

Sotheby's

Contemporary Art / Turkish

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LOT 14

TANER CEYLAN

B. 1967

TEN KAFESI (CAGE OF FLESH)

signed and dated Subat 2012

oil on canvas

180 by 160cm.; 70 7/8 by 63in.

ESTIMATE ±W100,000-150,000 GBP

CATALOGUE NOTE

Cage of Flesh (Ten Kafesi), the most recent piece by the photorealist painter Taner Ceylan, engages with the politics of and the erotics within representation in Orientalist painting by confronting the viewer with a re-imagined figure of an odalisque. Following his highly acclaimed *Lost Painting Series* that featured *Fake World* (2011), *1640* (2011), *1879* (2011), *1923* (2010) and *1881* (2010), *Cage of Flesh* uses an ingenious amalgam of allusions to both Orientalist eroticisation of female flesh and the Sufi tradition of imagining the flesh as a cage of worldly desires.

Referring to the infatuation of the Orientalist male gaze with Oriental female carnality, Ceylan envisages the flesh as a cage in which the odalisque is incarcerated. The reduction of "Oriental" woman to a silenced, oppressed and submissive body codified as beautiful, smooth and sensual flesh to invite and satisfy the Western male gaze deprives the odalisque of her individuality and renders her flesh a cage in which she is merely a body that cannot speak its name.

Cage of Flesh, however, does not offer a corrective counter-image to expose the sins of Orientalism. Ceylan does not resign himself to a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in the face of Orientalism. His is not a quest for an authentic, real past untainted by Orientalism. Rather, Ceylan seizes an image or a spectre of the past and places it in an anonymous, ahistorical setting not only to obscure the boundaries between the past and the present, reality and fiction, but also to attend to the ways in which the silenced voices of the past haunt our present. The odalisque in *Cage of Flesh* is one of those silenced others of the past coming back to us, albeit in an unexpected way, with her gaze denied to the viewer, her bosom veiled by her hair, her lower part of the body lost from view and her somewhat sharp body contours at odds with the typical soft, hyper-feminised, inviting figure of the odalisque. Rather than simply interrogating Orientalist representations, *Cage of Flesh* draws on the very ambiguity and playfulness of them to highlight "the multiplicity, diversity and incommensurability of possible positionings" within Orientalism itself. (Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, London and New York 1996, p. 4).

It would be argued that even the most eminent of the odalisque paintings, namely *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres complicates the scopic regime of Orientalism by creating a partially visible, somewhat uncanny female gaze detached from the elongated backside, insinuating a self-conscious indifference on the part of the odalisque to the sexualised display of her body as an object of the voyeuristic male gaze. *Cage of Flesh* also reminds the viewer of Mariano Fortuny's *Odalisque* (1862). The latter's avoidance of the gaze as well as her suffering in view of her own reflection in the mirror reverberate with Ceylan's odalisque who refuses to exchange looks with the viewer, feeling ashamed, suffering and struggling, as it were, to release herself from this very cage of flesh.

Ceylan's intermedial aesthetics is dramatically at play in *Cage of Flesh*, questioning the truth-claims of photography and painting by carrying out a laborious hyperrealist practice and treating painting as an "imagined photograph". The artist's playful use of hyperrealism in this piece, however, incorporates further references to sculpture and performance art. The predominant figures of inspiration in the artist's earlier work (i.e. Caravaggio, Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin) are further elaborated by references to Cindy Sherman's appropriation art and Evan Penny's sculptures.

In her series *Sex Pictures* (1992), *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* (1994-96), *History Portraits/Old Masters* (1988-90) and *Hollywood/Hampton Types* (2000-2), Sherman's use of prosthetic body-parts creates an alienation-effect to confront the objectification of the female body. Sherman's depiction of the female body as a dead skin, a void resonates well with Ceylan's disruption of the odalisque's fantasised perfection and sexual allure. Revealing the lower part of the body as a plastic loose skin, a partial object, *Cage of Flesh* betrays, as it were, the dominant masculinist Orientalist gaze. Ceylan's painting also alludes to Evan Penny's figurative sculptures. Penny intervenes in the hyperarticulated presence of his sculptures by using distortion and dissection to expose the constructedness and hence "implicit artificiality" of the human body. In Ceylan's painting, the odalisque as the figurative object turns into almost an abstraction as the subtly crafted beauty and sculptural quality of the image loses its human depth. Thus, the very impersonality of the loose skin cancels the status of odalisque as the fetish object of the Orientalist male gaze. Ceylan's inventive contestation of the fantasised unity of Orientalist representation acquires a further dimension with the reference to the Sufi understanding of flesh, which, in the works of a wide range of Sufi poets from Rumi and Yunus Emre in the 13th century to Seyh Galip in the late 18th century, appears as an obstacle to divine love and union with God: flesh is a cage in which the bird of the soul (*mürg-i rûh* in Ottoman Turkish) is enslaved; the body with its ceaseless carnal desires is the prison of the shining soul whose origin and final destination is the highest abode of Heavens in the Kingdom of God.[i] Thus, Ceylan's painting leaves the viewer with the question of whether the odalisque in her cage of flesh is in pursuit of love and union with God or with her *own* body and soul caged by the

Orientalist gaze or with both.

This catalogue note was written by Cüneyt Çakrlar (University College London) and Serkan Delice (University of the Arts London).



Fig. 1

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, La Grande Odalisque, 1814
RMN-GP (Muse du Louvre) / Thierry le Mage