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MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER



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List Projects 32: Elif Saydam

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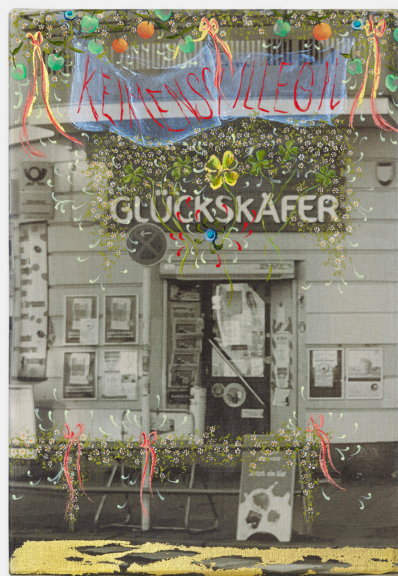
Berlin-based artist Elif Saydam conceives of painting as a space for the projection of fantasy.

Throughout history, many painting traditions have served the fantasies of a state or an imperial court, but Saydam's approach emphasizes eros in the textures of everyday life. In their paintings, quotidian sites, including gas stations, apartment blocks, and convenience stores, are layered with gold and ornament, suggesting the persistence of fantasy—particularly the desires of precarious urban populations—in increasingly gentrifying and financialized cities.

Saydam's paintings are rich with references to the history of the medium, particularly so-called "minor" genres like miniature painting and illuminated manuscripts. Their works often combine meticulous decorative elements with glimpses of daily experience and interjections of humor: "Don't know why I have to work / Don't know why I can't play," reads one recent, elaborately layered canvas. Saydam's textual sources are equally eclectic, ranging from twelfth-century Persian poetry and Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977) to the slogans of contemporary social movements. They also experiment with painting on unconventional surfaces and supports, including antique bathroom stall doors, anti-shoplifting mirrors, and kitchen sponges.

On the occasion of their exhibition at the List Center, Saydam and I produced this interview about the themes and concerns that motivate their practice, ranging from the contested politics of decoration to the transnational history of brick. This conversation, taking place on a Google Doc over the course of several weeks, offers a glimpse of the many studio visits and phone calls that precipitated this exhibition.

—Zach Ngin, Curatorial Assistant



Elif Saydam, *Zu spät (IV)*, 2021. 23 karat gold, inkjet print and oil on canvas, 11 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. (30 x 21 cm). Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin and Los Angeles. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski

ZN: I thought I'd start by approaching this conversation a little sideways: You once observed that you've been politically underestimated because you're a painter. This may have been kind of an offhand remark, but I think it gets at something important about the fantasies that people project onto something as nebulous as the medium of painting. Could you elaborate?

ES: I'm not invested in defining what painting is, or isn't, capable of—it's nebulous, as you say—but it's compelling to see who bristles (or perks up) in conversation when you claim the role of a painter. I'm inclined to believe these fantasies and their consequences say less about me, or them, than a world pressing in on us. I once had an argument with a friend for my likening of the painter to the poet. I was thinking about the contested legibility of circulating codes and motifs, the necessity of a certain style of loneliness, and the generative role of being an unreliable narrator. An attachment to the historical legacy of all that feels a little embarrassing and a little beautiful. Lots of people make paintings, but I think it's a little different to want to be a "painter," who I think of as a kind of scribe. My friend, a dutiful materialist, objected to the contemporary painter's proximity to capital, something undeniably withheld from the poet. Painting, no doubt, has demonstrated a singular proclivity to bend to the will of the market. On the other hand, there are limitations to manicured tropes that allow for

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"critique," or radicality, or experimentation, and are expected to be in service to a political imagination, while other disciplines are deemed ineffective. I'm ultimately invested in limp-wristed and impotent strategies and outcomes. I'm compelled by how these qualities are less likely to be absorbed into a political apparatus because they lack a sober vigor, and you can potentially get away with much more. The challenge, in any case, is arriving at ways to reveal one's agenda and be consistently guided by that impulse.

There's a permanent display at the Met of some small Philip Guston paintings accompanied by a quote where he says: "What kind of man am I... sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue." Guston was a committed anti-fascist and communist, and I'm grateful that his ambivalence about painting didn't keep him from working but, instead, shaped his practice with both an incongruity and harmony that never stops struggling against itself and spitting out gifts. Attempting to infuse a polemic into a nebulous medium can be a lot of fun, feel pointless, maybe doomed to fail, and slippery enough to become a life's work...

