

HALE TENGER / BORDERS / BORDERS

Artwork Labels

Introduction

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HALE TENTER / BORDERS / BORDERS

Hale Tenger (born 1960, Izmir, Turkey) is one of the most important artists of her generation. A sensitive observer of the power relations that shape and change our realities, Tenger has spent over three decades exploring how to navigate the search for freedom, and how we act in the world when faced with its absence, through the poetics of image, sound and language.

As a young person, Tenger faced the spiraling violence between left and right-wing political groups in 1970s Turkey. These conditions, coupled with an economic collapse, were used to justify the 12th September 1980 coup d'état which overthrew the government. Witnessing the breakdown of civil order and the creeping normalisation of authoritarianism instilled in Tenger an urgent need to respond, 'For me, making art was the only way I could manage to become, to exist.'

HALE TENTER / BORDERS / BORDERS is the first museum survey of the artist's work. Spanning the 1990s to the present, it features key multimedia installations alongside significant video, sculptural and sound works that encapsulate Tenger's enduring preoccupations: hegemony, human oppression, the subjugation of more-than-human life forms, and the tension between violence and gentleness; as they relate to the cyclical recurrence of war and peace.

The exhibition demonstrates Tenger's unique construction of *affective atmospheres* through the intricate layering of sound, image and language. Her installations unfold slowly, revealing a subtle interplay

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of presence and absence, truth and fiction, past and future. These are works that resist resolution in favour of cultivating refection on how history is constructed, how narratives are weaponised, and how we might find new ways of being within, and beyond, borders. As Tenger herself states, 'At its core my work is about standing against patriarchal hierarchical power games.'

In this spirit, *HALE TENTER / BORDERS / BORDERS* is an invitation to attune to the psychic, physical and political borders that define and transform the world. Though covering more than thirty years, the works in this survey speak directly to now as authoritarianism rises, the public realm disintegrates, borders tighten, dissent is criminalised and the media increasingly fragments reality into competing fictions. As she says in relation to the turbulence of recent global events that have horrifically undermined international law and humanitarian agreements, 'I would now argue that it is not only Istanbul but life itself, and the world as we've made it, that subjects us to a full range of paradoxes.' Her work cannot lead us out of this confusion but it can open a space to feel the contradictions more fully, as we both believe and do not believe that things will get better.

HALE TENTER / BORDERS / BORDERS is presented by AGWA's Simon Lee Foundation Institute of Contemporary Asian Art.

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Böyle Tanıdıklarım Var III / I Know People Like This III

2013

dry laser printing on X-ray film by applying digital effects to 731 photographs compiled from press archives, plexiglass, LED, metal

Arter Collection, Istanbul

Adapting the private architecture of a corridor, *I Know People Like This III* is a labyrinthine passage through images of decades of political violence in Turkey. For this work, Tenger sifted through over 4,000 press photographs, selecting 731 to print onto X-ray film. The installation begins with images of urban conflict in the southeastern Anatolia region in January 2013 and moves backward in time towards the 1955 Istanbul Pogrom.

This corridor is lined with iconic images of these events: the mass protests following the 2007 assassination of Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink; the 400th vigil of the Saturday Mothers in Galatasaray Square, held weekly since 1995; and the 1980 military coup, the 3rd coup d'état in the history of the Republic of Turkey; alongside lesser-known scenes of police brutality, show trials and executions.

These spectral photographs function like diagnostic tools as they make visible the fractures and hidden injuries within a nation's political body. They suggest that without adequate diagnosis such generational traumatic injuries will remain untreated and, therefore, unhealed.

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Such images do more than record the repetition of violence and the fragility of resistance; they also reveal the deep emotional toll of bearing witness. As Tenger has said, 'My mother couldn't stay in the labyrinth for very long. But I also trouble myself with my own works. I kept crying as I was collecting those images.'

Accordingly, this is not just a historical archive; it is a confrontation, an invocation. It asks that we remember when memory itself is friable and faulty, and that we stay present when nothing remains clear except the urgent need to not look away.

