

Montreal's Mere Phantoms Report On the Istanbul Biennial

by Joseph Henry 29/09/13 12:04 AM EDT

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("Come Out and Play" [2013] by Mere Phantoms. Photograph by Senem Sinem.)

As the Montreal artists **Maya Ersan** and **Jaimie Robson**, known collectively as **Mere Phantoms**, prepared for this year's **Istanbul Biennial**, things got decidedly complicated. Biennials (and the like) are somewhat grandiose, political affairs, though Turkey's major contemporary art event found itself in the midst of a city turned upside-down. A protest against the commercial development of Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park escalated into a full-blown urban resistance, as long simmering national questions of secularism, freedom of expression, and state oppression bubbled to the surface in an increasingly intense struggle between protestors and violent police forces. The Istanbul Biennial, titled "Mom, Am I Barbarian?" seemed perfectly poised to consider and articulate the city's new political concerns opening three months after the Gezi Park protests, dealt with "the notion of the public domain as a political forum."

Yet the biennial, led by curator **Fulya Erdemci**, seemingly shored up its institutional defenses instead: Erdemci cancelled the event's programming in all public municipal spaces, leaving the exhibition inside traditional fine art spaces. **Critics** cried hypocrisy, identifying a discrepancy between the biennial's political intentions and its choice to retreat from exhibiting in municipal space. Artists scrambled to work with the biennial's now topsy-turvy schedules, communication, and perhaps, ideology as both the Gezi Resistance and anti-biennial protestors raged in the midst. Mere Phantoms were no exception, struggling to plan their upcoming project and opting to send Ersan as the duo's sole representative on logistical and cultural grounds, given her upbringing in Istanbul. Separated and working hastily, the duo battled both organizational disfunction and political turmoil.

Ostensibly, Mere Phantoms appear somewhat out of place with the biennial's newly charged

political climate. Ersan and Robson's work utilizes the traditional form of shadow puppets with projections as an installational and performative medium, collaborating with composers and inviting gallery participants to shape an impressive event of light and form. They also operate as **Atelier Make**, an alternate but not entirely separate design enterprise based on Ersan and Robson's background (they met at the **Emily Carr University of Art + Design's** ceramic studio years before joining forces in Montreal in 2010). With this in mind, **BLOUIN ARTINFO Canada** sat with Mere Phantoms to discuss their experiences presenting at the dramatic Istanbul Biennial, the newfound politicization of their work, and their uneasy role between educational and curatorial platforms.

Can you outline the specifics of your project at the biennial?

Maya Ersan: We had an interactive shadow installation. The idea with the installations that we do is that in order to view the work, the public has to physically get involved as well. There are a number of mobile lighting units that we use; the public uses those to move around the paper work that we create, to make big shadow projections. Next to the installation is an area where people can come and make paper cut-outs.

The piece was called "Come Out and Play," and it's based on a phrase coined this past summer, because Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey, was going on in all kinds of interviews and speeches, saying "don't partake in this game." It's sort of a word play in Turkish: *Oyuna Gelme*. It means don't be a part of this conspiracy that's coming from the West, or the outside in general that's breaking Turkey apart. So it was this very twisted notion, especially in the way it was interpreted in the progressive community.

Jaimie Robson: The way that the prime minister's phrase translates is literally "don't come out to play," as in "don't engage in this kind of trickery." We kind of turned that around, in terms of inviting people to yes, please, actually do come out and play and do engage in this dialogue and discussion that has now begun with the installation of the work, and will continue through the six-week duration of the show. The piece [takes the form of a] cityscape, but it draws on various urban landscapes rather than representing one [city], so there's room to play and interpret within that.

The general critique of the biennial argued the exhibition's organizers were reclusive, or even reactionary in distancing themselves from protest movements that had taken place earlier in the summer. When you were there, how did you find the political climate of both the biennial and the city?

Ersan: It was toned-down: first of all the show's dates were pulled back, and I think they cut out a number of artists, and the venues changed. There was no big celebration: usually these events come along with a lot of meet-and-greets and parties, and I couldn't even get to the one dinner organized for the artists because there was a protest and we ended up running away from [tear] gas. The whole exhibition was really restrained: the venues felt restrained, and the work felt a bit restrained. It didn't feel like a strong statement that maybe would have been appropriate as a follow-up to all the protests.

There's the political movement in Istanbul and the rest of Turkey that [started] with Gezi Park, and then it became a series of different, really creative spontaneous events throughout the summer. But there was also a group of people who are directly against the biennial itself, who disrupted some of the biennial's public events. The whole thing got really mixed-up in that sense.

With that climate in mind, how did you change your usually artistic approach?

Robson: Well the context of the work really stemmed from the events that were taking place. It probably would have been a very different piece, had the political climate been different.

Ersan: We might have created a more historical piece. For example, often we work with archival materials or embedded stories, or we pick some kind of key event that might have

happened in a city, like a giant flood or a big fire that changes the landscape. “Come Out and Play” definitely [deals with] the human relationship to architecture, and the shadows play with that scale. You have these miniature cities that become giant in projection.

Robson: Istanbul’s a very rich city for history or architecture, and there’s so much that we could draw on visually. But this just seemed like such a timely opportunity to work with something that’s so current and so present.

How did the work go? What was the experience like?

Ersan: The reaction was really fantastic. People were drawn into the poetics of the work. I think it stood out a little bit from the rest of the work. The way the lay-out was done, you had to find your way into our piece, which in the end worked. There’s a beautiful soundtrack by our Montreal-collaborator **Christian Carrière** that’s very meditative, very contemplative. It’s a bit of a mesmerizing experience, where you hold this light and you start creating shadows that layer on top of each other and you’re hearing this soundtrack.

A lot of the work in the biennial was very documentary-based, specifically political, and deeply research-based. So I think we kind of stood out or created some kind of a pause from that.

Following this, in what ways do you see your work as political?

Ersan: Actually, seeing the work in Istanbul, [made it feel] very political. We live in this screaming world: the prime example is the Turkish prime minister, he just screams and does not listen to anyone. It’s this sort of very patriarchal, colonial attitude towards constructing the societies that we live in, which to me is a nauseating experience. I found the work showed its political side quite strongly there, in what it asked the audience to do.

Robson: I think it is almost a political act to take hours out of your schedule, and sit down and make something that’s of your own creation and then let it go. You leave the [paper art] behind, you don’t take it with you. It’s very material based in its expression, but it’s kind of non-materialistic at the same time. It’s not about acquiring, it’s about contributing. We create an initial concept, but it really only takes its complete shape through participation and engagement.

What does it mean for your work to be curated? You’re often programmed for educational events, yet you’ve also exhibited in an international, large-scale biennial. How do you locate yourself between these two registers?

Robson: We enjoy both contexts actually, and we’ve both worked as educators and programmers. We understand the kind of back-end that goes into all of that work. I think it’s an interesting opportunity to blend those realms a little bit, and break some of the rules actually.

Ersan: We have an affinity for questioning the very process of curating: who gets to curate? In what context, and to what end? Do those processes help cultural production in a general way, or does it actually compartmentalize arts in ways that might not be natural for artists. We discuss a lot how we position ourselves as Mere Phantoms, and as Atelier Make; we have this parallel existence in both worlds. It’s an interesting experience for us to see, that in this day and age, 2013, everything’s supposed to be mixed-media and there’s no boundaries. Actually the boundaries are exactly where they were a few hundred years ago, when you apply for funding, when you go to the bank to set up accounts, when you’re being curated — all these questions that pigeonhole you into one place in your practice. We question it a lot. I think there’s space for work like ours in these contexts.

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