

**MELANCHOLY AS ARTIST'S PERCEPTION:
BLACK BILE AND REVERIE**

by

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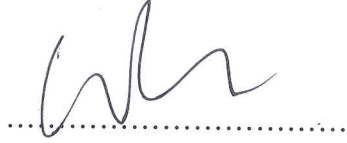
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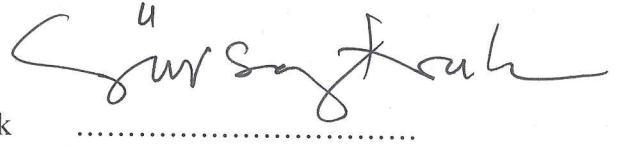
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ABSTRACT

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Ahu Akgün Aygül

M.A. Thesis, June, 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Wieslaw Zaremba

The meaning of melancholy as state of mind and approaches to it vary among psychologists, philosophers and artists. In this thesis, controversial and ambiguous concepts of melancholy are addressed within their specific meanings, constituted by the positive aspects of melancholy that also constructs my approach. First, thanks to philosophers and psychologists, perception through the creative process is provided regarding the position of the referred artists and my approach through my works. Then, the definition of melancholy- as a state of mind- is given, and creativity as a result of melancholy's positive aspect concludes the thesis. Approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to perception, Eugenio Borgna's definition of melancholy, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of creativity constitute the main idea. Noticeable examples of melancholic attitude throughout art history and the perception of the artists are used for being more explanatory to clarify the theoretical approaches of philosophers, psychologists and artists. The examination of these three topics is contextualised in my paintings and installations under the topics of Black Bile and Reverie projects, and analysed in relation to one another. The thesis stands as a supplementary text for the projects.

It is necessary to emphasize that the thesis does not lead us to solid results. The sensations form the base of my thesis. They do not lead us to more than a state of guessing, or forming an opinion, and the definitions only point out one specific part of the concepts.

Keywords: Melancholy, Perception, Phenomenology, Creativity, Visual Arts, Painting

ÖZET

SANATÇI ALGISINDA MELANKOLİ:

KARA SAFRA VE GÜNDÜZ DÜŞÜ

Ahu Akgün Aygöl

Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Haziran 2018

Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Wieslaw Zaremba

Psikolojide bir ruh hali olarak ele alınan Melankoli'nin anlamı ve bu duruma olan yaklaşımlar psikologlar, filozoflar ve sanatçılar arasında çeşitlilik gösterir. Bu tezde, melankoli ile ilgili tartışmalı ve muğlak kavramlar, kendi yaklaşımına da ayna tutan melankolinin olumlu yönlerini öne çıkaran anlamları ile ele alınmaktadır. Başlangıç olarak, filozoflar ve psikologların yaklaşımları ışığında, sanatçı algısının yaratım sürecine etkisi göz önünde bulundurulmuş ve kendi sanat pratiğim üzerinden de incelenmiştir. Daha sonra, melankolinin bir duygu durumu olarak tanımına yer verilmiş ve yaratıcılık üzerindeki olumlu etkisi incelenmiştir.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty'nin algıya yaklaşımı, Eugenio Borgna'nın melankoli tanımı ve Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi'nin yaratıcılık analizi tezin ana fikrini oluşturmaktadır. Sanat tarihi boyunca melankolik tutuma sahip dikkat çekici örnekler ve bahsi geçen sanatçıların algısı; filozofların, psikologların ve sanatçıların kuramsal yaklaşımlarını daha açıklayıcı kılmak için kullanılmıştır.

Bu üç konunun incelemesi, Kara Safra ve Gündüz Düşü projelerim kapsamında ürettiğim resimlerimde ve enstalasyonlarımda ele alınmış ve birbirleriyle ilişkili olarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu tez, projeler için tamamlayıcı bir metin olarak yer almaktadır.

Tezin bizi kesin sonuçlara götürmediğini vurgulamak gerekir. Tezimin temelini oluşturan ana tema duygu durumlarıdır.

Tanımlar sadece kavramların belirli bir bölümüne işaret ederken, tahmin etme veya fikir üretme durumundan daha fazla yönlendirmede bulunmazlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Melankoli, Algı, Fenomenoloji, Yaratıcılık, Görsel Sanatlar, Resim

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ÖZET	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: PERCEPTION OF ARTISTS THROUGH ARTS	5
CHAPTER 2: DEFINITION OF MELANCHOLY THROUGH ARTS	11
2.1. Melancholy Towards Creativity	17
2.2. Ambiguity in Melancholy (the positive aspect of dark side)	20
2.3. Individual Expressions Over Melancholy in Arts	26
CHAPTER 3: MY PROJECTS	39
3.1. Black Bile	41
3.2. Reverie	46
CONCLUSION	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig.1: Ahu Akgün, “My Closed Eye, My Sighted Eye”, 2016
- Fig. 2: Paul Cézanne, “The Large Bathers”, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1906
- Fig.3: Paul Cézanne, “Grand Pin et Terres Rouges”, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 1890-95
- Fig.4: Francisco de Goya, “Saturn Devouring His Son”, Prado National Museum, 1819-23
- Fig.5: Ahu Akgün, “Get Caught”, 2018
- Fig. 6: Ahu Akgün, “Loving Darkness”, 2015
- Fig. 7: Albrecht Dürer, “Melencolia I”, State Art Gallery in Karlsruhe, 1514
- Fig.8: “Kleobis and Biton”, Delphi Archaeological Museum, 580 BC
- Fig.9: “Athena Parthenos”, a marble copy, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 3rd century CE
- Fig. 10: Ahu Akgün, “July”, 2016
- Fig. 11: “Apollo Belvedere”, Vatican Museum, Museo Pio Clementino, 350 BC
- Fig. 12: Francisco de Goya, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” (plate of Los Caprichos 43), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1799
- Fig. 13: Francisco de Goya, “And There’s Nothing To Be Done”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1810
- Fig. 14: Francisco de Goya, “The Third of May, 1808”, Prado Museum, 1814
- Fig. 15: Jean-Antoine Watteau, “Pierrot”, Louvre Museum, 1718
- Fig. 16: Edward Hopper, “Blue Night”, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1914
- Fig. 17: Pablo Picasso, “The Death of Casagemas”, Musée Picasso Paris, 1901
- Fig. 18: Pablo Picasso, “The Blind Man's Meal”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1903
- Fig. 19: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “People in the Street”, private collection, 1913
- Fig. 20: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Self-portrait”, Saarland Museum, 1916
- Fig. 21: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. “Self-portrait as a Soldier”, Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1915
- Fig. 22: Max Beckmann, “Self-Portrait with a Cigarette”, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1923

- Fig. 23: Kathe Kollwitz, “Self-Portrait with Hand on Forehead”, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1910
- Fig. 24: Alberto Giacometti, “Portrait of James Lord”, 1964
- Fig. 25: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-4”, the imaginary first stage, pencil on canvas, 2018
- Fig. 26: Process of “Who get Under-4”, while Ayşe Aydoğan poses for my painting, 2018
- Fig. 27: Ahu Akgün, “O-OSYM”, 2014
- Fig. 28: Ahu Akgün, “Wives, Fathers, Daughters, Sons, Brothers and Sisters”, 2014
- Fig. 29: Ahu Akgün, “Say Stop”, 2015
- Fig. 30: Ahu Akgün, “Within”, 2014
- Fig. 31: Ahu Akgün, “Within-2”, 2014
- Fig. 32: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-1”, 2015
- Fig. 33: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-2”, 2017
- Fig. 34: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-3”, 2016
- Fig. 35: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-4”, 2018
- Fig. 36: Ahu Akgün, Untitled, 2016
- Fig. 37: Ahu Akgün, “Self Censor”, 2017
- Fig. 38: Ahu Akgün, “23 Seconds”, 2016
- Fig. 39: Ahu Akgün, “A Season”, 2016
- Fig. 40: Ahu Akgün, “Bird Repeller”, 2017
- Fig. 41: Ahu Akgün, “Swirl”, 2017
- Fig. 42: Ahu Akgün, “Black Bile”, a selection from Photobook Project, 2016
- Fig. 43: Ahu Akgün, “Irfan waits for Ali”, 2017
- Fig. 44: Ahu Akgün, “Loving Darkness-2”, 2015
- Fig. 45: Ahu Akgün, “Faces”, 2018
- Fig. 46: Ahu Akgün, “Inter-solidarity”, 2017
- Fig. 47: Ahu Akgün, “Tell Me About Your Plans”, 2017

INTRODUCTION

The world we live in presents us with multifarious tragedies such as wars, genocides, murders, injustices, discriminations, massacres and destruction of nature and history. How are we coping with this *Zeitgeist*, while we feel responsible yet do nothing to confront it? According to Rollo May, it is necessary to have courage to live sensitively in this traumatic era. We are being confronted by decisions. When we have nothing to do, are we going to withdraw from the feeling of panic and anxiety? In this way, we will be disclaiming the chance of forming the future (May, 1994, 39). When May mentions, “forming the future”, he means to encourage the artists to express themselves through work of art, with the best thing that they are able to do. Does this make the object of art or the process of creating it, a therapy for its artist or the viewers, while confronting with our era? This question makes me examine why I create reflexive works based on tragedies. The urge to create is coming from one or more sensations, and what I see through art history is a proof of different approaches of artists through cataclysmic events. The common denominator among approaches is the desire of the artist to make art. Melancholic attitude of the artists tends to bring along the urge to create. This urge may come from the melancholic emotions. These emotions arise from the artists’ attitude of forcing their selves directly into the middle of tragedies. This condition could not be prevented by artists’ daily effort but their urge to create art.

It is possible to sense melancholic state in this creation process because of the consequences of inertia over the society that the era obligates. It is important to consider that the work of art is a reaction that shows itself as a melancholic attitude for the artists who sometimes hide the feeling of melancholy in a profound expression. When the viewer encounters with two-dimensional artistic product, that is, the painting, s/he perceives its disturbing silence as a result of its stability, constancy and tranquility (Soysal, 2003, 21). In this silence, the painting creates an illusion and refers to the viewer an object, with its light and dark areas. This is the first glance of the viewer when s/he perceives melancholy as an idea that becomes inconceivable part of the paintings. Ahmet Soysal explains it as the ‘darkness’ of the painting. To define its profundity that stuck in life, earth, subjectivity; he refers its lack of cognitive language, which exclude explicit, regular, rationally connected language factors. The view

from this inconceivable part of the painting presents this vital 'darkness' through the light of the painting (Soysal, 2003, 24).

The 17th century, the darkness inside the painting is seen to indicate the object. To the viewer the joy behind the light and dark areas of the painting comes to the foreground. A painting can carry inside and convey the joy and the grief, sometimes both at once, or identically (Soysal, 2003, 14). But how does a work of art involve joy and grief at the same time, and convey it to the viewer? Ahmet Soysal argues that especially creative beings encumbered with thoughts, habits, traditions, and sometimes with madness too (Soysal, 2003, 13). When artists convey their inner sights through work of art, all those functions become visible and readable by the viewers. In addition, Soysal points out that joy and grief together reveal a need and a desire, and this obligates the act of making visuals of the released emotions (Soysal, 2003, 17). So with the expression of the artist, to see these opposite poles in one surface becomes inevitable.