Sınırlar/Sınırlar / Borders Borders

1999

single channel colour video, sound, 4 min 45 sec (looped)

Courtesy of Hale Tenger and Galeri Nev Istanbul

A long time ago I suddenly realised that the country one belongs to is not, as the usual rhetoric goes, the one you love but the one you are ashamed of. Shame can be a stronger bond than love.

—Carlo Ginzburg

In *Borders/Borders*, Tenger uses play and repetition to unravel the human impulse to divide, dominate and defend. The video screen is split in two: above, an anonymous hand draws a line in the sand, again and again, only to see it washed away by the sea; while below, children play a game of tug-of-war.

This innocent struggle over territory becomes a reflection on the origins of borders. Those drawn not only on maps but also between identities, beliefs and bodies. In doing so, Tenger exposes the act of partition not as a distant political abstraction but as a primal, embodied gesture, to ask:

Through what kinds of actions were these borders drawn?

Were they drawn along ideological, psychological or national lines?

What need, what fear, what desire is being fulfilled by these borders?

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The children's game is playful but it is also a rehearsal of power relations. The hand's repetitive gesture is obsessive, even ritualistic, an assertion of control undone by the rhythms of nature.

In the looped choreography of drawing and erasure, *Borders/Borders* reminds us that the logic of domination is neither stable nor sustainable. No borders are permanent. They are performances. They persist only through belief. No matter how deep the line is drawn, time and tide will always reclaim it. In dissolving the line, Tenger returns us to the sea, a metaphorical space beyond ownership in this work, where nature renders all human claims provisional.

Denizin Üzerinde Balonlar / Balloons on the Sea

2011

seven channel colour video and sound installation, 5 min 39 sec (looped)

music: Serdar Ateşer

Courtesy of Hale Tenger and Galeri Nev İstanbul

Whatever their goal is, they come back, as, this or that way, things don't remain the same ... Well, it's still depressing in a way, but strangely optimistic—for me.
—Hale Tenger

Created during the outset of the Arab Spring, a moment fraught with uncertainty yet charged with the possibility of political transformation, *Balloons on the Sea* carries a paradoxical sense of hope. It offers no illusion of revolution as a single, transcendent moment but situates it in the form of a poetic literalism, as a relentless beginning again.

The installation draws on a uniquely Turkish pastime of shooting balloons floating on the sea. At its centre, a large screen inverts the image of a chain of balloons, transforming them into luminous, floating abstractions. Behind this, six smaller screens show individual balloons that periodically vanish, only to reappear, at an opportune time.

There is beauty here but there is also violence. A chain of joy and lightness becoming an execution row in

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the open sea. A series of fragile lives cut short and yet, they return, again and again. This repetition is not without pain but it carries with it a powerful insistence that change, however delayed, is always in motion. As Tenger said, ‘We know various forms of overpowering continue to haunt societies on different levels, politically, culturally or economically but we know as well that no suppression can be carried on forever’.

In *Balloons on the Sea* militarisation becomes play as beauty becomes violence becomes beauty, again, and again. These elements cannot exist without the other. A balloon is shot only to reappear again, and again. It might ask that we sit with this discomfort a little longer than is comfortable. For in this brief pause between the impulse and the act there is reflection. Without reflection there is no justice, no peace.

Rüzgarların Dinlendiği Yer / Where the Winds Rest

2007

16 floor fans, black cables, rotating video projector, black and white video

Arter Collection, Istanbul

Created in the wake of the 2007 assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, *Where the Winds Rest* invokes an atmosphere thick with absence, guilt and denial. A creeping dread spreads like serpents across the floor; an eerie silence lingers long after the violence. These are punctuated by moments when nothing is said but everything is felt.

Projected in a slow, circling motion are two lines by the Turkish poet Edip Cansever, 'Did you pull the body from underwater? We didn't pull the body from underwater.' As the text passes over the room and across the metal grilles of the oscillating fans it flickers between legibility and distortion. In this visual and linguistic blur the text becomes an incantation. The question loops and the answer returns. It is in this gap, between the desire to know and the instinct to look away, that memory surfaces not as truth but as contradiction, prejudice and fabrication.

