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BY
HG MASTERS

REASONABLE

AYŞE ERKMEN

BEAUTY

ArtAsiaPacific 73 May & June

PORTRAIT BY SERGIO BELINCHÓN

Features artasiapacific.com

Unlike many of us, Ayşe Erkmen has perfect clarity about the choices she makes. For her first exhibition at Istanbul's Rampa gallery in February, the back wall of the exhibition space was painted Pantone 18-2120, because Honeysuckle pink is Pantone's 2011 color of the year. In the same show, Erkmen wove tautly stretched, electric-orange canvas safety straps between the gallery's four, thick supporting columns to "bind the space together horizontally because the columns support the space vertically." These bands, titled *Easy Jet* (2011), were orange because Rampa's concrete-floored, halogen-lit underground space is so austere that she wanted a burst of color when viewers turned the corner into the large exhibition room. For *Turm 79* (2010), her contribution to the public-art project "Emscherkunst 2010" in Germany's industrial Ruhr Valley region, she installed a golden balustrade on top of an abandoned coal tower, because coal was once the region's "black gold." On sunny days the railing glimmered, looking like a crown on the industrial structure, and this was her intention—to "give elegance back to an old thing."

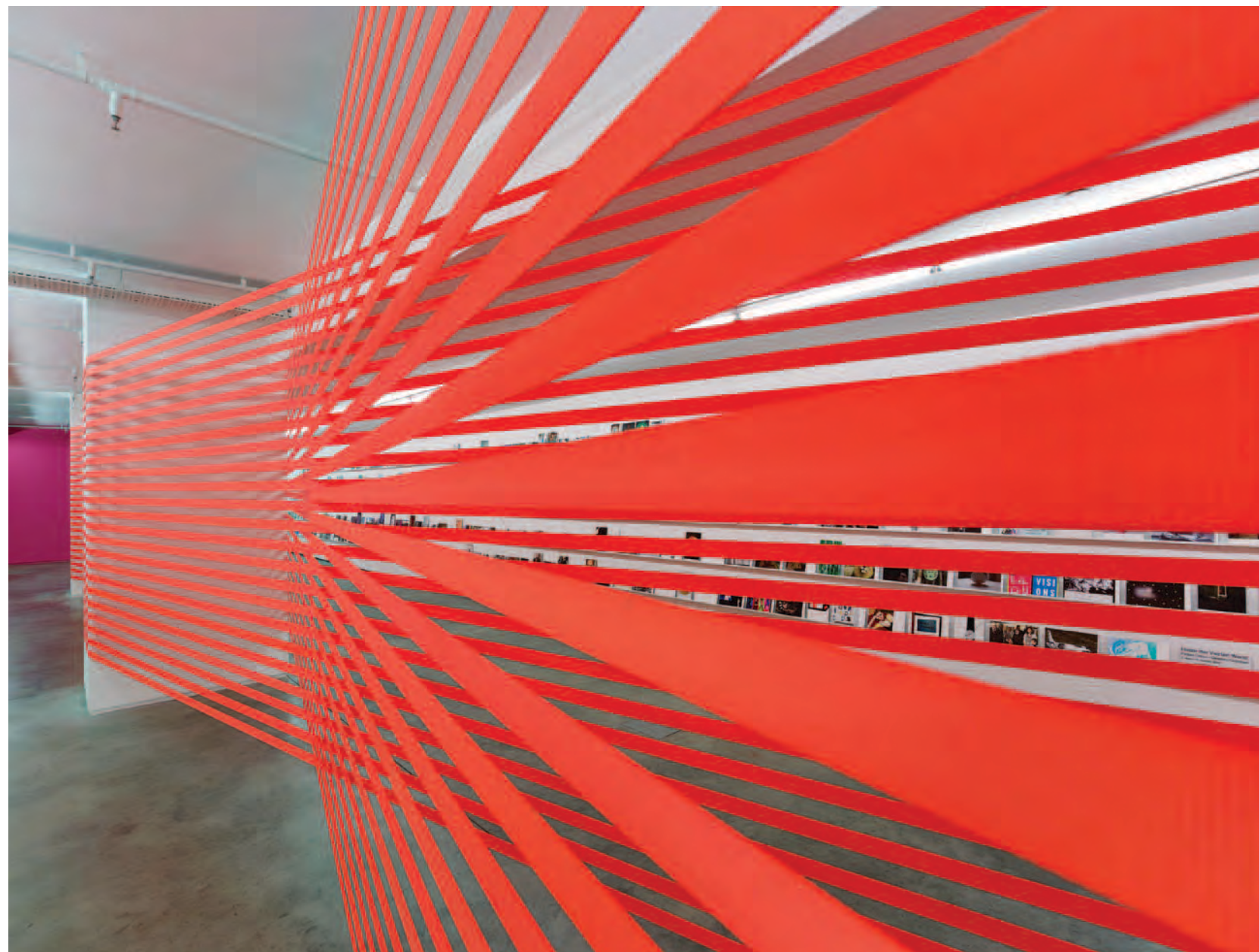
While there is no single style or form to Erkmen's art, her preoccupation with uniting a sense of necessity and a strong visual presence is evident throughout her diverse sculptural works. Her four-decade-long career spans wall-mounted, floor and free-standing sculptures, public artworks, installations ranging from minimal interior interventions to sound pieces and even one involving a pair of tigers, as well as related video pieces. Color is a key consideration, and she has come to favor bright, pure hues (and not just those from Pantone swatches). As we were discussing her recent Rampa exhibition, the Istanbul-born artist expounded: "Showing an idea is important, but it must be done in the most aesthetic way possible. Everything has to have a purpose." But despite her insistence on making well-considered choices, Erkmen maintains that *she* doesn't want to be the one who makes those decisions. For her, "the perfect artwork is one that decides itself."