ZN: Much of your work unfolds fragments and references from maligned aesthetic worlds: those of the everyday, the diminutive, the decorative, the minor. You once mentioned wanting to name an exhibition after Adolf Loos's essay "Ornament and Crime" (1913), a diatribe in which he claims that ornament "inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution."¹ We've talked about how, in his text, a modernist transcendence of decoration is linked to ideas of racial and civilizational superiority.

ES: I have to acknowledge some brilliant students at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf who turned me onto the Loos book after I gave a lecture there. I wasn't familiar with it at the time and was taken by the title for reasons unintended by the author. I'm no expert on architectural history or the work's impact within that canon, but I'm drawn to taking the title literally—a gleefully degenerate embodiment of my work—while exploring what "ornament" can stand in for in different contexts, each with its own misguided projections or aspirations (mine included).

To the credit of a zealot like Loos, there's no question that Corinthian buttresses headed nowhere, and the Baroque petticoat-layering of form was an index of a European imperial apparatus gone (or born) rotten, covering its nasty little sores of time with fig leaves. But where does that rottenness end—and something else misunderstood begin? Loos is not uninterested in empire. He just wants it to look different. The racism of the text lies not only in the obvious pitting of modernity against the so-called "lowly" vernacular art/architecture of other customs and timelines, and the folksiness of how those are portrayed, but also in how this Very European Man cannot recognize the ways in which figuration, stylization, and abstraction are complex intercedents developed across different regions. This very failure of recognition results in a sensibility that is vitriolic, toxic, and rapacious to overcompensate for its lack, as is often the case. When these qualities are naturalized as expertise, therein lies the violence.



Home of Neriman and Ibrahim Günc, Çeşmealtı, Türkiye. Courtesy the artist

ZN: As the theorist and scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has noted, the category of "the ornamental" has triggered "heated debates about the differences between excrement and essence, surface and interiority, the peripheral and the central, femininity and masculinity."² One can almost trace these same oppositions or, more precisely, an ambivalence toward these oppositions across your practice.

ES: Just the way "ornament" is used as a blurry noun, "decorative" is not only a pejorative qualifier but also a lazy adjective. I'm concerned with how it stands in for something else off-putting, veiled under a loose and ambiguous term. Maybe specificity is avoided because what might be deemed "decorative" is potentially perverting a power schema—one rife with racialized, gendered, and/or sexualized subtexts of desire, or envy. To dismiss this complexity with an imprecise qualifier avoids acknowledging a threat to the given aesthetic order and its dynamics. Cheng chronicles the distinct attempts of the orientalist's gaze to turn us into animal, mineral, furniture, whatever. And meanwhile, within a painting pedagogy, imprecision still reigns hard. When I studied art, "illustrative" or "decorative" were used interchangeably as negative criticism. It's certainly changing now as other centers of gravity come to the fore. And this has less to do with "identity politics" than with efforts to decolonize cultural trajectories and make space for other rich histories of abstraction and modernity, which run on different timescales (and often predate similar developments in the West).

During my childhood in Türkiye, I was lucky to grow up in a house where my family let me decorate *everything*: furniture, garden walls—I even painted the refrigerator. I never considered this a practice or worldview, obviously, because I was a kid. I come from a long line of unhinged decorators. Whenever I present a lecture on my work, I always start by sharing a very personal photograph. In what was once the working-class home of my grandparents, a brutal brown sewage pipe cuts across the wall from the toilet up above. As a teenager, my Auntie Fulya painted it into the thick trunk of an enormous cherry tree,

pink flowers blooming along the walls and around the corner. To this day, if someone flushes the toilet upstairs, the entire blossom tree shakes with a sound that is impossible to ignore. Why does this image resonate so much—beyond being a wondrous, beautiful, kitsch heritage from my family, in a domestic space that still means something to me? Because there was no denying the shit literally moving through the room. Denial was never the intention, but acceptance certainly wasn't an option either. As is often the case, embellishment is not a willing cooperation with material conditions but a provisional forgiveness of them. I mean "forgiveness" here as something with a ferocious dignity—indignation, even—folded into it. Lots of people will know what I mean by this, but it took me a while to understand.

