

Collectors & collections

Can and Sevda Elgiz have been instrumental in introducing contemporary art to Turkey, and Turkish art to the world

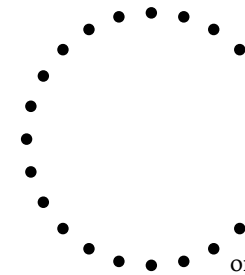
By Jonathan Bastable
Photographs by James Mollison

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contemporary art – it’s not always easy to live with. Anyone can handle the shock of the new for the duration of an exhibition visit, but it’s different if you take that electric hit every time you go downstairs to the kitchen.

Turkish collectors Can and Sevda Elgiz know this, but they have a rule that every piece they acquire has to spend time in their house while they decide where to place it. ‘When Can first bought this piece I said I could not tolerate it in our home,’ says Sevda, standing in front of Jan Fabre’s *Mur de la montée des anges*. It’s a full-length evening gown made up entirely of the carcasses of dead beetles. Their shiny little carapaces are a vivid emerald-green at the neck of the dress, shading gently to coal-black at its hem. Lean in close, and the work has a distinct odour – earthy, dark and verminous. ‘We lived together for a while,’ continues Sevda, ‘and now it is very precious to me. Some of the works in the collection are like members of the family,

Opposite, detail of Ola Kolehmainen, *Hagia Sophia year 537 XX*, 2014. Below, detail of Jan Fabre, *Mur de la montée des anges*, 1993.

Opening pages: Sevda and Can Elgiz with detail of Abdurrahman Öztoprak, *Painting 443*, 2006. All works are at the Elgiz Museum

and I feel a great deal of affection towards them. I am often sad when they leave the house.’

Sevda and Can seem to feel a need to foster individual works, as if each piece were an orphaned lion cub to be cared for until it can be released back into the wild open spaces of the public gaze. For many of the artworks in their collection move on from the Elgiz house to the Elgiz Museum in Maslak, Istanbul’s high-rise business district. Can and Sevda were among the earliest Turkish collectors of contemporary art, and their museum was the first in Turkey to be entirely devoted to such work. ‘Art has no limits,’ says Can. ‘It can be anything. It is not a matter of a brush and a canvas; the main thing is the idea. When we were going to auctions and fairs in the 1980s and 1990s, other collectors would say to us: where can we see contemporary art in Turkey? But there was nowhere, no contemporary or avant-garde space, no interest at all.’ ‘But at the same time,’ says Sevda, ‘when friends came to our home they would say: why are you buying this stuff, why do you collect it? We’d reply that this is the new art, but no gallery in Istanbul would display it because it wasn’t saleable. That’s what gave us the idea to make a museum: the responsibility fell to us.’

Can Elgiz is an architect and a land developer, and many of the tall buildings in the vicinity of the museum are his work. He is also the lead architect of the collection, the prime mover when it comes to sourcing and pursuing works. ‘I consider myself the wife of the collector,’ says Sevda. ‘Can is close to art because of his work. After dinner, he sits down with his books, listens to his music, and does research. He is the one who decides whether we should be going to Shanghai next, or Berlin. I follow him, but along the way we talk and we argue.’

While Can heads the hunt for new work, Sevda’s role is more curatorial – and much more than merely spousal. She is the smiling face of the museum, and a fierce advocate of everything it contains. ‘The collection started in our home; it was when we ran out of room that we decided to get a bigger space and open to the public. So we consider the museum our home – or an extension of our home. That means all the visitors to the museum are our guests. I love to receive them and to guide them round, to tell stories about each piece we have bought. After all, every piece we have was our choice – not the result of a conversation with a dealer or a curator. This is not a commercial collection, and not an investment. It is a passion, the fruit of a passion.’

Sevda also says that the collection does not set out to be educational, but admits that most people who walk through the door – both locals and foreigners – learn something new. ‘Most of our local visitors don’t know Tracey Emin, but they »





Left, Hakan Bakır,
Horse (Chess), 2010;
Opposite, detail of
Güngör Taner, *Fantasia*,
1994, at the Elgiz home

