

Shown in the basement of the Westbeth, a famous artist colony once populated by such illustrious figures as Merce Cunningham, Diane Arbus and members of the Martha Graham dance company, Köken Ergun's three-channel video installation *Ashura* (2013) echoes through the venue's stairway, giving one the impression that one is about to step into a room full of people. Instead, what we encounter is an unfinished space with cement columns, a large rug placed on the floor, a single spotlight and three screens set at 90-degree angles to each other. This presentation echoes the content of the video in more ways than one. The rug, which creates a comfortable intimacy, is similar to a prayer rug seen on the floor of a mosque in the movie; and the bare basement is mirrored in the first scene, in which a group of young men convene in a raw industrial space in Istanbul to chant and dance in a circle in celebration of the day of Ashura, a Shiite holy day commemorating

the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad. Ashura is associated with religious tension between Shiites and Sunnis, making it a sensitive subject, especially in Turkey, where Shiite Muslims are a minority.

Ergun's interest in the rituals of this holiday is almost scientific, though its focus is not on the grand narratives of religion but on the sense of community they instil: that is what we see in a mesmerising scene in which a crowd of men sob while listening to the story of the battle in which Hussein was killed, or in the shot where a large group of men, young and old, reenact the martyrdom in their local mosque (down to one man, dressed in women's clothing, playing Hussein's wife). Even when leaning towards the theatrical, and exposing these unsettled gender relations in a work populated almost entirely by men, the video shows utmost sympathy, mainly achieved through formal means – the three channels converge and go out of sync at different

moments, showing details of people in a crowd, or a few angles of the same scene, and the sound fades in and out for enhanced effect (the stereo sound of the crying scene is heart-wrenching).

All this may give the impression that *Ashura* is a larger-than-life piece about religion, power and marginalised communities. It's all there, true. But more than this, Ergun, an artist who drove a tank through a sleepy Danish town (*Tanklove*, 2009) and documented the unease of state-sanctioned ceremonies such as Flag Day in Turkey (*The Flag*, 2006), demonstrates that his fascination with communities and their rituals stems from an interest in the intimacy of humans and how they interact. The closely observed relations between people who cry in company, adjust each other's costumes and coordinate their chanting are the most powerful here. Ergun shows that a real statement – potent, direct, urgent – is made in the space where politics meet the personal. *Orit Gat*



*Ashura*, 2013 (installation view). Courtesy Protocinema, New York