Though first exhibited in Izmir the work addresses a broader culture of denial as tragic events are not acknowledged and frequently covered up. By taking the

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form of a call and response that loops into a compulsion to repeat, the work holds us in the murky water between witness and accomplice.

It locates us as an active participant: if you were asked, 'Did you pull the body from underwater?' what would you say?

The voice in this work is able to inhabit us because it is silent and anonymous. It speaks in a haunted tone that is both inside and outside of language. We cannot be certain who is speaking and who is being spoken to. Is it a blind man? A death drive? A hypocrite? A rape drive? Nor do we know who is implicated in the 'We'. It is inside us, and beyond our capacity to know.

World Cracker

1992

Russian-made nut cracker, toy globe

Courtesy of Hale Tenger and Galeri Nev Istanbul

Tenger studied ceramics at the Istanbul Fine Arts Academy and later completed her MFA at South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education in 1988. It was there, following her teacher's suggestion to 'go outside', that she began engaging directly with the material world beyond the studio—not as a reference for her work but as raw material to fashion it from.

Many of Tenger's early works use found objects, such as rope, oil, scrap metal, wood, dustpans and gear shifts, assembled into sculptural compositions that experiment with the unity of word and image. While most of these objects retain traces of their original function they are symbolically transformed through the addition of language. In the pairing of object and title the resulting works resemble a kind of visual pun or caricature that explores how humour and irony can both animate and complicate urgent political realities.

World Cracker was created shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As rumours circulated that workers in crisis-hit factories were being paid in goods rather than wages, Soviet-made items like Russian nutcrackers, tins of caviar and bottles of vodka flooded Istanbul's street markets.

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In Tenger's hands, one of these pitiless nutcrackers becomes more than a tool. Here, a toy globe is caught between the jaws of a dragon-shaped nutcracker. The joke is immediate but its implications run deeper as the facile globe echoes the post-Cold War anxieties around power realignments and the commodification of geopolitical collapse.

Perhaps, this nutcracker is held by a man who does not kill. Not yet. Will possibly kill. Will surely kill. It is power disguised as an everyday object. One in which the world is reduced to a bite-sized toy that is crushed not through malice but indifference. A gesture of sovereignty turned comic then cruel. However, though the man thinks he holds it, the truth is nobody really holds it.

***Dışarı çıkmadık, çünkü hep dışardaydık
/ İçeri girmedik, çünkü hep içerdeydik
/ We didn't go outside; we were always
on the outside / We didn't go inside; we
were always on the inside***

1995/2015

steel I-beams and iron angle brackets, barbed wire, watchman's wooden hut, galvanised sheet metal, scenic nature images, cassette tape cover insert, brown packing tape, tea glass and saucer, tea spoon, tea, sugar cube, candle, star and crescent lapel pin, pocket radio, glass sheet, postcards and postage stamps, cushion, machine-made carpet cushion, plastic framed mirror, nail, folder, fan, a pair of men's shoes, men's trousers, light bulb, black sticker, MP3 player and sound, 32 minute 49 sec (looped)

Arter Collection, Istanbul

Perhaps I wasn't behind bars but being outside didn't necessarily mean I was free.

—Hale Tenger

Originally created for the 4th Istanbul Biennial in 1995, *We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside* conjures a figure who could neither go outside nor come inside. Caught between these two competing realities, the safety of being 'inside' and the freedom of being 'outside', a tragic paradigm emerges: Is there no alternative?

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The work began with a real structure: a dilapidated guard's hut that Tenger found in the abandoned Antrepo Customs Warehouse, dragged into the middle of the exhibition space and enclosed within a two-meter-high barbed wire fence. In an unsettling inversion, the hut is now both prison and shelter with its imagined guard both enforcer and captive.

Inside, the hut is plastered with picturesque landscapes of tropical beaches, alpine peaks and idealised views of Istanbul covering the actual view of the Bosphorus outside. A half-drunk glass of tea rests on a ledge, a star and crescent-shaped brooch glints beside a radio playing popular Turkish songs from the artist's childhood. These sentimental fragments of a nation's past accumulate to create a nostalgic space but the comfort they offer is cloying and claustrophobic. It is a stoic posturing, a toxic pragmatism, a version of the English 'Keep Calm and Carry On' when maintaining composure is potentially counterproductive. For nostalgia is not sentimentality; it is the suffering caused by an unappeased longing to return. In an unsettling inversion, the imagined identity is now codified through confinement.