While artists are creating, their purpose is not creating morals via conscious intentions. They are concerned with hearing and expressing the vision that shows itself in their entity (May, 1994, 53). Rollo May explains the aim of a poet as a struggle with world's futility and its silence by giving a meaning to it, turning silence into voice, making the nonexistent exist (May, 1994, 96). Moreover, he adds the poet's work is not to wait until his scream stick in his throat (May, 1994, 101). The aforementioned artistic vision is a unique approach that varies among artists and their perceptions. What makes a work of art a masterpiece is not the artist's' ability to visualize what they observe but is what they include while bringing their artistic vision into reality. That is what makes a painting or a poem, genuine and beyond repetition (May, 1994, 97). This point is where phenomenology relates to the process of creation. Life experiences, perceptions and cultural heritage of an artist are the way they convey their vision.

Soysal explains the artistic vision by giving an example of depicting a cloud. According to him, he is not emulating the dead visual of a cloud, and not creating an imitation of a dead one. The sensed vision of the cloud within his suited inherent power starts to 'work' and 'process'. He explains it as if he becomes the cloud, or he becomes the one who keeps it alive. The cloud that he displays carries his inherent reflection- his living as an insider and he adds; invariably, a painter reveals his/her whole life (Soysal, 2003, 19).

At an essential level, this idea manifests in the tension between formal and form. The form is the main space for emerged sensation (Soysal, 2003, 40), where subjective expression delves into the roots of our entity. These profound sensations are unique for each of us. At the same time these sensations involve all experiences that belong to our entity and it is only possible explain them via work of art. The way that a work of art displays itself and its perception by the viewer ground and relay on a never-ending sensational meaning. At the same time, this meaning is relayed by a formal work with explicitly given proportions. As a result, the dark meaning and formal explicitness of a subjective work of art constitute a unique appearance (Soysal, 2003, 120). By that manner, via work of art, the artist opens a door to a subjective relation with the viewer.

As long as a viewer watches the darkness inside a work of art, he gets closer to or even beyond what the artist aims to convey. As May mentions, in mature creativity, the artist and the viewers should come face to face with the anxiety to see the enthusiasm inside the created work of art (May, 1994, 107). As Soysal points out, it also should be kept in mind that while trying to define the darkness behind the painting might seem just as guesswork or opinion, it is sensation, not more. We can only come out with approximate truths, half-truths or fake truths (Soysal, 2003, 20).

The perception of an artist designates the position of the viewer. The process of the artist goes through the reflections on the visible results, even before the work of art is displayed. The life experiences of an artist induce him/her to create within a perception that is affected by what s/he has been through. Thanks to the specific and common paths through melancholy belong to philosophers, psychologists and artists, what my intent here is to draw a chain system that all encompasses my creation process and my perception through the melancholic state which I endure and cope with. These elements of creation stimulate each other while finding themselves a place in my work, as well as in art history. As a summary, the structure of this chain system is formed thus: the perception of an artist brings melancholy to the foreground. This melancholic state of the artist impels him/her to create a work of art. The traces of this path find themselves as subject matter and as a creation process in my painting series *Black Bile* (2016) and *Reverie* (2018).

In Black Bile series, I was inspired by the definition of fluid behavior of melancholy, which is explained in chapter two that explores a definition of melancholy through arts. I was depicting current news rapidly, and it was not easy to follow and keep up with every event. While my depictions were in a sequence that I felt I had witnessed, I was also depicting the sentiment that this inertia was dragging me into. Figuring out my emotional state in relation with doing nothing against current events also constitutes my approach through my paintings. These depictions reflect my depression, anxiety, and anger towards being stuck in inertia as society and as a reaction to that situation. I was doing nothing but following the news and creating my works.

By examining my approach through the art creation process, I started to be aware of my emotions. They became less frequent and more dispersed as a gloomy state, which I have been able to name as melancholy until I realize it settled in my whole life. Therewith, the realization of melancholy as subject, bring me to create the Reverie series. This psychological state becomes my subject matter and helps me to endure by presenting me a language to express myself that pushes me to create.

CHAPTER 1

PERCEPTION OF ARTISTS THROUGH ARTS

The discovery of the photography in 1839 brought the discussion of the relation between painting and reality to the foreground all over again. The fictional unity of reality was demolished. The factors of phenomenological objectivity as light, color, form, surface, depth started to be approached both for themselves, yet always on the behalf of and by considering the world, earth, entity or darkness of life (Soysal, 2003, 123). Paint and canvas are objective elements. Artists to reveal their thoughts and emotions have used them powerfully and existentially. Paint and canvas are not the only elements that an artist relates in a dialectic way, but also the forms that he/she sees in the nature that develop his/her observations (May, 1994, 123). This condition brings the artist into a decisive position where the net of media and phenomenological body appear at the same time or overlap each other (Soysal, 2003, 55).

In a painting, an inherent affection is transported into a visible entity; the subject shown in the visible entity starts to live as affection through the act of being looked at. From this point of view, phenomenological approach or intention through painting gains relevance. It is the act of a painter ascribing more than what we see with its variant meanings in his/her surrounding through visible entity. The distinction between the natural vision and the work of art is the trace of the maker (Soysal, 2003, 25). In her article “Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty’s Thought”, Carolyne Quinn describes Merleau-Ponty’s approach, defining characteristics of artists as varied, like standard physically or psychologically expressions of individuals. In a sense, what differentiates artists from other individuals is their urge of transmitting their expressions into objects, even into permanent ones. During the process of conveying, the medium that they have been using contributes to the formation of what the artists perceive. Thus, the profound physical and psychological states of the artist turn into exact results (Quinn, 2009, 17). For example, even the cave paintings were related and conducted with human-specific ideational attitude. However, this irreducible base contains and involves phenomenological material. Through painting, the idea is established on a sensual and affective base (Soysal, 2003, 26).

What Ponty aims to bring to the foreground is the discussion of determinant character of perception through lived experiences. He argues that the word perception introduces the awareness of position and a sense of the body through gained knowledge. It is even possible to mention that reflexiveness over experiences still exists in its creative way (Quinn, 2009, 11).

In the series of works *Reverie* most pieces depart from the daily events in a reflexive way. To give an example, “My Closed Eye, My Sighted Eye” (Fig.1), is an auto portrait referenced to the biographic book of unjustly arrested (2016) Turkish writer Aslı Erdoğan. Due to the need of coming eye to eye with Aslı Erdoğan, I depicted myself one eye closed- as opposite eye of hers as she depicts herself in her book “*Miraculous Mandarin*”. This is explained in more detail in chapter 3.2 *Reverie* Section. The need of depicting my auto portrait was a reflexive attitude in which I try to support her by saying that she is not alone.



Fig. 1: Ahu Akgün, “My Closed Eye, My Sighted Eye”, 2016

Ponty describes art as if it is not an imitation of something or a production of a refined taste, but a process of expression (Ponty, 2017, 54). He raises the subject of the body as a book that

is unknown and open for new language. No one can predict what kind of art can be created in that dialect. Once the language appears, it is unable to refrain from creating its own history or state of carrying a meaning. By that manner, prolificacy of humankind uses its current state as an expression mechanism, which leads them to display this dialect in their own ways (Ponty, 2017, 23).

Ponty evaluates this language, in relation to Paul Cezanne's approach to painting. He refers to Cezanne as he writes with painting that is not depicted as he ever depicts before; to create this language and he transforms it into a permanent art object (Ponty, 2017, 54). In addition, Ponty explains Cezanne builds up his paintings over nervous breakdown that is commonly familiar to everyone. When Cezanne confronts nature, he observes it like a child. This condition brings him to approach every object from its nucleus (Ponty, 2017, 47). Cezanne depicts landscapes in their pure state using the science of seeing and observing what he sees in nature (Ponty, 2017, 50). Quinn quotes from Ponty's analysis of Cezanne: "The artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout" (Quinn, 2009, 14). Quinn explains Cezanne's paintings as observed by the viewers: "non-human creature". While Cezanne paints, he dedicates himself to rediscover what he sees (fig.2). He disrupts the structure of objects and plays with perspective of their environment, leading his viewers to perceive the emotional additions through his paintings.



Fig. 2: Paul Cezanne, “The Large Bathers”, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1906

Cezanne’s perception is reflected within his paintings as visible experiences on canvas. He initiates himself with the inhuman nature that he depicts. By that manner, as Ponty mentions, the painter constructs an image and displays it, dwelling on the sense and image in separate minds. Also, the language an artist uses is shaped by his/her own perception of the world; within the way s/he ascribes a meaning to it (Quinn, 2009, pp.14-16). Rollo May explains Cezanne’s approach to his own paintings as if he sees a tree like no one has ever seen before (fig.3). Cezanne himself mentions that he has been living as if a tree conquers him. All characteristic units of the tree are absorbed by his perception and perceived by his neurotic structure. It is not just a vision of a tree anymore; it becomes ‘the tree’ (May, 1994, 95).



Fig. 3: Paul Cézanne, “Grand pin et terres rouges”, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 1890-95

Cezanne explains that he distinguishes between nature and painting through his art. He defines art as a personal perception, providing a sensational body to what he sees; the painting is a rationalization of his approach. While he introduces and defends his thoughts, he avoids arguments and instead prefers to paint. In his process of painting, he tries to avoid straying from sensation by keeping himself in self-comprehension (Ponty, 2017, 49).

Susan Sontag explains this self-comprehension in her book “Under the Sign of Saturn”, referencing Walter Benjamin’s attitude: “The self is a text-it has to be deciphered. The self is a project, something to be built. And the process of building a self and its works is always too slow” (Sontag. 1981, 117).

Sontag adds that Walter Benjamin finds it necessary to perceive life within physically lived experiences, which might constitute a parallel state with Cezanne’s approach.

“He says in “One Way Street”, as one never understands a landscape from an airplane but only by walking through it” (Sontag, 1981, 125). The slowness that Sontag mentions here and Walter Benjamin's approach to experiences stand as a summary to my approach, where I combine perception of artist and the melancholic state as resultant each other.

Cezanne appears as the main artist to explain artistic perception through creation process. In art history there are other explicit examples of artists with a similar approach, such as Albrecht Durer, Francisco de Goya, Alberto Giacometti, and more, which are explained in detail in Chapter 2.3 Individual Expressions Over Melancholy in Arts. May explains their common approach as an aim to bring to the foreground their own comprehension of the meaning of being human and to search for ways of transmitting these self-comprehensions through the real world. He defines creativity, as it requires an intensive awareness of being and increase of conscious (May, 1994, 68, 101).

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITION OF MELANCHOLY

Etymological acknowledgement of ‘Melancholy’ comes from the Ancient Greek. When *melan* represents ‘black’, *khole* means ‘bile’¹. Hippocrates does the earliest extensive medical research two thousand and five hundred years ago in ancient Medical School of Kos Island. Hippocrates gives the name ‘melancholia’ and it is assumed that the playwrights of the period Sophocles and Aristophanes influence him (Teber, 2009, 10). The ancient Greeks define melancholy as a black bile, which is a dark fluid inside the body. The depressive state of human is featured as a dark fluid secreted by an organ and pumping through the veins. By relating fluidal behavior of melancholy with sexual secretions alluding directly Dionysus and Aphrodite, Aristotle brings scientific and mythic references together. He declares melancholy is not a sickness that a philosopher experiences, but it is his nature (Kristeva, 1980, 15). Following Aristotle, we see, melancholy balanced with genius, comparable to anxiety of existence. It is a foreshadow of Heidegger’s anxiety thought of “Stimmung”, which is explained as a mood or an atmosphere ². Also, Schelling thought that philosophers are melancholic as a result of their extreme humanity (Kristeva, 1980, 16).

