grows increasingly insistent, gradually unraveling a subtle tension between lightness and complexity. The video concludes with Emre, his movements slowing as fatigue sets in, stepping out of the frame and leaving behind only the white backdrop for the viewer’s gaze.

Stripped to its essence – a son, a song, and a blank space – *Emre & Dario* engages with the layered complexities of displacement and cultural belonging. Created during a period of socio-political upheaval in both Turkey and Germany, where reunification brought profound social transformations amidst a climate of rising xenophobia, the work presents the notion of identity not as a fixed but fluid construct, shaped by individual and collective experience, intergenerational dialogue, and geographic and cultural contexts. Much like a *poltergeist*, the work embeds itself in the viewer’s mind with its haunting earworm melody and unresolved questions.

Text by Liberty Adrien

Dario Moreno, Istanbul, 1954

Istanbul, Istanbul !

Istanbul c'est Constantinople
C'est à Istanbul ou Constantinople
Que je suis allé un jour pour y découvrir le grand amour
Que l'on attend toujours

Istanbul ça n'est plus l'Europe
C'est à Istanbul ou Constantinople
Que je l'ai trouvée un soir qui flânait
Au milieu de la foule d'Istanbul

Le muezzin chantait en haut d'un minaret
Et tout le long du Bosphore
Je faisais déjà des rêves d'or
A Istanbul la vie était belle
C'est à Istanbul, je me le rappelle
Que mon coeur fut pris
Par les sortilèges de l'Asie
Je l'ai suivie dans la foule
Un soir sous le beau ciel d'Istanbul
Istanbul Istanbul Istanbul Istanbul

Istanbul c'est Constantinople
C'est à Istanbul ou Constantinople
Que je me voyais déjà arrivé au paradis d'Allah
Qui vous attend là-bas

Oh Istanbul ça n'est plus l'Europe
C'est à Istanbul ou Constantinople
Que je m'approchais en me faufilant
Au milieu de la foule d'Istanbul

Je n'savais comment traduire mes sentiments
Mais en riant elle me dit :
"Comme vous, j'arrive droit de Paris !"

Oh Istanbul c'est Constantinople
C'est à Istanbul ou Constantinople
Que nous avons pris le train qui nous ramène à Paris
Loin du bruit et de la foule, c'est bon de rêver à Istanbul !

Istanbul ou Constantinople
Le bonheur est là, si bon, à sa porte
C'est bien inutile d'aller le chercher
Je ne sais où Istanbul ou Tombouctou
L'amour il est là tout près de vous

Istanbul, Istanbul !