While all successful artworks possess an inner balance or internal logic, Erkmen pursues this harmony in a rigorously empirical manner. When she wrapped the façade of the art center Witte de With's building in Rotterdam with a padded fabric, she chose a garish turquoise hue—especially jarring in contrast with the muted tones of the design-conscious Dutch port city—because it was Pantone's 2010 color of the year. The fabric had a patchwork design that referred to the De Stijl artist and group-founder Theo van Doesburg's geometric abstraction, *Contra-Composition XVI* (1925). Erkmen's combination of the two elements—from the high modernist style of De Stijl and the US-based Pantone's consumer-friendly, late-20th-century global "color space"—is a witty mash-up of the century-long evolution of modernist design from rarified and European to populist and international.

If "site specificity" is one of the art-world's favorite and much-abused pieces of jargon, Erkmen takes the mandate of creating works from and for specific contexts as literally as possible, while still maintaining that the final product is something to experience rather than understand.

Artists who examine the conditions of the exhibition—from the setting of the "white cube" to the social relations between people and institutions in the art world and sources of capital—comprise a robust chapter in recent art history. But whereas first-generation 1960s Conceptualists, such as Mel Bochner (who printed the dimensions of the exhibition space onto the walls) or Hans Haacke (who delved into the political views of art audiences and museum donors), prioritized facts over form, Erkmen's aesthetic conceptualism begins with facts and ends in form.

In the relationship between initial ideas and the resulting art object, her sculptures are comparable to several other Berlin-based artists who came to prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as Olafur Eliasson, who uses natural phenomena such as the refraction of light through water or glass as the starting point for his experiential installations, or Carsten Nicolai whose projects derive from his investigations of various sonic phenomena. In the best pieces by these artists, the final format and experience transcends a mere illustration of the starting principles, permitting sensorial pleasure rather than



(Previous page) **9'45"**, 1999, room installation with motorized walls, 340 x 290 x 700 cm. All images in this article, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy the artist and Rampa, Istanbul.

EASY JET, 2011, orange safety belts, metal tighteners, tape circumference: approx. 1,320 m.

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stripping it from the artwork—as was the original intention of many early Conceptualists.

