

HAMBURG

Elif Saydam

KUNSTVEREIN HARBURGER BAHNHOF

The Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof is located in a former train station in Hamburg's Harburg district, and traces of this past are visible today in the magnificent coffered ceiling featuring the original painted floral decoration from 1897. In their exhibition, "... *schläft sich durch*" (... Sleeps Through), the artist engaged with the kunstverein space in imaginative and multifaceted ways. Building on their own distinctive visual language, Saydam adroitly activated painting for contextual reflection without losing the thread of their own narrative—here by designing the show as a commentary on the historical implementation of class structure, and by staging an exhibition within the exhibition in the smaller of two galleries, which used to be the waiting room reserved for blue-blooded travelers.



View of "Elif Saydam," 2021. From left: *The Drone I*, *The Drone II*, *The Producer II*, *The Producer I*, all 2021. Photo: Fred Dott.

On the walls in this space hung four paintings in the compact A4 size (about $8\frac{1}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{2}$ ") that Saydam has long favored. The floor was covered completely with a custom-made patterned carpet titled *Blue Saloon* (all works cited, 2021), which set the room apart as a special realm, not only visually, with repeating comic-style motifs, but also acoustically, as the deep-pile textile muffled visitors' steps and softened their voices. Inspired, the Berlin-based Canadian artist says, by the "insane" carpets of Las Vegas hotel lobbies and casinos, with their aesthetic of "hyperdecoration," the carpet and the imagery on it fused the notion of the VIP area with a central concern in Saydam's art: the lure of easy money, a tawdry dream vision of the elusive and fleeting

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happiness of the rich that draws people to ritzy casinos and dingy betting parlors alike. Fittingly, the premises had been briefly occupied by one of the latter before the kunstverein took over in 1999.

And it was in such a place, a run-down Berlin gambling shop, that the artist found one of the carpet's repeated images, a cartoonish five-pointed star. In Saydam's adaptation, this representative of good fortune, wanly grinning at us with bloodshot eyes from atop a pile of three pillows inside a wreath of lemons, looked disheveled after a long night out. The character would have preferred to just "sleep through" it, as the title (taken from a Garfield comic) suggests. A second recurrent motif quoted a pair of roses from the historic ceiling painting, the gesture inverting high and low. The third element, a daintily ornamented logotype, brought the point home: FIRST GRUB THEN ETHICS, the phrase an intentionally awkward translation of Bertolt Brecht's adage, from *The Threepenny Opera*, "*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.*"

In the main space, the onetime waiting room for first-class—but nonaristocratic—passengers, Saydam presented four large-format hybrids of painting, assemblage, and installation art: shaped canvases fastened to steel grilles that were suspended from the ceiling by chains. Seen from afar, the ensemble looked almost like an abstract crucifixion scene. The pieces were actually based on Constructivist artist Varvara Stepanova's designs for work attire for a utopian postrevolutionary society and referenced characters from *The Wizard of Oz*. From up close, the double-sided works turned out to be multilayered compositions exploring and enlarging the possibilities of painting. Employing a range of techniques, from transfer printing and embroidery to gold leafing, tie-dyeing, and oil painting, the artist expertly interwove trash and embellishment, cartoon imagery and snippets of reality, traditional forms and vernacular pictorial idioms in a work epitomizing of critical hyperdecoration. Delicately painted miniatures of fruit and flowers or tacky decorative grape clusters were also visual echoes of slot-machine symbols. The ubiquitous lemon motif was Saydam's take on the saying "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." The exhibition offered a magnificent discourse on the contradictions between the fixation on economic gain and work as a source of self-determination and personal fulfillment. So who's "sleeping through"? Garfield-style indolence, in this show, proved to be the ferment of a resistance to co-optation.

—Jens Asthoff

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

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