Perception of melancholy gets changed extensively in medieval age. During this time, it lay on the borderline of anomalous state and as revealing the nature of existence. The approach of medieval age goes back to the idea of cosmology which belongs to the first age’s late period; and relates melancholy with thought and wisdom planet: Saturn. In ancient Rome, Saturn was representing the God of liberation, agriculture and time. The God Saturn takes its origin from Cronus of Greek mythology, who eats his children to guarantee his security. It is necessary to mention Francisco de Goya, who depicted “Saturn Devouring His Son” (fig.4), aiming to convey his own depression. In Goya’s painting we come up with an example of redefining a mythological character on behalf of a personal condition (Morgan, 1990).

¹ "Melancholy | Definition of Melancholy in English by Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries | English. Accessed May 17, 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/melancholy>.

² Wheeler, Michael. "Martin Heidegger." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. October 12, 2011. Accessed May 17, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>.



Fig. 4: Francisco de Goya, “Saturn Devouring His Son”, Prado National Museum, 1819-23

In my painting “Get Caught” (fig.5), which belongs to the Reverie series, I try to associate Goya’s attitude towards his condition with my position with regard to today’s government mindset of restraining self-expressions through any media organ. My aim when painting my auto portrait is to convey to the viewer the feeling of a need to be merged into the void as I eat myself but getting caught anyways.



Fig. 5: Ahu Akgün, “Get Caught”, 2018

Today, definition of melancholy is given as a gloomy state of mind; a sober thoughtfulness, a feeling of misery; a pensive sadness, a part of a human experience of a natural reaction to a difficult situation³. These definitions of melancholy that declare that melancholy is a disorder needed to be cured, are still controversial among psychologists. Even though most of the psychologists examine melancholy as a disease, individuals commonly feel that melancholy can be regulated by their rational approaches (Borgna, 2014, 181).

Since my interest in melancholy is a positive one, in this thesis I am referring to the psychologists whose prevalent approach is opposed to considering melancholy as a disease. Eugenio Borgna, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Carl Jung examined melancholy as conceptualizing of profound emotions. According to them, the profundity of these emotions transforms into the realization of beauty and aesthetics through the temporariness inside the

³ "Melancholy." Dictionary.com. Accessed May 29, 2018. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/melancholy>.

life cycle. However, they agree that melancholy is a controversial and ambiguous concept even though their common approach has its positive aspects.

Eugenio Borgna in his book “Melancholy” denotes the types of melancholia into two states: One is clinical, a humored condition that is considered as a disease that is hardly endurable, an affected attitude that might cause a desperate state. This clinical state of melancholy, which needs a professional help to be cured, is an outcome of inherited and environmental factors.

Borgna explains the other type of melancholia as the state of mind that indicates the mood of the person. Due to the melancholic state of mind, the person is drawn into a despairing mood and anxiety. However, s/he is not definitely lost inside it and is able to transform the state of melancholy into something else (Borgna, 2014, 31-43). In the “Black Bile” series, my focus point is transforming melancholy into an artistic practice (fig.6) which is mentioned in the Introduction Section and further explained in 3.1 Black Bile Section.



Fig. 6: Ahu Akgün, “Loving Darkness”, 2015

Borgna finds it interesting that the signs and expressions of these types do not display notable differentiation. However, it is apparent that melancholy as a state of mind does not produce an anarchic reaction, as it does in a clinical disorder. It is possible to diagnose that both states include an anxiety towards an insurgent delusion that causes people to concern and to question their existence and their entity. Also, even just the questioning of existence causes anxiety that might be emphasized as not comparable to the commonly known melancholy (Borgna, 2014, 66-67). Rollo May considers it significant to distinguish melancholic anxiety from neurotic anxiety, which is characterized by inhibited vitality in his book “The Courage to Create” (May, 1994, 111).

Today, the created condition of our society drives me into the melancholic anxiety. Due to that feeling, in an ordinary day the words pertain a musing sadness, and quietness appear while the stereotypes and ordinariness of daily life vanish (Borgna, 2014, 67). I find myself within this silence, while I am painting mostly human figures that convey my profound expressions that are not able to settle themselves in physical reality. I transform the feeling into an art object, a painting. The process of creating heals me; I feel as if I comprehend more deeply the situation that we are living in. In the process of depicting, I constitute and develop a language of statement that dwells in the viewer.

As I mention in Chapter One, Susan Sontag, in her book “Under the Sign of Saturn”, points out a physically comprehensible attitude in Walter Benjamin’s standpoint towards melancholy. She advocates Benjamin’s relation to the planet Saturn with melancholy via an indication of the “apathetic, indecisive, slow” influence of Saturn over people. She adds, “Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament” (Sontag, 1981, 114). Benjamin defines himself as borne under the sign of Saturn and continuous “the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays...” in his ‘sorrow-play’ (the Trauerspiel) (Sontag, 1981, 111).

Due to this created condition, the feeling of drowning into society and its obligations appear thus the environment immediately becomes barred and suffocating. On the other hand, it is possible to observe people who live in this condition gain a feeling of connection to society soon after they feel the detachment. It seems that it is the reason of their hypersensitivity (Borgna, 2014, 67-69). Sontag's characterization of a “melancholic” in society is as follows:

As a prevalent approach, they mainly believed that melancholy was necessary for attaining insight, as in Robert Burton's evidential state in his masterpiece: "He that increaseth wisdom, increaseth sorrow" (Burton, 2000, 26).

2.1 Melancholy towards Creativity

Melancholy is considered as one of the physiological states that originate from inconstancy in the body approximately since 500 BC. Due to the unbalanced structure of the body, Hippocrates developed the four humors, which refer to body liquids that relate to particular emotions: sanguine (blood), phlegmatic (phlegm), choleric (yellow bile), and melancholic (black bile). Black bile refers to the melancholic attitude. People afflicted with melancholy are displayed as if they appear with a touch of genius that dissociates individuals from the rest of society (Sullivan, 2008). The social status of painters and sculptors are assumed as not as essential than craftsmen during the beginning of that era. They are considered in the same position with the working class and even sometimes they have been belittled by the society of the period. Until they are considered as 'geniuses', they have been through a process of rediscovering how to depict the forms of human body rather than obtaining ready prescriptions that have been developed by Egyptians (fig.8).



Fig. 8: "Kleobis and Biton", Delphi Archaeological Museum, 580 BC

The sculptors want to learn how to create an image of the body as seen by their own eyes. Since this era becomes interrogation of beliefs, traditions, and myths by its artists, they start to become the masters of expressing the unspeakable thoughts and feelings. Even as they have been despised and alienated by the snob part of the society, they also start to be considered beyond a religious or political sense, with their works of art themselves, by the growing number of the ruling class. To give an example Phidias is one of the most significant sculptors of Hellenistic Greece whose original works are destroyed after the hegemony of Christianity and just their copies remain. Art historians analyze the sculpture of Athena as more than an icon or a representation of demonic spirit, but as an exalted humanoid creature (fig.9).



Fig. 9: “Athena Parthenos”, a marble copy, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 3rd century CE

As the period of sculptor Praxiteles starts, the aim of creating bodies as alive as human and depicting the creatures of a ‘better world’ seem to be achieved (Gombrich, 1958, 74-104).

During the ongoing process of the era it is also necessary to mention the names of poets who give inspiration and subject of the visual artists of the period: Sappho (580 BC- 360 BC), Sophocles (497 BC-406 BC), Aristophanes (450 BC), Homer (9th or 8th century BCE), Aeschylus (525 BC- 456 BC) Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), and more.

Considering the era, Borgna refers to Aristotle's examination about such exceptional people: "Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry, or the arts are melancholic?" (Borgna, 2014, 174) Also Julia Kristeva mentions that according to Aristotle's approach, the melancholic state that is balanced with genius ranks within the same content with the anxiety of existence. Within that anxiety, it is possible to mention the gloomy state of individuals, but at the same time it is a sign of a creative being (Kristeva, 1980, 16,34). Throughout history, many philosophers have been challenged by the same question, although their responses varied. However, despite the controversy surrounding the argument, it would appear that connection of melancholy with creativity was a common thought among the philosophers.

In Borgna's "Melancholia", Hegel and Kierkegaard were utilized as subjects in the search for the "negative" inside the "positive", and the positive based within the negative ("negative is also positive within itself"). Moreover, Borgna adds in a dialectic evaluation of psychiatry itself, there is the intention to find the positive that implies the essence of life inside an extended negative (Borgna, 2014, 31-33). To rename, this positive approach stands as a creation process through arts. Within my process of creation, the negative aspect of the society that I am living in fills me with fear and anxiety that drives me to paint and sometimes within the subject of the tragedy itself.

For instance, right after the coup that happened in Turkey on 15th of July 2016, the urge of depicting the portraits of soldiers that were injured during the attempt, drive me into such comprehension. I empathize with those children and their families and their confusedness became my confusedness, their fear became my fear (fig.10).



Fig. 10: Ahu Akgün, “July”, 2016

2.2 Ambiguity in melancholy (the positive aspect of dark side)

In mythological narrations the characters display distinctive and contradictory mental states. Their moods usually fluctuate between anger and fear or attack and retreat. Especially in Homer’s Iliad, the characters’ attitudes possess the psychological poles of enthusiasm, anger, retreat, revolt, fear of God, desire of power, and fear of solitude at the same time. The reaction of mental tension and melancholic depiction show themselves for the first time in written history with Homer’s epos. Also, since Homer’s scripts within melancholic state of being is considered as revolting through order of power, this state is accepted as not only the beginning of arts but also psychology (Teber, 2009, 79, 82, 93).

Contemporary psychologist Rollo May observes the people of the ancient era to keep their profound passions under control not to tame but to transform the demonic powers into a creative utilization via form, ratio, and golden proportion (May, 1994, 113). The ambiguity of melancholic attitude shows itself during that transformation process. Considering the position of artist, melancholy might turn into an urge of creation along with its depressive expression. The profundity of emotions that artists possess becomes a positive aspect through the work of art. The analysis of transformation stages and the examples of availing from

melancholic mood through process of creation are mentioned below in the works of psychologists and philosophers such as Rollo May, Julia Kristeva, Carl Jung, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

In the *Courage to Create*, May emphasizes restrictions that creativity itself requires one to have. Creative acquisition appears with and against the limitations of an artist's experiences. Consciousness itself comes out within the awareness of these restrictions, and human conscious is a distinctive element of existence; people would not be able to improve their self-comprehension without limitations. Conscience is an awareness that comes out from dialectic tension between opportunities and limitations (May, 1994, 126). May adds that arts come from the tension between subjectivity and restrictions. Also this subjectivity obliges arts to be shaped in different forms (May, 1994, 127). The tension evokes itself within the work of art. The miserable one is not represented and there is no indicator. However, it is present, inside the work of art devotionally, not as material or representative figure but within its intuitional meaning (Soysal, 2003, 37).

It is not proper to define melancholy as the main base of creation but possible to say that it is a stage that an artist inevitably falls into.

Melancholy as a stage in creation takes place in Carl Jung's Alchemy Theory. Jung asserts that symbolism in arts conveys more than its visible entity. Thus, he points to alchemy as a metaphor of self-transmuting process while alchemy refers to converting base metal into gold to support the idea of considering items in various contexts. This reconsideration process appears in Sigmund Freud's 'Sublimation' theory, which Jung also refers to (Jung, 1971, 37). In "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud proposes that melancholy arises from an inner reflection of the object that is loved and hated at the same time (Kristeva, 1980, 120). Jung relates this Freudian theory to the alchemist trick of converting base metal into gold, while Freud explains that it as transmuting negative into positive or void into adequate one (Jung, 1971, 37).

