



Melike Kara

LC QUEISSER

For her first show in Georgia, Cologne-based Kurdish German artist Melike Kara gathered new works—paintings, wall-mounted crocheted works, “knot sculptures” made from PLA filament, and a video—under the title “How She Shapes Us.” “She” is the Munzur River, which flows through the artist’s homeland—and, as if mirroring a river bend, the video *Munzur* (all works 2021) was projected on a curved white-brick wall in the staircase leading to the gallery’s second floor. Composed of three vertically oriented cell-phone recordings, the video follows from different angles the ceaseless flowing and swirling of the river as it passes through the province of Turkey long known as Dersim. This territory, renamed Tunceli in 1936, has a large Kurdish population and is the only one where the majority are Alevi, a persecuted Muslim minority. Historically, it has been a site of significant Kurdish resistance to the Turkish government. It is also one of the most biodiverse regions in eastern Anatolia, but since the 1980s ambitious dam projects have been planned and executed there, harming both the natural surroundings and the social fabric of the region.

Four crocheted-wool pieces, shimmering with silvery threads, were hung on top of the projection, forming an integral part of the video installation. As the viewer moved farther into the gallery rooms, multiple other light-pink works, from the series “Remember Us,” 2021–, were revealed, appearing abstract at first glance but containing visual references to the geometric rhythms of patterns traditional to Kurdish crafts, as well as to those existing in nature. Some of them were intentionally left unfinished, the loose threads hanging down the walls, painted a metallic silver gray. The crocheted-wool work that gave the show its title stood out as the only figurative scene, based on a family photo of Kara’s aunt and another woman washing dishes in the Munzur. Its fine needlework radiated calm and familial warmth, even as it offered a poignant reminder of the often unwritten and violently erased Kurdish histories within the Turkish state. Memories like these are now kept only within the personal archives of families.

PERES PROJECTS

As human and nonhuman life surrounds the river, so does the energy-industry infrastructure that endangers its fragile ecosystems. Here in Georgia, Kara's work resonated with a local controversy around the Namakhvani hydropower plant on the Rioni River. The largest energy project since the country declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the dam was to be built by a Turkish construction company. Since early 2021, the Rioni Valley Defenders—a group formed by local residents and supported by feminist and queer activists, progressive liberals, and leftists—have demonstrated hope that environmental justice could serve as a unifying platform. The protests experienced a painful rupture in July, however, when the Georgian Orthodox Church pitted the rural movement against the LGBTQI+ community during Gay Pride. Nevertheless, a small victory for the activists came in September with the construction company's withdrawal from the project and at least a temporary moratorium on construction.

Juxtaposed with Kara's wool works were large paintings whose palettes were limited to a few combinations of dark purple, conifer green, or black, with traces of pink, silver, and white. They were inspired by traditional Kurdish tapestry motifs from various regions, with titles directly referring to locations of their origin. For example, *bid majnun*, which evoked the same kinds of fluvial processes seen in *Munzur*, did not contain any clearly discernible figures. The painting was abstract, but only in the sense that a super close-up examination of a carpet in the making or a distant bird's-eye view of a landscape would be—meaning, not really abstract at all. The lightly applied combinations of lines and squares in oil stick and acrylic could well have comprised a map of the region or of any place, perhaps, that does not include dams but lets the river shape us.

– Inga Lāce