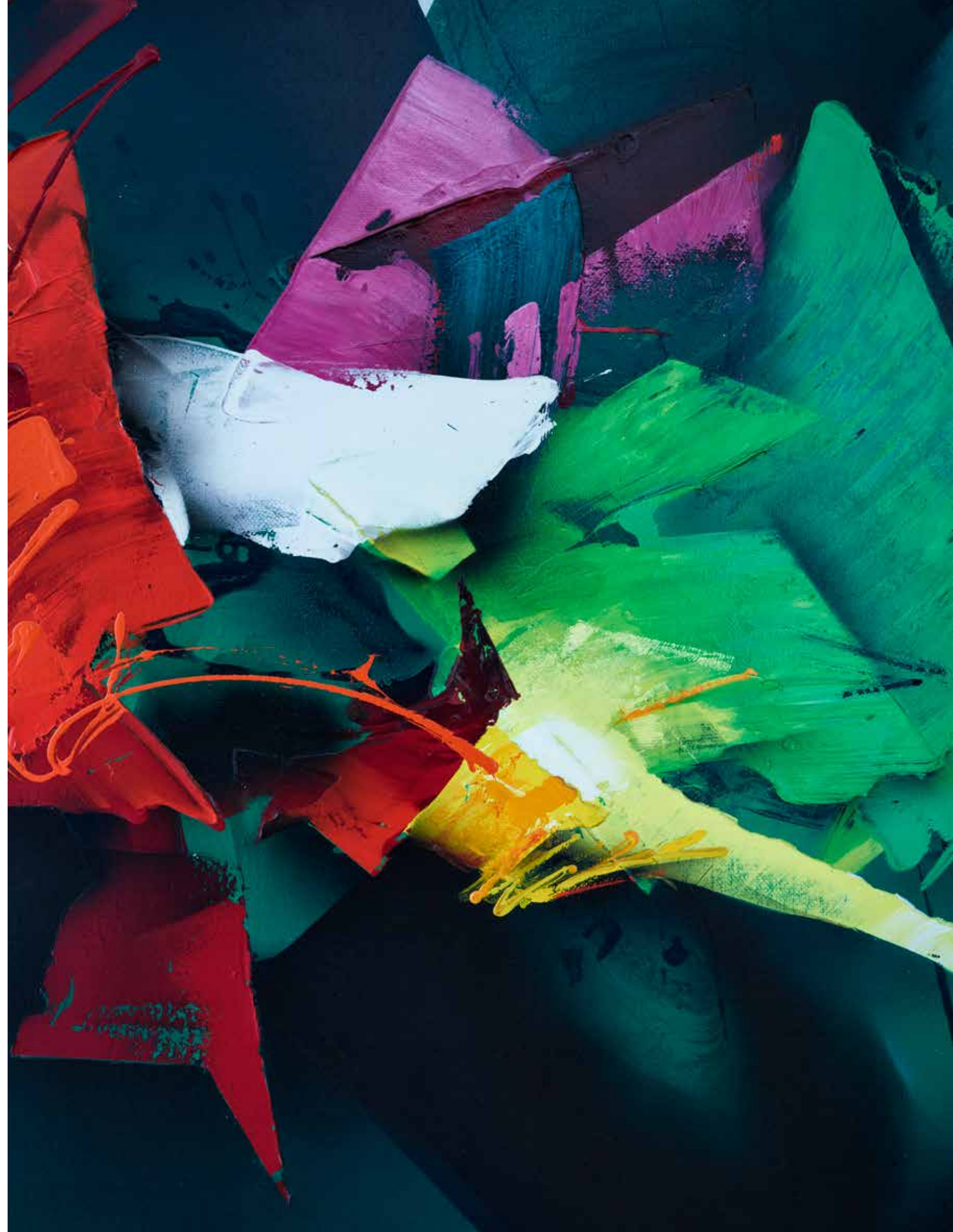
are curious to see what we have. They look at her embroideries and go: wow, who is she? Overseas visitors, meanwhile, get to see what is going on in Turkish art. I always remember when we first went public, we asked friends to host exhibitions. One of these was curated by Vasif Kortun [now director of the SALT contemporary art centre in Istanbul]. It was very marginal, very avant-garde. A friend of ours said that she would host, so her name went on the catalogue and the invitations. Before the opening, she came for a look around and was horrified: is this the art? This is it? Oh my God, if only I'd known! All my friends are coming here to look at this? She was so disappointed on the day – but now she is one of the biggest collectors of contemporary art in Turkey.'

In the museum – which was formerly a Porsche showroom – the Turkish works mingle pleasingly with the Western European and North American art. Near the entrance are a couple of those Emin's, with their misspelled confessions, which seem to catch the eye of the Turkish newcomers. Then there is *Twenty-Three Haunts*, an enormous Gilbert & George work from the duo's London series; the East End street names – Brewhouse Lane, Artichoke Hill – look oddly exotic in this place, a taxi ride away from the Golden Horn. A vivid Paul McCarthy Cibachrome print depicts jars of mayonnaise and vaseline fished from someone's garbage. And in the far corner of the museum hangs a mesmeric Sol LeWitt abstraction – a worm's blue odyssey on a crimson ground.

