

İNCİ EVİNER

Movements for the interstitial body

BY TIFFANY LUK



Portrait of İNCİ EVİNER. Photos by Tiffany Luk for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



A view of İNCİ EVİNER's studio in Hasköy, Istanbul, 2022.

When you see Turkish artist İnci Eviner's work, it is hard to imagine what her studio might look like. Her recent solo exhibition "Houris and Travelers" at Dirimart gallery in Istanbul in November 2022 highlighted the range of her artistic practice. In the main gallery space, a ten-meter-wide projection of the video work *Reenactment of Heaven* (2018) was accompanied by ceramic human-animal figures lined up in row, some splashed with black ink, of Eviner's latest series, *Travelers* (2022). Fervent with motion, the four-minute-loop of *Reenactment*—horizontally divided, with the top third depicting women dancing on an Istanbul rooftop and the bottom portion showing disjointed figures performing repetitive actions amid inky brushstrokes—contrasted with the inanimate ivory ceramic sculptures of *Travelers*.

Tucked away in the quaint neighborhood of Hasköy is Eviner's studio. I initially thought I could walk to the studio from where I was staying, although a 15-minute taxi ride through a labyrinth of narrow streets rendered my earlier idea a folly. When I arrived, Eviner and her studio assistant were waiting by the door on the ground level of a residential building. Her workspace has lofted ceilings and large, uncovered windows that directly face a children's playground. Her studio assistant later told me that local residents, alarmed by their eccentric costumes and rehearsals for Eviner's videos, were initially concerned that they were a cult, before realizing this was an artist's workspace.

Aside from a small kitchen, the interior was brimming with traces of the artist's work. A large portion of a wall that was adjacent to the entrance served as a display space for excerpts from Eviner's work, revealing the multiplicity of her practice, including silkscreen prints from the series *New Citizen* (2009) depicting peculiar creatures such as the half-calligraphic, half-mammal *Text-Animal*; a sculpture from *Travelers*; and a still image from the video work *Harem* (2009). Eviner studied painting at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Art (the present-day Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) and up until the early 1990s, her work had mostly consisted of oil paintings and drawings. Since then, her practice has expanded into different contemporary mediums; she is best known as a video artist and for her ink-like, black-acrylic paintings on paper, the latter of which was exemplified by *Ahtapotu Dinlemek* (*Listening to the Octopus*), *Funny Business*, and *Arzu Haritası 1* (all 2022) presented at her latest show.



Jars of baby sharks and a snake on the shelves of Eviner's studio.

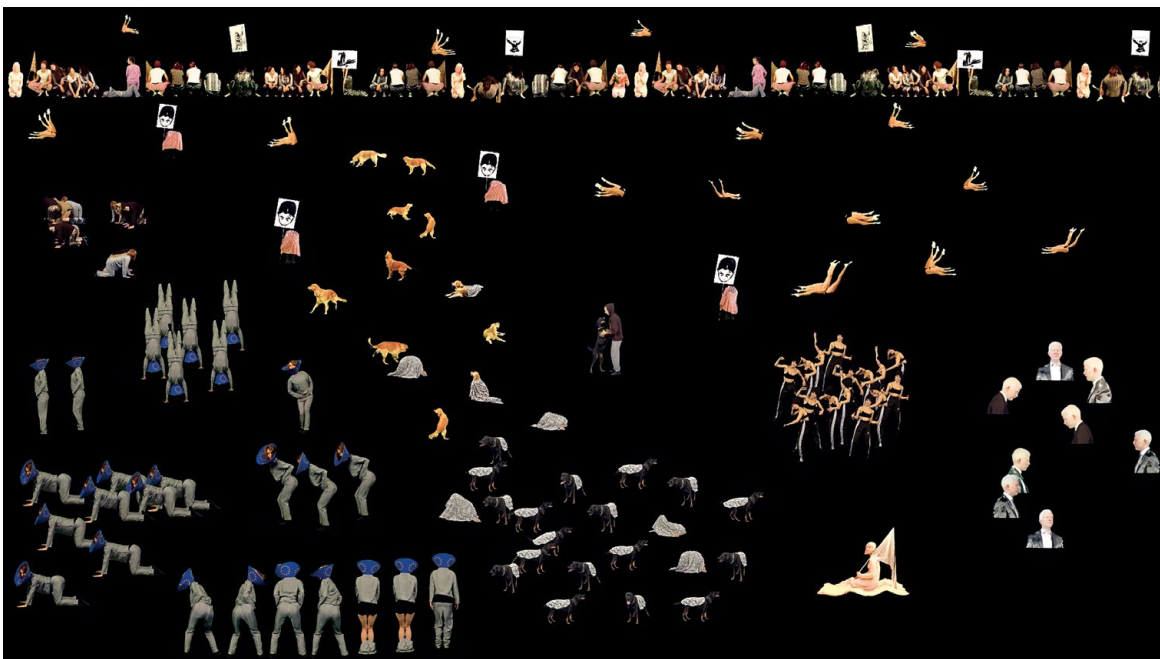
Nevertheless, drawing is still at the heart of Eviner's practice. Walking around her studio, I found sketchbooks on a table, on bookshelves, and stacked upon each other inside a cabinet. Flipping through her notebooks, one could see the blueprints for the elements found elsewhere in the studio: for example, a fuschia hat resembled the material form of one of her sketches of a shrew-like head.

