

# BURÇAK BINGÖL

Wildflowers sprout from ceramic slabs  
in the artist's Istanbul studio

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY CHLOE CHU



Burçak Bingöl in her studio.

Istanbul is a palimpsest. From Byzantine to Persian kings, countless conquerors looking to expand their empires have lusted after the city for its strategically advantageous positioning on the mouth of the Bosphorus Strait, which leads to the Black Sea. Each time a successful colonizer staked their banner on its lands, they also left their traces on the metropolis's culture and architecture, often effacing and building over what already existed. Located on the southern tip of Istanbul's European half, Beyoğlu is a microcosmic reflection of the city's layered past and mixture of cultures. Today, walking through the district, visitors encounter Byzantine-era relics, winding cobble-stone streets, storied Art Deco apartments and grand buildings with ornate, classical facades. The undeniable "Europeanness" stems from the neighborhood's history as a home to embassies from the

continent, built in the 16th century under the auspices of Ottoman sultans, and entertainment establishments developed later by European and Ottoman merchants, who cemented Beyoğlu as the aristocratic epicenter of non-Muslim life in the Islamic nation.

Concerned with historically rooted alienations between cultural and religious groups, and uncovering obscured pasts, Burçak Bingöl set up her studio in Beyoğlu in 2010, feeding off the district's embodiment of fragmented and often conflicting influences. Her space can be found on the ground floor of a three-story building with a nondescript concrete exterior, situated on a quiet, sloping street just a corner away from the bustling paths that lead to the area's main tourist draw—the Galata Tower, which dates from the 14th century, and has been reconfigured as a prison, fire observatory and restaurant over the years. During

our conversation, Bingöl described her space as similarly “liquid,” adding that “the studio is the shadow of my mind, and it changes.” When I stopped by in May, the open, single-room studio was roughly divided in half. On the right side of the entrance, close to the space’s only windows, which open into the street, was a plush navy couch and a table that stretched nearly from wall to wall. On the left side were densely packed floor-to-ceiling shelves, workstations, a sink and two kilns.

After a quick scan around the room, it became apparent that a running motif throughout Bingöl’s work is flowers, from the variegated plants that snake up a ceramic, one-to-one-scale remake of the front of a truck, *Cruise* (2014), which greets viewers immediately after they step beyond the property’s pair of heavy metal doors, to the delicate ceramic slabs formed into curling leaves and petals that flank the vehicle’s facade, flora appeared in abundance. Throughout Bingöl’s nearly two-decade career, such patterns have been used to illustrate alienation and context to one’s surroundings in different ways. Her interest in flowers originates from her time as an undergraduate student at Ankara’s Hacettepe University at the end of the 1990s, where the Western-oriented curriculum promulgated modernist mottoes of abstraction, subtlety and sensitivity to material—with absolutely no room for the figurative or decorative. Bingöl pointed to a piece on one of the racks that she had made during her early student years. With a modular design comprising identical, sand-hued, triangular forms, pieced together in a chain, the installation adhered to the modernist style that her professors expected of her. Yet she couldn’t help but question her teachers’ aversion to embellishment. The turning point came when she found feminist texts criticizing certain types of women’s art and how they mimicked stereotypically male expression in order to be accepted into the art world. She felt that up until that point she had been doing the same, suppressing her curiosity for the beautiful and kitschy in favor of what was considered “strong, masculine.”

Revealing the contrast between the works made before and after this transition, Bingöl’s earlier, subdued undergraduate work sits opposite to one of the first major works she made using the flower motif—a ceramic simulacra of a propane tank. Created after she spent eight months in New York at a residency with Hunter College, the sculpture is covered in a decal with lush, swirling vines studded with pink marigolds, a Victorian-era pattern scanned from a piece of fabric and chosen by Bingöl for its suggestion of ivy, or something that appears to expand generously over the surface. For this work, she had predictably received criticism from her contemporaries, who deemed the work “too fancy.” But that was precisely the point. Bingöl had wanted to dislocate the utilitarian object from its usual reading by rendering it in the fragile material of ceramic, coating it with imagery that functioned not just as ornamentation but as a juxtaposed element beautifying the everyday tool, and furthering the gap between its form and meaning. Additionally, the work conveyed her own in-betweenness, or sense of alienation, after she returned to her birth place Ankara and realized that she felt, ironically, more at home in New York.

When Bingöl moved from Ankara to Istanbul in 2010, she once again felt estranged from her surroundings. Turkey’s capital, located on the Asian continent and pervaded by modern, Bauhaus buildings, couldn’t be more different to Istanbul, a place split between Europe and Asia and steeped in a history “that you can’t ignore,” according to Bingöl. It was in Istanbul, with its clash of cultures, that she came to the realization that alienation was not just something that she experienced personally, but a societal phenomenon with historical roots. She thought to convey this problem by creating *Cruise*, whose evocation of a massive, oncoming vehicle can be seen as a metaphor for the

issue’s potentially crushing weight. Meanwhile, the Islamic patterns—a marked contrast to the Victorian prints she was using before—that seemingly grow atop the ceramic represent the artist’s attempt to reconcile her own connection to the city’s eastern cultures. If plants speak of specific geographies, the artist said, then she had completely overlooked half of what was around her by favoring Western interpretations of flowers.



*Cruise* (2014), a one-to-one scale ceramic rendering of the front of a truck, hung opposite the studio’s entrance.



