

A Military Legacy and a Tactical Subversion

DUYGU DEMİR

The premise of this text is simple, yet perhaps slightly unorthodox; I look at the practice of Altan Gürman through the lens of a local history of painting by placing him at the modernist end of a specific lineage of Ottoman artists. Juxtaposing Altan Gürman’s works with those by miniaturist Matrakçı Nasuh, the military student-painters who painted figureless scenes from the grounds of Yıldız Palace, and Ahmed Ali (later known as Şeker Ahmet Paşa), I am constructing an alternative constellation of idiosyncratic visual affinities. This is a thread constructed through an embodied eye informed by military experience. The larger underlying claim here is that militarization was indelibly intertwined with modernization and Westernization at multiple and widely different points in the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, directly and indirectly informing and influencing the visual output of artists, especially in the partial importing and adopting of painting in the Western modality, including its transformations.

Scrutinizing Gürman’s work in this light not only makes this vernacular connection between the military and the modern visible, but also allows for a reading of a critical position through a subtle undoing; both of this specific legacy and of painting as its medium. What I attempt to make here is not a definitive reading, but rather a modest proposal, not suggesting intentionality on the artist’s part (but not completely dismissing it either), asking the reader to bear with me while I attempt to substantiate this claim of visual kinship with a military bent.

Topographic Miniature

Rather than visualizing literary works, as in the case of *Shahname* in Persian miniature, Günsel Renda distinguished the Ottoman approach to miniature as preoccupied with the depiction of current and historical events such as military victories, reception ceremonies and hunting expeditions. The Ottoman *nakkaş* worked from observation, depicting events he experienced first-hand. The miniatures, therefore, simultaneously served as documents, in that they were reliably committed to documenting ‘reality,’ especially in defining the sites of events, with



Matrakçı Nasuh, *Beyan-i Menazil-i Sefer-i Irakayn-i Sultan Süleyman Han*, 1537, Istanbul University Library.

special attention to discerning the qualities of the site communicated through a “topographic arrangement” allowing the critical details and characteristic attributes of the site in question to be identified. Renda says that, however stylized, Ottoman miniature painting is based on observation, allowing for towns, forts and cities the Ottoman army besieged or inhabited to be recognizable to historians. She also posits that this mode of what she calls “topographic miniature” was additionally influenced by the contemporaneous engagement with the preparation of Ottoman atlases inspired by Portuguese and Spanish maps in circulation at the time. Matrakçı Nasuh, who accompanied Süleyman the Magnificent on significant military campaigns, operated between this mode of topographic miniature and landscape painting, as he both documented locations with the exacting accuracy of a cartographer and infused them with a strong personal sense of nature through the use of colour, composition and attention to detail. For Renda, Matrakçı Nasuh’s work can be characterized as *topographical miniature* that veers towards landscape painting.¹ A janissary recruit, Matrakçı Nasuh was a polymath, known for his gift as a swordsman and sharpshooter, as well as a mathematician, historian, cartographer and miniaturist.

Gürman, for his part, was a painter’s painter, save for his flirt with architecture through his grandfather, and the classes he followed at Istanbul Technical University’s School of Architecture before he signed up for the painting department at the Fine Arts Academy. He settled back in Istanbul after spending three years in Paris, during which time his approach to painting took a turn that would render his previous work obsolete. When Gürman returned to Turkey, he began realizing a series of works that had previously existed only in his carefully kept sketchbook from Paris (1963-66) in the form of collages, paintings and what he called *montages*, a distinctive, expanded form of painting that integrated the readymade and juttred out of the surface of the canvas only to restrict entry to it like a danger zone. Renda’s designation of Matrakçı Nasuh’s visual output in manuscripts as between landscape painting and cartographic miniature is oddly similar to Canan Beykal’s posthumous reading of Gürman’s work, in which she identifies the eye of a soldier to unlock the views the artist depicts:

