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# MEHMET ALI-UYSAL

by Olivia Sand

Trained in architecture as well as in art, Mehmet Ali-Uysal (b 1976 in Turkey) merges both of these spheres when it comes to his art practice. Working in sculpture and installation, he defies the notions of size, space, time, reality, illusion or nature, leading the viewer to question each and every piece. Transposing these interrogations in a playful way, his perfectly executed pieces never fail to draw attention through their aesthetics and wit. Based in Paris, Mehmet Ali-Uysal is one of the most interesting artists from Turkey's young generation of contemporary artists. Outspoken and grounded, his practice thrives on imagination, turning the sometimes rigid medium of sculpture into a wonderful encounter challenging all the laws of nature or physics. His latest exhibition, at the Bon Marché in Paris, gave an opportunity to further discuss his practice and find out more about his approach to work.



Mehmet Ali-Uysal, courtesy Paris-B. Photo: Théo Baulig.

**Asian Art Newspaper:** You just had an exhibition at the Bon Marché in Paris, a space filled with tradition, but it is not easy to deal with when it comes to its architecture. What was your approach?

**Mehmet Ali-Uysal:** The building was complicated, and it was very different from the spaces I had worked in before. At the Bon Marché (rue de Sèvres), I was dealing with a shopping mall so during the exhibition my installation could not interfere with people's shopping. Also, in terms of volume, the space was challenging. Fortunately, I also had some experience from previous exhibitions as how to work with space, and I guess ultimately, we handled it in a very good way.

The Bon Marché contacted me 19 months ago. My first impression was rather negative, as I was not too enthusiastic to work within a shopping mall. When I told my friends I had been approached by the Bon Marché, they were surprised that I was not more enthusiastic about the project. The Bon Marché is usually not a place I go and I was not too familiar with the store. I then did some research and learned a lot about it – it was the first modern department store in the world. The project related to various issues ranging from the pandemic to climate change. I was not trying to surprise people, but I did want them



to think and reflect when they saw my pieces.

**AAN: The project started outside of the store. Is that right?**

**MAU:** Yes. For this project, the windows of the Bon Marché were important as they were part of the installation. It started outside with all the windows on the rue de Sèvre flooded. Overall, the exhibition was divided into three parts, although to me it was one single installation. The images of the windows on rue de Sèvre have not been published, as it was almost impossible to take photographs that truly reflected the piece. There were eight windows, all filled with water. Therefore, when trying to take photographs, the windows seemed empty. People passing in the street even sometimes seemed to miss this part of the installation. From the start, this built a certain negative energy and once you went inside, you saw that the flooding was caused by the icebergs. The third part was the end of the exhibition and was more optimistic, with a boat reminiscent of Noah’s Ark. Ultimately, people felt positive about the piece, especially as in general terms, everything we hear about climate change and the environment has a tendency to be very pessimistic. I was less concerned about how adults reacted to such negative news, but for children, the overall situation is most depressing. The question remains for the younger generation: how do we explain what is happening and that everything may soon be coming to an end ?

**AAN: So much has been said about this topic that ultimately, some people simply stopped paying attention. However, you found an interesting angle, drawing people in without them noticing it.**

**MAU:** I do not consider myself an activist and I do not want to be one, as I am afraid it would make me blind to views and perspectives other than my own. I have seen this with some of my friends who were studying philosophy. At the end of the day, they were going so far in their endeavour that it was no longer possible to discuss any topic outside of the philosophical realm. Therefore, I am simply trying to be aware, to learn more about the subject and to adapt. For example, I am 45 years old and I eat meat. Today, I am trying to change my habits and am trying to eat less of it. Also, I am a hard-core smoker. I am trying my best to smoke less, but I am still smoking. I do not want people to judge me, although I am aware that continuing to smoke and eat meat is not good. In my opinion, we should not judge the positive minimum or maximum in our lives. We are all involved in this circle in regard to gas, food, and tobacco. Some people manage to refrain from all these things, but I cannot, although on a personal basis, I am making the effort. I can only be critical towards myself, but I can certainly not afford to criticise anyone else.

**AAN: However, you are trying to draw people’s attention in the right direction.**

**MAU:** Especially younger people. I hope seeing my project may have an impact, as they grow up, they may remember it and start changing things.

**AAN: As to your practice, would you also consider entering the political arena?**

**MAU:** Since I studied both, art and architecture, people often ask me whether I am an artist or an architect. I always reply that I am neither. I do not like it when the political factor is too visible in a work of art. I am from Turkey and I came to Paris five years ago. The art scene in Turkey is too political and I am trying to stay away from it. When I was still living in Turkey, my mind was too politically oriented and that was a hurdle to my practice. Presently, I have taken a much more selfish approach, trying to identify my own space and understand myself. I relentlessly continue to question myself and my perception.