My grandfather welded his own walking stick and painted it bubblegum pink, along with the rest of this house. Later on, I avoided painting anything, partly out of a misguided shame for this boundless impulse—seen as gauche in a different geography—until I, thankfully, realized this gesture spoke volumes about class and belonging. In circling back to this image—both the photograph and the "tree" itself—I realized I was free to paint all over, not because things weren't scarce or precious, but precisely because they were. Now, our home is painted white—sadly, social mobility looks boring as hell—but if you scratch at the paint a bit, you'll see pink underneath...

ZN: I also think of your paintings, such as *Kotti (redux)* (2023) and *Zu spät (IV)* (2021), in which nondescript buildings are adorned with fabricated banners. Their slogans—Land Back, The Rent Is Too High, Kein Mensch ist illegal [No One is illegal]—refer to real social movements and have real collective force, but their projection onto a particular view or landscape feels like an aching kind of longing. I love how these works engage the perversity of political fantasies that are thwarted or unfulfilled but remain open—a possibility constantly and unconsciously posed by the antagonistic arrangements of our society. Could you talk about the fantasies that your work elicits and their relationship to the marginalized aesthetic categories you deploy?

ES: When I started painting on photographs of the city, I wanted to approach "embellish" as a verb with two definitions: "To make something more attractive by the addition of decorative details" and "To make a statement more interesting by adding extra details that are often untrue." To treat protest banners as ornament on the canvas could only be perceived as disrespectful to the gravitas of social movements if ornament is seen as having little value. In many ways, I see myself as trying to plant a kind of trap on the canvas by leaning into frivolity. You're right that this series is driven by longing, but more precisely, by mourning, too—for things that are lost or were never there in the first place.

Over the years, I made a number of paintings of Kottbusser Tor—"Kotti" for short—a roundabout in Berlin's Kreuzberg district that is arguably the capital of the Turkish-speaking diaspora and also dense with queer bars and leftist spaces. It's a juncture where everyone converges in a way that the German state really doesn't like, probably because these inhabitants, who are pitched as incompatible, aren't really incompatible at all. For a number of years, there was a permanent outpost of police vans next to a twenty-four-hour fruit stand at the bottom of Neues Kreuzberger Zentrum—an iconic housing project from the 1970s that was officially renamed Zentrum Kreuzberg Merkezi, in Turkish, and has been

1 Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (MIT Press, 1970), 20. The lecture was originally delivered in 1910 in Vienna.

2 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 14.

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Exhibition view: *Elif Saydam: Hospitality*, Audain Gallery, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 2024. Courtesy the artist and SFU Galleries. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

described by the city as a "crime-ridden failure." In 2023, an enormous permanent police station opened up in the lobby. To get into Cafe Kotti, a favorite spot for Kurdish and Turkish activists and organizers, you have to literally slink past the entrance of the police station—the facade of which is painted the most lifeless, inhospitable shade of gray I've ever seen. It's such a godless color; I couldn't mix it if I tried.

So, in one way, these small paintings of the city were a devotional attempt to archive a love being lost, or a fight being played out, and love redeemed. But I also wanted to find a way to reflect the untrustworthiness of my version of the story, and the painting medium itself, in the very materiality of the work. The photographs are printed with non-archival inks on plastic foils that are melted onto canvas and—like an old newspaper—will unstoppably fade; the yellow is the first to go, magenta disappears last. Eventually, all that's left is the fantasy I painted over it in oil and gold leaf, floating there, immortal, out of context, tethered to nothing. Leaving us and our architecture—but hopefully not our social lives—behind.

ZN: The first time I visited your studio, you were working on a series of paintings on antique bathroom doors, which you exhibited last year at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. This was a playful reference to game shows ("Choose a door!") and an earnest consideration of exits. Many of the works you're showing here were made a little earlier and are closer to walls than doors; in some places, the pieces thin into apertures and translucency. I'm curious if these disparate features belong to a single structure—or, in other words, if it's possible to trace the shape of the "architecture" you've navigated across these bodies of work?

ES: Three years ago, there was a fire in my building, and the Berlin Fire Department chainsawed my front door in half, cleared the area, and hastily screwed it back together while I was away. I'm still waiting for my slumlords to fix it. As it stands, or tries to, you can bodycheck the door open if you really want. It's probably sheer luck that nobody has tried—I keep my valuables at the studio—but perhaps that's cynical; I might be pitied by the noble thief, since I already look like I've been robbed. Since then, I've thought often about how the door is less a flimsy architectural threshold and more a mutable social contract where intimacy is respected, interrupted, tolerated, or grossly violated.