We have to look at these views from the perspective of a very specific person for these components to make sense to us. Who could this person be? Doubtless, it is someone (who is not visible, but stands where we stand) observing these green fields, hills and trees. If these signifiers are to be ascribed meaning beyond the concept of any tree, any hill or any field, if one is to approximate Gürman’s message, then we have to say that the eye of this observer is that of a soldier who is connected to this field. And, precisely for this reason, I suggest that the term ‘landscape’ remains inadequate for these views and that they should not be considered as such. In my opinion, these [the works in the *Views* series] are an art of *fortification* rather than of landscape. It is not possible to unlock this series without acknowledging their relation to the military, which remains the focal point of Gürman’s life, art and work.²

The pairing of Gürman with Matrakçı Nasuh here intentionally extends the similarities to a formal level, in their economy of description, veering close to the cartoony to the contemporary eye, as well as the comparable natural elements

¹ Günsel Renda, *Başlangıcından Bugüne Çağdaş Türk Resim Sanatı Tarihi*, vol. 1, Günsel, Renda, Turan Erol, Nurullah Berk, Adnan Turani, Kaya Özsezgin, Mustafa Aslier (ed.) (Istanbul: Tıglat Basımevi, 1980), p. 25. ² Canan Beykal, *Altan Gürman* (Istanbul: Derimod Kültür Merkezi Yayınları, 1991), p. 56. Even though the exhibition catalogue is bilingual, I re-translated this section of the text, as I found the translation to English inadequate. The italics are mine for the word “fortification,” which is the translation for Beykal’s use of the word “tabya” in Turkish. In the original translation, this is translated as “surveillance,” which is suggested by Beykal as in the watchman surveilling the land as the embodied viewpoint for Gürman’s *Views* series. However, she proposes “tabya sanatı” as a replacement term for landscape art/landscape painting, infusing landscape with a militaristic outlook; present, protected, visible yet limited perhaps in its surveillance, a specifically standardized view from an unindividualized subject-position.



Ahmet Ragıp, Court Gardens of the Yıldız Palace, 1890s, Istanbul State Art and Sculpture Museum Collection.

included, so as to highlight this military outlook on nature embodied by two artists who lived more than four hundred years apart. Of course, despite the striking congruence, while Matrakçı Nasuh’s work includes identifiers and specifics to make the image correspond to an actual place, Gürman sheds all specifics; extremely reduced signifiers only point to the thingness of the land and the body of water that he depicts, where the topographic lens itself (the adopted eye of the maker, the highly abstracted view of the soldier) becomes the signified.

Military Landscapes

Although landscape painting proper entered the Ottoman palace in the 18th century, in the form of murals commissioned from European artists, a practice that was later taken up by the elite for their homes as signifiers of modernization and Europeanization, the notion of landscape and linear perspective entered the vocabulary of Ottoman artists through military education. The Mühendishane-i Berri-i Hümayun (1793) [Imperial Land Engineering School] and Mekteb-i Ulumu Harbiye-i Şahane (1834) [Imperial School of Military Sciences] were the schools where art classes were initially taught; both were founded before the Fine Arts Academy (1883). The classes offered in these institutions which aimed at training military personnel as well as engineer-architects³ were *menazır* (perspective) and painting classes based on copying from already two-dimensional work such as photographs and European prints.⁴ Adapting Western technique for primarily military objectives, these “art classes” entered the curriculum for the making of topographic layouts, technical drawings and engraving, not to produce artists who could express themselves through the act of painting per se, but to mould students with the newest educational methods for military advancement. Another expectation from these initial generations who were trained in the Western modality of representation was to produce paintings for the palace, through which modernity could be both displayed and performed. Landscape paintings without figures were the preferred choice, as they least offended Muslim sensibilities. In her book *The History of Ottoman Painting*, Wendy Shaw theorizes that these classes produced hybrid individuals and hybrid works, not partaking in any clear artistic tradition, functioning either as diagrammatic military paintings, or as works of oil on canvas reproduced from photographs to eschew the ban of imitating nature, and produced under the patronage of the sultan.

