

Görüldü

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Forty years ago, Ali Cabbar drew a series of sketches, some of which are reproduced for the first time in this book: bare-chested and barefooted young men casually pose on a bed or on the floor; a man in a tank top leisurely reads in bed. One of the drawings reveals a detailed, academic-style study of a man's exposed foot. On another drawing, a man in a long-sleeved shirt sits on a windowsill. His rolled-up sleeves uncover the watch he is wearing, keeping track of time. The face is remarkably anonymous, but a lot of detail seems to have gone into depicting the lock at the top of the windowpane. On the reverse side of the paper, all of these drawings have the Turkish word "görüldü" stamped in slightly smudged ink. The word can literally be translated as "seen," "sighted," "observed," but in the passive voice, it is an authoritarian term that means "approved" —signalling that something has been monitored, a decision made, and that there is no way back, perhaps a secret has been revealed, or someone "busted". Case closed. And to be accurate, the official stamp on these drawings signifies that the document has been inspected by a prison guard and can be posted to someone on the outside. This mark is present on all of Ali Cabbar's drawings without exception from the early eighties as they were produced during what Ali calls "a short period of freedom in prison". The drawings are portraits of his cellmates that have been preserved basically because he managed to mail them to his family during confinement.

The Turkish coup d'état of 1980 was, among other things, a response to a growing support for socialist movements and led to some 650,000 arrests, 1,683,000 blacklisted individuals, 30,000 people who left the country as political refugees, and 39 tons of newspapers and magazines being destroyed. From this perspective, Ali Cabbar's drawings, and the act of reassuring their preservation tells us at least two significant things about what artists do, why we need them, and perhaps also why they often are among the first victims of totalitarianism.

First of all, there is the act of observation. With my less than rudimentary knowledge of Turkish I'm aware that I am on thin ice here, but still want to claim that the act of observation (drawing portraits of cell mates) is an act that shifts the grammatical tense of görüldü from its authoritarian meaning to a subjective present (he draws what he sees). This act is one of witnessing, thus it is also proposing a reality other than that which has been imposed upon him. The artist is the one who observes, takes notes, pays attention to details and records what he sees. This is where art and science meet: in the act of observation and the complex realities of the first person present indicative tense.

Secondly, and this is important, there is the integrity of the act. It is a refusal to be subdued into the imposed role of political prisoner and an insistence on being an artist.

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The day after I had spoken to Cabbar about these incarceration drawings, a local library was giving away books. I picked up a worn copy of a book by Herbert

Marcuse, a creamy cover with an image of a self-portrait by Salvador Dalí, dog-eared yellowed pages, penciled notes scrawled across the margins with underlined passages in the text. Flipping through, one of the first underlined quotes that I read declared: “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.”¹

It is striking that Marcuse uses the somewhat obsolete term “truth” while also claiming that the power of art is breaking “the monopoly of established reality”. In other words, it would seem that art is not proposing another reality, but indeed a form of resistance to grand narratives. It provides a form of counter history, or perhaps a microhistory, where the integrity of a minor observation can break the logic of grand narratives.²

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But there is more to this story. It is not only a question of integrity, of resistance and the power of imagination over circumstances defined by others. It is also one of compassion. In addition to the portraits, Cabbar also managed to create print works in prison with a makeshift woodblock made out of glued matchsticks with the heads removed.³ He would sand off the surface with a discarded razor blade and create a very small wooden block. After carving an image on it, he printed handmade postcards that he sent to people on the outside. To me that sounds like an attempt to reassure his loved ones that things were OK, even when they obviously were not. “Happy New Year” becomes a way of saying “see you soon, when all this is over”. Cabbar also created numerous children’s books, or fanzines inside prison for daughters of two of his friends. One girl was the child of a cellmate. She was born while her father was in prison. He was imprisoned for eleven years because as the editor of a leftist newspaper, he was responsible for the entire content. The other child, who was two or three years old at the time, is now an established artist. In a sense, they were actually written not for the children—who probably were too young to understand—but for their parents, his friends, in order to give them an idea of life on the inside. But we’ll save that story for another text. Obviously, caring for another is also caring for oneself. Worrying about friends and family on the outside implies a concern for one’s own circumstances. To remember others is to be remembered. Ali Cabbar always comes across as jaunty. Not in a naïve sense, but with a rather distinct and immediate sense of humour that somehow also embraces situations gone awry. And in many respects, I realise that this also goes for many of his artworks. They seem to exist in a place where two worlds collide, each of which has its own particular truth.

As Marcuse has stated: “Art is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society – it is committed to emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity.”⁴ In other words, the drawings themselves become a vehicle of acknowledgement and indictment. They are both a breeze of freedom and a testimony.

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Ali Cabbar's crime was that, as an art student and graphic designer, he published his organisation's underground publications. He was arrested in the last year of art school, two months before graduation, and completed his education afterwards.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of his involuntary isolation in a Turkish prison. And it is also the year that he finds himself in a very different kind of confinement due to regulations of "social distancing" in Belgium. Half a lifetime has passed, and the circumstances are radically different. Yet somehow, it is from this horizon that the integrity of Ali Cabbar's vast body of work over the past four decades becomes clear. The past months' isolation works are in many ways just as attentive, immediate responses to what is going on around him as those sensitive drawings of his cellmates, the fanzines and postcards created four decades ago. He is observing. Görüldü. In the first present indicative (the tense used to express facts in the present, past, future and conditional tenses). And yet again, in contrast to the confidence of a lot of the populism or categorical propaganda we are experiencing in both social and mainstream media right now, Cabbar provides a form of pessimism intertwined with slapstick comedy where liberating laughter recalls dangers circumvented.

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In 2003, Angela Davis wrote: "The prison is one of the most important features of our image environment. This has caused us to take the existence of prisons for granted. The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us."⁵

And truth be told, prisons are extremely popularized today. This has made invisible those affected. Instead, photographs of arrests, crime-scene images, mug shots, and American TV-style court cases overwhelm us. We watch them "set bail", say "Your Honour" and somehow believe that justice will prevail. It is in light of the tsunami of international media and entertainment that simply enforces aggressive policing and dominant notions of criminality, which in turn normalizes the incarceration of "enemies", "monsters" etc. that Ali Cabbar's work can be understood. Today, perhaps more than ever, we need a perception that shifts grammar and alienates us from the well-designed existence and performance of a society sketched out by Davis and Marcuse. What is physically materialised in Ali Cabbar's work is a liberation of sensibility, imagination, and reason. A pocket of freedom.

1. Marcuse, Herbert. 1979. *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Dublin: Macmillan Press. p.9

2. Microhistory is a term closely associated with social and cultural history, which also has been used in the context of research-based artistic practice in past decades. The Swedish artist Magnus Bårtås describes it as a way of calling attention to marginalised phenomena and stories and of using them prismatically in order to gain an understanding of larger context. Differently from the more illustrative "case study", a microhistory can be said to ask "large questions in small places".

3. The matchsticks and glue are traditionally accessible materials for the inmates to create mini objects such as cars, furniture for dolls, and model buildings as souvenirs for their loved ones. It is in fact one of the favourite pastimes of Turkish prisoners. The artist used this material to create a flat surface on which he carved an image and printed it on paper like a stamp. You can see these images on pages 70-73 of the book.

4. Marcuse, Herbert. 1979. *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Dublin: Macmillan Press. p.9

5. Davis, Angela. 2003. Are Prisons Obsolete?. New York: Seven Stories Press. p.18-19