



INTERVIEW

A story full of art and epiphanies and metaphors

HATİCE UTKAN
İSTANBUL - Hürriyet Daily News

The word epiphany comes from ancient Greek and means a sudden realization or comprehension of the larger essence or meaning of something.

It is a "deep" word, which is used to understand a situation better. But Kerimcan Gülerüz, a passionate man of art and the owner of The Empire Project Art Gallery and Museum, uses the word to describe his latest project, "The Empire Project."

"The Empire Project was like an epiphany," he said. "It depicts itself through symbols and images. It stresses the problems in the art scene of Turkey. It opens new dimensions and understandings into people want to look at Turkey right now."

All these aspects sum up and pose a question: Why does the world want to see the Turkish art scene? Turkey has a unique aspect, according to Gülerüz.

"It is a very bizarre country that is predominantly Muslim yet technically tolerant in its art work," he said.

"We face questions like why Turkish art is obsessed with sex. It's because we have serious taboos in male and female relationships and artists deal with those problems." This leads to the obsessions and problems of an artist. An artist is someone who is obsessed with a problem or who has a problem, according to Gülerüz.

"Artists are like canaries in the coalmines; they get intoxicated by the environment that they live in. A good artist is sensitive and troubled and has issues," he said.

Gülerüz speaks like a book. He stresses his ideas and thoughts by using similes and metaphors, yet talking is not enough for him. That's why he is out in the scene to create something new and contribute to Turkey's thriving art scene.

"We are the remains of an empire," said Gülerüz. "This has very bizarre sides and aspects. It affects everything. We are the sediment of an empire."

Even though this idea exudes a romantic projection, people still struggle with it inside, according to Gülerüz.

"Empire Project is easy to say, it is one of the visible sides of the big plan," he said, adding that it was a kind of an action platform for the community that supports contemporary art.

The Empire Project is a cold, sterile title which is meant to awaken confidence, he added.

At the Empire project, which is also the work of the Society for the Support of Contemporary Art, or SSCA, everything is about art as



BUILDING:

The Empire Project is situated in one of the oldest buildings in Taksim (Top). Gülerüz (L) says "The Empire Project was like an epiphany." "It depicts itself through symbols and images," he adds.



Gülerüz has resisted adopting a business plan that becomes less about art and more about business management.

Gülerüz, however, had to struggle to achieve his goals. "I was gathering tools and looking to what I would do for a long time," he said, adding that later on, he realized that people do not need lots of money to realize what they want to do.

Although it would be unfair to say that everything started when Gülerüz decided to shoot a movie with his friend, Paxton Winters, the event is central to understanding the artist's subsequent path in the field.

"This was a low-budget movie," said Gülerüz. "I then realized that people always talk about the ideas and exhibits and their excuses. However, it is possible to create without complaining and presenting any excuses."

After concluding the movie, Gülerüz was finally ready to present himself to the art society of Turkey.

His first project was the gallery Karşı Sanat, which he opened in 2003. "It was a beautiful place and also had very romantic communist ideals." That's when Gülerüz became aware of the important realities in running an art gallery. Even though Gülerüz is against running a gallery with a commercial mindset, it was evident that he needed a good business plan.

"Karşı Sanat showed me the initial stimulus to do something is to exhibit but it is also important to get real critiques," he said.

Then, his second project X-Ist came to life. "I wanted to have gallery that answered the needs of the art scene in Turkey," Gülerüz added.

Once again he resisted commercial concerns and this time he succeeded. The need was clear, according to Gülerüz. "There are young, talented and unknown Turkish artists."

So he made a space that treated young artists like any five-star artist. "Our aim was to show something innovative and unknown, yet beautiful."

"So we took the hard way at X-Ist," he said, adding that the gallery also carried young artists to an international platform. "We had shows where no works were sold or only one work sold." Still, Gülerüz and his friends never gave up. Currently, X-Ist is running its seventh season in town and even though it is in the up-market neighborhood of Nişantaşı, the gallery has not let the bourgeois cultural values of the area direct its mandate. Most importantly, however, the gallery has proven that there are young, talented artists in Turkey.