The second category mostly comprised paintings of Istanbul and its environs, especially the grounds of the Yıldız Palace, reproduced mainly from photographs in the albums of Sultan Abdulhamid II.⁵ Rather than landscape paintings in the Western tradition, expressive, romantic, or idealized, implying the subject position of a beholder of nature, these were “painting[s] of photograph[s] of land that has been landscaped [...]”⁶ As enlarged colour renditions of photographs, the odd glassiness of the Yıldız Palace paintings has an affinity with the intentional flatness of Gürman’s cold surfaces. Artist Turan Erol captures the uncanny inherent in them, a description that remarkably applies as much to the Yıldız paintings as it does to Gürman’s work:

In these paintings, the sky is always blue, sometimes brightening as it recedes into the horizon or becoming lit up by thin white clouds, and the waters are mirrors reflecting this blue. The trees and the street lamps, in the same



The Bridge of Narni, 1972.

direction, set up a monotonous rhythm; nothing ever moves, while everything receives its share of light eternally from the same source and in the same proportion. These paintings are mirrors of a universe where neither morning nor evening exists, where there are no misty horizons, where the sun never shines, and the seasons never change. In this world, there is no autumn or winter; everything seems to be immersed in an eternal sleep under an indirect spring light.”⁷

These paintings are flat, objective and immediate, resolving figure into ground and collapsing spatial depth, qualities that fall perfectly into line with a pop sensibility. The Yıldız paintings are almost “screened images”, in that nature is mediated through the photograph, which is then mediated further by oil on canvas. Reproductions of mechanical reproductions, they are odd precursors to the structural tactics that would be taken up by Gürman more than half a century later. No doubt, while the Yıldız Palace paintings are unquestioning attempts that aggrandize and colourise photographs on canvas as a technical exercise, or as part of the soldiers’ devout service to the empire, signifying adeptness in a Western technique rather than literacy in the paradigm of painting, Gürman’s work is a deeply cerebral exercise; his is the work of an informed intellectual, who not only comments on the history of painting but also participates in a contemporaneous structural debate on painting’s means by reducing them to its basic components.⁸

Yet, there is another commonality between Gürman’s work and the Yıldız Palace paintings: the suppression of the individual. In the case of the 19th-century Ottoman painters, this suppression was for the will of the state: landscape paintings by soldiers were completed by their instructors, and presented to the sultan to decorate the newly Westernized palace, signed “his servants”, and bearing no trace of the individual:

Signed with an affirmation of loyalty in lieu of or in addition to individual signatures, the paintings acted as thanks for the monarch’s patronage rather than as interpretations of his domain. [...] Emerging from a military environment with no tradition of visual production, these paintings repressed the possibility of subjectivity implied by the concept of style. After all, what empowers a soldier is his ability to exist not as an individual subject, but as an executor of state will. In the earliest cohort of Ottoman paintings, the artist was not there.⁹

Of course, for Altan Gürman, depersonalization came as a conscious choice. In fact, his earlier work, which is almost successfully suppressed in the artist’s historicization, stood on the opposite end of this spectrum. His student work at the Academy of Fine Arts bears traces of his academicized Cézannist training, in which he slightly conceals principles of plastic composition and construction of volume with an expressive brushstroke. Only a year before the drastic change in his approach to artmaking in Paris, his work was a full-fledged local iteration of abstract expressionism that had become popular in mid-century, signalling an embrace of non-political individual expression. Gürman completely eliminated his signature from his works starting with the *Statistics* series (and continued this stance, save

³ Keep in mind that Gürman’s initial visual training also bears traces of architectural education based on technical drawing, first learned during his youth from his architect grandfather and later through Ercüment Kalmık’s classes at the School of Architecture in Istanbul Technical University, which he attended before entering the Fine Arts Academy.