Therewith, Jung determines the theory of 'Individuation' that refers to alchemic process of generating the "philosopher's stone". Jung describes the 'Individuation' process as a metaphor to alchemy that is associated to the main units of consciousness. The theory of 'Individuation' is depicted as reconstructing the conscious out of individual and collective unconscious. He also explains this reconstruction process as 'finding the center of the Self'

that also can be named as self-awareness (Miller, 1986). Achieving this self-awareness might be compelling for the ones who avoid preferring the path of facing his/her profound, dark thoughts and feelings. This condition might be considered as in the contrast of artistic character who is deprived him/her self from compromising with society while feeling comfortable to follow their own passions that confronts them with their unconscious demands. As a result of confrontation, artistic product is created and the process becomes self-comprehension (Jung, 1971, 83). Also, especially he refers to analogy between 'Individuation' process which is also named as 'finding the Self', the process of transforming base metal into gold which is alchemic approach, and process of creativity that includes melancholy as a stage. It is important to look into the stages of alchemy more thoroughly to understand the relation between melancholy and the creation process. The alchemic approach is established in four stages: nigredo (blackening), albedo (whitening), citrinitas (yellowing), and rubedo (reddening).

Nigredo stage carries the property of introduction to create the philosopher's stone. The image of blackening is indicated as depressive state of a being. The second stage, albedo, is the status of distillation from the disorganized and complex structure of Nigredo. In albedo, the focus subject is evaluated in two antithetical categories. This stage is also named as 'whitening'. The third one is the wisdom stage, Citrinitas. It directly cites transforming base metal into gold. The last stage Rubedo is identified with integrity of the self and it is the achievement status of alchemy that represented with red color (Jung, 2014, 231). Melancholy presents itself in nigredo stage of alchemy. When the being tries to emancipate him/her self from this blackening stage, he/she forces him/herself to encounter with his/her profound, dark emotions or in other words with his/her own demon (Miller, 1986). This is where the melancholic attitude of a creative being appears.

Jung follows the traces of the symbolic forms of alchemy that appear through the unconscious, where dreams and delusions of a being display themselves. Iona Miller argues that the Jungian approach of symbolism through sub consciousness is not possible to define with rational terms, but through ambiguous images and symbols. These ambiguous symbols mostly appear through alchemical, mythological or religious references that gain meaning by indicating these concepts (Miller, 1986). While Jung mentions these symbolist images he also refers to works of art. He adds that art does not have to possess a certainty and an

obligation to express specific meaning, that it “does not explain itself and is always ambiguous” (Jung, 1971, 104). Jung explains this process of artistic creation as if the artist seeks for fusion of opposing aspects, and thus which causes a depressive state by venturing and dominating humanistic desires such as contentment, safety, or amusement (Jung, 1971, 101). Also when Kristeva defines creativity, she mentions linking up the subjects of contrary contents and attributes this ability to the melancholic being. She describes melancholic character during creation process as if they liberate a subject from its fixed and consistent meaning (Kristeva, 1980, 76). Likewise, the duality of the creation process and the subject itself appear in Freud’s theory of ‘Sublimation’ as I mentioned above.

Ambiguity of negative through positive and its vice versa again appear in Eastern approach. As Jung mentions “The light of wisdom shines only in the dark, not in the brightly lit theatre of our European consciousness and will” (Jung, 1971, 59). Additionally, he considers the theory of yin and yang as aspects that ensuing each other, when one ends the contrary one begins. “Thus yang at its highest point changes into yin, and positive into negative” (Jung, 1971, 61).

According to Jungian theory, art is a psychological activity that displays itself in the process of creation, which includes melancholic state. Moreover, this state is not a disorder while considering artists, and he avoids medical treatment regarding creative beings. Rather, he thinks it is significant to create within artists psyche’s restrictions and he finds this condition helpful through creativity process. This state of the artist contributes to transform their profound and bothersome conditions into a positive state, into an act, into an artwork (Jung, 1971, 102).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addresses Jung’s theory of darkness inside a being, arguing that the consequence of ignorance by the possessors of this darkness, is discontent personality. The aspect of possessing darkness is present in every individual but the approaches to evolve this state differ. Generally, the poles of the psyche appear as developing only one pole, which leads the individual into dissatisfaction. As opposed to disowning attitude, creative beings indigenize both poles as perceiving offensiveness and toleration simultaneously. Csikszentmihalyi mentions that creative beings’ character is distinguished by complexity:

“Like color white that includes all hues in the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 57).

Among this characteristic spectrum that Csikszentmihalyi mentions, the main discouraging state for creative personality is to endure the feeling of void and loss that restrain the creation process. When their ability of creation returns, satisfaction appears and it is the most familiar feeling among every creative beings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 74).

The leading researcher in positive psychology, Csikszentmihalyi, establishes the theory of ‘Flow’ that mirrors the joy that appears during the fulfilled process of working. On the other hand, he finds contentment disturbing until the work is done; the joy comes soon after they leave being in the ‘Flow’. “The more flow is experienced in daily life, the more likely we are to feel happy overall” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 39). Csikszentmihalyi also mentions that the ‘Flow’ theory includes darkness within the process of creation. In his book “Creativity”, Csikszentmihalyi compiles the attitude of a creative personality. In his line up, he involves the dark side of creative personality in the 10th row: “Finally, the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to suffering and pain yet also great deal of enjoyment” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 73). He explains this suffocating attitude an artist inevitably falls into as the inspiration for their work of arts. He gives an example of claim made by novelist and academician Richard Stern: “...every negative feeling, is in a way precious. It is your building material, it is your stone, and it is something you use to build your work. I would say the conversion of the negative is very important... Don’t duck pain. It is precious, it is your gold mine, and it is the gold in your mine” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 260-262). Also as a supportive idea of melancholy in creation process, he mentions Jacob Rabinow, who assumes himself in jail to help him generate an atmosphere of isolation and thus becomes vulnerable and alienated from society, as he creates (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 73).

Since the artists are sensitive enough to be counted as out of bounds and easily hurt, the researchers evaluate their condition as more to be inclined to be addictive and under the threat of psychological disorders. Mark Strand, as Csikszentmihalyi mentions, defines melancholic based attitudes as if they possess ‘characterological makeup’ either this ‘makeup’ displays itself as failing with addictions or instead turns into a prolific mindset (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 73).

Even Jung seems like-minded with Csikszentmihalyi while he defines melancholy as not only an impression but also an accompaniment for artists. He reads a work of art by developing more ideas than its artist attempts to convey. Jung claims that contemporary art arises from psychological requirements of communities that an artist considers, rather than taking as a subject their personal and profound sufferings as in the Romantic era, which obligates one to display sensitivity of the artists' personal depths, still considering their unique perceptions (Jung, 1971, 117).

In Greek mythology anxiety finds itself hand in hand with urge of creation, which leads us to Apollo. It is important to remember that he is the God of form, sense and rationale. That's why the Apollo Temple became crucial in those chaotic times and it is not coincidental that citizens searched for the reasons and meanings beneath the assurance of the God of balance and proportion (May, 1994, 112). The form of archaic sculpture of Apollo's eyes (fig.11) are distinguished with its wideness from classical ancient Greece sculptures and also from standard proportions, which is determined by the sculptor Polycleitus (450-415 BCE) with his Doryphoros (c. 450–440 BCE) sculpture, also known as the Greek Canon.⁴ This wide-open eyes show the tension and state the high level of awareness and watching far and wide of the mobilization era. Even if at first sight these sculptures seem entirely powerful and conquering, they possess the eyes of anxiety.

⁴ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Polyclitus." Encyclopædia Britannica. May 04, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polyclitus>.



Fig. 11: “Apollo Belvedere”, Vatican Museum, Museo Pio Clementino, 350 BC

Also it is possible to mention that with the depiction of the wide eyes, the aim of the work of art can be read as if it is not only conveying the anxiety of its artist’s era but also expressing his inner tension (May, 1994, 115). In that manner, what we deduce about ancient Greeks was that they were aware of the significance to dominate and also direct those urges. They believe that the essence of a virtuous being is not to be chosen by their passions but to be able to choose their own passions (May, 1994, 116).

2.3. Individual expressions over melancholy in art

Although the approaches to melancholy of the psychologists and philosophers mentioned above vary, it is possible to see melancholy as state of mind and its reflections on creative experiences through a number of artists. While some of them take melancholy as a subject itself though their works of art, some just leave it to the viewer to sense, with methods of painting which appear sometimes by a look of a figure and sometimes with a brush stroke or a color selection.

The most apparent example of taking melancholy as the subject it self can be considered as Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) engraving 'Melencolia I' (see fig.7) in which he exposed the relation between melancholy and creativity by emphasizing the grief within an amazing talent and passion (Sullivan, 2008). Dürer depicts the humor of a melancholic woman as sitting on stairs with an undetermined architectural style, during twilight. This place might be anywhere and anytime. The woman is surrounded by meaningful disorder. Not only she is depicted in a melancholic mood but also even the hammer and nails are represented as solitary and desolate. The engraving gives a psychic tension that leaves the viewer in a bizarre emptiness while it is overcrowded with symbolic elements. The wings that are attached to her back contradict the position of her body, which shows a decreasing physical vitality. According to some researchers, the wings pertain to the spirit more than the body. It might emphasize the symbol of wholesome, gloomy, suspicious and wise people with the desire of departing this life. According to Dürer, maybe the melancholic beings are not dry and cold people as assumed; he depicts the melancholic woman as wearing the chaplet out of lively plants, emphasizing the vitality of melancholic' creative minds (Teber, 2009, 23-25, 28,30).

There have been artists that take the same melancholic approach, emulating Dürer's engraving 'Melencolia I.' One such is Francisco de Goya (1746- 1828) whose creative life is expanded one of the most complicated periods of history and his work of arts carry the reflections of this war era (Teber, 2009, 72). His critical approach through irrationality, sensuality, anger and violence display themselves in his "the Caprichos" (1775-79) series of engraving (Bareau, 1996, 29) (Fig.12).

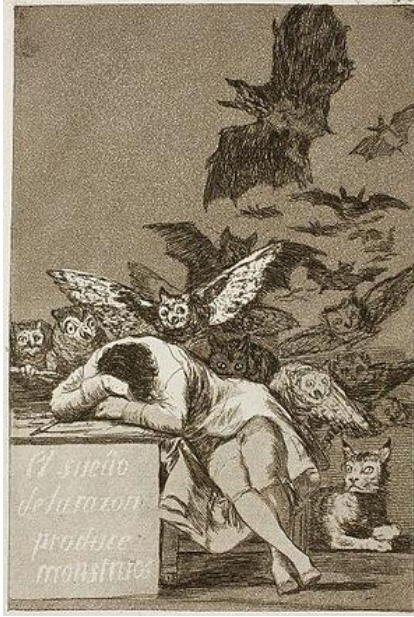


Fig. 12: Francisco de Goya, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” (plate of Los Caprichos 43), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1799

Since he is influenced deeply by the Peninsular War that is also known as War of Independence (1808-14), he starts to convey his dark emotions through his “Disaster of War” series (fig.13).

