

Melike Kara

Cologne is rather still today. The air is fresh and the sun shines a frank, almost abrupt light on the German post-industrial city. In the neighborhood where I meet Melike, the streets would be empty if it wasn't for some moms and their kids. Through a double door, then onto a courtyard, four steps lead down to a well-lit concrete room, rather blank if it wasn't for all the numerous oil-painting sticks on the ground that make the eye wander from the floor to the walls covered with paintings laying up on each others. Carefully, Melike shows them one by one. Unraveling a work that in less than a decade has already become a trademark.

Interview
by
Lucas Leclère,
portrait by
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— Were you always painting and drawing as a child?

Yes, always. But I wasn't good in art class as a kid. I wasn't interested in representing a subject faithfully to wow the teacher. I was never that much into that, but I loved drawing for myself. In the end, your work as a child at school doesn't mean much; it's more about what the teacher feels you should do, not about how you feel.

— Were the characters you are using always part of your work?

At the Academy my style was figurative. Then I evolved into abstraction and started to make sculptures and videos, especially in Rosemarie Trockel's class. I was exploring making marks with different techniques and traits. About two and half years ago, characters started springing from these figures. I restricted myself to one or two colors in order to set some sort of a mental frame I could experiment with. Let me show you one of the first I did. You can see how it started to emerge from abstraction. Figure drawings.

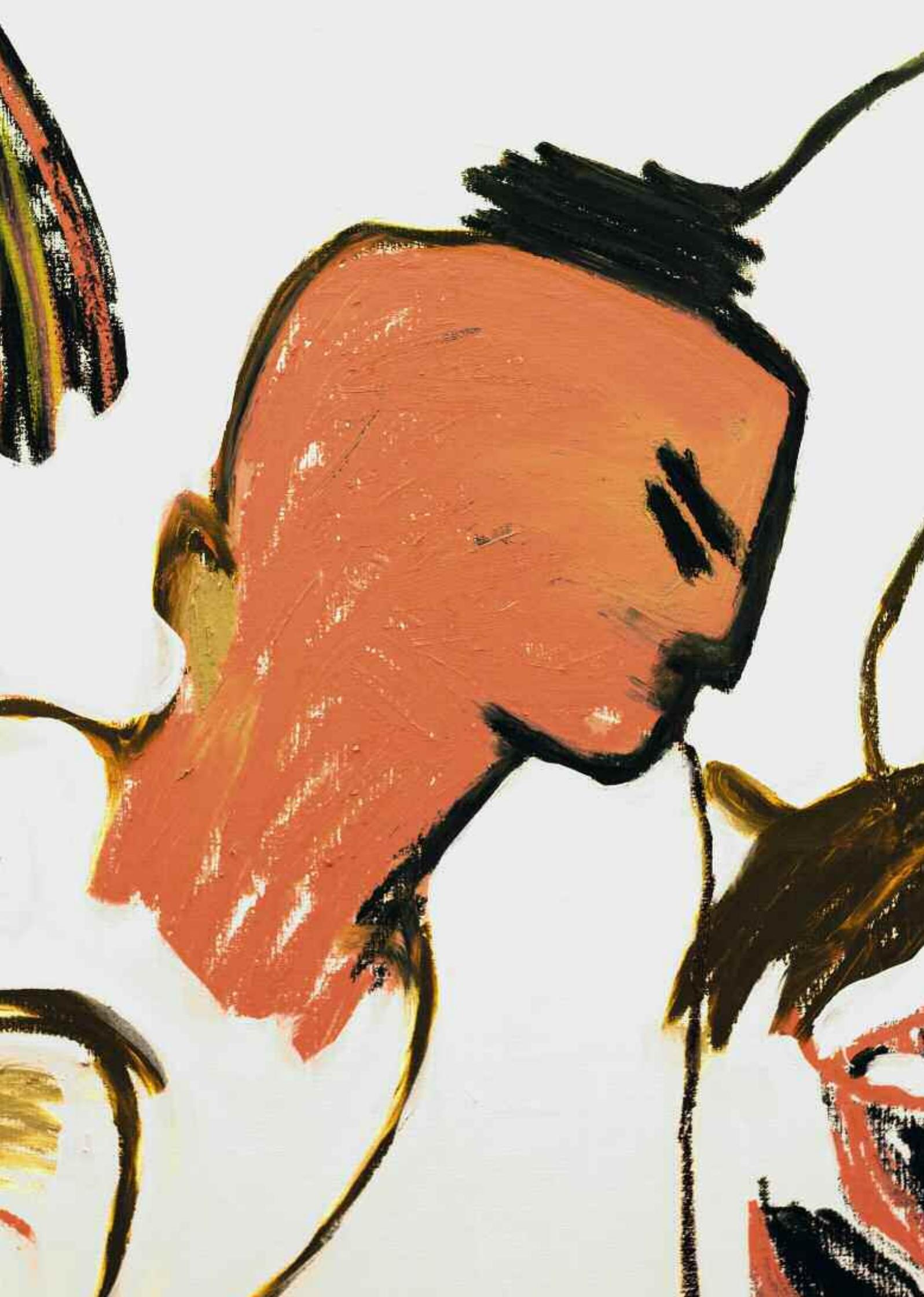
— Is there a particular reason why you decided to live here?