Erkmen's residence in Berlin is almost two-decades long (in fact, longer than Eliasson's or Nicolai's), beginning when she came to the newly restored German capital in 1993 on a DAAD fellowship. As a result, today Erkmen is well known in the German art world. She has been involved in high-profile exhibitions such as *Skulptur Projekte Münster* in 1997, and held exhibitions at many of the country's *Kunsthallen*, *Kunstvereins* and *Kunstmuseums*. She has taught at the Art Academy in Kassel, the Städelschule in Frankfurt, and is currently teaching at the Kunstakademie Münster. Her contribution to the German art community was acknowledged in a midcareer retrospective at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof in 2008.

Though she exhibits less frequently in Turkey than in Europe, Erkmen has never lost touch with the Istanbul art scene—which retains strong ties to the diasporic Turkish communities in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and Germany. Erkmen, who is representing Turkey at this year's Venice Biennale, is recognized as among the dozen-or-so members of the first generation of Turkish contemporary artists. Her peers include Füsün Onur, Cengiz Çekil, Sarkis Zabunyan, Seza Paker, Serhat Kiraz and Canan Beykal (though Onur and Sarkis are a decade older than Erkmen, and the others are younger), who all came to prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s,



SCULPTURES ON THE AIR

1997

Photo documentation of a helicopter "exhibiting" the artist's sculptures in the airspace near the St. Paulus Cathedral, as part of Skulptur Projekte Münster, 1997.

a period when raging civil conflict largely isolated Turkey from the rest of the world. That small group of Turkish artists who had rejected the figurative, representational dogma of Turkish art schools came together to organize popular annual exhibitions of their work in Istanbul called “A, B, C, D.”

Though these artists evolved quite differently from each other, their respective practices can be understood as the result of searching for parameters for making artworks in the absence of any guiding philosophy or a commercial marketplace to sell their work. As Erkmen recalls about working in Istanbul in the early 1980s: “I was very lucky to be working in these conditions because I had no concerns about selling, buying or getting good reviews. Nobody wanted or expected anything from me. There were no collectors, no critics, so it was complete freedom.” While artists such as Sarkis and Çekil turned towards idiosyncratic formal languages and sui generis mythologizing, Erkmen took the opposite approach, looking at what is logical and feasible given a certain set of circumstances and the necessity of producing something aesthetic.

Since she designed a series of sculptures in 1977 for specific locations at Mimar Sinan University, Erkmen has looked to the context of the exhibition for a place to begin generating ideas for each artwork. When we had our first interview in Berlin in July 2010 she explained how she was producing ideas for her September exhibition at Berlin’s Galerie Barbara Weiss: “When it’s a gallery space, I try to make something that refers to the commercial aspect. Every work in the exhibition stands on its own; they are not connected.” By contrast, she continued, “When I have a museum show, I take a different approach. The space is very important for me; the duration is very important. Everything else around the exhibition matters, such as what country it is in, what kind of location it is in.” As she summarized it, “I want everything about the artwork to come out of the necessities of the exhibition.”

One of Erkmen’s signature tactics, particularly in institutional settings, is to modify the exhibition space using existing features of the room. At the Sharjah Biennial in 2009, in a work called *Simdi Tamam (Alright Now)*, she transformed a room in the Sharjah Art Museum by leveling the sloping floor and adjusting the walls so that the floor and walls were at right angles. The room was “corrected” but was also now out of alignment with the building’s architecture, becoming like a five-walled cube inserted into the nonrectilinear space. Erkmen lowered the track lights as well, which emphasized that another space had been inserted into the existing one. In Erkmen’s own description of the piece, this was a response not only to the sloping museum space, but also to her impression of Sharjah “as a very Islamic place and to the simplicity of the whole city, which gave me the idea of making a very simple, corrected room that was a kind of spiritual place. This goes together with the character of the place, as opposed to Dubai.”

