

ASLI ÇAVUŞOĞLU

IN CONVERSATION WITH

SARA O'KEEFFE

Artist Asli Çavuşoğlu investigates how historic artifacts, when recontextualized or reimagined, can unfix perceptions of the past and empower understandings of our present. Her installation, performance, and media work evolve out of lengthy research processes and operate through original archival displays. As in her newly commissioned work for the Triennial, *Long Ago Person Found* (2014), Çavuşoğlu often mobilizes objects that have been cast aside or that maintain an uncertain status within official classification systems—such as those utilized by national archives or libraries—to bring hidden narratives to the fore. A distinguishing aspect of her work is a desire to connect the histories of oppressed populations around the world. While poetic in final form, her work often begins with an activist bent: to uncover and pay homage to muted histories and expose the dominant powers that sideline them.

Long Ago Person Found reflects upon the ways that human remains—particularly of populations that have been persecuted—are stored. Drawing upon her ongoing interest in fragmentary archeological forms that remain unidentified or unclassifiable, Çavuşoğlu turned to the unidentifiable remains of several populations. The multivalent objects that together comprise Çavuşoğlu's installation serve as an elegy to the lives of those whose skeletal remains persist in anonymity or obscurity. These include recreations of the controversial boxes in which unidentifiable Native-American remains are stored in institutional collections, as well as flutes, combs, necklaces, and other artifacts that metonymically stand in for the lives of the people who “disappeared” in Argentina during the *Guerra Sucia* or the Armenians and Kurds who vanished in Turkey and whose bodies were later found in mass graves. Working with real bone and bone pigment, Çavuşoğlu allows the empty containers and simple objects to serve as a somber monument—an epitaph to these people's lives.

SARA O'KEEFFE: Your work explores the way social histories become cast in materials. Often turning to fragmentary forms or to historical sites whose ownership is contested, your work reflects, poetically, on the way objects bear testimony. For *The Stones Talk* (2013), you worked with objects that had been deemed unclassifiable by the Turkish National Archive due to their damaged or otherwise unidentifiable form. In this installation as in *Long Ago Person Found*, the objects are quite poignant as remnants of items that accompanied lives that may never be known. What draws you to these orphaned objects?

ASLI ÇAVUŞOĞLU: A fragment is a product of separation in which each part refers to the absence of the intact original. I often think of questions posed by literary critic Camelia Elias, who explores “to what extent we can assume that a fragment *is*, i.e. has a constitution of its own. Where does the fragment begin, with what, and as what?”¹ *The Stones Talk* was conceived with these inquiries in mind and was pitted against what I see as problems associated with the archaeological field, whereby artifacts become utilized by political agendas to produce a sense of national identity. The exhibition consisted of seventy-one archaeological artifacts discovered at various excavation sites in Turkey. Each was subjected to a different classification system and deemed unworthy of being displayed.

Classified as “study pieces,” they are considered deficient, formless, or insignificant.

In the installation, these artifacts were presented as new wholes, reconstructed with a diverse range of materials, including ceramic, rubber, epoxy, Plexiglas, felt, volcanic rock, leather, and foam. By explicitly creating and displaying new objects, my intent was to expose the often politically charged deliberations involved in presenting such fragments and to raise a new question: Who has the right to decide what should be displayed? The title of the work further questions whether the objects are telling their own stories, or are being ventriloquized by a larger power.

SO: This notion of ventriloquism is powerful. Do you see yourself as channeling particular voices through your selection of objects and method of display? Certainly the way you exhibited the objects in *The Stones Talk* wasn't typical of a national archive—they were accessible to viewers on plinths, visible from multiple sides, rather than guarded behind vitrines. How do you decide how you will display your objects when you are mimicking museological conditions?

AC: At least half of the artwork is the display itself. In *The Stones Talk*, I used plinths made out of foam to imply the flexibility of the narrative, but also because of the foam's similarity to the material in which the study objects were kept while in storage.

SO: Your recent research into the storage of bones in museums and archives in the United States was quite extensive and started with your interest in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, passed in 1990. Can you speak a bit about what you found?

AC: In the 1970s, activist Maria Pearson discovered that the skeletal remains of “whites” and Native Americans, uncovered in the same site, were treated quite differently. The remains of whites were buried, but the bones of Native Americans were sent to labs for study. Pearson mounted a legal challenge to the ownership of Native-American human remains kept in museums and stored in labs, which eventually led to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990.