⁴ Mustafa Cezar, *Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi*, vol. 1, (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, 1971), pp. 374-399.

⁵ Of course, landscape paintings are not expressly limited to this category, painters were sent alongside photographers on expeditions as well. For more on this, see texts by Selim Deringil, Ahmet Ersoy and Berin Gölönü in *Ottoman Arcadia: The Hamidian Expedition to the Land of Tribal Roots (1886)* (Istanbul: ANAMED, 2018).

⁶ Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*, (London: IBTauris, 2011), p. 35.

⁷ Turan Erol, “Painting in Turkey in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century”, in *A History of Turkish Painting*, (Genève, Switzerland: Palasar SA, 1988), p. 41.

⁸ See, for example, his two collages from 1972 and 1973, or the unfinished montage from 1976 with the same title, *Narni Köprüsü*, Gürman’s version of Corot’s *The Bridge at Narni* or his subtle references to a reckoning with classicism in other collage works such as *Neoklasizmin Rüyası*.

⁹ Wendy M. K. Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 33.



Ahmed Ali, *Soldiers Training*, 1897, Istanbul State Art and Sculpture Museum Collection.

for a few collages from the 1970s), and used stamps for text in order to avoid handwriting completely, but these ready-made looking works were still handmade, carefully copied from magazines, replicating the broken horizontal strips that were the result of emulating low-quality prints (much like Lichtenstein's treatment of the Ben-Day-dot technique). The complete depersonalization would only happen after his return to Turkey, when Gürman embraced spray-paint and integrated materials such as barbed wire, nails and wood onto his surfaces. Gürman intentionally rendered his own hand subservient to the embodied persona of the anonymous and standardized soldier through whose eyes he made his landscapes (in his later works, the soldier would also become visible as the figure of Pierrot). In fact, Gürman had been a conscript soldier himself for more than two years during a critical time in the country's political history. Stationed in Ankara (more as a paper-pusher than a soldier on the field, nonetheless) between 1960 and 1962, his obligatory military service coincided with the 1960 *coup d'état*, with which a decade of liberal economy and international alliance was cut short with the first in a series of military interruptions of Turkey's democracy. A letter from Gürman to his mother-in-law during this time attests to a positive, if absurd, experience serving as a conscript soldier during the coup before going to Paris.¹⁰ He signed the letter with a series of abbreviated titles for his office, mocking the ranks of the National Ministry of Defence in which he served, and which he often called "the department of important work." It wouldn't be too far-fetched to say that it was this unintended infiltration of the military structure that fuelled Gürman's distaste for army logic and allowed him to emulate the viewpoint of the soldier. The antithetical reliance of the Turkish intelligentsia on the military to enforce democracy and stability and how the coup was welcomed by the intellectual elite must have struck a chord with Gürman as a deeper layer of absurdism and cognitive dissonance.¹¹

In his handling of his dual position, as an artist with personal sensibilities and as a bureaucrat at the service of the state as a soldier/painter, it is perhaps Ahmet Ali's predicament that comes closest to that of Gürman's. Ahmet Ali was teaching at the Military Medical School [Askeri Tıbbiye İdadisi] when he was noticed by Sultan Abdülaziz and sent to Paris to train in the studios of Gustave Boulanger and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Upon his return, he rose in society and was charged with the purchase of European paintings for the palace. While he bought examples of academic paintings for the imperial collection, he rejected academicism in his own work, which was formally similar to the Barbizon painters. He followed the work of contrarian Gustave Courbet very closely, while remaining loyal to the sultan. Ahmed Ali's later work was less Western and more of a culturally hybrid form, as he rejected the technologies of Western linear perspective learned in school and solidified abroad for a visual language closer to manuscript painting.¹² Ali's painting *Soldiers in Training* can be seen as a testament to his own subject position. In this painting, as a military exercise takes place in the non-receding background, two soldiers are watching grazing deer, an act undertaken countless times by the Barbizon painters that Ahmet Ali so admired, testifying perhaps to his split role between his responsibilities to the state and military, and to himself as an artist. The ambiguity of perspective and stylistic choices in Ahmed Ali's paintings have been subjected to various interpretations, and perhaps it can be speculated here, for the sake of the comparison with Gürman, that the mysteries of his stylistic choices can be read as a



Bilge and Altan Gürman, date unknown.

testament to his split position between being a soldier, an artist, and a bureaucrat.