The studio felt like a well-loved home brimming with idiosyncrasies. Six disco balls hung from the ceiling, jars of preserved baby sharks and a bottle containing a small snake sat on top of the cabinet of her sketchbooks. There were photos of Eviner with her video-production crews—many of them her students at Kadir Has University where she is an associate professor—and one wall had colorful child-like scribbles pinned to it. "My grandchild's exhibition," Eviner joked. In one corner, there was a projector and a screen. We ate almond cookies while watching the entirety of her video works in reverse-chronological order.

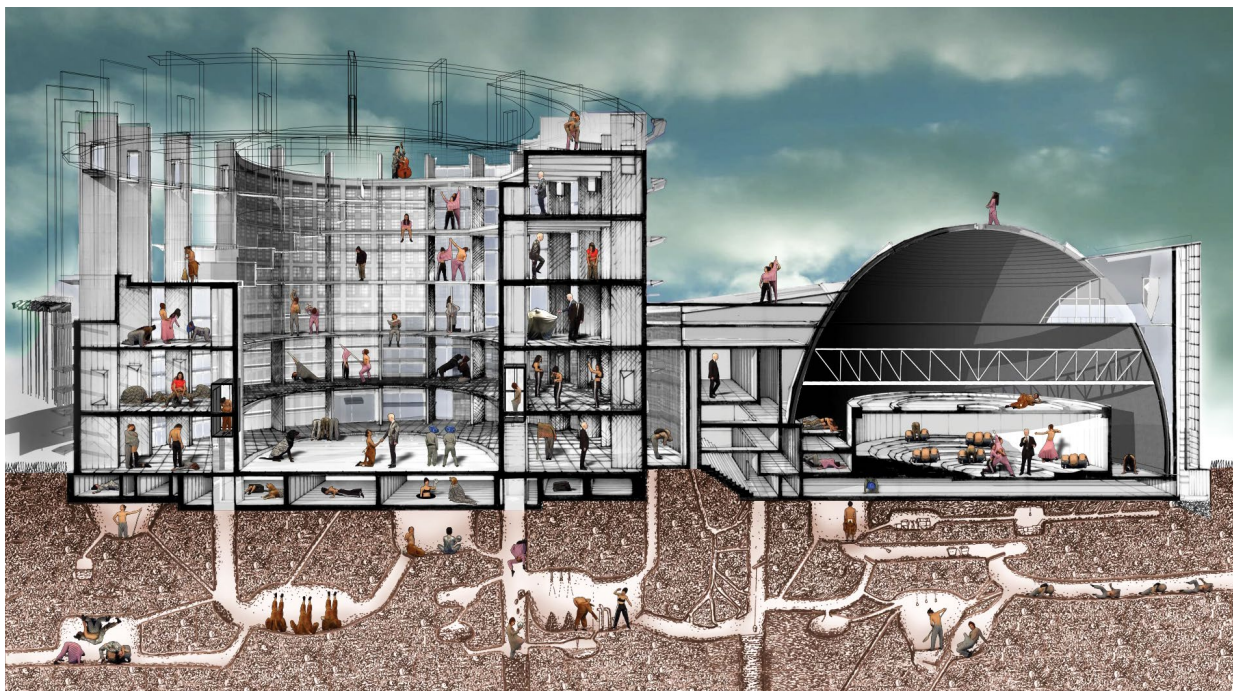
At first glance, Eviner's video works, beginning with *Harem*, are a sensory overload. Many of her video works are collages of different self-contained scenes on a loop, which she composes onto large tableaux, such as a map of continental Europe in *Fluxes of Girls on Europe* (2010) or the interior of the Ottoman royal palace, as imagined by Antoine Ignace Melling in an 18th-century engraving, in *Harem*. So while some works—for example, *Broken Manifestos* (2010) and *Beuys Underground* (2017)—are around three minutes in duration, to see everything the artist has composed in one video would take manifold loops. There are myriad tiny figures engaged in handstand walks, solo dances, tiny motions like a spinning dog, to name a few. While we watched them on the small screen in her studio, it was easy to imagine the scale of a proper presentation—and one needs it to truly take in the attention to detail Eviner has exacted in her work.

