

THROUGH THE LENS

ELIZABETH KARP-EVANS examines Turkish artist KÖKEN ERGUN's latest video work and discovers how he documents the extraordinary in the everyday.

A young, articulate hybrid of east and west, Turkish artist Köken Ergun politely defies cultural labels. His increasingly popular video work is nuanced and painstakingly precise, and often requires a dual examination of our private and public opinion on the matters of religion, culture, and community. This is a broad definition of a refined artistic practice, but it is this general appeal of a familiar humanistic presence in the artist's foreign landscapes that has won his work a global audience. Ergun's carefully crafted single and multi-channel videos document the social and religious rituals of different communities around the globe, revealing veiled narratives with earnestness akin to matured documentarians like Errol Morris. 'I'm not interested in groups that are misunderstood,' he says referring to his subjects. 'I'm interested in the groups that are not yet seen.'

In 2014, these 'unseen' groups seem few and far between. Globalization and an unprecedented access to the Internet have granted a large part of the world the ability to locate the communities the artist seeks out. However, it is rare we feel compelled to search for these differences around us. Ergun's work is the catalyst that ignites our need to look our neighbors in the eye and see their differences, in a world where constant connectivity is leaving less and less time for examination.

While the communities we see in Ergun's videos do co-exist within larger

subcultures—their needs changing and reflecting the change around them—it is the act of cooking breakfast, dancing at a wedding, and bowing to pray that preserves the identity of his subjects. This is the idea at the root of his work: that culture is kept alive by ritual, and practices largely instilled by religion, in the predominately Turkish communities he films.

Ergun makes a case for this in his most recent video *Ashura* (2010–2012). Part of Protocinema—a nonprofit art organization founded by Mari Spirito in 2011 based in Istanbul and New York—*Ashura's* debut in Manhattan marked Ergun's first solo show in the United States. The piece opened last November in a dimly lit basement in the historic Westbeth building, the same building where telecommunication technology was developed and from which the first long-distance phone call was made. This seems fitting since a strong element in both the artist's work and in Protocinema's mandate is a need for pancontinental communication. 'It's about adding on and opening up dialogue,' says Spirito of the work she selects for the program.

It took Ergun 'two and a half years' to complete *Ashura*, a 22 minute film. The title references the holy day of the same name, central to Shi'a Muslim belief; to compare the day's significance to a Christian holiday would be to equate it to Easter. The finished video shows performers,



Untitled (2004): Single-channel video, no sound, 11:00.

onlookers, men, women, and children dutifully rehearsing for the reenactment of the historic battle, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (grandson of the prophet Muhammad), as well as participating in a weeping ritual on the actual day of Ashura.

Besides being a compelling look at an often isolated, minority group—Shi'a make up only slightly more than one percent of the majority Sunni Muslim population in Turkey—Ergun is able to successfully transport his audience to the neighborhood, the very room where filming took place. In the Westbeth's dim basement the video projects onto three perpendicular screens, creating a room for viewers to enter into. Covering the floor is an ornate burgundy carpet that was shipped from a mosque in Istanbul. Low florescent lights offer a similar glow emitting from onscreen. Cultural and religious barriers dissolve as, essentially, we sit in the same community hall as the film's participants.

Like much of his work, *Ashura* has that fly-on-the-wall perspective that the best documentary films offer to viewers. More than observant, Ergun's camera gives us an almost voyeuristic look at a group of people in an unfamiliar setting. The lens often focuses on the individual personalities of his subjects, revealing everyday life in the midst of chaotic activity—our view floats over the removed shoes of the performers and is an unnoticed third party in friendly conversation. These moments become

just as important as the ritual: *Ashura* the film is not about Ashura, but about people celebrating their culture. Like much of Ergun's work, it's about the act of living life.

That the rituals of his subjects can stave off the globalization we see manipulating culture in the 21st century isn't necessarily the point. Nor is it proven historically that by holding on to native customs groups in diaspora have been able to introduce a greater religious acceptance in their host country; of course some form of accepted exchange between the two groups is inevitable. Viewing *Ashura*, and his other video works, namely *I Soldier* (2005) and *WEDDING* (2006–08), it becomes clear Ergun is trying to reconcile how his subjects reconcile their own beliefs in our current era.

'As the geography and the cultural environment [in migration countries] around these homeland rituals change, the rituals themselves also mutate,' says Ergun speaking of *WEDDING*. 'Turkish and Kurdish weddings in Germany have more patriotic acts in them or the traditional music and dances are slightly exaggerated. Contemporary wedding rituals in Turkey do not easily reach weddings in Germany where the style is reminiscent of weddings in mainland Turkey during the '70s or '80s, when most of the Turkish and Kurdish immigrants settled in Germany.'



I, Soldier (2005): Two-channel video, 07:00.

Ergun's videos also introduce western audiences to religion as something that dictates day-to-day social customs, rather than dogma. But his attention to the importance of ritual as a result of religion, that this is what's keeping diaspora communities 'sane', is an exploration taken on not by a documentarian, but an artist with a firm position: 'Religion is more than belief, it is a set of rituals and formalities that organize the daily life of a group. In very simple terms, [I am a believer of] the argument that religion precedes culture.'

Yet, secular viewers tend to respond to his work as something progressive. This is perhaps where the artist, already a sage soul, divulges wisdom beyond his 37 years. 'Our systems of belief are evolving as mankind evolves. In contemporary art we look at abstract images and try not to analyze the image too deeply. This is where I find a lot of similarities between belief and art: they don't attempt to answer questions in a scientific way. I would always be skeptical about art and science trying to merge, because they are completely different ways of seeing things. Art and belief are very close. This is why I'm interested in religious groups.' It would be wrong to assume Ergun's art only focuses on religious groups. His powerful, sparse work TANKLOVE (2008) documents strangers' reactions to a hulking tank meandering down a quiet city

street in Denmark. The faces captured by the artist's camera show shock and curiosity, but not fear. Performed in a war-torn country, the piece would certainly garner different reactions and yet, there is still this reaction, a communal emotion. It is this that has led Ergun to find the similarities in different cultures. 'What [all cultures] have in common is that the explanations are manmade. I think that this proves that it all comes down to one phrase, which is a German saying, mann ist mann, "Human is human," everyone is the same.'

And it is this, something akin to a humanistic social need, which spurs Ergun's interest in documenting different groups in our condensing world. 'Some things are bound to disappear in time—the longer you stay abroad and the more you do things their way, the less you will miss the specific pieces of your native culture.' The communities in his films are trying to hold on to what the rest of the world ignores and by not assimilating, it is all or nothing in terms of retaining their identity. Ergun is hopeful that in our hyper-connected 21st century this is possible, 'There's a very important saying, "Your enemy is what you don't know," I would like to elevate curiosity in society, because if you make people more curious they will find their own truth.'

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