NAGPRA mandates that all the federal agencies and federally or partially federally funded museums return human remains and objects of cultural patrimony to federally recognized tribes. However, I learned there are still about one hundred and thirty thousand Native-American human remains in US museums waiting to be claimed by related Native-American groups. Classified as “unidentifiable,” these human remains are very difficult to trace as they were moved from one collection to another.

“Repatriation” is a term usually applied to the return of persons to their country of residence or citizenship, but in NAGPRA cases, what is it that is really being repatriated? As scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, exhibiting human displays creates “a semiotic seesaw, equiposed between the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead.”² Is the repatriation really a semiotic transformation of the “object” from a sample or specimen to something more sacred that falls within the category of

the dead? I am interested in how museums negotiate these terms. In archaeological museums skeletons are displayed horizontally as though they were asleep, whereas in natural history or science museums they are usually standing as though they were alive. Even these simple choices affect the way we conceive of the dead body. With this new work, I set out to ask who has the right to interpret, narrate, and represent the human remains, many of which seem to have lost the privilege of being active agents in the world of the living.

SO: Your relationship to bones is also related to Turkish history—the massacres of Armenians, Kurds, and other political and ethnic groups whose mass graves have been uncovered. Can you speak a bit about how the recovery of bones resonated with you in light of Turkish history?

AC: The mass graves filled with unidentified bodies and the people who are looking for their disappeared relatives are still relevant and vital issues in contemporary Turkey. The body is the proof of somebody's death. Without that proof, the death becomes abstract. I became consumed with these burial boxes, as it's horrible to think that the museological boxes housing unidentified Native-American remains are similar to those containing Argentina's *desaparecidos*.

SO: For the Triennial, you work directly with bone char—with the remnants of bones. I understand you came across this material over the course of your research while in residence in New York.

AC: I've been doing research on bone black, a black pigment produced through the carbonization of bones. Known as one of the oldest pigments, it was used by prehistoric artists in their cave paintings and later by famous painters such as Rembrandt.³ I became fascinated with the way a “grave” is concentrated in bone black pigment and this prompted my interest in how the dead are utilized practically. I found a

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) where one of the characters, Manny Di Presso, a lawyer, speculates upon the possible repurposing of the skeletal remains of American troops: Some bones are sent to be exhibited in the lake as part of an amusement park for curious divers to examine whereas some are sold to be used as cigarette filters and others are used to produce a special ink.



SO: One of the materials you work with is a jewel named Apache tear. You also worked with jewels in the *Pawnbroker Series* (2012), which, like your work for the Triennial, has a stark black-and-white palette, since you captured these objects as photograms. This series also seems to resonate with your new project in its simple presentation of quite loaded historical objects.

AC: The photograms in the *Pawnbroker Series* depict replicas of Ottoman jewelry, which became popular in Turkey through “historical” soap operas. The popularity they’ve reached as “Ottoman jewelry” is mainly because they have been reproduced first for those soap operas; their made-in-China imitations then spread into the mass market.

Needless to say, these replicas are part of a reinvented tradition, since the only photographs documenting royal jewelry date back to the nineteenth century. After the Ottoman family’s exile from the new Turkish Republic in 1924, they had to take most of the jewelry with them in order to survive financially in their less royal circumstances abroad. Through the *Pawnbroker Series* I wanted to expose the absence of the “real” tradition as well as the literal absence of those jewelry sets via their imitations.

Apache tear is a form of black obsidian. According to popular sources, it is named after an Apache legend in which a group of outnumbered warriors—facing defeat against US cavalry—decided to ride their horses off a mountain to their deaths rather than be killed. The tears of the warriors’ families turned into stone upon hitting the ground.

It is believed, among healing-focused gemologists, to be a stone that absorbs negative energy, grief, and sorrow. According to the legend, Apache women shed so many tears—enough to crystallize into the gem—that no more tears would be possible when in possession of the stone.

I am aware of the possible marketing strategies of this gem, however I believe that this (hi)story tells a lot about how our motivations—let them be official or personal—are reflected onto objects. In *Long Ago Person Found* I examine how I can bring together the connotations, names, and histories of particular materials to challenge stories of the past.

SO: One of the other materials you are working with is the product of a traditional craft in Turkey: combs made out of bones. Can you tell me about this material?

bone. Bone-comb craftsmen in Turkey are still using the bones of the animals, however, like many other crafts, it’s going to become extinct in the near future.

