Familial dichotomy

Suzan Atesoglu

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Familial Dichotomy

by Suzan Atesoglu

July 2001
Final Approvals

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Date: ____________________
I thank my committee, Eileen Feeney Bushnell, Julia Galloway and Richard Hirsch for their continued guidance in the completion of this project. I also thank my family for their unconditional love and support.
# Familial Dichotomy

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“We need stories, visual and verbal, fiction and nonfiction. His/story or her/story, persons’ stories are all part of discovering who and where we are, where we have come from; and where we are going, individually and collectively. Histories and stories can stimulate our imagination; stories can jar or provoke us and raise questions. Stories can give us a sense of peace, of repose, or become a metaphor for greater things beyond our everyday lives.”

Katherine Hoffman¹

Proposal

Growing up in a small college town with an American mother and a Turkish Father, I often felt different than the majority of my friends. When I was younger these cultural differences manifested themselves in very basic forms, such as addressing my father as ‘Baba’. Throughout my childhood I continually noticed these aberrations within my family from that of the average American family.

My thesis work focuses on my identity in terms of familial relations and characteristics. More specifically, the work is an exploration of my parents’ extended families in relation to myself. With the completion of this work, I hope to have a better understanding of my familial identity.
Searching for Identity

"We look to connections with immediate family in order to understand our place within larger communities: our neighborhoods, cities, countries and worlds, our genders, economic classes, generations, races and sexual preferences."

William Tolan

My family

I am an American with a twist. My father is Turkish while my mother is American. My parents met in the sixties while my father was getting his Ph.D. in Pittsburgh. Once married, my parents returned to Turkey for the next five years. It was there, in Ankara, where my sister was born and I was conceived. Shortly before I was born, my parents returned to the United States and decided to stay for good. This decision to return to the states had drastic effects upon my sisters and me, making us outwardly more American than Turkish.

Albeit living in the United States, my sisters and I are much closer with our Turkish relatives. My mother is quite liberal; yet, my mother’s large family is conservative and uptight. There is an air of coldness and separation between the members when they meet at the seemingly yearly funeral or wedding. When I was young there were summers at my grandparent’s beach house, but now there is not even a yearly family reunion. Half of the family does not speak to the other half because of an inheritance feud. This type of behavior seems to be exactly what a family should not be. There is no sense of community or support, just rivalry and competition.

By contrast, my father’s family is small; I have only one cousin. Although they live in Turkey, I know this family quite well. My Aunt, who is twenty years younger than my father, came to live with us for a year and went to my high school. I also spent several summers living

with my late grandmother in Turkey for a month at a time. This grandmother was strong, independent and stubborn. She was one of the first women lawyers in Turkey and worked for the government until she was seventy. Her husband died when she was fifty, yet she never remarried.

The verbal and emotional interaction within this family is intense, and at times, melodramatic. Ironically, our family name, Atesoglu, is translated directly into English as son-of-fire, ‘ates’ being fire. The Atesoglus speak loudly, they are bossy, and they do not allow much personal space. Hospitality is shown through copious amounts of food followed by more food.

Identity

Family and society around an individual determine identity. One learns from family and society to behave and to speak in a specific manner. An outsider can observe an individual and pinpoint characteristics that can link this individual to a society or family group.

Outwardly, I seem completely American of Western European decent. I am pale with freckles and red hair. In speaking, I have a standard American accent. What concerns me more than my appearance is my behavior. I often wonder how an outsider would define my behavior. Would I be more closely linked to my mother’s or my father’s family? How much of my learned behavior is cultural and how much of it is familial? Also, how much of my families’ behavior is cultural and how much is it familial?

I do believe the customs on my father’s side of the family, such as showing hospitality through food and standing in close proximity while speaking is cultural. Yet, the guarded interactions between members of my mother’s family are not necessarily cultural, but specific to
this family, and I have trouble understanding them. My confusion about my own family prompted me to use my heritage as the subject for my thesis work.

Choosing my familial experiences as a subject for my work seems logical. Viewers might wonder what does my family have to do with their family? By learning about my particular family, the viewer may question their own families and the relationships within their families. For instance, Katherine Hoffman writes,

"Family images may provide some sense of immortality of bloodlines: family images may call up pleasant and/or unpleasant memories or situations. But there can always be a "journey" to "see a newer world" that may be clearer and richer as a result of having looked at and been moved by images of others and thereby to understand our own individual identities and the families we are part of or close to."  