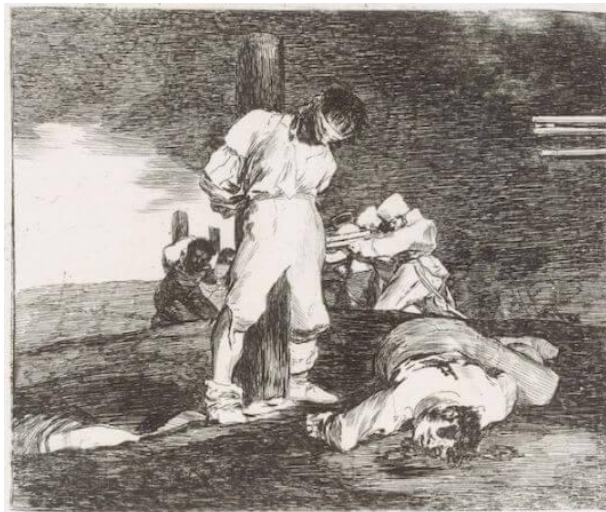


Fig. 13: Francisco de Goya, “And There’s Nothing to Be Done”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1810

The transformation of this dark era continues to show itself through one of his masterpieces, “The Third of May, 1808” where the execution of Spanish rebels is displayed against Napoleon Bonaparte's army (fig.14).



Fig. 14: Francisco de Goya, “The Third of May, 1808”, Prado Museum, 1814

The signs of melancholic attitude through Goya’ work of arts become more apparent through his late 14 paintings that are named afterwards as “Black Painting” (1820-23) series, originally wall paintings that he painted on his house walls outskirts of Madrid (See fig.4) (Bareau, 1996, 9).

After the 19th century, when the causes of melancholy were diagnosed as the social conditions of the environment, people start to run away from their main playground: the world and its societies. As Teber emphasizes, creative minds search of a dream for “*A Room of One’s Own*” as reference to Virginia Woolf, to protect and find themselves in between soul and spirit, nature and human, physics and metaphysics, wild and civilization. As a result, the melancholic and incompatible human soul tries to follow the traces of the lost outer world from his/her own mirror that s/he keeps in that room (Teber, 2009, 300-302).

Regarding melancholic diagnosed artists, in 2006 an exhibition was held in the Berlin New National Gallery named "Melancholy, Genius and Insanity" in Art. Approximately 350 works of art were shown, from antiquity to contemporary art, forms such as Pieter Bruegel, Edward Hopper and Caspar David Friedrich and more, to display the suffering and the process of creation through different art cultures.⁵

To express melancholic emotion, various methods, figures and symbols are used. Artists such as Jean-Antoine Watteau, Paul Klee, Max Beckmann, Pablo Picasso, Edward Hopper and more choose to depict "Pierrot type" which is a character that is appeared in Padua comedy theatres (Italy) around 1545. In 1570, an Italian comedy theatre group developed the Pierrot type as a mask to criticize the social deformity and hypocrisy of Renaissance period. Within increasing social tensions, some artists started to make gloomy music to emphasize their despairing conditions, wearing outfits of white clothes and masks. With his depiction of Pierrot, Watteau (1648-1721) (fig.15) perpetuates the character as gloomy, desperate, insecure, exhausted but despite of all possessing the power of standing straight on his feet (Teber, 2009, 306-310).



Fig. 15: Jean-Antoine Watteau, "Pierrot", Louvre Museum, 1718

⁵ Robert. "'Melancholy' Proves to Be a Powerful Lure." Europe Breaking News. November 05, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2018. <https://www.europebreakingnews.net/2006/04/melancholy-proves-to-be-a-powerful-lure/>

Regarding Edward Hopper's (1882-1976) Pierrot depiction in 1914 (fig.16) the viewer encounters someone incompatible with society, while the Pierrot is depicted sitting in the center of a casually gathered community. With the contradiction of his melancholic glances and his outfit, his entity becomes much more meaningless and even awkward (Teber, 2009, 310).

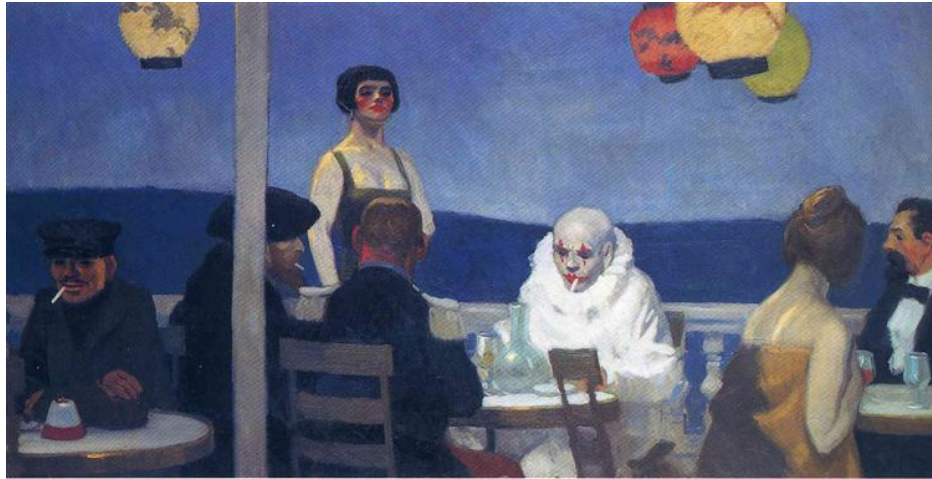


Fig. 16: Edward Hopper, "Blue Night", Whitney Museum of American Art, 1914

Other than symbolic characters, melancholy is formed as a mental state, especially in portraits. While the artists display the subject mostly by using the figure of a woman, a man or a child in profound emotions in the gloominess of a landscape, also they find themselves in a melancholic emotion. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), in his early years, copes with poverty and weakness of his emotions and with the suicide of his close poet friend Carles Casagemas, he becomes much more desperate (fig.17). In his Blue Period (1901-1904) the traces of his sorrow are displayed (fig.18) (Gotthardt, 2018).

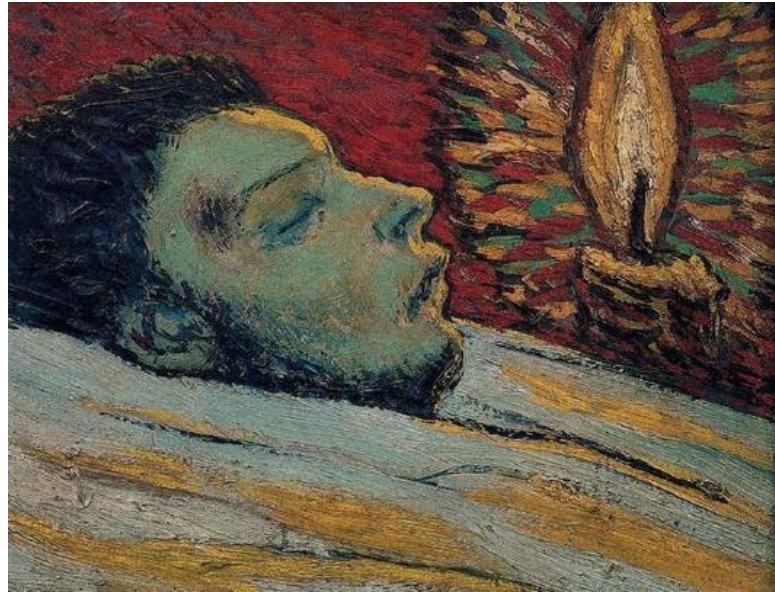


Fig. 17: Pablo Picasso, "The Death of Casagemas", Musée Picasso Paris, 1901.

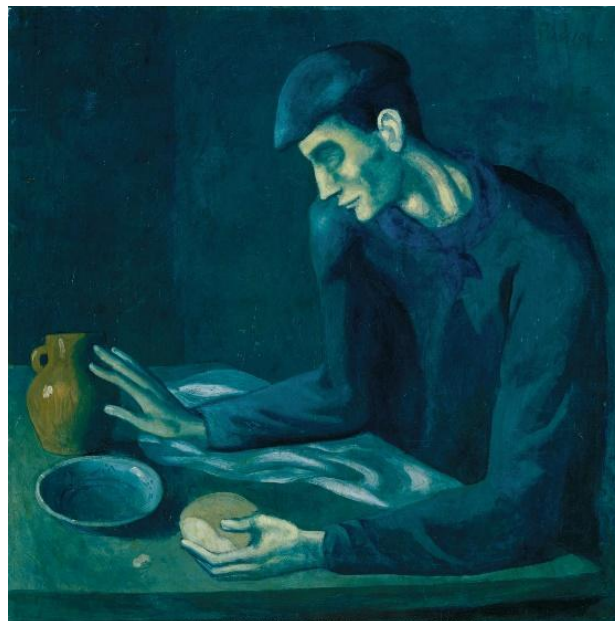


Fig. 18: Pablo Picasso, "The Blind Man's Meal", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1903

The prolific attitude of Picasso indicates what Borgna emphasizes, seeing a positive aspect in a negative state of mind, where most artists give the impression of managing with the feeling of melancholia by transforming it into an art piece (Borgna, 2014, 32).

Borgna affirms Karl Jaspers' approach to the unquestioned relation of melancholic experiences with creative ones, as an emotion that reveals the suppressed genius by transforming inherent impulses into an artwork. For sure, an art piece's value is detached from the psychological state of an artist (Borgna, 2014, 182). But also it is not controvertible to declare that the melancholic themed art pieces are created as a result of dreadful experiences (Borgna, 2014, 181). As a result of conveying the melancholic emotions to the viewers by their artworks sincerely, the viewers get the feeling of melancholy from those paintings immediately. Soysal explains the reflection of artist through his/her work of art by associating painting with poetry, which also stands as an effort to leave a creation behind. These leaved traces are demanded to be emphasized on indication of the painter, 'I': traces of him/herself and as a result, the painting becomes the witness 'I' of the artist (Soysal, 2003, 22).

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) is another example of an artist that brings his psycholological determinations to the foreground through his work of art. He aims to depict and express mental crises of the modern life, including the entire process of the World War I period (1914-1918). With his usage of lines and colors he displays (fig.19) the urban people through his era in a critical way as showing their hypocrisy, anxiousness and stricken psychologies (Teber, 2009, 317).

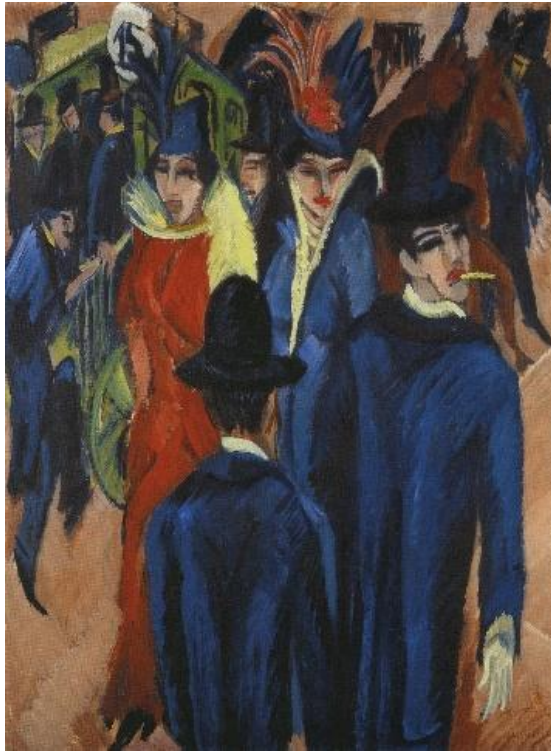


Fig. 19: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "People in the Street", private collection, 1913

Expressionists attempt to display social upheaval of their own era by depicting their self-portraits, their "I", especially through their own eyes. They perceive depicting self-portraits as mirroring their society (Teber, 2009, 314). In his self-portraits (fig.20), while Kirchner searches for his own biography and acknowledgment of the "self", he starts to use a technique that contains intermittent lines and fragments to display the effect of war on himself explicitly (fig.21) (Teber, 2009, 317).