We assume there is a homeland, a future or a past that we might return to. Be it through nationalism, liberalism or community, each promises a comfortable *inside* where fulfilment exists. But the installation suggests there is no clear border. What seems like safety becomes surveillance; what appears like protection reveals control. The inside is no more secure and the outside is never fully alien. We are always displaced, always lacking. We are never fully at home in any space.

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This is not simply a work about Turkey or one historical moment. It speaks to a condition of estrangement, of what it is to live within the psychological architecture of nationalism and nostalgia, of being shaped by what we do not *consciously* believe. The fence, the guard's hut, the old radio songs. These are not dead remnants of another era. They're active ideological structures that enforce belonging while simultaneously defining who remains outside.

Tenger's work offers no catharsis. It is a paradox and an accusation. You are asked to choose: stay outside, enter inside, open the door, step inside. This is not relativism. This is not universalism. This is not optimism. It is pessimism. We will never be here again. Our past will always linger. Our confinement will always persist. Try to reconsider our perspective. Try to ask more of ourselves and of others. Try to admit when we were wrong. We will, hopefully, feel something. We will, hopefully, see the cell.

Sirkülasyon / Circulation

2000

five channel colour video, sound, 1–5 respectively: 15, 19, 13, 46, 12 sec (looped)

Courtesy of Hale Tenger and Galeri Nev Istanbul

Circulation explores the uneasy overlap between spectacle, control and the commodification of culture. Originally exhibited as part of *Strange Home* at the Historisches Museum alongside the 2000 World Expo in Hannover, the video was created in response to the artist's experience of visiting a low-budget circus in Istanbul with her young daughter. What stayed with Tenger wasn't the performances themselves but the indifference on the face of the ringmaster—his expression shifting only slightly between introductions, as if going through the motions of a role long divorced from meaning.

The installation presents five monitors, each showing slightly different footage from that circus. Animals perform, acrobats move through routines, and the ringmaster cycles in and out of view. The upbeat tune of *Lambada* plays over the footage, adding an eerie cheerfulness to the repetition. We become caught in this loop of entertainment, performance and emotional detachment.

Tenger's decision to show this work in an historical museum within the context of a World Expo was deliberate. These massive showcases of national

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innovation and ambition often create temporary spectacles of progress that leave behind abandoned infrastructure and little lasting value. For her, they represent a broader ‘circulation’ of globalised display culture, where images, objects and even people move through systems of consumption and exhaustion.

By pairing low spectacle (the circus) with high culture (the museum), *Circulation* destabilises our expectations. It raises uncomfortable questions: Who is performing? Who is watching? Is art itself part of this same cycle? In a system that rewards visibility and novelty, what gets worn out in the process?

Circulation doesn’t offer an outside to the loop. It implicates artist, viewer and museum alike. In the endless repetition of the ringmaster’s detached face, we begin to recognise the familiar sensation of cultural exhaustion. A sense of finitude announces itself as we feel that the future is undergoing a slow cancellation.

Beyrut / Beirut

2005–07

single channel colour video, sound, 3 min 47 sec (looped)
music: Serdar Ateşer,
audio: YouTube/msoubra

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia
Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2013

2013/0109

A hollowed-out hotel, the iconic pink façade of the St. Georges Hotel in downtown Beirut. Shot covertly from the hotel opposite in 2005 this once glamorous seafront resort was partially destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and later became the infamous site of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination by a truck bomb on 14 February 2005.

Beirut is composed like a painting. Warm sunlight glazes the gridded windows of this formally elegant four storey building as soft white sheets billow in the breeze. A gentle, hypnotic score enhances this soothing, almost serene tableau, wrapping it in an illusory tranquillity.