After viewing her most recent video, *Agoraphobia* (2021), which takes place around Şadi Çalık's monument for the 50th anniversary of the Turkish Republic on İstiklal Avenue, I realized Eviner's moving-image works are a composite of the fantastical and the real. Her works often address political issues while still visually existing on the plane of fantasy. For example, *Parliament* (2010), a three-minute-long video with a surreal, sectional view of the European Parliament based on an architectural sketch of the building and the ground it stands on in Strasbourg, initially depicts only a few men in suits, followed by the sudden influx of people within and outside of the parliament, with one using a pickaxe on the roof above the auditorium. It also shows people digging underneath to gain access to the building. This work was inspired by Eviner's artist residency at Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne where she came to see herself as the "other" relative to the French. The depiction of the European Parliament represented, at the time, the very real possibility of Turkey's accession to the European Union after negotiations began in 2005. The building of the European Parliament, serving as a synecdoche for European political and cultural hegemony, and the various yet limited methods of entry into it, is perhaps a reflection Turkey's precarious geopolitical position, traditionally as the meeting point of "Occident" and the "Orient" in the western cultural imagination.

After a virtual tour of "We, Elsewhere," her exhibition in the Turkey Pavilion at 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, Eviner referred to cultural theorist Judith Butler's writings about the idea of "gender performativity" as a product of culture and politics. Eviner has previously stated that her approach to the body, as a subject, differs from western women artists, as well as the type of ideological feminist discourse prevalent among women artists of her generation. Instead, she maintains, her work is highly influenced by Turkey's religious and political contexts.



İNCİ EVİNER, *Broken Manifestos: Demonstration, Immigration, Violence*, 2010, still from video in loop with color and sound: 3 min. Courtesy the artist and Dirimart, Istanbul.



İNCİ EVİNER, *Parliament*, 2010, still from video in loop with color and sound: 3 min. Courtesy the artist and Dirimart, Istanbul.

Eviner graduated from the art academy in 1980—the same year a brutal coup d'état installed a military junta and began a decade marked by the erosion of secularism and increased censorship, with dozens of journalists imprisoned. This was the political environment in which Eviner, and artists of her generation, got their start. Eviner's interest lies in the idea of the body—both its interiority and physicality—and the history and culture in which the body inhabits. This is evident in Eviner's visual language, which pushes the boundaries of the body, exploring the ideas of male and female, animal and human, and the spaces in-between.

Similarly demonstrating the vacillation between animal and human, reality and fantasy, is Eviner's *Travelers*. The white ceramic sculptures of fragmented animal-like and human bodily forms, lined up in row on metal armatures, with some works splashed with black ink and others adorning with horse tails, represented what Eviner called a "fantasy parade." Eviner noted that the fantastical figurative statues are meant to evoke mythological pasts, at a talk led by Eviner at Dirimart during the exhibition's opening. Limbs without torsos, movement without motion, time without history—this work is a meditation on the interstitial and builds on Eviner's rich visual language.

Speaking to Eviner, despite all the social critiques of women's place in Turkey's religiously conservative communities as well as its secular society, she makes a note that she wants to focus more on the idea of joy in her future work. This made sense to me, as her studio and her multifarious artworks reflect an artist who finds interest and pleasure in her practice, in the making of drawings and the flowing of her imagination onto the page and the screen.



Installation view of İNCİ EVİNER's *Travelers 1*, 2022, ceramic, metal structure, 150 × 810 × 25 cm, at "Houris and Travelers" at Dirimart, Istanbul, 2022. Photo by Nazlı Erdemirel. Courtesy the artist and Dirimart.