Taken together, these well-known artists function as Plimsoll lines, a series of calibrations against which the depth or the density of the homegrown works can be judged. And the Turkish art certainly measures up. Dennis Gün's *Last Breakfast* is a beautifully lit, high-resolution photograph of a crystal glass, half filled with wine and set on a silver salver next to a stack of round wafers. A jewel-encrusted crucifix is a strong hint that this last breakfast is taking place on the morning of the Last Supper, and the work is an excellent foil to the nearby McCarthy. There is an enormous square canvas by Abdurrahman Öztoprak, a mentor of the collectors, and one of the few artists that they collect from every period of his oeuvre. Öztoprak's works are complex exercises in geometrical abstraction, but many of them tend towards the figurative. In the museum there is a work that consists of intersecting quadrilaterals in vexillological shades of red, black and blue – but the shading and the arrangement of the shapes create the impression that the viewer is standing at one end of a long, dim corridor. This canvas bears the inscrutably neutral title »

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Right, Louise Bourgeois,
Mannequin Head/Male,
1993, with detail of
Andy Warhol, *Oxidation
Painting*, 1978, on
the wall, at the Elgiz
home. Following pages,
detail of Dennis Gün,
Last Breakfast, 2010,
at the museum







If you were to seek a leitmotif in the Elgiz collection, it might be a fascination with scale



Above, *Fugitive Shadow* exhibition at the Elgiz Museum with, from left: Arif Çekderi, *Empathic*, 2016; Carole Turner, *Moon Shadows*, 2016; Emre Özçaylan, *Margin of Error*, 2016; Mahmut Aydın, *Three Monkeys*, 2016. Above right, detail of Ozan Oganer, *Ram*, 2014, at the Elgiz home. Right, Stephan Balkenhol, *Tänzerin*, 2005, outside the museum. Opposite, Y Bahadır Yıldız, *Current*, 2012, on loan to the museum



Painting 443, but it could easily be called something like *The Light at the End of the Tunnel*.

So the two strands of the collection invite comparison with each other; but the juxtapositional approach amounts to more than a patriotic assertion that Turkish art is as good as anybody's. As a whole, the collection makes the point that contemporary art, while it may be a difficult language to master, is nevertheless a universal tongue, a way of addressing pan-human concerns and anxieties. Next to that mazy two-tone Sol LeWitt hangs an abstract canvas by Şenol Yoroğlu. It is a mesmerising work: thick, raised gobbets of purple oil paint, like macerated blackcurrants, crowd the centre of a canvas streaked with an ancient ochre hue that could be potter's clay mixed with congealed blood. Here and there, livid blisters of bright, clean blue break through. To me it seemed utterly clear that this painting, entitled *Fossilise*, is about death and the inevitability of death. And I have never coveted a work of art so suddenly or so intensely.