Gaining insight about an artist's particular family can only aid in the understanding of others. These glimpses of family can make us more compassionate, break boundaries and can unify.

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My Niche

"Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of self: in which case, it is best the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt and sometimes discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes."

James Baldwin

It is my belief that part of questioning identity, is searching for where one fits. A critical issue involving my identity as an artist is defining where I fit within the art world. Some of the work to which I feel the greatest affinity, and to which I most relate, is Funk Art. Funk Art it is often autobiographical, narrative, direct and involves humor. It is work that moves me and leaves me with intense, lasting pictorial images.

Robert Arneson is a critical figure in the development of Funk Art. His sculpture speaks to social issues using simplicity and straightforwardness making his work accessible to a broad audience. The work pays tribute to daily trials and tribulations, social ills and humorous situations. Although most would not considered Arneson's work beautiful in the standard sense, Beth Coffelt rightly states that

"The force of Arneson's work, the beauty, is not in the virtuosity of the glaze, nor the modeling, nor the tour de force of form attempting to overmaster the explicit content: but of the content, which he keeps drawing from his own guts, to rise to meet the form, which is metaphysical. It is an amazing, precarious, and absolutely masterful paradox."

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Many question why Arneson continually uses his self-portrait as a vehicle for communication. They may presume that the use of self-portrait to communicate ideas may separate the viewer from the artwork, but this is not the case for Arneson. As Susan Foley states in her catalogue essay, "by using himself explicitly to reflect these situations he can operate from a neutral ground, eliminating scenario and cast of characters. Yet his presentation with all its personal references inevitably transcends the individual situation to make it a universal statement."7

In a similar way, Viola Frey's work appeals to the mass populace as well. She addresses social interaction and experiences of 'real' people. She is best known for her monumental figures which demand to be noticed. Due to their large scale, Frey's figures are extremely close to the viewer, she says "they intrude: they enter our personal space even from the other side of the room."8

By placing her monumental figures outside of galleries, Frey's work takes on a more significant meaning. The work exists in spaces where people live, where they have daily interactions and experience joy and trauma. The figures in these alternative environments become "witnesses, intruders, aliens with an unsettling and familiar resemblance to those near and dear" while the "brittle tension of their presence transforms the real-world environments they inhabit."9 Like Arneson, Frey uses biographical, narrative and direct information to communicate her ideas.

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7 Suzan Foley, Robert Arneson: An Exhibition (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art 1974) Part II.


Another artist whom I have found influential is Ida Applebroog. Strongly influenced by the Bay Area Figurative Group, Applebroog makes narrative paintings, using the family of humanity as her subject to question social and political problems that exist in daily life. On a whole Marilyn Zeitlin describes Applebroog's work as the "gap between ideal and actual in social and political relationships."\(^{10}\)

Using ordinary people to communicate her narratives, Applebroog makes her work accessible to all viewers. Her images elicit strong emotional response that stay with the viewer. Applebroog's paintings tell stories of suffering, injustice and miscommunication. Her figures are full of emotion, both exaggerated and blunt. According to Zeitlin Applebroog's work is rather revolutionary since "in the context of contemporary art, the representation of genuine emotion is the exception rather than the rule. Applebroog does not suffer from the crisis of Post-Modernism, the breakdown of representation, but finds her own methods for communicating the real crises of the time."\(^{11}\)

Work by Arneson, Frey and Applebroog force me to question life and society around me. It is work that is not self-promoting, but rather, socially responsible. Arneson, Frey and Applebroog serve as artist-educators using their work to ask questions and promote new thought.


Contemporary Influence: Images

Plate 1: Robert Arneson, Self-Portrait, Stoneware, 1978, dimensions not listed\(^\text{12}\)

Plate 2: Viola Frey, "Family Portrait" Earthenware, underglaze, and overglaze, date not listed, 84"\(^\text{13}\)

Plate 3: Ida Applebroog, "Emetic Fields," detail Oil on canvas, 102" x 204", 1989\(^\text{14}\)


Choosing the Figure

"Working with the figure is probably one of the easiest and the most difficult of ceramic sculptural disciplines. Easy because the potential of the human body as a metaphorical vehicle of expressions of self, humanity, emotions and temporal relationships is seemingly endless: difficult because we all know the figure so well, both its history in art and its immediate reality."