Fig. 20: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "Self-portrait", Saarland Museum, 1916

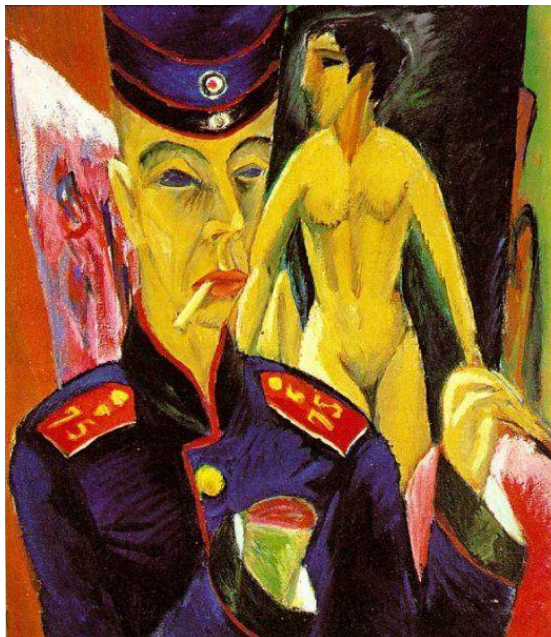


Fig. 21: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. "Self-portrait as a Soldier", Allen Memorial Art Museum,
1915

Max Beckmann (1884-1950) can be mentioned as another artist that displays his own era by depicting self-portraits (fig.22). His pieces are assumed as most sincere, while he is afflicted with mental depressions and fear crises during the war and his aim is always to convey the meaningless of life (Teber, 2009, 321).



Fig. 22: Max Beckmann, “Self-Portrait with a Cigarette”, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1923

The German painter and sculptor Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) who suffers from mental disorder and is sensitive about injustice results of war and poverty, depicts herself (fig.23) in the attitude the woman in Dürer’s “Melencolia I” engraving as hands on her head (Teber, 2009, 321).



Fig. 23: Kathe Kollwitz, “Self-Portrait with Hand on Forehead”, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1910

While Otto Dix (1891-1969) depicts himself as a soldier (1915), Erich Heckel (1883-1970) as a solitary being with existential sufferings (1919) and Egon Schiele (1890-1918) shows the pain through his figures, not only in portraits but also in body parts; they all have a common feeling of melancholia that occupies their creative approaches, arising from their eras of suffering.

As an explicit example of an artist who inevitably fell into a melancholic attitude during the process of creation, we can consider the book of “A Giacometti Portrait”, written by James Lord (fig.24) in 1965 during his modeling for Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) in 1964. Lord takes notes of Giacometti’s attitude from the beginning to the end of while his portrait is being depicted (fig.24). As Lord emphasizes, Giacometti is seemingly desperate to avoid starting something new in his first hour. He is aware of the power to display his own visual reality through other people who affect his neural system negatively.

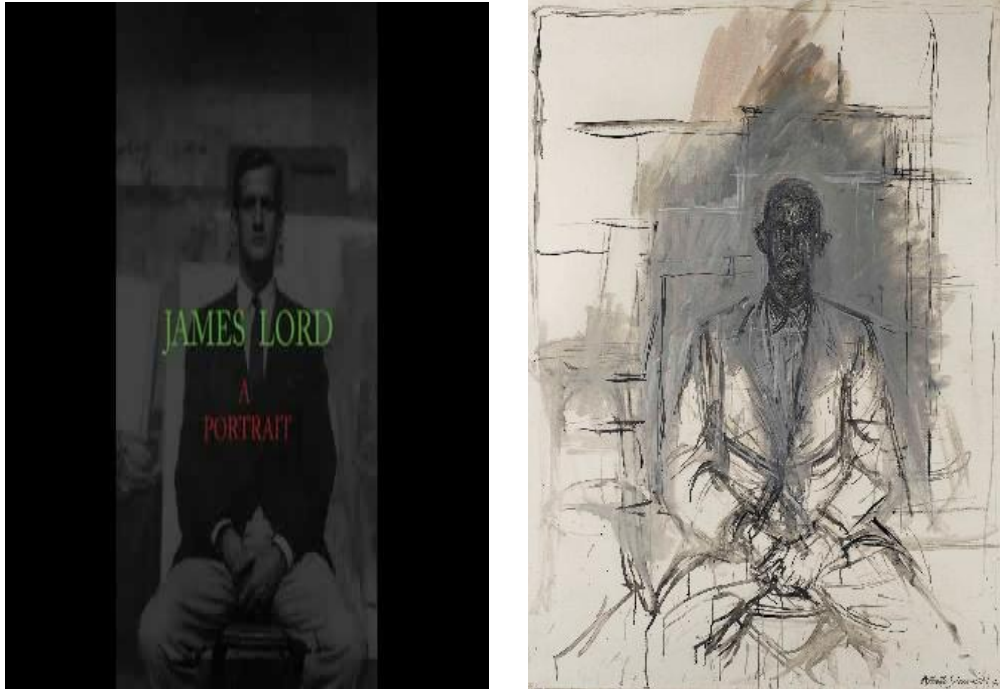


Fig. 24: Alberto Giacometti, "Portrait of James Lord", 1964

Through his anxiety he starts to make determinations: he thinks that the more you work on a painting, the more finishing it becomes inaccessible. During the whole process Lord finds Giacometti as being doubtful by necessity about his own talent, not just over the portrait that he has been doing but also over all the works that he has done before. In his book, Lord depicts Giacometti's physical attitude in his breaks, sitting on his chair with his hands dangle to the floor in an absolute depression as if there is no chance and hope for the rest of his life. All his anxiety shows itself as melancholic breathings and angry exclamations that display his inevitable pain. Lord determines that his urge of creation never leaves him and never gives a him moment of relief (Lord, 1997, 16, 21, 23, 30, 44-45).

CHAPTER 3

MY PROJECTS

My art practice and process have always related to emotions that I confront in my daily life. As a result of melancholy, I find the opportunity to transform feeling into art objects that have also started to become my reflection on current events. The painting series “Black Bile” consists of 6 pieces that were painted before my graduate studies but named and conceptualized afterwards. My departure point for those paintings has been the tragic political events that have occurred around us and the responses that I have given to those events in a reflexive way.

During my graduate education in Sabancı University, the works that I produced under the name of Reverie series have a similar departure point. Found visuals that are usually displayed in newspapers, movies or social media, as well as personal photographs and reflections of all these visual images in my dreams inspire me. These visuals may be the scenes of a political demonstration or an image of immigrants, a crowded city scene or a natural disaster. I also sometimes combine these images with texts that I read that are not directly related to the subjects. I try to combine these unrelated concepts in my paintings. All those images serve as indirect sources to my compositions; while those images appear formally in my paintings, they may at times also give the impression of profoundness.

Another way of conveying melancholic emotion to the viewer and inviting them to a similar state of mind is through the use of my color palette and gazed figures. While the illusion of three-dimensional figures staring to the void, absorb the viewer; the limited color palette with bluish greys helps me to create an atmosphere of non-real space that leaves the viewer in a limbo between a dreamy mood and reality.

When I start to draw, my imagination, rather than the usage of visible ready source materials, comes to the foreground. In the early stage of my working process I construct the composition in small sketches mostly inspired from my image sources. When I settle in front of my canvas, I tend to place the figures using a pencil (fig.25).



Fig. 25: Ahu Akgün. “Who Get Under-4”, the imaginary first stage, pencil on canvas, 2018

The process continues through proposing to my entourage, especially to my colleagues, if they would like to that they be the models, mostly for my big scale, crowded compositions (Reverie series). Also I let the models to choose the pose that they want to see themselves in. So, as I take their photographs while they are posing, I care about their comfort and allow them to devote themselves to that pose (fig.26). Most the models that I use have, concerns over the existential problems of our generation, just like me. I tend to attach them a common profound feeling that they probably once felt. While considering the comfort of my models, I attempt to provide a realistic scene on my canvas. That is why I make them choose the character that they want to be depicted as.



Fig. 26: Process of “Who Get Under-4”, while Ayşe Aydoğan poses for my painting, 2018

Below, I tried to explain my intention and what I want to convey through painting to the viewer. The list below displays my approaches one by one but to keep in mind, what viewer gains from my works are free from the concepts that I intended to convey.

3.1. Black Bile

The “Black Bile” series were shown in Mamut Art Project, 2016 with an explanatory text below:

“In Ancient Greece, it was believed that the ‘black bile’ circulating in the human body was the source of melancholy. The perception of sorrow was depicted as a black fluid, or humor, secreted by organs. The fluid nature of melancholy and the process in my work have been identified with one another. The aesthetic concerns and search for beauty which accommodates melancholy, has become the issue that compelled me to select my themes from the inside of life itself.

The Process:

It began with the radio, with the news.

The news was about how The College Student Selection and Placement Center (“O-OSYM”) (fig.27) forced the students and the families into total confusion and dilemma with its obligations and constantly changing exam system. Then the agenda suddenly changed.



Fig. 27: Ahu Akgün, “O-OSYM”, 2014

In Manisa, Soma a coalmine explosion occurred on 13 May 2014. 301 people were, trapped underground, 301 people covered with soil and the “wives, fathers, daughters, sons, brothers and sisters” (fig.28) were waiting in hope.



Fig. 28: Ahu Akgün, “Wives, Fathers, Daughters, Sons, Brothers and Sisters”, 2014

Next, the tragedy of a violently slaughtered women in Mersin on 11 February 2015 was on the news. Everybody was in grief as if it was the first time a woman was raped and murdered in Turkey. Later the story of a raped and killed university student, Özgecan Aslan once again put forth the subjects of violence against women. Finally, this repeated appearance of deaths and violence made public say “stop!” (fig.29). Demonstrations began.



Fig. 29: Ahu Akgün, “Say Stop”, 2015

These continuous tragedies almost caused an endless mourning in the country. People overfed by news segments of unending tragedies could not keep up with sadness. Each disaster is forgotten along with its tragedy.

A new disaster was occurring before I could get over the previous one. Neither my wrist, nor my soul could not keep up with the agenda and this collective amnesia brought me to a point of giving up on depicting current events.

As a result of not willing them to be forgotten and to forget, I turned my gaze to what I have “within” (fig.30); to the moments of demanding the presence of each other, even through “within-2” (fig.31) the violence and anxiety that our eyes reflect.



Fig. 30: Ahu Akgün, “Within”, 2014



Fig. 31: Ahu Akgün, “Within-2”, 2014

Nonetheless, I wanted to love this world that we fill with tragedy obscured behind the beauty of our presence. In “Loving Darkness” (see fig.6), I channeled the sadness that I felt from the news into an expanded melancholic mood through my life. I learned to live with it and to be productive, like everyone else...”⁶

⁶ From the text of Black Bile exhibited in Mamut Art Project 2016.