Though her emphasis tends to be on the history and context of a given site, Erkmen also has a repertoire of gestures that she returns to. Erkmen’s *Das Haus / Ev* (1993), incorporating lowered lights, was made almost 20 years ago at the DAAD Galerie in Berlin where she “just unrolled the cables of the lights and they came down,” she recalls. Another room-altering project, *9’45”* (1999) comprises a wall that slowly moves, changing the size and shape of the space until viewers are forced out completely and it becomes just a wall. For an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bonn the same year, she reprogrammed the museum’s freight elevator so that it slowly raised itself a few centimeters above the wood floor of the gallery, before lowering and becoming flush again—a work called *More or Less* (1999). She summarizes these museum interventions by remarking, “I like it best when I don’t bring anything from outside. That’s my favorite working strategy.”

While the designing projects based on the conditions of the exhibition is a conceptual strategy, it is also the product of the fact that Erkmen has never had a studio. When she was a graduate student at Mimar Sinan University in the mid-1970s she learned to make her sculptures with fabricators, and she soon recognized that she didn’t

need to do things herself because they were much better at it than she was. “Though I had very good teachers, I learned more about art from the metal fabricator than from my teachers,” she recalls. Today, she says she still loves working with technicians. “They have the best ideas. It enhances your work because they have ideas coming from the technical necessities, and I believe that everything should be constructed in the simplest way.”

Her reliance on professional expertise allows her to produce technically complicated works. At the Istanbul Biennial in 1995, Erkmen took advantage of a freight elevator that connected two floors of the Antrepo I, a former customs house on the Bosphorous in the industrial Tophane district. She had the elevator repaired and then lined with new corrugated stainless steel so that it resembled the interior of a shipping container. The doors on both floors were propped open with a long stick, both so that the audience couldn’t enter and so that the passage of the elevator between the two floors was always visible. She reflects that the piece, *Wertheim ACUU*, came out of the experience of participating in large group exhibitions—“Artists in these exhibitions are always fighting for the best space”—as well as the biennial’s theme, “Orient/ation,” about the shifting postcolonial and post-Cold War relationships between Europe and the rest of the world, the legacy of Orientalism and the place of women in this realignment. With her elevator moving between the two floors, mirroring her own frequent passages between Europe and Turkey, she did indeed win the biennial’s best location, which she conceded only with a slight smile when I jokingly suggested it.

In many of her projects over the years, there have been not only significant technical challenges to resolve but also logistical ones. *Shipped Ships* (2001), a public-art project for Frankfurt’s Main River, required transporting ferries and their local crews from Istanbul, Venice and Shingu, Japan, to the German financial center for the summer season to operate a service between 11 stops on the Main (at prices corresponding to each country’s rates). *Shipped Ships* gave Frankfurters a view of their city that they’d never had before, as well as the disorientating experience of traveling on an Italian, Turkish or Japanese ferry in their own city—an inversion of the immigrant’s experience by making the locals briefly feel out of place in their own town. The project was so well received that when it ended there was a public clamor to institute it as a regular city service.

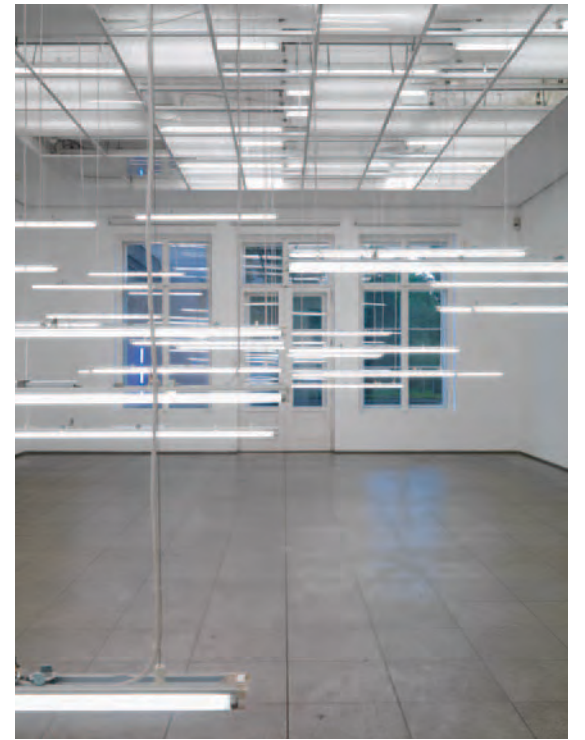
But other projects have proved far less popular with municipalities. For the 1997 Skulptur Projekte Münster, Erkmen’s proposal to install a clock with two hands of equal length on the damaged façade of the St. Paulus Dom was rejected and church leaders blocked any further attempt by her or the exhibition organizers from realizing a project within the church’s vicinity. Undeterred, she came up with a project in which antique stone sculptures from the city’s Westphalia State Museum would be exhibited on the roof of the museum, adjacent to the church. To get them there required transporting the stone objects by helicopter over the church’s plaza and the city center—a journey inspired, Erkmen innocently maintains, by the opening scene of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960), in which women sunbathing by a rooftop pool are startled to see a helicopter transporting a sculpture of Jesus.