Janet DeBoos15

I desire to create work that communicates to a broad audience. Throughout history and contemporary times, the figure has been, and is, one of the most effective means in art to communicate ideas. There is a commonality in form and body language of the figure to which people respond; each individual is an expert on human behavior because we experience it constantly.

I have created a cast of figures that act in my narrative. I chose not to use a single emblematic figure, but a variety of figures with which many viewers can identify. My figures embody an anti-classical sensibility similar to those Philippe Comar describes as "portraits of wrinkled crones, of emaciated or bloated invalids, of pregnant women and chubby infants express entirely prosaic reality that contrast with classical refinement."16 For instance, my Turkish Grandmother figure is wrinkled, has a hooknose and overly large breasts. She is completely exaggerated, but her presence is far more in the realm of reality than a stoic figure representing an ideal beauty.


My Audience

“As we live our lives we accumulate a fund of memory traces based on our sensory experience. These remain in our minds charged, it seems, with vestiges of the emotions which accompanied the original experiences. The overwhelming majority of those experiences belong within the realm of sensuous life, and may never reach the sphere of word formation or what are usually regarded as concepts at all. And yet they probably provide the essential continuum from which evolves everyone’s sense of the world and consistent reality, everyone’s understanding of what it means to exist, and are even the ultimate ‘compost’ from which scientific abstractions spring. It is in the realm of these submerged memory-traces that creative art moves bringing them into the orbit of everyday life and making them available to the experience of others by formalizing and projecting them. From the artist’s side the projection is done by his activity in shaping and forming. From the spectator’s side it must be done by active ‘reading’ of the artist’s forms.”

Philip Rawson¹⁷

My work is for the public as a whole. The work is clear and statements are simple; I push for universality. I would like the work to be a collaborative effort between the artist and the viewer. Although I have created a very specific narrative, each viewer will have a different set of “memory traces,” thus bringing a different perspective to viewing the work.¹⁸ E.H. Gombrich describes this essential relationship in which the viewers “share in the readings of images to collaborate with the artist and to transform a piece of colored canvas into a likeness of the visible world.”¹⁹ My work is not solely about my familial experience, but about the familial experience of the viewer.


¹⁸ Ibid. 16.

By using subjects and situations that are familiar to the viewer, the viewer can relate and empathize. My desire is for the viewer to have an emotional response. I am not looking to make beautiful work which immediately engages the viewer only to be forgotten an hour later. I would like to make work that, according to Ellen Dissanayake, “isolates and complicates what is presented to us so that we must see it, not merely recognize it in the routine habitual way of ordinary experience.” My aim is to create narrative work about daily life that challenges the viewer, forcing the viewer to see the episode in a new light.

Making artwork directed toward the masses will benefit humanity, rather than a few aficionados of the art world. All people need visual stimulation since “art is said to provide a sense of meaning significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any other way (Hirn, 1900, Cassirer, 1944:143). Persons who feel assured of this meaning, it is said, are more likely to accept the periods when there are difficulties and problems in life; they will have a zest, a feeling of being personally involved in their position in life, of belonging and mattering. J.Z. Young (1971: 360).” In choosing to produce for the common person, I am moving closer to my goal of being a socially responsible artist.

My quest to be socially responsible is not revolutionary, but rather is becoming quite common in contemporary art. Two artists I admire and who have a commitment to social responsibility are John Ahearn and Jane Alexander. Ahearn turned from the mainstream art world in 1981 to produce artwork for the community of the South Bronx. His goal is to

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21 Ibid. pp. 70.

“celebrate a sense of family and community, racial equality, and ordinary heroes.”

Jane Alexander is a South African artist whose ‘humanoid’ figures tell the story of South Africa. Her work is disturbing, thought provoking, and raises questions about the goodness of humanity. Oguibe Olu says Alexander’s “best known work appears to translate the brutality and psychical distortions that apartheid foisted on its proponents and all those who perpetrated crimes in its name.”

Some of Alexander’s photomontage work places her ‘humanoids’ outdoors around Cape Town. Work displayed indoors is always given a context utilizing features such as rooms, benches, background setting, etc. Her figures have an eerie reality that pushes the viewer to question their position within Alexander’s visualized society.

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23 Ibid. pp. 225.