As day slips into night, the visual stillness is pierced by a tonal shift signaling a kind of betrayal. The white sheets—hung in protest against Hariri's real estate company Solidere International—twist violently in distress and a chilling soundscape of sirens, artillery and distant gunfire—sourced from civilian footage of the 2006 Israeli bombardment of Lebanon—engulfs the image. The video ends abruptly in silence and darkness. A memorial to the dead that are still dying.

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The violence in *Beirut* exists and can be understood through a form of latency—something not seen but deeply felt. The daytime image is not a portrait of a ruinous hotel or a documentary of catastrophic events. The traumatic experience is made visible in this work via a semantic lapse; it is in the flip from light to dark that meaning falters and the once clear daytime image becomes unstable. *Beirut* now speaks in a hushed, suggestive voice that insists that something traumatic has happened, is happening or will continue to happen. As a result, the spaces in the video—the hollowed-out hotel, the open windows, the white sheets hung like curtains—no longer function simply as architectural elements. They start to feel uncertain, ambiguous, like question marks. They suggest something is missing, concealed, unresolved or possible.

Evoking the fragile border between appearance and reality, *Beirut* reminds us that images are central to both art and life. They can preserve memory, soothe unbearable truths or distort them entirely. Like the world it reflects, *Beirut* is a beautiful image becoming a message: the message is death. And still, through its looping structure the video follows a rhythm that echoes the cyclical nature of life itself: day becomes night, present becomes past becomes present again, and the pulse of destruction becomes the faint but persistent beat of renewal.

I'd rather open my heart than become comfortably numb

2024

ready-made nickel tamata, unique handmade silver-plated brass tamata, iron nails, brass hanging brackets, directional speakers, sound, 2 min 17 sec (looped)
electro/acoustic adviser: Hakan Kurşun

Courtesy of Hale Tenger and Galeri Nev İstanbul

BORDERS / BORDERS

or *The Burden of Relativism*

I don't know how to die in [THIS WORLD]

BORDERS / BORDERS, or The Burden of Relativism, I don't know how to die in [THIS WORLD] takes place in the southern hemisphere winter of 2025. It is staged in a time of repetition. Of arrests. STOP. Everyone has the need for *freedom of peaceful assembly*. Of destruction. STOP. International law says that an attack must be cancelled when it becomes apparent that the target is civilian or that the civilian loss would be *disproportionate* to the expected military gain. Of forgetting. STOP. Too much memory. Not enough thinking.

There is a secret conspiracy between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Some of us know exactly when and how they will die in this world. Some hope not to die in this world. You will not die, friend.

I do not know *when* to die in this world. I know *when* to die in this world.

I do not know *how* to die in this world. I know *how* to die in this world.

This uncertainty sustains our secret disavowed hope. Maybe. We will not die. Some of us are more mortal than others. Some never achieve the category of humanity.

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We spoke, a long time ago, about never wanting to go back. We can't stand repetition.

I can't correct it. I can't correct it.
I'm corrupted. I'm corrupted.
You're corrupted. The world's corrupted.

We arranged nine works from 1992 to 2024 in the shape of a spiral we will never return to the same. We hope this will contribute to an understanding of belonging that resists distinctions between inside/outside. An attempt, perhaps, to avoid authority, to save us from the doom of duality.

A long time ago, echoing Simone Weil, dreamers believed that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past. For those who prefer the present, force will always be at the centre of human history, and *Beirut*, 2005–07, which entered the State Art Collection in 2013 and sits at the centre of this exhibition, is the purest and loveliest of mirrors. Be careful, if we break them, we disappear at the same stroke.

We feel the burden of repetition, of receptivity, of relativism. Of feeling too much and at the same time too little. We enter the exhibition in January 2013 at a political deadlock and arrive in September 1955 at a state of terrorism. We leave in July 2024 as we watch the first live-streamed genocide, a conflict cycle of conflict cycle of conflict cycle of conflict cycle, we begin again, and again.

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You have waged a war in the realm of words. Everything you say is a lie and that is why you are free to say it. We understand there can be no universal, truth-telling or all-seeing ‘objective’ narrative that can capture a single truth. The best we can hope for is to arrive at a version of truth instead of one big lie. That, my dear, is the whole truth pure and simple.