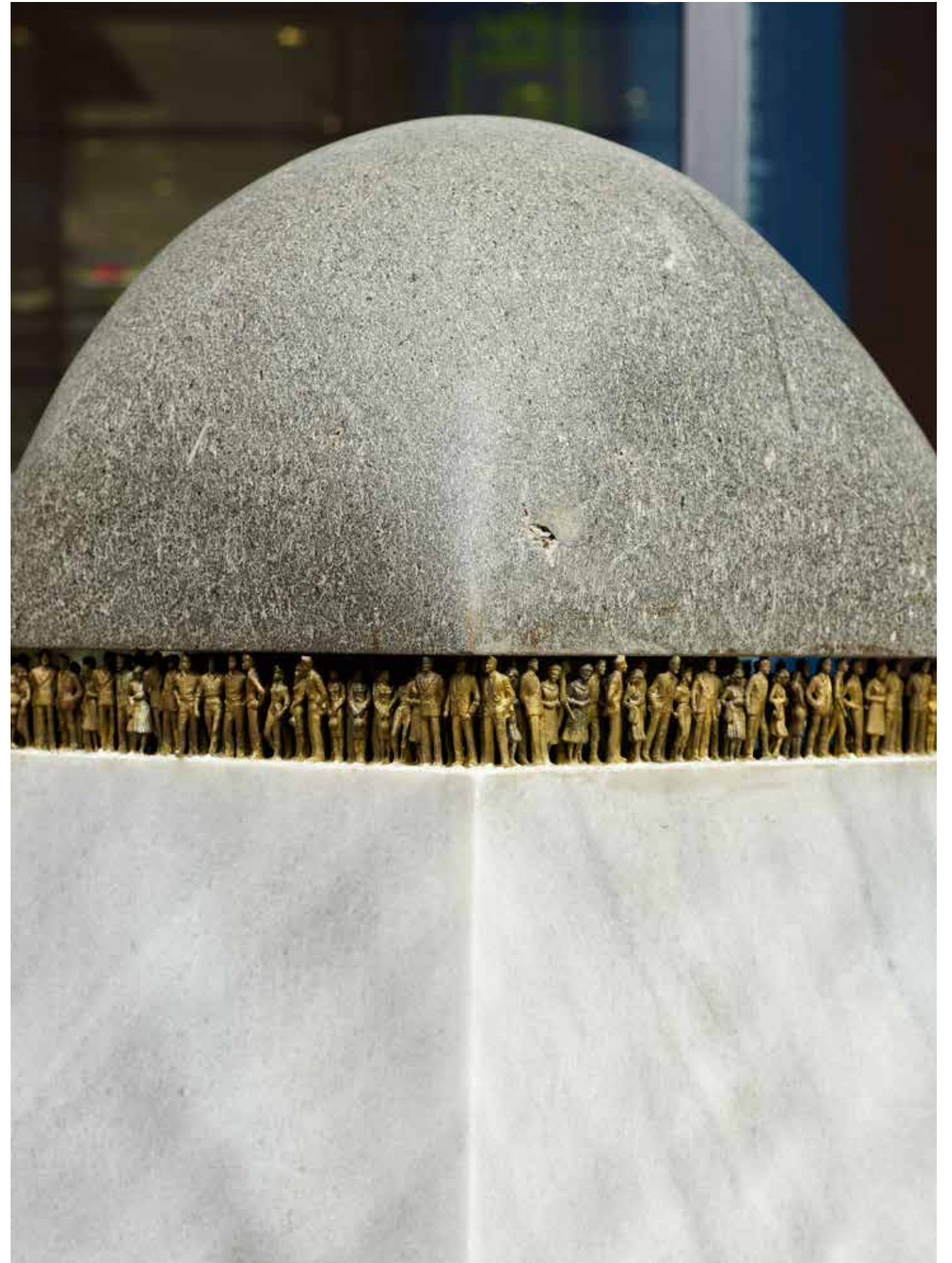
If you were to seek a leitmotif in the Elgiz collection, it might turn out to be a fascination with scale. Take the photography: the McCarthy and the Gün; Barbara Kruger's *Fate*, in which the title word is superimposed on an extreme close-up portrait of »

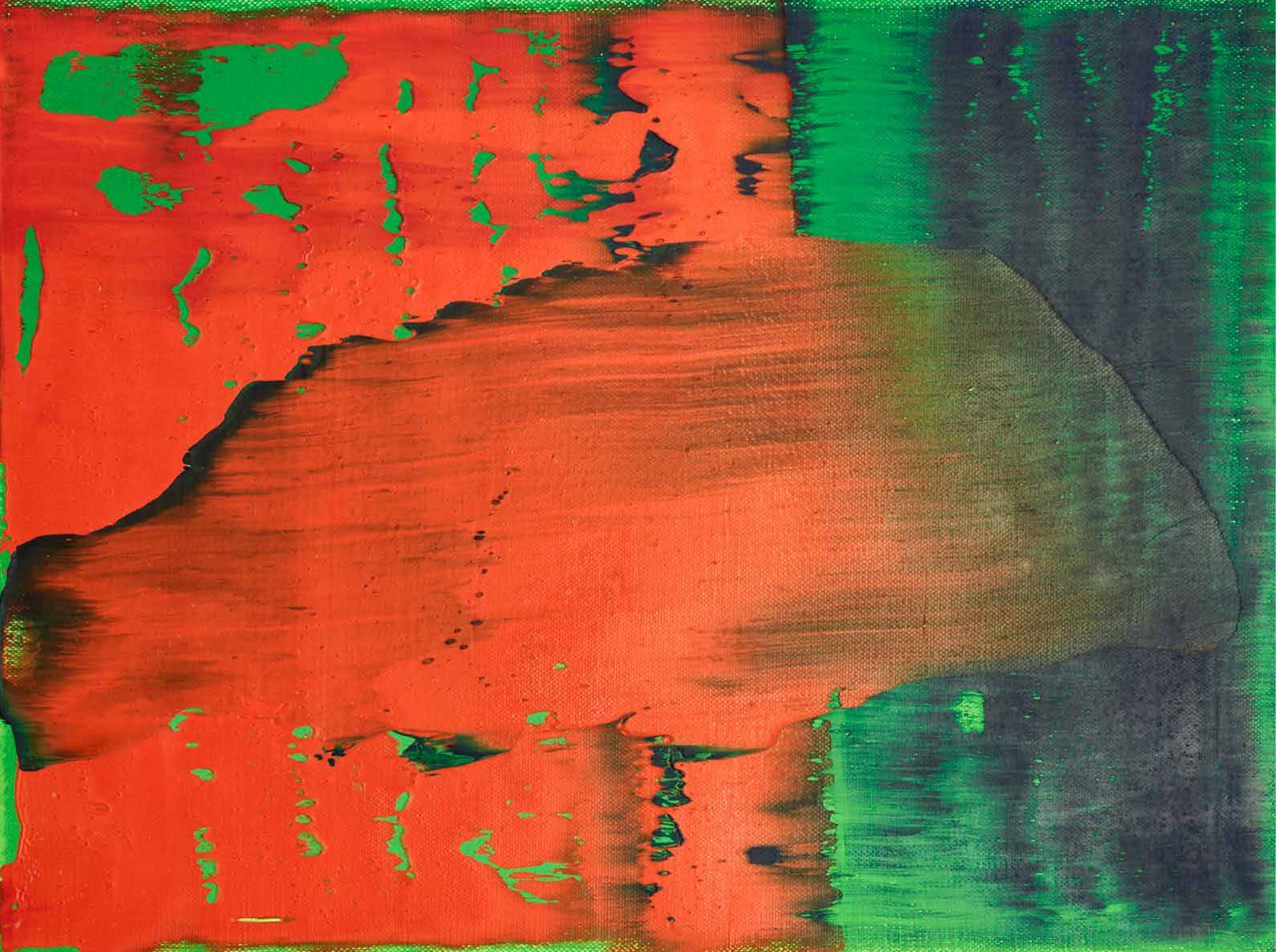
© DACS 2016. Arif Çekderi, *Empathic*, 2016. Metal, 171 x 76 x 35 cm © Arif Çekderi, courtesy the artist. Mahmut Aydın, *Three Monkeys*, 2016 © Mahmut Aydın, courtesy the artist. www.mahmut-aydin.com © Emre Özçaylan © Ozan Oganer, courtesy the artist. © Y. Bahadır Yıldız, courtesy the artist. www.ybahadiryildiz.org