Jane Alexander, “Born Boy with Worker and Traffic,” photomontage, 28.5 x 40 cm, 1998

Why Only Women

The only way I could go into the water was if I was on my mother’s back, my arms clasped tightly around her neck. It was only then that I could forget how big the sea was, how far down the bottom could be... When we swam around in this way, I would think how much we were like the pictures of sea mammals I had seen, my mother and I naked in the sea water.

Jamaica Kincaid, 1983

Growing up I was constantly surrounded by women. My mother played a more active role in my, and my three sisters’, upbringing than my father. Moreover, my mother has three sisters. Her mother had two sisters and these sisters never had children. So, in effect, I had three maternal grandmothers. My father’s father passed away when I was a baby so I only know his mother and his sister. Needless to say, those who have been the most inspirational to me are women in my family.

Because strong women always surrounded me, I never realized that women could be marginalized. My sisters and I grew up believing we could do and be whatever we wanted. We played on boy’s sports teams, we were not afraid to speak in class and we never felt we should be treated differently than boys. It wasn’t until I was in college that I really thought about the disparity between the sexes.

When making artwork, I chose to focus on women because it is what I know. Being a woman I understand and empathize with the trials women face on a daily basis. Through my work, I will focus on the familial life of women in a manner which challenges the viewer’s preconceived notions.

The Body of Work

Five pieces sit atop a honey-white pedestal. The massive 4' by 8' by 3' 3" pedestal is constructed in two sections. The top section of the pedestal is two and a half time thicker than the bottom section. Using this two-part construction allows the top section of the pedestal to float. On the left of the pedestal are the two Turkish figures faced inward with arms outstretched toward the center of the pedestal. In the center and a bit to the left, is the self-portrait head. The back of her head faces the Turkish figures as she peers across and through the American figures. The American figures are on the right side of the pedestal. One with arms crossed behind, the other with arms crossed in front. They are at a distance from each other at the edge of the pedestal while they gaze at each other.

On the left, the Turkish figures are warm and energetic. The grandmother wears bright red and is equipped with ample bosom and hips. Her hands reach for the other Turkish figure as well as the self-portrait. Her mouth is open in loud conversation. Across from the Grandmother is the cousin. She is of average build and clad in bright turquoise. Her face and body are strained as they reach toward the Grandmother. Loud words spill from her mouth as well.

In the middle of the pedestal is the self-portrait. She is a large head flanked by figures of about the same overall mass. Her surface is warm and buttery. The colors and intensity used are far more realistic than the other four figures. Upon her visage is an expression of acceptance, serenity and independence. She is aware of what is around her, although none of it is problematic.

The anemic Americans peer at each other with blank expression. The cousin crosses her arms in front as she separates herself from all around her. The Aunt pulls back from the group
with arms crossed behind her. Properness makes them almost robotic as they exist in an emotionless world.

Scale

Upon viewing the work, scale would be the first element to which you respond. The Turkish figures are large, about one and a half the size of life. The self-portrait head is even larger, about eight times the size of life. The Americans are a bit smaller, about life size. The overall scale separates the work from reality, making it almost surreal. Although the pieces are large, they are approachable. They are not big enough to impose on your own personal space, although they are too large to allow you to be part of the dialogue.

Color and Surface

Colors have drastic effects on the psyche; therefore, color drastically affects emotion and perceived mood of artwork. Colors selected for the Turkish figures' clothing are red and green. Red has associations with fire, danger, and blood. Intense reds are thought to increase muscular tension and bring to mind extroverted people. In contrast, green is associated with sea, fields, and leaves. Green implies a natural more basic way of life. The skin of the Turkish Figures is a warm pinkish-brown. It implies a feeling of vibrancy and fullness.

The American figures wear blue which is associated with sky, summer, and water. Blue is a color of introspection and contemplation. It suggests detachment and remoteness. The

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28 Ibid. pp. 69.

29 Ibid. pp. 70.
skin of the American figures is almost white which is associated with coldness, snow, and cleanliness. The blue and the white combined suggest independence and lack of emotion.

The clothing of the Turkish figures is primarily matte, with varying layers, and therefore suggesting fabric. By suggesting Turkish fabric, the figures are connected to a rich history of patterning from the Anatolian region. Similarly, their warm pinkish-brown skin is slightly textured and similar to colors found in Turkey; it is an arid area full of earthy tones. The American figures are shiny and suggest newness. Similarly, American is a young country where everything is relatively new.

