

CENGİZ ÇEKİL



CENGİZ ÇEKİL,
(Top) *Tanned Jackets*, 1994, 12 jackets, white paint, dimensions variable;
(Bottom) *Towards Childhood, Since Childhood*, 1974, Coca-Cola bottles, batteries, string, tree branches, bulbs, cable, electric tape, 34 x 10 x 10 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Rampa, Istanbul.

A deeply personal iconography is crucial to an artist's ability to communicate—this is a counterintuitive idea, particularly in an era dominated by socially engaged artworks that often depend on legibility for relevance. Nonetheless, the 65-year-old sculptor Cengiz Çekil made such a case to *ArtAsiaPacific* before the opening of his retrospective at Istanbul's Rampa gallery. True to his dictates, Çekil incorporates raw materials (concrete, wood, metal, fabric) and found objects (newspapers, Coke bottles, watches) while drawing equally on his own life experiences and the shamanic roots of Anatolian culture, as well as international modernism, in forging an idiosyncratic contemporary sculptural language.

Curated by Platform Garanti director Vasif Kortun, the Rampa exhibition was an art-world reintroduction for Çekil, who has lived in Izmir for the past 32 years and whose antiformal tendencies were never fully embraced by the Istanbul art community. These interests were evident in one of the first works of the exhibition, *Iron Earth, Copper Sky* (1975), a stack of three plates (from top to bottom: copper, mica and iron) held together by iron bars on the corners that help form the boundaries of a 50-centimeter cube. A heating element rests on the mica plate and emits palpable warmth through the copper plate on top. The sculpture shares a title with a 1963 novel by Yaşar Kemal about peasants who create a mythical character to alleviate their suffering, and it encapsulates Çekil's long-standing use of raw materials for their metaphorical potency.

Another integral component of Çekil's vernacular is the repetition of certain numbers, particularly 7 and 12. *Towards Childhood, Since Childhood* (1974), for instance, is an arrangement of 12 one-liter glass Coke bottles on the gallery floor, each mounted on a pair of branches and outfitted with a battery pack and a small light on the front of the bottle. With their simple wiring, the objects resemble homemade toys, or bombs. Similarly violent undertones carried over

to *Tanned Jackets* (1994), which comprises 12 men's suit jackets, the insides painted white, splayed out on the gallery wall as if they were animal skins being dried. In each case, the objects evoked something else without ever approaching verisimilitude or concealing their materiality.

Despite the obvious incorporation of modern objects, Çekil's sculptures remain the product of obscure personal decisions—ones that nevertheless still resonate with a humanistic appeal. Take the artist's recent work *1,200 Watches* (2005), for example, in which he arrayed defunct watches in five zinc-lined, glass-covered display cases. Found in flea markets and selected according to their brand, their appearance or his own associations, each is tagged with a small blue label bearing the artist's name. A private collection of oddities and rarities, *1,200 Watches* is both a tribute to the artist's watch-repairman father and a meditation on mortality, an impression further suggested by the cases' coffin-like appearance.

The meditative mood continued in a second space across the street where Çekil's *Reverse Image* (1980) had a darkened, ground-floor room to itself. Resembling a camera obscura, the sculpture consists of an amplifier that brings outside noises into the gallery and a lens that reflects an image of the street turned upside down onto a 51-by-44 centimeter scrim. Originally created during the political repression that followed a 1980 military coup d'état, the work illustrates the estrangement of public and private life with its inverted view of the outside world. But in 2010, on a quiet renovated street, *Reverse Image* reflected an easy tranquility. As the sun set, the screen darkened until only the passing lights of cars momentarily illuminated its surface, altering one's perception just enough to inspire pure aesthetic pleasure.

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