

"Apricots from Damascus" – A Zine and Exhibition Project in Istanbul

by Elizabeth Larison | Feb 29, 2016



Apricots from Damascus, installation view. Image courtesy of apexart.

Contemporary movements of exodus and forced migration have sparked global anxiety as the number of displaced people worldwide approaches 60 million. All over, people necessarily cross borders, and in a complex arrangement of figurative and physical traversals, borders cross people. With increasing frequency, entire populations are met with the paradox of being forced to move, all while facing severe restrictions in doing so.

Responding to diasporas past and present is a zine and exhibition project entitled *Apricots from Damascus*. Organized by Atif Akin and Dilek Winchester, the project takes inspiration from Winchester's project *Apricot City A4* (2010–2011), in which she invited activists and politically engaged artists to create zines for public distribution on mobile, battery-operated pushcarts. The project's new iteration offers insight on the rhizomatic effects of migration by once again invoking the DIY simplicity and informal circulation of the zine. It also experiments with the very format of what constitutes an exhibition, as it was proposed, selected, and produced as such for apexart's Franchise Program. Within *Apricots from Damascus*, nineteen artists, academics, and curators produce sixteen zine issues—each one representing the work of a sole contributor, duo, or collective. Photocopied in black and white, the zines alternately employ elements of collage, photography, and drawing. Through poetry and prose, research and memoir, several issue contents explore the histories and residues of different waves of immigration during Turkey's republic period. Focusing on the creative, academic, and scientific contributions of immigrants, the zines examine the fate of cultural production following mass displacements.

The project's location within one of Turkey's major cities is deliberate, if also unfortunately timely. A transcontinental metropolis built over thousands of years by conquerors and immigrants alike, it also absorbs a high number of Syrian refugees amid Turkey's history of hostility to minorities. In the initial conceptualization of the project, zines would be produced and distributed on-demand throughout the city via mobile print-and-copy pushcarts, a nomadic operation that would both locate and perform the project's thematic interests. However, increasing public tensions surrounding recent bombings in Turkey's urban centers raised concerns that public distribution would put some minority vendors at risk of unwanted attention. Instead, distribution occurs at book stores, community organizations, and at SALT Galata: where the zines are scattered across a series of low platforms on the center's second floor.

In addition to the zines, several other artworks anchor the installation throughout SALT Galata. Among the most powerful include those that signal particular contradictions embedded within cross-border and cross-cultural movements. Together, zines and other artworks in *Apricots from Damascus* call forth a nuanced re-consideration of the current swells of migration.



Khaled Barakeh. *Materialised Distance*, ceramic sculpture, 2013. Image courtesy of apexart.

Several zines examine accounts and effects of migration during Turkey's republic period. In their zine, Dilek Winchester and Hera Büyükaşçıyan bring together the writing and drawings of Ivi Stangali, a Turkish-born Greek artist who was forced to leave the country during its 1964 expulsion of Greeks. They weave excerpts from a despondent letter written by Stangali with passages from *The Illiad*, drawing attention to the wrought histories of movement between two lands, and their resulting effects on cultural production and

cessionation. (Winchester and Büyüktaşçıyan note that there is little evidence of Stangali's practice following her exile to Athens). Banu Karaca calls attention to another generation of migration in her zine, describing a notation in her former-Turkish passport which marked her as a "Child of [a] Laborer" when her family had migrated to Germany in 1987. She cites this as lingering evidence of Germany's post-war economic initiatives which welcomed the migration of Turkish laborers. Through this anecdote, Karaca explores the complex and interconnected lineage of German and Turkish foreign policy, which she notes is presently "mirrored [...] in treaties and incentives that have now positioned Turkey to act as the guardian of the fortress Europe, to keep refugees out of its realm." In their zines, Winchester, Büyüktaşçıyan, and Karaca shed light on the myriad and inconsistent justifications which have influenced movement across Turkey's borders.

Nadia Al Issa and Atif Akin offer perspective on the current refugee crisis through invoking etymologies and histories often taken for granted. In her zine issue "[B Is for Botany as I is for Identity: Reading, Writing, and Acting with Plants](#)," Al Issa identifies a lexicon of re-location that contains abundant references to botany. Summoning words like *indigenous*, *cross-pollinate*, *alien*, *home-grown*, *uproot*, and *transplant*, she demonstrates how the naturalization of terms around human migrations is at odds with the xenophobic governmental structures that bureaucratize and discourage it. In a similar fashion, Atif Akin's "[Apricots from The Damascus Room](#)" draws from the movement of botanical matter—namely, the apricot, an early export of Damascus—to weave together notions of resiliency and preservation with relocation. Presented as both zine and installation, Akin's work correlates the arrangement of adjacent galleries at Metropolitan Museum of Art with the trade routes of the apricot and the trajectory of the present-day Syrian refugee: from Damascus, to Turkey, to Greece, and, through the museum's exit, to New York City and the West. Both zines suggest a measured understanding of the diasporatic that alternately incorporates transmutation and resilience.

The works of Khaled Barakeh and Pınar Öğrenci address concepts of tolerance and cohabitation. Barakeh's porcelain sculpture, *Materialized Distance* (2013) takes inspiration from Northern Ireland's famed reconciliation sculpture, *Hands Across the Divide* (Maurice Hannon, 1992), in which two men—one Protestant and one Catholic—are poised to shake hands. Barakeh's work builds off of Hannon's by giving precise shape to the negative space between the outstretched hands, and in doing so, gives poetic form to the abstract differences between opposing parties. Hedging between agreement and resistance, the work represents the unrealized consummation of a truce—a situation which Barakeh parallels to conflicts in his native Syria. Öğrenci's 5-monitor *LED Light City* (2015) is slightly more optimistic in its pulsating collage of red, black, and green LED signs commonly seen throughout Istanbul, as the languages and content of the signs are reflective the city's increasingly diverse cultural enclaves. Yet, this seemingly banal linguistic and cultural coexistence is tempered by the artist's 3-day arrest and detention in the second week of the exhibition's run. The cause: her participation in a peaceful protest of the Turkish state's violence against minorities.

Contradictions like these frame the entire project. Nearly all of the zines and other artworks espouse a desire to facilitate the free movement and acceptance of migrants, all while tacitly acknowledging that the decision to migrate is not always a free choice, but rather a condition of something seemingly far more complicated. Conversely, though the project's primary component, the zine, was to circulate largely in public spaces in a meditation on migrancy and cultural heterogeneity, the project has been confined to the measured safety of arts and community institutions because the subject of its critique has grown beyond expectation. In the end, it seems that these tensions are what *Apricots from Damascus* does well to draw our attention to.