The use of patterning on the clothing of the Turkish figures is a symbolic marker. Patterns have been used for centuries in the Islamic word on ceramics, rugs, textiles, architecture, etc. Although the history of Islamic Ceramics began in Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, the world, is perhaps, the most familiar with Turkish Iznik ceramics. After the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, Iznik ceramics flourished under the reigns of the Sultans. Patterns used on both of the Turkish figures' clothing are derived from Iznik ceramics. Both come from the rose, rosebud and tulip motifs from the Damascus and Rhodian Periods. The red of the Turkish grandmother is derived from the 'sealing wax red' which became popular in the 16th century under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. The turquoise color used for the younger Turkish figure comes from an alkaline glaze that grew in popularity from the 13th century onward.

30 Ibid. pp. 69.
33 Ibid. pp. 124.
Historical Reference: Images

Plate 1: Iznik Ceramics, detail, Demascus Period, 1520-1555

Plate 2: Iznik Ceramics, detail, Rhodian Period, 1550-1600

Plate 3: Iznik Ceramics, detail, Demascus Period, 1520-1555

The majority of this image is 'sealing wax red.'

34 Philippa Scott, Turkish Delights (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2001) pp. 9
35 Philippa Scott, Turkish Delights (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2001) pp. 38
36 Philippa Scott, Turkish Delights (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2001) pp. 8
Body Language

The work utilizes very blatant and exaggerated body language. The Turkish figures are in close proximity, almost touching and reaching out to suggest an overall ease and emotional closeness. Their arms stretch into one another and their mouths seem to be spewing words. The self-portrait is separate, calm and content. She is independent and plans to remain independent of the others. The American figures are far apart; one crosses her hands in the back and the other crosses them in the front. There seem to be an imaginary line drawn around them which can not be crossed. Their faces are blank and stoic. None of the three groups look at each other; they are separate entities. Each of the groups remains self-contained leaving the interpretation of the interaction more open to the viewer.
In Summation

With the completion of my thesis I have realized that the work in the Bevier Gallery or this paper is not the final product. The final product is my overall learning experience. I have discovered why I need to create, what I plan to produce and where my work will fit within the contemporary world.

The thesis experience has caused me to think in greater detail about the correlation between social responsibility and being an artist. As an undergrad, I did not plan on being an artist. I spent four years preparing for a career with an international service organization. With the completion of that degree I planned to do positive things for humanity. While writing my senior thesis, I discovered I would not be happy unless I became an artist.

As an artist I do not have to forget about aiding others, I just have to make an effort to be socially responsible. Part of this responsibility is teaching others, be it through the production of artwork, or through the more direct act of instruction. In making artwork I plan to pose questions, break boundaries and unify. I want to make art that is universal and direct; it will be inclusive rather than exclusive. My narratives will deal with familial relations and will appeal to a broad audience.

At some point, I would like to take my work away from the traditional gallery setting and move it outdoors or to a public area. Perhaps the work will be placed where artworks usually do not exist such as in rural areas, small towns and neighborhoods. In the gallery setting, I would like my work to have a more specific context by creating a more concrete environment.

Completing my thesis has made me simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable, comfortable in the sense that I have a specific life-long plan, uncomfortable in that I may fail. I plan to just persist.
## Technical Information

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The Body of Work: Images

Plate 1  *Turkish Grandmother*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
36” x 28” x 25”

Plate 2  *Turkish Figures*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
38” x 36” x 13”, 36” x 28” x 25”

Plate 3  *Turkish Figures, Self-Portrait, American Figures*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics, casein
8’ x 4’ x 6’ 4”

Plate 4  *Turkish Figures, detail*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
38” x 36” x 13”, 36” x 28” x 25”

  *Self-Portrait, detail*
Low-fire clay, casein
8” x 18” x 24”

Plate 5  *Self-Portrait*
Low-fire clay, casein
8” x 18” x 24”

Plate 6  *American Figur,*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
36” x 10” x 14”

Plate 7  *American Figure*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
34” x 11” x 15”

Plate 8  *American Figure, detail*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
36” x 10” x 14”

  *American Figure, detail*
Low-fire clay, glaze, acrylics
34” x 11” x 15”
Bibliography