Perceptual space is important and I wrote my two theses on this topic. Today, it is interesting that I tend to feel more ignorant about the subject, as I have accumulated more knowledge, it makes me realise how little I actually know. Until I moved to Paris when I was thirty years old, the world seemed very small to me in Turkey. Later, after travelling to 15 different countries for work and experiencing their culture, it makes me realise that the more I travel, the bigger the world seems. I am referring to that experience in order to give you an example of the perception of time and space. When I was twenty years old, I was reading certain philosophers who shared the view that time and space were one same thing. I could never understand that. Now, I feel that time and space could indeed be similar, although I do not know for sure. Sometimes, we forget that working on a topic like time and space is also a political action. Perhaps this latest project at the Bon Marché was the most political when it comes to daily life. What I did before was also political, but in a more poetic way.

**AAN: What caused the transition from architecture to the art world? Did you feel there were some limitations in architecture you wanted to overcome?**

**MAU:** In Turkish, my name is Mehmet Ali-Uysal, but in Arabic, it is Mohamed Ali. Until I was a teenager, my dream had always been to be a boxer. Of course, my parents



Su (water) series, 2022, Le Bon Marché Rive Gauche, courtesy Paris-B. Photo: Le Bon Marché



Peel series (2021), courtesy Paris-B. Photo: Mehmet Ali-Uysal

did not let me become a boxer. By chance, I started to study architecture and I liked it. I was fortunate that it was an excellent school, the equivalent of a grande école in France. It was a kind of liberation for me. During my second year of architecture, I also had to take some classes in other departments. I did not know what to take and, ultimately, I decided to sign up for sculpture. It changed my life and opened my eyes. Things happened by chance, and it was by chance that I began making sculpture. After finishing my studies in sculpture, I said to myself that since I liked sculpture, I should try it, otherwise I may regret it all my life. That is how I came from studying architecture to studying art.

**AAN: For your large scale projects, completion and realisation are essential. How do you go about it?**

**MAU:** The idea comes together with the space. Although I prepare precise drawings explaining the project, I need to take into account that I have to handle the execution

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*When I signed up for sculpture at university, it changed my life*  
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with different people since the projects are site specific, be this in China or Dubai. So each time, I am working with different people. Also, each culture is different when it comes to my work experience. I remember in Hong Kong, I had been looking for plaster for two days, even though what was brought to me as being plaster was not, and that ended up putting on hold the completion of the project.

The two aspects you mentioned, the realisation and the completion, are incredibly important for my projects. If I am unable to express my idea in a perfect way, it is not worth pursuing. This leads me to say that ultimately a good idea can also turn out to be a bad one, especially if it is not well executed. Last year, I was working on a bridge project for Abu Dhabi, but in the end, although all parties involved had spent a lot of time on the project, and it was very interesting financially, we just could not do it. Therefore, I always insist on choosing certain media: random old material will not bring anything to the project; it is generally best to drop it all together. Nevertheless, most of my projects can be completed and installed in the way I envision, but a few do not make it. This is the game in the art world.

**AAN: However, your background in architecture must be very useful in your practice when it comes to choosing materials, as often architects are the first to use new products. You have an advantage in that respect.**

**MAU:** That is true, but there are many projects where I do work by myself, without relying on anyone else. I myself am not a specialist of any material or techniques, but I generally know how it works and how to use it. Let us take welding; I created some projects that included some mirrors and metal. I am unable to weld such pieces together.

Therefore, I am providing the exact guidelines of what I want before having it executed by a professional in that field. Today, we have the option of welding through laser; this is a highly specialised task that I could never master.

Initially, I was always dreaming about projects I could complete all by myself, but after a while, when working on projects for institutions or a specific place, I decided to change my approach. I realised I needed outside help to get them to meet the standards I had set. In addition, over the years, my imagination has grown. I cannot cut 10 mm thick glass, but I can envision my project with the cut glass. From that point on, I was more relaxed about conventions and the traditional way of making art, especially if that meant relying on a structure beyond my skills.

**AAN: You used to teach at university. Is that something you would like to take up again?**

**MAU:** It depends on the project. I have been teaching for fifteen years, and recently, I was looking at my old notes: 20 years ago, I knew what art was and what a sculpture was, which is what I was teaching my students. Today, I do not know anything anymore about the subject. I do not think that presently, for example, I could teach and tell my students what a painting is and what art is about. Perhaps my students could teach me? During my studies, I used to question everything I was taught. At the time, I felt I was learning more from my friends and the outside world than from my professors.

