



Eylem Aladogan



IRON TRIGGERS THAT COULD BE RELEASED

BY MICHEL OREN



Opposite and this page: *Listen to your soul, my blood is singing iron triggers that could be released*, 2009–11. Nut wood, cherry wood, metal, and textile, 146 x 51 x 189 in.



Eylem Aladogan's large-scale sculptural work recently emerged from the Dutch art world like a moth bursting from its cocoon, finding international exposure at the 12th Istanbul Biennial. Though her smaller work has appeared in Paris, Basel, Munich, Los Angeles, and New York, her major pieces had been exhibited only in Netherlands-based art museums such as the Stedelijk, the Kröller-Müller, and the Boijmans van Beuningen.

The new work, *Listen to your soul, my blood is singing iron triggers that could be released*, consists of approximately 15 rifle stocks and assorted gun barrels that transform into curved boards patterned on one side like feathers. The whole piece tilts upward like a great wave, with the rifle stocks on the ground, the barrels bent sharply in two places so that they point at the ceiling, and the curved boards sweeping into the air like the finials of a Norwegian stave church. On the sides opposite the feathers, finished planks are covered with a network of lines burnt into the wood. With barrels ready to fire harmlessly (and perhaps in celebration) at the sky, this aborted hunting scene seemed to speak of sublimation (the feathers) or containment (the net of lines)—it wasn't clear which.



Top and detail: *Dendrogram Room*, 2002. Wood, epoxy, aluminum, and ceramic, 177 x 276 x 512 in.

When asked about the implied violence of *Listen to your soul*, Aladogan replied that it represented the need to change, and “change always causes fear. For me, the rifles reflect both fear and strength at the same time. You can say that without death there is no urge to survive. We need fear to trigger inner growth.”¹ I wondered what other works could have issued from notions so invested with struggle and instability. Luckily a friend was able to translate a few lines from Dutch art magazines that had engaged in a lively discussion of Aladogan's corpus. From their pages emerged a process-oriented artist who works between sculpture and prints and drawings, which she treats as three-dimensional objects.

Aladogan was born in the Netherlands in 1975 to parents who had emigrated from eastern Turkey. For her graduation show at the Willem de Kooning Academy in 1999, she

Abys, *Army of Me*, 2004. Ceramic, wood, textile, and polystyrene foam, 122 x 118 x 146 in.

carved a series of clay birds, wings outspread on an autopsy table. The birds were dead, yet a timed system periodically misted their bodies, preventing them from cracking, the moisture keeping them somehow alive. “It was, for me, an image of the refusal to accept reality—the denial of death or the inability to let go of something you’re attached to—to use tricks, against all odds, as long as possible to maintain it,” she says.² The birds were given names such as “albatross” and “California condor,” but it is worth noting that *aladogan* means “peregrine falcon” in Turkish, and there is a strong autobiographical element in this artist’s work. In addition, she has always shown a keen sympathy for plants and animals.