With so much of her attention paid to the context and design of her projects, I asked her about the relationship between her practice and architecture or design. She replied that while there are some similarities in the processes, “In art, you don’t have reasons. In architecture and design, you have to have reasons to do something. So I explore this borderline, where the reasons for the artwork come out of the exhibition itself. Of course because nobody is asking me to design something specific, it’s still a thing without a reason but I try to find the logic inside the work. It is a logic that is illogical.”

The pull of two opposing tendencies, the aesthetic and the rational, imbues her sculptures with a very particular paradox. The typical Erkmen work is a marriage of lengthy consideration and visual intuition. But the two impulses occasionally remain disconnected or unresolved in the work’s final realization. For example, the 52-minute

(Right) **DAS HAUS / EV**, 1993, light installation with fluorescent tubes, three videos, screens, pedestals, speakers and plants, dimensions variable. Installation view at Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof-Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 2008.

(Below) **GHOST**, 2010, audio and light installation with nine directional speakers and 12 lamps. Installation view at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, 2010.



In one of her most offbeat projects, Erkmén generated her artwork around an oddly shaped, mountain near Singen, Germany. She leased an image of an elephant from a commercial image bank and placed signposts with the image at locations throughout the city where the hill was visible. Additionally, a billboard-sized poster of the elephant was placed in a field partway up the mountain, absurdly situating an animal of the African Savannah in a European field.



(Opposite page, top to bottom)
WERTHEIM ACUU, 1995, freight elevator with corrugated steel sheets and cording bars, 400 x 259 x 252 cm. Installation view at the fourth Istanbul Biennial, 1995.

AM HAUS (Detail), 1994, 40 words in Turkish, made from plexiglass, attached to the façade of a building in Berlin. Photo by Sergio Belinchón for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

(This page) **HOHENTWIEL** (Detail), 2000, public art installation in Singen, Germany, 12 panels of digital print on aluminum signs, set in tube frames on street posts, 84 x 126 cm each.

For one exhibition, she rigged the museum's elevator so that it raised itself a few centimeters above the floor, before lowering and becoming flush with it again.

animated video *Hearts and Circles* (2009) that Erkmen made for an exhibition at Centre d'Art Contemporain d'Ivry-le Crédac outside of Paris, incorporates the heart-shaped logo of the museum and other graphic designs, including four overlapping circles, from the museum's website. In Erkmen's piece, the semitransparent, colorful hearts and circles move around on a black background, overlapping with one another, creating new shapes and colors. But the video's final form reflects its origins in a graphic-design studio too closely, recalling a desktop screensaver or Flash animation—inoffensive and uninspiring.

