

Encounter of Cultures

Özge Topçu, a visual artist born in Turkey, lives between Lisbon and Istanbul. The artist conceived the exhibition *White Yields to Purple* for the Analytical Chemistry Laboratory with the aim of creating a connection between Tyrian purple—an ancient pigment discovered and traded by the Phoenicians—and the sterile white of the room, a symbol of purity in Western culture. Through this intentional contamination, the purple-painted tiles together with the ceramic works seek to evoke an Antiquity that, according to the artist, has been shaped and distorted, its narrative perpetuated over time. “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory (Erinnerung) as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”¹ Through this alteration of colour, the artist proposes a shift in perspective. Purple illuminates the forgotten routes that connected the Eastern Mediterranean to the Atlantic, along which merchants, pigments, alphabets, and narratives circulated.

Tyrian purple was produced from secretions extracted from marine snails, whose exposure to air and sunlight triggered chemical reactions that produced its characteristic purple colour. Because producing even a small amount required large quantities of snails and considerable labour, the pigment was extremely valuable and became a symbol of status and power in the ancient world.

As a science teacher, Özge Topçu has the sensitivity and knowledge to engage with subjects that intersect art and science from a sociological perspective, without losing the artistic, contemporary, and current character of her work, which also subtly refers to migratory movements. “Those who coincide too fully with the epoch, who in every respect adhere perfectly to it, are not contemporaries because, precisely for this reason, they are not able to see it; they cannot keep their gaze fixed on it.”² In the exhibition *White Yields to Purple*, the artist foregrounds contemporary artistic practice, valuing matter and its possibilities while, in parallel, reflecting on an expanded idea of society and the encounter of cultures.

¹ Walter Benjamin, in: *On the Concept of History*, p. 11.

² Giorgio Agamben, in: *What Is the Contemporary? and Other Essays*, p. 59.

As the artist tells us: “This installation will unveil the captivating history and cultural threads surrounding what has been lost in the histories of the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula. Lisbon and the Eastern Mediterranean, both explored by Phoenician civilisation, share a common past. I would like to reveal how these regions, connected by maritime routes, shaped the course of Mediterranean and Iberian civilisations.” Through this exhibition, the artist seeks to bring present-day Portugal and the Eastern Mediterranean closer together.

This installation also gives form to the trail of the sea snail in the sand, reflecting on its mapping as a memory of the limits of the observable and the tangible. It maps time and space within the laboratory in close connection with Mediterranean culture, as a symbolic extension of the union between cultures that are not, after all, so distant from one another. “The condition comprises something more than the conditions under which life was given to man. Men are conditioned beings: everything they come into contact with immediately becomes a condition of their existence.”³ This exhibition reflects on social, cultural, and historical movements, in which the transformation of matter into artistic objects cannot be separated from its artistic and social implications.

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³ Hannah Arendt, in: *The Human Condition*, p. 17.