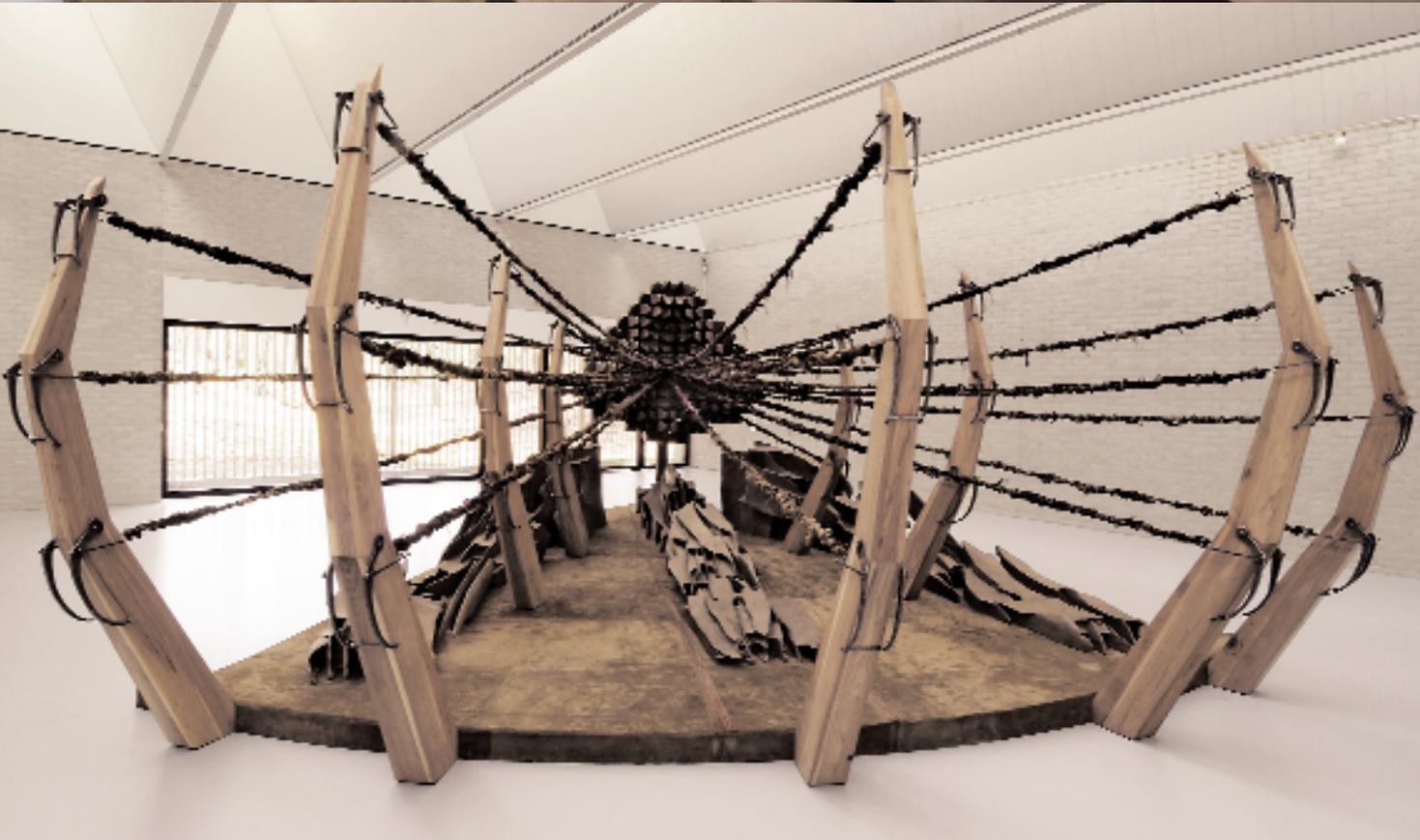
Aladogan spent time working on an organic farm in Tasmania, where she was impressed by the ancient trees and a method of sheep-shearing in which the wool was carried away by vacuum tubes. From this came *Dendrogram Room* (2002), an oval space with four (later five) life-size ceramic sheep on each side in various stages of decomposition or transformation—though one critic found that these sheep also had “unexpected tactile qualities” and were “cuddly like leather.”³ Cold, clinical fluorescent tubes lit the sterile, white-tiled space. Pointed shears dangled from the ceiling next to each animal, turning the installation into a lab for sinister experiments in which the sheep seemed to be on life support. Sacrificial sheep are well known from the Abraham/Ibrahim story in Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, but the pathos of these examples led one reviewer to speak of them in terms of “vulnerability,” “victimhood,” and “humiliation.”⁴ The artist believes that sheep can also represent a threat, pointing out that Satan has ram’s horns.

In 2004, Aladogan mounted an ensemble piece in the Stedelijk Museum’s project space (SMBA). *Army of Me* consisted of two principal components: *Spirit*, a 30-foot-wide Stealth bomber made from gleaming, pearly white fiberglass, with spectral underwing bombs like scrolls, and *Abys*, a darkened room containing a collapsed military parachute. Ceramic rocks, or perhaps grinding teeth, marked top and bottom of this cave. “She has a preference for images in which destruction coincides with oppressive beauty,” wrote one critic. “*Army of Me* is about the twilight zone between threat and euphoria.”⁵

During a solitary three-month trip through Arizona, Utah, and Nevada to study Native American culture,

Mettle Rite, 2008. Wood, metal, and rubber, 295 x 157.5 x 177 in.