© DACS 2016. © Caner Sengünalp, courtesy the artist and Gallery Ilayda.
Following pages: Gerhard Richter, *Green-Blue-Red* (Edition for Parkett), 1993. © Gerhard Richter 2016 (21092016)





Detail of Gerhard Richter, *Green-Blue-Red* (*Edition for Parkett*), 1993. Previous pages, from left: Chiharu Shiota, *State of Being, Dress*, 2015, at the Elgiz home; Caner Şengüenalp, *Visit the centre of the world, you will find the secret stone there*, 2013, in the sculpture garden between the museum and Beybi Giz Plaza

‘Collectors have a duty to make visible the work that they own’
Sevda Elgiz



Above, Paul McCarthy, *Untitled (from Propo-Series) (Mayonnaise, Petroleum Jelly)*, 2002. Right, Sevda and Can Elgiz at the museum with, from left: David Salle, *To Be Titled*, 1998; detail of Gilbert & George, *Twenty-Three Haunts*, 2003; Stephan Balkenhol, *Big Man*, 2012; detail of Azade Köker, *Exploded Still Life*, 2010; Barbara Kruger, *Fate*, 2001; Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #184*, 1988

Marilyn Monroe; an Ola Kolehmainen view of inside the Hagia Sophia, showing the luminous crystal chandeliers against a forest of rusted scaffolding – all of these are images that would sit happily within a design magazine. One of the things that makes them art is that, like Alice eating cake, they have grown too large, and so have migrated from the page to the gallery. Can, as a maker of skyscrapers, is naturally at home with bigness – a canvas the size of a garage door is not going to faze him. Once, when applying their have-it-at-home-first rule, Can and Sevda found that a painting by David Salle would not fit through the door (‘We knew the dimensions, but forgot to take account of the frame,’ says Can). The architect’s solution was to knock a big hole in the house, bring the picture in, then rebuild behind it.

But for the most part, the flow of art is in the other direction – away from the Elgiz home, through the portal of the museum, and beyond. ‘Collectors have a duty to make visible the work that they own,’ says Sevda. ‘The way to support an artist is not only by buying, but by making sure that the art is seen.’ It comes as no surprise that several of the office blocks around the Elgiz Museum – built by Can – accommodate works from the collection, either outside the entrance or in their foyers. Here in Maslak, downtown Istanbul, Can’s glass edifices are functioning as pedestals and display cases for the contemporary art that he and Sevda love. Which means that the collection is reaching out, leaching out, into the wider world. ♦

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