**AAN: Overall, do you view your practice in the continuation of the artist Claes Oldenburg (b 1929)?**

**MAU:** I respect what he is doing, but in art, the creation can never be something totally new and is therefore always based on something older. People often want to see something completely new and revolutionary. That does not exist today and it did not exist in the past. From my practice, based on my experience in art, it is a development of things that are linked. I would not say that we are looking at a continuation, but rather at something that like a liquid that is expanding, becoming bigger and bigger.

With the *Skin* series, I address space in a different way. If we go

Continued on page 4



back to the beginning as an embryo, the first space we all experience is as a fetus. The idea of the fetus was the starting point of this series. I felt that the skin I was wrapped in was my mother's house with the skin being the walls and the blood veins the pipes. These are some of the metaphors on which my work is based. Oldenburg is using this idea of perception making things bigger and he is also relying on the idea of American consumerism. Looking at the greater picture, I cannot say that what I am doing is radically different from earlier artists. Everything I do relates to other artists' work, but this goes for any other artist in the art world. In terms of continuation or legacy, one should also look at it from a different perspective and see this as a positive development – trying to go beyond what has already been done.

**AAN: When referring to what came before, where there any movements, artworks, or artists that had a strong impact on your practice?**

**MAU:** I had the opportunity to see three exhibitions of Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978). I am intrigued by the way he lived, the fact that he had to escape from New York and go to Paris. I admire all the things he did, but unfortunately, he died so young. To me, he was a true and real artist. From what he left behind and from reading about him, I feel he was most special and what he accomplished is very impressive. In addition, he simply lived his life, not paying attention to the art market. He was not making art in order to make money even though he may have made some money based on his art. More than anything, he wanted to complete the pieces he envisioned in his mind. He came to be who he wanted, and I admire these kind of people, some of them artists, writers, and poets. As they pass away, perhaps they were hungry and did not own much, but they realised themselves. I have a lot of respect for that approach and in that sense, Matta-Clark is a very important artist to me.

**AAN: Today, as an artist, it is not easy to remain independent and build a career without galleries.**

**MAU:** I use them and I use the system. I am now working with three galleries and, from the start, I told them that they were not my superiors or my boss, but my business partners. Thinking that they are under the impression that they are my boss is unhealthy for me, as well as for them. The same is true for collectors. All too often, when they acquire one of my pieces, collectors think they own me and that they are buying me. Frequently, when you think about an artist, you immediately associate him with the name of a gallery or an institution. I do not want to find myself in that position and I hope I can continue as I have done so far, even though it is not easy.

**AAN: If you had a magic wand, what would you change in the art world?**

**MAU:** If somebody were to pay my rent, giving me some money, and support the production of my art projects, I would leave the art market and get out of the system. What I am trying to do is this, even though I need to find money for production costs, so far, I still feel free about my undertaking. I am not rich, but I can survive. I never had the feeling that because one specific piece was selling well, I should create more of them. I am not



Pince à Linge (2010), mixed media, variable dimensions, courtesy Paris-B. Photo: Mehmet Ali-Uysal,

criticising the artists who did that, especially if they had to and had no other choice.

**AAN: Many of your works have a witty title. How do you go about entitling them?**

**MAU:** Sometimes, the title is part of the piece. Generally, I see my works as poems without names. In certain cases, the title is as important as the installation itself. Overall, if I choose a title for an exhibition, all the works featured in the show bear the same title. For example, I love the title of the exhibition at the Bon Marché: *Su* (water in Turkish).

**AAN: Your sculptures and installations are generally over-dimensional. How do you go about studio space and storage?**

**MAU:** Presently, I do not have a studio, but I hope that one day I will have one. In terms of production, I work with many different people in Ankara, depending on the project. So far, I cannot afford to rent a place, especially as my practice requires a great deal of space. What I do is I take exact notes of my projects, trying to visualise and render them in 3D. Even for smaller projects, my notes have been a great starting point and they are always fuelled with new ideas.

**AAN: As to your installations, except for the site specific ones outdoors, what happens to them once the exhibition is finished?**

**MAU:** Some of the installations made of plaster were destroyed. As for the Bon Marché project, some of the pieces will be recycled and the iceberg, for example, is to be used at a music festival. I was particularly careful for this exhibition, as I wanted the pieces to be either recyclable or reusable. I have a hard time storing these pieces as I have no space. Therefore, it seemed to me to be a better idea to donate certain pieces so they could be used in a different function.