I was born and raised here. Cologne can be a place where you are really able to focus on your work. The mentality is pretty warm and open-minded; I always liked the vibe here. There are a lot of fabulous institutions in Cologne and its surroundings, also a lot of new spaces and galleries have started to settle here. It is becoming more and more lively. You're pretty centrally located in the heart of Europe. Paris is super close by train, as is Brussels. You can move around easily from here.

— Weren't you ever tempted to live in Berlin?

I wasn't keen on the energy of the city as a youngster. It was fine to visit but I couldn't picture myself living there. By your mid-





twenties it gets better because it's obviously the place to be in Germany. Here in Cologne, I'm totally free to go to the studio and work without missing anything. However every time I'm in Berlin I feel I should move there, as all my friends already live there. They all wonder why I'm still here. But it's so quiet here! We are spoiled here with the Ludwig Museum, which I'm very fond of. As a child I would go all the time with my mom. I got struck by a Dali painting, at age seven or eight. It's funny because he wouldn't be my favorite painter now, but this particular painting is still stuck in my head, and it's still in the museum today.

— *Some people find there is a great deal of sexual tension in your work. Is it something you relate to?*

No. Not at all. I can see why people tend to think this about my work. In that one painting where three guys lay on top of one another, someone got excited thinking they were having sex, but I wanted to represent a state of pressure inside a trio. That was what was on of my mind, not plain sex. I've really gotten hooked on watercolors. It's my new passion. I do it at home; I'll show you on my phone.

As she slides across the delicate watercolors she just did, mostly A4 format, we hear bicycle bells ringing in the courtyard of the school next to her studio, as well as kids laughing and screaming, the sound muffled by double windows. The sun pokes through a cloud and throws its golden arrows of light on the concrete floor stained with oil paint, briskly enflaming the metal feet of the minimalist iron structure that holds her new work painted on glass, which she will present in two weeks at the Brussels Art Fair.

— *Visually, there is a lot of talking going on in your work.*

Yes, the waves and lines interacting between the characters are more a way to materialize and signify dialogues and thoughts between one another. I've been sensitive to the tensions one feels in social circles and I want my work to echo these exchanges.

— *Do you see it more as the conceptualization of a social interaction?*

Yes, and of emotions too. I want to show feelings; so this is why my characters are genderless. This is also why I stick to few lines for the face, in order to show feelings more than anything else. You'd get anger in the eyes of someone who's cross, happiness in the shape of the mouth, etc. It is all about questioning the self and how it connects to the others. Spiritual people are often heard saying that we are all one. How do you feel this bond? Does it exist just out of enunciation or is it something you experience within you? I think the space in between others is primordial, or we wouldn't feel that we are ourselves. It is also hard to discuss it in English. I don't mean it in a Freudian *über Ich* way when I say "the self". For example, I don't know if you ever had the feeling that you could watch your own trail of thoughts from a point of view foreign to your own body. Well, that's one of the elements I'm painting with. Also fear is a decisive element for me. At times, it rises powerfully in your body with the simple trigger of a mere thought. It can be very visual and physical. The way your body reacts to it. And it is almost as if it had cut you off from your own self for a moment. It came and went. It somehow separates you from reality for a moment, though you haven't moved an inch. You're still here. I'm scared of flying for example. And it's interesting how I have to handle that. When I'm sitting in a plane, a claustrophobic thought comes in and out of me. Sometimes I am able not to interact with the thought and it's fine, so the fear disappears.

— *Also these new paintings have warmer tones to them. Do seasons influence your use of color?*

Yes they do, but probably more subliminally: its sounds a bit like reacting to the seasons like fashion does. I never intended to be fashionable. In fact, my painting gets darker and fuller. I tend to use denser tones. It is the first time my paintings are so full, too. I try to convey the idea of the trail of a thought without marking it too heavily.