Before Departure (all my changes were there), 2008. Ceramics, leather, felt, metal, and walnut, 126 x 295 x 335 in.

Fortitude Solitude, 2009. Silkscreen, offset, lithography, etching, and nut wood frame, 32.5 x 39.4 x 12.6 in.

Aladogan drove a jeep and forced herself to take risks along winding mountain roads. “The unknown attracts but also pushes back,” she wrote.⁶ On her return to the Netherlands, she produced two works. *Mettle Rite* (2008) consists of a cluster of vertical wooden forms held aloft on metal poles in a forested park in Arnhem. The sculpture mirrors the trees, suggesting a harmonious accommodation with nature. But on second look, the wooden forms become blades, or the negative spaces of knives, such as might cut down nearby branches. One reviewer finds in this work a “reference to mosques and cathedrals, with its corresponding upward trajectory symbolizing striving, courage, and the surrounding psychic tensions.”⁷

The second piece, *Before Departure (all my changes were there)* (2008), is probably Aladogan’s most ambitious work to date. A series of bowed walnut davits rising more 10 feet high anchor felt straps strung on wires that lead, at the other end, to a massive spiky ceramic piece that looks as though it were made of large seeds but whose elements were, in fact, modeled after an eagle’s beak. Below, on a leather-covered platform, lie eroded ceramic rocks and a burnt-in network of lines. Reviewers have seen the ribs of a boat or a giant spider in its web, but the piece primarily refers to a crossbow. “I wanted to make a crossbow that seems like it would hurt you...the harder you pull to attack, the harder you hurt yourself,” Aladogan says.⁸ Her work appears to have become more confidently aggressive in the 12 years since *Birds*; like *Listen to your soul* in Istanbul, *Before Departure* seems cocked and ready to fire.

From one point of view, *Before Departure*, with its avowedly Native American inspiration, seems like old-fashioned primitivism. But primitivism also refers to the unconscious, and here Aladogan has proved uncannily skilled in finding the precise sculptural equivalents for her complexly layered and conflicted feelings. One may speculate that her background is Kurdish and that this may have contributed to sympathy for other marginalized cultures, but she downplays such considerations as mere obstacles to be overcome, mere grist for struggle through art: “Only under the influence of oppression [does] willpower come into existence as an opposing force.”⁹

If the more recent sculptures seem primed for future detonation, this only continues a past process, which involves prints, drawings, and maquettes. Aladogan’s prints are technically complex combinations of digital manipulation, photopolymer etching,



silkscreen, inkjet, offset, and lithography. She designs the frames for her prints and drawings and “because the frame interacts with its surroundings, the drawing is also a sculpture to her.”¹⁰ By refusing to cover these works with glass, she avoids reflections and allows the texture of the paper and the marks on it to be seen. By prefacing the image of each sculpture on her Web site <www.eylemaladogan.com> with a preliminary sketch, she affirms that these sculptures are only milestones in an ongoing spiritual struggle. Critics comparing Aladogan’s work to such disparate practitioners as Anselm Kiefer and Louise Bourgeois are united in praising her mastery of form and thoughtful and meticulous execution.¹¹

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Notes

¹ Aladogan quoted in *The Companion to the 12th Istanbul Biennial* (Istanbul: IKSU/Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 2011), pp. 94–95.

² Anton Staartjes in *KM*, no. 71, 2009.

³ Ingrid Commandeur in *Museumtijdschrift*, no. 3, 2008.

⁴ José Boyens in *Ons Erfdeel*, 53/2, May 2010.

⁵ Adriaan van der Staay, *Imagining Emotion: art as a binding element in contemporary society* (Amsterdam: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, 2008), p. 8.

⁶ Staartjes, op. cit.

⁷ Monica Khemsurov in *Sight Unseen* <www.sightunseen.com/2010/07/eylem-aladogan-artist/>.

⁸ E-mail communication from the artist, November 2011.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Boyens, op. cit.

¹¹ Ingrid Commandeur in *Museumtijdschrift*, op. cit., and Frits de Coninck in *Het Financieele Dagblad*, April 12, 2008.