Those of Erkmen's works inflected with more evident humor and humanity are more effective. One of her most offbeat projects was designed in 2000 for a public-art project in Singen, Germany, where Erkmen generated her artwork around the town's distinctive geographical feature, the Hohentwiel Mountain, an extinct, oddly shaped volcano that rises over the Aach River. She leased an image of an elephant from a commercial image bank—Erkmen held several exhibitions in the mid-1990s including "Images" in 1996 at the Kunstverein Arnsberg and "I-MA-GES" in 1997 at the Kunsthalle Recklinghausen incorporating these generic photographs—and placed signposts with the image at locations throughout the city where the mountain was visible. Additionally, a billboard-sized poster of the elephant was placed in a field partway up the mountain, absurdly situating an animal of the African savannah in a European field. The connection between the elephant and the mountain was purely



(Above) **MORE OR LESS**, 2000, room with elevating floor, 565 x 280 cm. Installation view at Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2000. (Left) **AYŞE ERKMEN** at her home in Berlin, 2011. Photo by Sergio Belinchón for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

visual—from Singen, it resembles a drawing from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's story *Le Petit Prince* (1943) of an elephant inside a boa constrictor. The original connection that gave rise to the piece was purely associative and not necessary for a viewer to grasp in order to see the similarity between the elephant's silhouette and the mountain itself, or to appreciate the uncanny oddity of a huge elephant billboard in Germany.

For elegance and pathos, few of Erkmen's pieces can match the recent installation *Ghost* (2010), created for "Tactics of Invisibility" at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA) in Vienna in April 2010, and later shown at Tanas in Berlin in September and at Arter in April 2011. Viewers walk into a white room, empty except for 12 hanging white lights and nine white speakers suspended from the ceiling. The lights come on and, for just under one minute, the voice of a soprano sings, repeating the refrain *Glück, Glück zum neuen Jahr* ("happiness, happiness for the new year"), part of a canon written by Ludwig van Beethoven in 1819 for the countess Anna Maria Erdödy, who was a former resident of the building, the Palais Erdödy-Fürstenberg, where TBA is located. The title refers to the countess' daughter Mimi, who, Erkmen explains, was a troubled young woman known for going out with men, shaming the family, and, as legend has it, later tried to commit suicide. Mimi's spirit still supposedly haunts the building. In her signature fusion of various elements of a location's history, Erkmen here created a work of romantic beauty, one no less affective when I saw it at the Tanas art space—a converted factory (and not haunted) in Berlin. Erkmen's works succeed best when they achieve this classical, Kantian purity, possessing an immanent purposefulness—manifest through a sense of the work's simple integrity and design—without having a factualism or purpose evident to the viewer.

Better still are Erkmen's most personal projects. The primary new work at February's Rampa exhibition was *Kendi Kendine (On Its Own)* (2011), consisting of more than 1,400 images printed on Dibond panels and organized into vertical columns on five shelves running the length of the two long walls of the gallery. They represented (top to bottom, clockwise through the space) the first 1,750 Google Image results for "Ayşe Erkmen" (there were more panels than space to display them at Rampa). The idea was a simple one, but difficult to execute. As Erkmen's assistants were attempting to create the work by downloading each of the images manually, they realized that each time they repeated the search the results were changing and, because of Google's algorithm, the results were different from one user's computer to the next. So Erkmen contracted a programmer to write a code that would download all of the results at the same moment, creating a virtual snapshot, a rare static picture, of her web-presence.

The first couple of hundred results are obviously related to her, pictures of herself or her artwork. But further into the room, the portrait of Erkmen expands to include pictures of artists that she has exhibited with, museums and galleries that have shown her work, as well as the occasionally unrelated images—this being the internet, there are several near-naked woman among the results. Considering that Googling oneself is a primal internet instinct, it's surprising that someone hasn't made this work already. But the simplicity or obviousness of the idea (compounded by the complexity of executing the piece) is also what makes it interesting as an observation on the new ways that we understand ourselves, as publicly available images or snippets of information connected to our names.

Erkmen conceived of the entire Rampa show as a summary of her works from the last few years that hadn't yet been shown in Istanbul. When I asked what her favorite piece was—trying to glean a sense of what criteria she uses to judge a work as successful or not—Erkmen gave me one of her wry smiles. She replied that her favorite is the A4-sized self-portrait she made on a typewriter with lines, periods, brackets and other symbols, the most modest yet direct work in an exhibition about representations of herself.