— *You paint a lot of nature too, and a lot of drinking for someone who doesn't drink. They drink all the time.*

Not all the time. It comes up; it's a social thing. The plan is to form a living element of the outside to universalize the context.

— *Oh no! I just stepped onto one of the sticks. They're so expensive as well.*

I know, but when you start using them you can't use anything else.

— *Have you been to the Semmelier shop in Paris?*

No, never.

— *When did you start using these sticks?*

It was about four years ago. I needed to express myself fast and on point. I always felt acrylic was too weak as a medium and I didn't like turpentine-based paint at all. And you can go fast with the stick, to get straight to the emotion you're after. It's much more dynamic.

— *Do you varnish them afterwards?*

No, never. They just dry.

She shows me more recent work on glass, where the recto and the verso are different.

This is perhaps the eye and the heart—and the inside—in my recent work. I'm more about showing the inner field between body and mind. It is also an exploration of a transformation your body experiences. The way it goes through different states and is altered by them, though the being is endless. Here you have a woman's ovaries and uterus.

— *So they are gendered.*

Not really... I'm more attached to the symbol; to me it's more linked to the Ying and Yang for example.

— *Do they form a diptych?*

Yes, they do. These are going to Brussels. I like them now, but they were really horrible in the beginning. It is different on glass than on white canvas, because I wanted to show more layers and play with the depth and difference between recto and verso. I was thinking about it while I was waiting for you actually. It's nice that I can play with a certain three-dimensionality and I like painting on glass a lot.

— *I would be interested in your sculptural practice, as I have not asked you about it.*

I see my painting and sculpture as equally important. The one ties itself to the other, and the other follows and strengthens the first. A few years ago I consciously decided to give painting my full attention. However, ultimately it was important to me, in the context of an exhibition, to integrate the space—to create objects that create the right context for my paintings and strengthen them. It is about world-building, which facilitates better understanding of both mediums. Now it feels like the sculptures are claiming their own space.

At the same time, it is important to follow my roots, to integrate my history. I come from a Turkish mountain village, with Kurdish roots. My great-grandfather was a shaman and my grandmother is still venerated there. I personally find myself between my formative German life, with all of its benefits, and the longing for memories of my ancestors' histories. All of this flows into my new sculptures, which I am slowly daring to create. It is as if the paintings have grown up and the sculptures are something that wishes to be born again.

— *I see you have a lot of magazines lying around here.*

I'm tragically addicted to magazines. I have a very serious addiction to printed paper. What you see here is nothing in comparison to what I used to own before. I threw out a lot when my boyfriend and I moved to another house. I started to download some on my iPad, but it's nothing like the feeling a printed page.

— *Do you watch TV?*

No. But I love shows like *Scandal*. Do you know it?

— *I don't watch any of them, so you can name any, and I won't judge you.*

You don't watch any? Not even movies?

— *Movies—of course I do! One of my favorites is Suddenly Las Summer. I also love it for its title. Your paintings all bear very intricate titles. Are they translated from the German or do you think about them in English?*

Both. When I was young, I longed to be a poet. Age fourteen and fifteen, I sent a considerable numbers of poems around to different publishers, but I got no reply at all from any of them.

— *Not even a negative answer?*

Nothing, and you know when you're really young, it is extremely discouraging. You think straightaway: am I not good enough?

— *I had the opposite problem. I thought I was amazing; it is as discouraging somehow! [laughs] Would you consider publishing your poetry, like Marlene Dumas does for example?*

It is definitely part of my artistic practice and in some parts, my writings are already influencing the titles of the works. Some titles are sentences out of the writing. You never know, maybe there will be a publication with all the writings. Somehow the writings and the works are referring to each other, so it would make sense.

— *Does the writing corresponds to your painting activity?*

I mostly write when I don't paint...when my head is full. It goes

maybe in the direction of automatic writing/psycho-geography; I'm kind of addicted to it. A bit like someone who needs chocolate when they're nervous.

— *You fit right in the city of the Lindt museum then.*

I know! As a child I was addicted to their chocolate fountain! I couldn't stop coming back for more.

— *Were your parents sensitive to art as well?*

My mother draws extremely well! Both my parents had really safe jobs, but nothing to do with art at all. But they love to go to museums with me. There's a German word for a typical family that takes their children to museums on weekend. English doesn't have one. I always enjoyed going to the museum with them. I was an only child, but I never felt lonely. Plus, I had a lot of hamsters as a kid—we had five: Charlie 1, Charlie 2, Romeo, Desperado and...

— *Like the Spice Girls!*

Yes.