**AAN: With the developments in the art market over the past year, what are your thoughts on NFTs as more and more artists, regardless of their background, are venturing into them?**

**MAU:** I am interested to learn about it. Sometimes, one has to wait until technology reaches a certain level. For example, several years ago, it was fashionable to create neon works and people used to say that every contemporary artist should at least



Monument à la solitude, Hommage à Osman (2020), mixed media, 80 x 90 x 62 cm, courtesy Paris-B. Photo: Mehmet Ali-Uysal,

create one neon work. In regard to NFTs, I am trying to understand the process, but as of now, I find them to be far from my practice. For example, two months ago, I had a private Instagram account, without using it to promote my work. Then, I lost my account which did not affect me as I hardly shared any pictures or stories. To me, what happened afterwards was the more interesting part: living in Paris, of course I still have a lot of friends in Turkey. With no account up and running anymore, even some of my close friends stopped calling me. Perhaps, this is what we have become: an image. If we are not sharing on Instagram, we disappear and we are dead.

As to the Bon Marché project, we had three press conferences and it turned out that 80 percent of the people attending were influencers.



The Sea, Cappadocia, Turkey, steel, variable dimensions, public collection. Photo: Mehmet Ali-Uysal, Courtesy Paris-B

I am not judging, but just making an observation. Perhaps I am too old, but I am trying to learn. I am a little bit frightened with what we are living and to become like that. This goes for NFTs, and of course metaverse. Personally, I am not ready for all of this. However, whether we like it or not, these changes will take place and therefore, I have to learn about it. I am not negative either, but I have a lot of questions. Perhaps someday, I will create an NFT. Around me, crypto money, NFT, metaverse (3D virtual worlds focused on social connection), everything is changing. I am certainly not the only one frightened about that. Let us hope that the changes will not take place too fast, as I believe they will also be the source of psychological problems. It may be different for young Tik Tok users with hundreds of millions of followers. Taking into account their high number of followers, these youngsters are subject to huge pressure. I am not against all these things. I am open, but I am quite frightened about it.

**AAN: Some people question the emotion and beauty related to looking at NFTs on a screen ...**

**MAU:** When it comes to NFTs, people do not spend any time looking at them. It comes down to being an investment and to making money. I have a project aimed at discussing that. I hope I will have a chance of completing it as I do not want to be left behind. I want to live with my time.

**AAN: Turkey has an international biennale in Istanbul, but Turkish artists are rarely shown or represented abroad. Why is that?**

**MAU:** I think art is primarily about money. It is like football: you invest, and then you have a good team. To be an artist, you first need to get sold. It does not matter how much. If you are not sold, you do not stand a chance to be in art history, whether you are good or not. This may seem a little radical, but it is real.

In my case, I left Turkey for the very first time when I was 31 years old as it is complicated to get the visa issue resolved. Now, I have a special passport from the French government allowing me to live in Paris. Beyond these technical issues, there is also a very conservative way of looking at Turkey: generally, when people meet me, the second or third question is always about Erdogan. Perhaps, it is linked to some kind of fear and collectors prefer buying other artists instead?

In Turkey, cultural studies are rather old fashioned compared to other countries. Fifteen years ago, through Erasmus, I had the chance to study in France. In comparison, the school of fine arts tends to be more traditional in Turkey and maybe this is another reason. Also, as indicated earlier, it is too complicated to go abroad and to get a visa, especially for the young generation. It seems that ultimately, they accept the fact that they will not go anywhere and they stop dreaming about it. Economic growth, a rich culture, and development of the art market usually go hand-in-hand. China is a good example of this: the country's economic growth also affected their art market, with their artists travelling abroad and Chinese people also buying their own artists. If we take the example of Iran, it has always been a culturally very rich place and there are numerous Iranian artists in the contemporary art scene. At this stage, I cannot say that there is a vibrant art scene in Turkey. Within my practice, most of the things I accomplished, I accomplished by myself, without any kind of support. Institutions can sometimes also hold you back as for certain projects, they may not consider it art since it may not live up to their expectations.

**AAN: Turkey also has its own pavilion at the Venice Biennale, yet compared to other countries, its artists are left behind. Why?**

**MAU:** The starting point should be from within the country itself, with collectors starting to buy their own artists. Unfortunately, in Turkey, we do not have that background or that approach yet.

**AAN: So far, you seem to have managed your career in a savvy manner. Do you agree?**

**MAU:** While I was studying, I never imagined I would have an exhibition! Now, I slowly know how the system works, where my place is in the art world. As I mentioned earlier, whoever supports me financially (dealer, collector) is my business partner and I need them. Without them, it is difficult to complete certain projects. For my Skin series, for example, I tried for eight years to convince people in Turkey to back the project, but could not find anyone, although by 2003, detailed drawings for the project were ready. Then, by 2008, I finally managed to complete the first version of Skin in France which became quite popular and well known. I am happy that so far, I managed to establish a relationship with my galleries, which works for both of us. That is priceless.