Impressed on these clay slabs are patterns from the iron gates of a furnace in Zilberman Gallery's Berlin space.

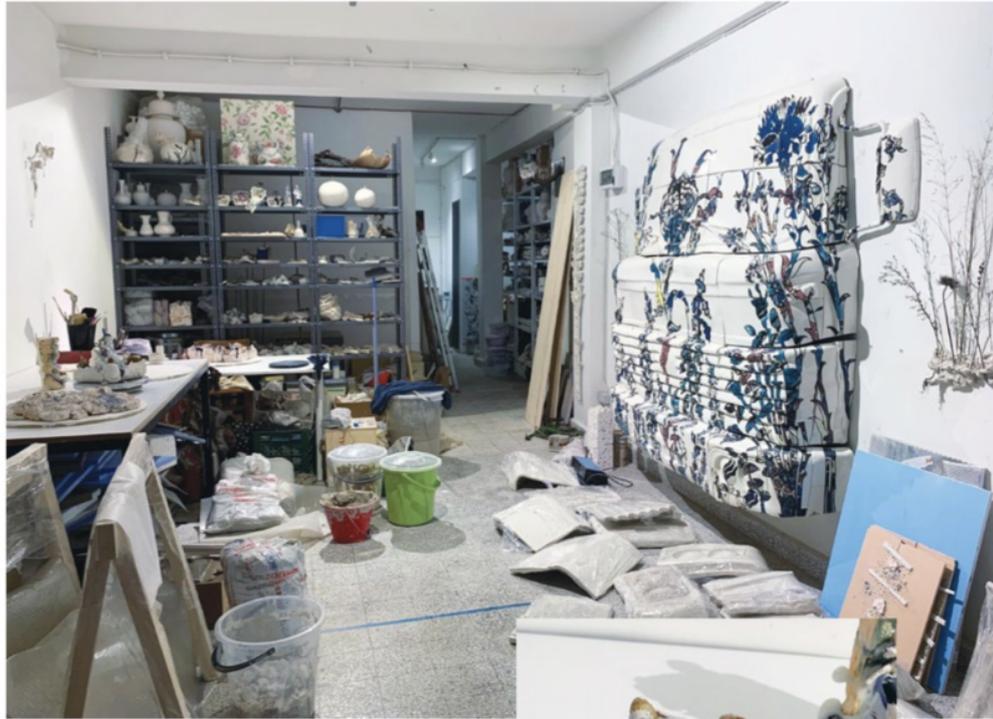
The artist's student work sits on the top shelf.



Bingöl uses diagrams to track her research. On the wall is a mind map that she did for *Hatay* (2017).



View of one half of the studio.



Bingöl subsequently decided to supplement her familiarity with Western motifs by looking further into Islamic imagery. She explained: “I feel complete when I know how things are connected, how two halves interact with each other.” Her quest for this connection led her to read an article about the trade of cobalt, in the form of raw mineral, and then in finished porcelain products, from Iran to China and back. Fascinated by how the cultural exchange was embedded in material transformations, she went looking for the deep blue on Istanbul’s monuments. She chanced upon the tile claddings of the grand, former residence of Ottoman sultans, Topkapi Palace. The tile’s designs were by 16th-century artisan Shah Kulu, who had included *fenghuang* and *qilin*—mythical creatures from Chinese legends. Delving further into Shah Kulu’s story, she hypothesized that, besides the objects from China, he also based his *qilin* on the tamed lions that lived nearby. Bingöl adapted his motifs, painstakingly shaping the hundreds of elements in ceramic, glazing them in cobalt, and then piecing them together in a delicate three-meter-tall panel. Titled *Hatayi* (2017), the installation pays homage to the notion that differences across eras and cultures can be bridged, in turn generating new ideas.

*Hatayi* was most recently shown by Zilberman Gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong 2019. There, the display was complemented by the artist’s watercolor paintings, with diffused pools of blue representing bodies of water, and suggesting the fluidity of ideas, people and goods. The inspiration for the pieces was contained in a plastic bottle in Bingöl’s studio. During a recent trip to Dubai, where she had presented at the 2019 Asia Contemporary Art Week, she visited a beach. While immersed in the waves, she heard a relentless high-pitched beep. She guessed that the vibration was coming from Iran, whose shores were just across the water. Inspired by how the sea connected the two nations, she bottled the water and took it home with her. Back in her studio, she realized she could incorporate the liquid—taken from the



One of the pieces that Bingöl was working on for her solo exhibition “Living Inside a Tale and There Only” at Zilberman Gallery, Istanbul.

seas around which activities of cobalt trade took place—into her narrative. This notion of movement, and the trope of water, is something she plans on further developing, she said.

At the time of my visit, Bingöl was busy preparing her showcase at Zilberman Gallery’s Istanbul project space, which would reference her concurrent solo exhibition at the gallery’s Berlin outpost. Laying on the table near the window were two clay slabs that she had pressed onto the ornate, floral iron gates of the furnace in the Berlin gallery. These were to be shown in Istanbul alongside sculptures, made from melded fragments of found objects, representing imagined remnants from a shipwreck halfway between Istanbul and Berlin. Embedded in one of the pieces, which Bingöl had just pulled out from her kiln, was a statuette of a lady with a flouncy bell-shaped dress. A rose is depicted on her fan—a reminder of Bingöl’s own quest for her roots.