In his short career, Gürman focused on a simple, often obsessively repetitive exploration that remained almost fully within the limits of the surface of the canvas, a battle fought with the legacy of painting and its confines, as well as with internalized militarism. Starting with his first solo show in 1967, he publicly committed to presenting a slowly expanding visual vocabulary of military landscapes, weapon names, camouflage, red tape, barbed wire, and armour cladding. He simultaneously made the embodied eye of the military subject his phenomenological informant and signalled the limits of painting as the support surface for his muted critique.¹³ He was engaged with understanding the notion of the military, both as a pervasive mindset and as an evolving representational method, which transformed landscapes into territories, humans into targets or casualties, and value of life into risk-assessment. Gürman was in the business of image-production, but tasked himself with how to produce images that would not conceal but reveal how they indeed operated. Was his work dedicated to uncovering this specific lineage of painting in Turkey, which was indelibly bound up with modernization and, hence, with its militaristic connotations? It would be a stretch to say so. But it would be safe to say that Gürman became occupied with the institutional framework, not performing a directly recognizable critique per se, but at the least, engaging obliquely with the multiple missions and identities shouldered by artists. While transferring the military gaze onto his canvas, and dissecting his chosen medium and its history into its components, testing what each of them did, Gürman touched on something immanent to his vernacular inheritance; a fortuitous tactical subversion performed through painting.

¹⁰ In the letter, Gürman considers himself lucky to be serving under an officer trained as an architect, who decorated his office with reproductions of Impressionist paintings. Gürman describes how his technical skills would only come into service when he was consulted in the design of the funerary stones for colonels and captains who died. Fellow conscript and artist friend Sarkis says that they endured these Ankara days by taking refuge in each other's company and by reading Bertrand Russell. Sarkis says that Gürman was making expressive and rapid watercolours during those days. Interview with Sarkis by the author, July 2017, Istanbul.

¹¹ The artist's wife Bilge Gürman suggests a different trajectory, citing an exhibition of photographs from concentration camps that the couple saw in Paris, which led to Gürman's engagement with the military as subject matter. Not dismissing this narrative, I am merely suggesting that this previous and extensive obligatory experience must have also played a part.

¹² Wendy Shaw argues against what John Berger interprets as an essentialist failure (forgetting the techniques he learned abroad later in life, as he was more deeply connected to the ways of the East), posing that Ahmed Ali's eschewing of correct perspectival depiction was a conscious choice evincing a search for a specifically Ottoman modality. Taking sides with Shaw, I go further and suggest that Ali's painting *Soldiers in Training* is not only an attempt at a synthesis between Eastern and Western visual practices as she suggests, but also a testament to his own subject position.

¹³ Critically reading Gürman's bureaucratized identity and internalised military eye is a completely subjective decision. Alternatively, a different local genealogy could be built on paintings reflecting anti-war sentiment or hints of discontent with militarism; if I had followed this path, I would certainly have used two paintings with the same title of *Gece Baskını* (Night Attack) by Çallı İbrahim and Zeki Kocamemi with the respective dates of 1916 and 1936. For late-Ottoman paintings revealing ambiguities about war, see Gizem Tongo, "'Civilization and Competence': Displaying Ottoman War Paintings to Their Allies", *The Great War in the Middle East*, Robert Johnson, James E. Kitchen (ed.) (London: Routledge, 2019).