Shortly before you and I met, I went shopping for doors at various estate sales. Along the way, I encountered some Art Deco bathroom stall doors from the 1920s, which activated all kinds of perverted references and storylines around what else we do behind those doors and took me off track from my initial straightforward quest for an iconic front door. I got carried away thinking perhaps these stall doors were from a nightclub or speakeasy, but they were actually from an office building in Manhattan. He had two doors, and I wanted three, so I painted a trompe l'oeil version of a third to solve the problem. I'm not shy about revealing that these are the kinds of arbitrary factors that guide the outcomes of my work. I also appropriated a reference from this beautiful painting in the epic poem *Bahramnameh*² of some figures gathered around a tiled black hole, which I willfully misinterpreted into a kind of urinal or glory hole in my rendition. I found this black hole so confounding and constructed all kinds of explanations as to what it could be. I was told much later while taking a miniature painting class that the hole was actually a well or spring gilded in silver that oxidized to black over the centuries. Getting a kick out of these misunderstandings and being

open to how elements calcify differently than expected relates to your question about how a constellation can be built through a practice. I have often said that although I'm technically invested in materials and image-making, I'm not actually concerned with what a painting "looks" like, and I don't expect a single piece to do all the legwork for me either. Ideally, the pieces work together—I even consider it an advantage that an individual painting fails on its own. Codependency between artworks feels actually kind of healthy.

A sentence that kind of changed my practice is one I encountered in Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, where he states, in all caps, "EVEN WEAK LINKS IN THE CHAIN ARE LINKS IN THE CHAIN."³ I've thought about how a weak link is a structural problem if a chain hangs from top to bottom, bearing weight under the laws of gravity, but what about other arrangements and contingencies, like lateral ones with multiple points of contact? Or even just the refusal to obey the law, or bear a load at all?

ZN: That line moved me so much when I first encountered it in your work. As we're seeing yet again, art and academic institutions perpetually feel the need to fortify themselves (almost always unsuccessfully) against crises: to be impervious, unaffected, sovereign. I guess I'm curious about ways of working that are deliberately weak and delicate: What if the things we make are meant to crumble upon a glance or a touch? What if we tried to cultivate our need and dependency as much as our strength and ability? We might think of this as a speculative twist on what Denise Ferreira da Silva describes as the racialized condition of "affectability."⁴

All this is to say that I'm thinking about your earlier comment about your interest in "limp-wristed and impotent strategies and outcomes." To be clear, this doesn't indicate a withdrawal of energy or effort. In fact, there is often an exorbitantly and excessively labored quality to the way your works are made. I'm thinking of the English paper piecing technique you used for the brick paintings on view at the List Center and the canvases you hand-wove for your recent exhibition at Franz Kaka in Toronto. These time-intensive processes can be effaced in the finished form of the works. Could you talk a bit about your labor and the relationship therein between impotence and effort?

ES: I think it's important to make a distinction between efforts and outcomes because sometimes they barely touch at all. We can run ourselves into the ground for the sake of the process—foreplay and all that—and what would a commitment to process mean when there is little-to-no guarantee of any result at all, let alone the one you want? I think my relationship to my own labor is both sacred and valued but also something I've betrayed and sold off for literally nothing in the past, and honestly, I continue to do so under very different guises than wage labor. There's a twisted game at play in wanting to efface my hand before anyone else has the chance to do it for me. But more importantly, I also want to cast efficiency aside and address this idea of being "a waste"—of time, money, space. Who

3 *Bahramnameh*, also known as *Haft Peykar*, is an epic romantic poem composed by Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi in 1197.

4 Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (Nightboat Books, 2019), 27.

5 Da Silva's work traces the colonial differentiation of "two kinds of minds, namely, (a) the transparent I, which emerged in post-Enlightenment Europe, the kind of mind that is able to know, emulate, and control powers of universal reason, and (b) the affectable 'I,' the one that emerged in other global regions, the kind of mind subjected to both the exterior determination of the 'laws of nature' and the superior force of European minds." See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 117.

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decides the criteria? I'm not actually asking; I just want to carve out a moment where I can pretend that it is me.