3.2. Reverie

Dictionary definition of ‘reverie’ is “*a state of being pleasantly lost in one's thoughts; a daydream; fanciful and impractical idea or theory.*”⁷

A group exhibition is held in 2001 called “Regrets, Reveries. Changing Skies” curated by Fulya Erdemci which took place in Karşı Sanat Gallery, İstanbul. The participant Ahmet Soysal defines and refers to reverie in the exhibition booklet as:

“Not a dream, or rather a conscious dream. Some sort of ‘contemplation accompanied by pictures, visions’. Usually requires a comfortable and peaceful state of mind. In some ways, a surface. Reverie has a certain sort of softness to it. A dip that remains on the surface...but suddenly you can arrive at somewhere else. For reverie is at the same time a form of travel. Unlike meditation, it is not an instant but a prepared jump (or plunge) into the deep but reverie, too, is a form of traversing ways. One could call it ‘being lost in imagination’ or ‘imagining’. Compared to the ambitions, claims of meditation, reverie is more modest: it does not demand a result or a gain” (Erdemci, 2001, 58).

Rollo May suggests that people allow themselves in their dreams to do cataclysmic things which they probably avoid uttering or even thinking about in their day dreams. People feel as if they undertake its individual responsibility, but if these fanciful thoughts are mentioned or evoked by someone else, people embrace the tragedies or cataclysmic situations easily (May, 1994, 119).

As a series of paintings and installations in Reverie, I intend to create a story that brings together fanciful and realistic aspects concurrently. I aim to be the one who evokes the cataclysmic events in a profound way. Therefore all the ‘fictional’ works have a reference to what I see around my environment as tragic or what those events evoke in my subconscious. The series might be considered as a reaction to what is going on around us. In Reverie Series, my purpose is to convey the thought of questioning today’s humanity state to the viewer; to make them to look around as honestly as possible without denying the darkness around,

⁷ "Reverie | Definition of reverie in English by Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries | English. Accessed December 22, 2017. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reverie>.

thereby offering the viewer an atmosphere of reverie by trying to create a common daydreaming space.

“Who Get Under”

The series of polyptych paintings refer to a child game that targets to the weak one. The game starts with addressing the fragile one and continues with squeezing him/her under by jumping on him/her until s/he accepts that s/he is defeated. The name of the game translates into English as “taking the life who get under”. To sum it up, if one player is weak and below his/her entourage, life will be finished by the other players who are ahead.

In the life-sized series of paintings 1-2-3 (fig.32-33-34), the scenes display the stages of people gathering to play this game. Even it is determined as a child play, it implies the analogy through the hierarchical structure of the system we are living in. As the series aim to constitute awareness through its viewer, the game becomes a representation of having one’s hands tied in relation to power. Also, it is an energetic, vivacious and action based game. So other than the way it is named where this blues comes from? Soysal examines the blues inside gameplay as relevant to every experience we live in daily life. According to him a game is not an illusion, but the reality and he associates the reality of playing with what a viewer receives from arts (Soysal, 2003, 114).



Fig. 32: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-1”, 2015



Fig. 33: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-2”, 2017



Fig. 34: Ahu Akgün, “Who Get Under-3”, 2016

In the painting-4 (fig.35), I depict the life sized figures on an unbalanced platform trying to remain standing, even they are aware that they are going to collapse. The figures' are blurry

as if they are just the viewers of the game or going to participate. With this contradictory pose, I intend to leave the viewer in a questioning position.



Fig. 35: Ahu Akgün, "Who Get Under-4", 2018

With this life-sized series of paintings, I intend to carry the viewer to an awareness of the spookiness that we are living in by creating a familiar atmosphere of a child game then bringing it to an atmosphere of melancholy and beyond a game to today's reality.

Other Works

The war in Syria and the tragic news about refugees affected the entire world. During the most intense moments of Syrian refugees trying to cross the borders of Europe I had this very vivid dream: I saw myself in clothes and had lifebuoy on, insistently trying to dive into dark, wavy water, feeling as if underwater was the safest place. My attitude was one I would never be able to understand, an impossibility to dive while my buoy is on. In depicting the girl with lifebuoy on (fig.36), I try to convey the insistence of surviving. The girl is depicted as a hero with her anxiety but also ready to overcome every trouble.



Fig. 36: Ahu Akgün, Untitled, 2016

“Self-censor” (fig.37) is a self-portrait where I depict myself tied up with paper tape. In this painting I am the one who restrains myself by taping my own body and leaving it motionless. While I am criticizing my inertia, the painting stands as a symbol of self-accusation.



Fig. 37: Ahu Akgün, “Self Censor”, 2017

“My Closed Eye, Sighted Eye” (see fig.1), is a self-portrait that references the biographic book “*Miraculous Mandarin*”, of Turkish writer Aslı Erdoğan. I depict myself with one eye closed- the opposite of Erdoğan’s when she depicts herself possessing a disabled eye. My intent is to come eye to eye with her in the name of supporting through her unjustly detained period in 2016.

“I’m not a child anymore but I still haven’t understood how other eyes see the world. Though my right eye, the healthy one, compared to the other eyeball that hasn’t lost its partner, is

way wiser; so to speak, has been around the block a few times. In fact, it can even be said that it's a bit know-it-all; stealing off the reality from the other eye, which from a quick calculation is nearly the half of the reality itself.

'King Oedipus has an eye too many' Hölderlin said, laying in his bed at the mental hospital. What keeps my mind on lately is this: Was it before or after Oedipus stabbed out his eyes that they were too many?

No way I can interpret this enigmatic statement from Hölderlin; but I feel my missing eye, my left eye, without any help from the mind, the memory or the myths; all on its own, has already solved the mystery. ”⁸

In “23 seconds” (fig.38): I depict portraits by quoting from Bruno Dumont ‘s movie, "L'humanité", where we see the starring character fall down and stare for 23 seconds in the beginning of the movie which leaves the viewer with questioning the concepts of falling down, inertia and death. While I depict the women’s faces lying on earth, I try to interrogate and associate with our inner attitudes. I intend to convey our usual attitude of pretending as if we are dead and mute towards dreadful events. My aim in the paintings is also to leave the viewer in a contradictory position of if the women are still alive or not.



Fig.

38: Ahu Akgün, “23 Seconds”, 2016

⁸ Translated by Defne Tesal, Erdoğan, Aslı. *Mucizevi Mandarin*. Istanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2016.

“A season” (fig.39); quotes landscapes from the opening scene of Erden Kiral’s 1982 film “*A Season in Hakkari*”. The movie focuses on the difficulties of villagers living in Hakkari. The aggravated life circumstances of the area unfold in wide angled scenes of the village, which conveys the melancholic atmosphere that the season brings. By the non-figurative painting of the movie scene I try to catch the moment of melancholy without linking directly the life of villager figures.



Fig. 39: Ahu Akgün, “A Season”, 2016

“Bird Repellent” and “Swirl”

Since 2015 I have been collecting the papers that I tear out to roll tobacco. (In order to stick, the cigarette papers obligate to tear up one side) The collection of boxes of papers represents smoked cigarettes and become the indication of harm that I have been giving to myself and to my environment. In 2017 I found myself devoted while rolling this remaining papers in a thorn form. I felt as if I was building up a space that is protected by the thorns that comes out from damaging aspect. “Bird Repellent” (fig.40) became a plant design installation with its black construction wire and smoked tobacco papers where I felt secure inside.

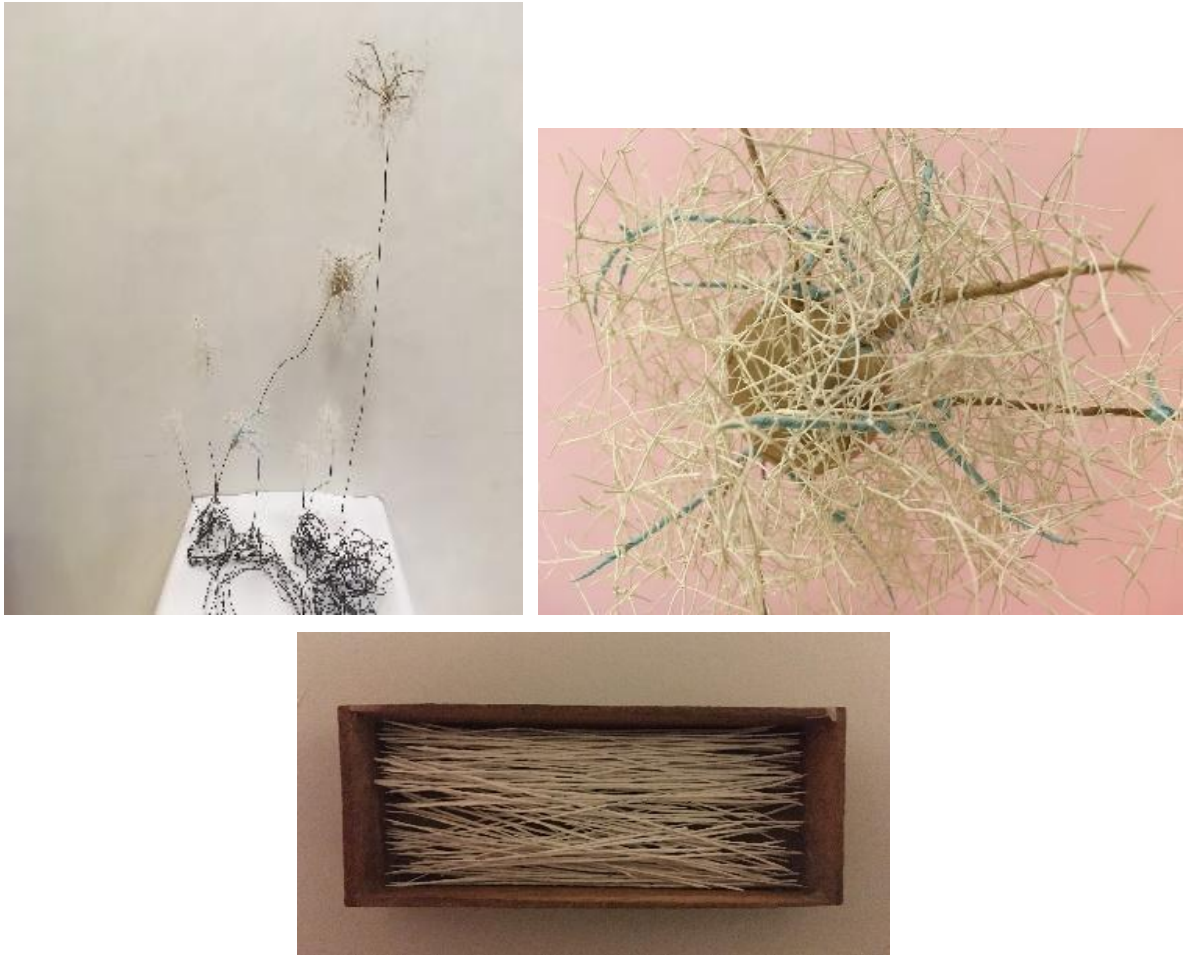


Fig. 40: Ahu Akgün, “Bird Repellent”, 2017

“Swirl” (fig.41) is another representation of dark wave that represents itself in my studio in Sabancı University. Its vortex structure gives me the feeling of endless movement in my working space. The fluid behaviour of melancholy displays itself in a different atmospheric form within the wire sculpture.



