

FRIEZE MASTERS

SEMIHA BERKSOY

VIGO | GALERIST
Stand G15 | Spotlight

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Vigo Gallery, London and Galerist, Istanbul is proud to present, a solo presentation of historically significant paintings by Semiha Berksoy (1910 – 2004) at Frieze Masters 2018.

One of the most notable figures in Turkey's modern cultural history and an extraordinary creative force by any standards, Berksoy was, over her long lifetime, one of the leading opera singers in Europe, an actress, performance artist, poet and painter.

Born in Istanbul in 1910, Berksoy began her creative career as an actress, starring in the leading role of the first Turkish sound movie, 'Istanbul Sokaklari' ('The Streets of Istanbul'), at the age of 21. Soon afterwards, Berksoy performed in the first Turkish opera, 'Özsoy', performing in front of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, who became a lifelong fan and supporter. In 1939, for the 75th birthday of Richard Strauss in Berlin, she sang the role of Ariadne in Ariadne auf Naxos, becoming the first Turkish prima donna to perform on stage in Europe. Meanwhile, in Turkey, she worked with Carl Ebert in helping found and inspire the Turkish State Opera and Ballet.

Berksoy painted throughout her life, having studied art as a teenager, but painting was until late into her life, an intensely private affair. An autodidact, self-mythologizer and mystic, the works, expressed in a powerfully immediate and emotive style, comprise a compelling visual diary of both Berksoy's storied career and her vital and turbulent inner world. Favourite and significant characters and scenes from operas and plays are depicted, as well as deeply personal and sometimes painful subjects. Amongst them; her late mother, the death of her baby sister and the great unrequited love of her life, the avant-garde poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902–1963), persecuted by the Turkish state in the 1940s for his communist beliefs.

When Berksoy scaled back her music and performance work in later life, she was able to spend more time painting and staged her first solo art show in 1969. Since then Berksoy's visual practice has been increasingly recognized as a major cultural achievement in its own right. In recent years the support of key figures such as Robert Wilson, Rosa Martinez and Omar Kholeif has brought Berksoy's painting to a wider international audience. Martinez included 26 of her paintings in the 51st Venice Biennale, 2005. Her work has also been included in the 5th Istanbul Biennale (1997), Manifesto 2 (1998), 9th Shanghai Biennale (2012) and will feature in the forthcoming Sharjah Biennial 14 (2019).

Capturing this key moment in the international discovery of Berkoy's painting, our presentation focuses on the confluence between Berksoy's visual and operatic practice. This includes some of her greatest paintings, notably; Salome, (1962) Love Under the Moonlight, (1971) - both only available to museums for acquisition - and Beethoven, 1988.

Salome (1962) the earliest work on show is a brutal masterpiece. One of the rawest expressions of her art brut style, which sought to parallel the immediacy and power of music in visual form. Similarly, naïve in style, though celebratory in tone, Beethoven (1958) employs a childlike symbolism in its portrayal of the composer; where, in a moment of creation, he becomes a Godlike sun, rising over the world. Whereas, Love Under the Moonlight (1971), is one of Berksoy's most iconic works images - depicting a simple and powerful image of love.

Ariadne Auf Naxos, 1987, one of Berksoy's most beautiful works, is an exquisitely elegant depiction of the archetypal female performer and thus of the objectified female subject. The bare breasts, with their promise of immediate carnality, collude with the impersonal distance of the mask-like face. More immediately the work recalls Berksoy's celebrated leading role in the performance of 'Ariadne auf Naxos' staged in 1939 for Richard Strauss' birthday. Her casting drew condemnation from the Hitler Youth, who demanded the role go to a German to which the conductor Clemens Schmalstich replied, "This role belongs to Semiha, because she is an artist".