SO: Your work teases out poetic questions raised by archeological objects, as well as the very methodologies through which these objects are known. It seems to be deeply concerned with the rich and plural meanings that can be invested in and garnered from objects, both at the time they are used, as well as retroactively, as attempts are made to reconstruct the past. Your 2011 film *In Different Estimations*, *Little Moscow* stitched together multivalent histories known through significant historical objects. Can you speak more about the film and why you chose to anchor this history through evocative objects: informer’s masks and police cars, among others?

in Fatsa, where participatory democracy had been running for eight-and-a-half months, making it possible for municipality officials to discuss public issues with the direct contribution of the community. During this unfortunate operation—in which a large number of military and police forces were mobilized—thousands of people in the region were arrested, taken into custody, and persecuted. Some were tortured and more than fifty young people were killed in the mountains.

There are many opposing stories that linger from this incident in Fatsa. Due to the lack of resources (until recently, books on the subject were banned) and a discussion platform around the issue, many lived experiences have become myths or mixed with other stories. I tried to communicate with these de-historicized confabulations in the film. The nature of the experience and the oblivion it generated gave me the opportunity to explore the conti-



AC: I was recently in Çatalhöyük and Aşıklı Höyük, prehistoric sites in Turkey, where it occurred to me that bones were one of the oldest tools. They were transformed into ornaments or needles, among other tools with other functions. It’s still a tradition to make objects out of bones—like bone china, an expensive type of porcelain, which contains

AC: In *Different Estimations*, *Little Moscow* is about the impossibility of reenacting the experience of an autonomous, local government that introduced participatory democracy in Fatsa in 1979 and was subsequently punished by the state through a military operation known as Point Operation. This coup d’état took place on September 12, 1980,

nuity in the film that would form an analogy with the continuity in the history. I decided to employ filmic fragments conjured as pieces of memory that are still being remembered, however I was unable to compose a linear story with a beginning and an end. My priority was to reflect the drastic changes of the historically “heavy” spaces and their

detachments from the people and their histories.

For instance, the Meat and Fish Administration, a government building where the Fatsa tortures took place, became part of a local university recently. While the building still looks uncannily like it did during the coup, none of the students are aware of what happened there thirty years ago. There was a historical movie theater and community center where the local representatives used to meet during the participatory democracy experience, which was transformed into a cheesy wedding hall. There was an elementary school named after the governor who was involved in the mass killing and torture of many people. No one remembers who he was, but he is still somehow there, crowning an institution with his name.

I discovered a library of banned books where each book was covered with newspapers. Apparently the owner couldn’t bury or burn them, so despite the danger he decided to keep them wrapped. They were just economy, sociology, and philosophy books. In the film, I used one of these books—a history of philosophy book—where a girl reads a chapter on Albert Camus. I wanted to use objects such as covered books and the forgotten places of this era as connotations, hoping that they might evoke repressed memories rather than serve as a useless attempt to bind them together.

SO: You have been quite concerned with the destruction of public monuments and spaces. I understand, for example, that the future of Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul has been a flashpoint for you and many others in Turkey. I also know that you became interested in the future of a historic building in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, called the Slave Theater. How did you come across the Slave Theater and can you speak a bit about what drew you to it?

AC: I noticed a sealed-off building the day after I arrived in Brooklyn for my New Museum residency, with an old sign that read: “Slave Theater.” When I researched it online, I found out that it had been a hub for civil rights activism and community events since 1984. It was named as such as a reminder of the past and the ongoing struggles of black people. Having been part of the struggles to protect the historical Istanbul movie theater Emek Sinemasi from being destroyed and replaced by a shopping mall, I realized that, even though Emek and the Slave Theater had different backgrounds and missions, they were suffering from the same aggressive gentrification.

We worked together with the people who have been working to restore the Slave Theater and raise awareness around it. I was rather like “the stranger” who, as defined by Georg Simmel, comes today but, unlike “the wanderer,” doesn’t leave tomorrow.⁵ Being careful not to hijack or dominate the group as a stranger who doesn’t have enough knowledge on the struggle, I only offered my humble ideas as much as anybody else did and ran errands with them. I believe one day international solidarities might lead to international political movements beyond nations, religions, and regions.

1. Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2004), 34.

2. Barbara Kitschenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books), 398.

3. David Bomford, *Rembrandt* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2006), 44.

4. Ebonex Corporation, “Product History,” <<http://www.ebonex.com/hist.htm>> (accessed Oct 22, 2014).

5. George Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143–49.