Fig. 41: Ahu Akgün, “Swirl”, 2017

“Black Bile” photo book

The challenge that I have been through in my Sabancı University education also involves a photo book project supervised by Murat Germen. In that project I again aimed to convey melancholic emotion but in a different medium, as photography. My intent was searching how a landscape can convey an emotion. I started with taking the photos of woody places around Sabancı University Campus. It was not sufficient for me, just taking the photos of the landscapes that we do not easily recognize but encounter everyday. Thus I started to add etchings to reinforce my approach through melancholy (fig.42). These etchings sometimes appeared as figures, sometimes as bushes that cover the original scene that provided a visible

entity to my inner sight, to my melancholic approach. At the end, the result became three unique editions of photography book.



Fig. 42: Ahu Akgün, “Black Bile”, a selection from Photo book Project, 2016

“Irfan waits for Ali” and “Loving Darkness-2”

In 2017 I participated in “Are We Happy”, a group exhibition held in Gallery 5 Istanbul, with two paintings. Our purpose was to redefine happiness in the name of art from different disciplines. I depicted my grandmother Irfan’s portrait, since she is suffering from dementia while she is waiting for her imaginary husband Ali on a bench (fig.43). I tried to redefine happiness focusing in her imaginary new world. In her new environment she is married and has loving husband. All, as she wants is all is in her mind



Fig. 43: Ahu Akgün, “Irfan waits for Ali”, 2017

I also displayed “Loving Darkness-2” (fig.44) during the exhibition. The purpose of depicting my entourage in the similar attitude with my portrait in “Loving Darkness” (see fig.6) was the same. I invite my friends, my loved ones to love darkness as I do.



Fig. 44: Ahu Akgün, “Loving Darkness-2”, 2015

“Faces”

The ceramics and plasticine molded plaster sculptures of faces (fig.45) stand as an anonymous entourage of melancholic emotional solitude beings. The crowd does not have a time or a place or even an identity. Their entity is visible but when the viewer encounters with that crowd, my intention is to feed his/her solitariness.

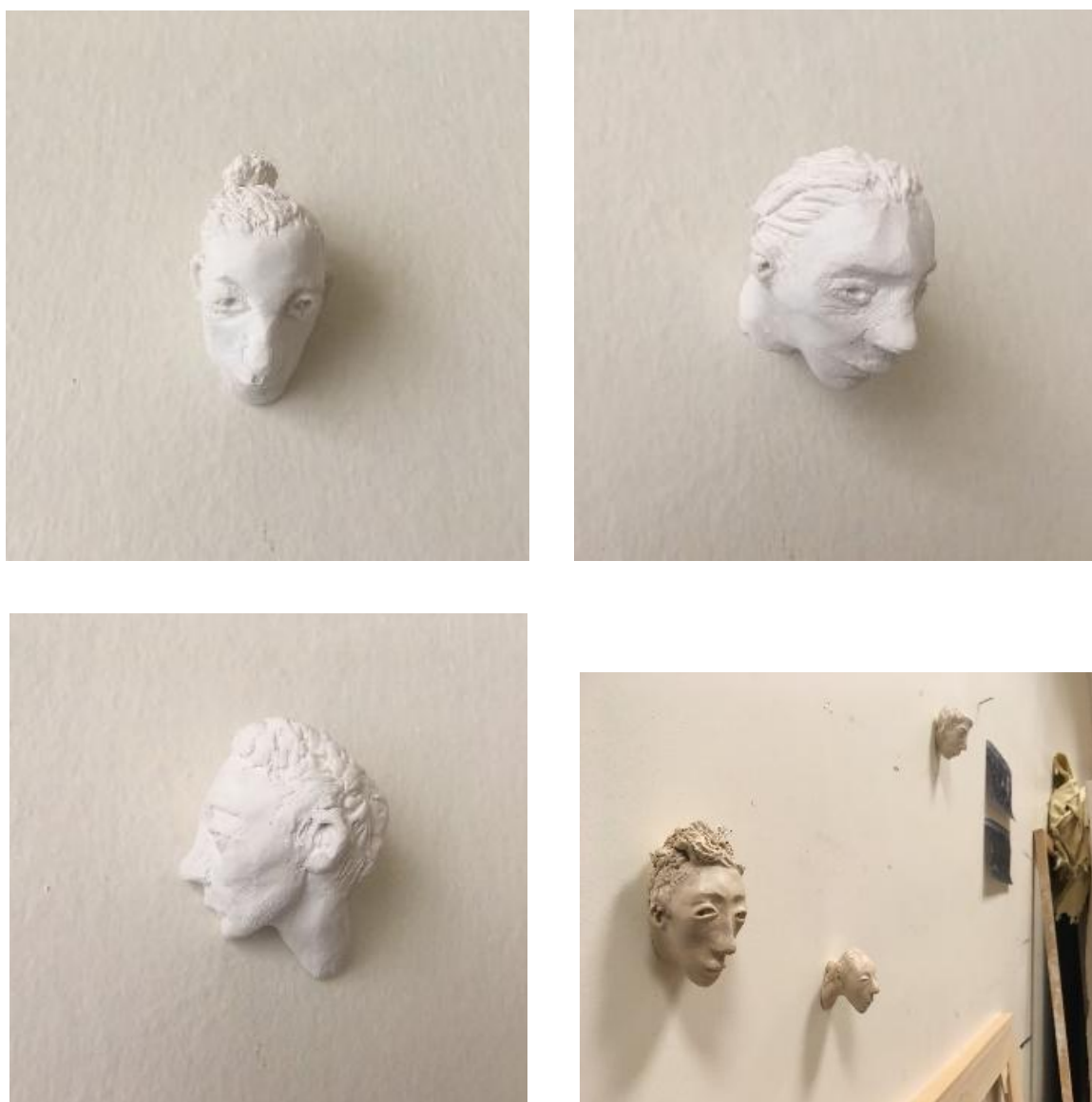


Fig. 45: Ahu Akgün, “Faces”, 2018

“Inter-solidarity” and “Tell Me About Your Plans”

“*Vesile*” exhibition was held in the beginning of 2017 by the art collective HAH (which was founded by Sevgi Aka, Ahu Akgün, Gizem Karakaş, Ayça Telgeren, Defne Tesal and Murat Yıldız in January 2017). The exhibition was in an office that my family owns where they conduct their business of construction, now an empty building that is exposed to urban transformation. In the “*Vesile*” exhibition our intent was to convey the experiences of replacement and loss that we tasted through our individual and collective lives by identifying one another. I exhibited my site-specific drawing installation “Inter-solidarity” (fig.46) and my in-situ production “Tell Me About Your Plans” (fig.47).



Fig. 46: Ahu Akgün, “Inter-solidarity”, 2017

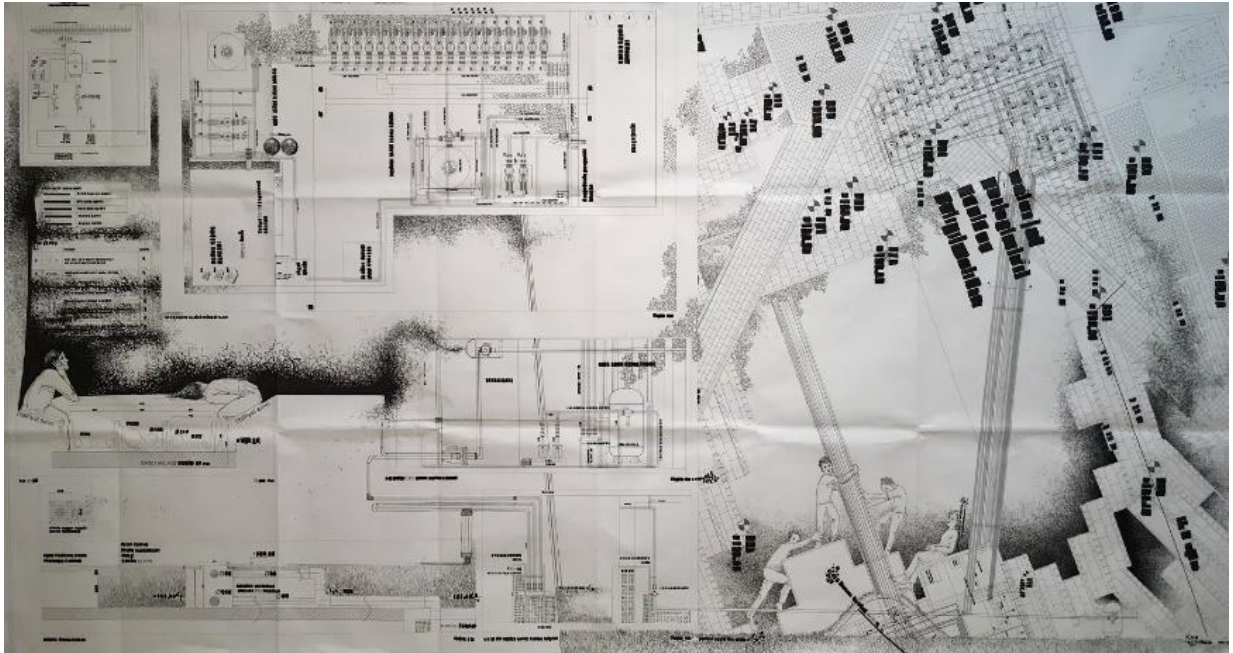


Fig. 47: Ahu Akgün, “Tell Me About Your Plans”, 2017

In the beginning of my creative process of “inter-solidarity”, my departure point was to convey the depression in the pressure of living on top of each other in an urban environment. However, while I was depicting the figures one by one, I realized that they need each other to be in balance and to avoid falling apart. What I experienced towards the end, considering the in-situ production with six people around by harmony, the subject and the feeling behind my vision through the piece, changed inevitably into a positive manner.

In ‘Tell Me About Your Plans’, I again intended to create a reverie world on a water installation layout that belongs to my family business. My purpose was to drive myself into a contradiction with the strictness of the layout and the fanciful layer that I added on to it. I tried to find the questions of reality somewhere between analytical thinking and chaotic one and aimed to convey the same interrogation to the viewer.

CONCLUSION

As I stated above, it would not be right to rank melancholy as the main base of any creation, but it is possible to argue that it may be a stage that many artists inevitably fall into. As I do not differentiate between my daily life and my artistic practice, I aim to emphasize certain melancholic approaches to art. Together with my very personal experiences and personal process of creation I also specifically consider the melancholy of my generation and my era. I followed the traces of melancholy as a state of mind and its reflections on creative experiences through similarities with several artists to search the place of melancholy through the arts. As can be observed in the examples the variations of conveying melancholic emotion via artistic expression presents different approaches such as taking melancholy as subject matter, ascribing melancholic meaning to a figure, or leaving it to the viewer to be sensed. When the depictions appear in art objects, the melancholic personality of the artists starts to be visible and easily readable by the viewers. The correlation between the artists, the art object and the viewer create a language that does not necessarily have strict rules but is based on sensations.

When melancholy is considered in relation to social conditions and even to climatic conditions of the environment, it seems likely that the feeling will continue to be the part of the creation process for many artists. In this era as long as wars and the restrictions of expressions continues melancholy could even be redefined as an “anarchic reaction” as it did in Homeros’s epoc. Melancholics. It may be seen as longing for another order and considered as an opposition to the current way of living even if melancholies may never be organized to rebel. As Teber refers to Virginia Woolf, they will be in “their own rooms”. With the feeling of melancholy poets and novelists will continue to write, sculptors to construct, and painters to paint. Their expressive methods will be their languages, and yet their voices will be heard from “their sorrowful rooms”.

The definition of melancholy as a black fluid provides me an image like liquids that take the shape of their containers. The feeling of melancholy presents itself as its container. It decides the shape the work; it may certainly turn into a depression or into a strong urge to create.

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