I love the idea of the things we make collapsing, but an investment in fragility isn't a carte blanche for institutions to drop their end of the deal; you or I embody vulnerability or affectability much differently than an institution does. Going back to expectations, or how effort and outcome overlap in a Venn diagram of disappointment, many relationships to cultural and academic institutions are at an impasse. Right now, in Germany, where I normally live, we are observing the collapse of the giant inflatable that was state-funding-as-soft-power entangled with the criminalization of objections to the genocide in Palestine. Massive funding cuts and a federal rearmament movement have coalesced in lockstep back to authoritarianism. German institutions are not only complicit with orders to quell dissent but, in many cases, fervently volunteer to persecute it before they are even asked to. It's absurd to expect that artworks last forever, but even more so when the structures we depend on to exchange and show them seem capable of folding at a mere glance. It's also worth making a distinction between crumbling and capitulation. I see the effort of the institution today is toward fortification, yes, but the outcome is actually disintegration, like a screen print of a brick wall on a piece of cardboard: impervious, but it'll flap away with the tiniest gust of wind. Figuring out the fortress is a folly is probably a good opportunity, or at least a logical conclusion.

ZN: Maybe this is a good time to talk about bricks, which are building materials right up to the moment they become tools for breaking things. The two of us have spoken a lot about Martin Wong, and I think about David Getsy's utopian reading of Wong's brick as "an image of open-ended

connection and potential in which any two or more units could fit together to make something more."⁶ But I don't want to neglect the brick's many histories across art, politics, and everyday life—from Stonewall to Guston to its transnational typologies.

ES: The brick is a timeless, legible cue for urbanity and the social. When approached as pattern, it demonstrates how we link up with or butt against one another in different relational orders. As Getsy claims, Wong uses it to illustrate maps of contingency, but what I love so much about Wong's work is how, ultimately, he was just so very interested in other people. The brick motif manifests potentiality and stability as form, while hinting at its weight when plucked from a structure as a singular unit and placed in the palm of someone's hand. For all the revisions of history playing out these days, isolating that single brick and imagining exactly whose hand is gripping it grounds us in a reality that can't be denied. And that brings some relief.

In 2022, for my exhibition *F*rgiveness* at Tanya Leighton in Berlin, I was working on large canvases that were quilts made up of tiny fragments of hand-stitched canvas. This was a way of approaching ornamentation or detail from another angle, where the detail was embedded into the ground of the painting itself as opposed to existing strictly on its surface. I noticed then that much of my work involves bringing together a series of repeating units and small parts that can be rearranged to build meaning, much like sentence fragments or letters forming words. This relates directly to Wong's development of an alphabet in his paintings, which was adapted from sign language and formally influenced by different stylistic references (Kufic calligraphy, for example).

I'm quite curious about questions of style, and I wanted to distill this interest in structure and language when I developed the pieces in this show here at the List. The brick, in its rectangular cliché form, references my Drag Moms, like Wong or Guston, but also distills itself into a widely recognized cartoon sign.

Then there is the industrial cinder block motif: a stark, unornamented foundational brick meant to be hidden from view. But this obfuscation is determined by economic factors . . . how much can you really afford to hide? What's your budget?

The third motif of the terracotta "breeze block" is developed out of the *Mashrabiya* or *Jali* lattice screen, an Islamic/Indo-Islamic architectural feature found across many regions. This block has infinite geometric variations within its square form and opens up myriad colonial references and consequences. As is usually the case, mid-century modernists in the West (particularly in warmer climates, like Los Angeles) went wild for the abstract qualities of the block's geometry in combination with its practical ingenuity as a partition that allows for privacy, ventilation, and light control. This all relates back to your question about apertures. I'd argue that partitions are predetermined and embedded in our lives in ways we can't control; I'm not trying to pry anything apart but rather seeing what kind of glances can be stolen from an obstructed view. I think a lot about that scene from Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950) of the prisoner blowing cigarette smoke through the wall to another inmate, and the eroticism of the obstinacy there, within that tiny crack.



Elif Saydam, *THIS TENDER THAT RENT*, 2022–23. Installation view: Oakville Galleries at Gairloch Gardens, 2023. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin and Los Angeles, and Oakville Galleries. Photo: LFDokumentation

⁶ David Getsy, "Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies," in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuisen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Walther König, 2022), 197.