Hotel Principles
Nazım Ünal Yılmaz

The Function Room, London
1–31 October 2015

Catalogue

The tavern entrance is at the corner. The interior is not visible from the outside. The door is a narrow, double door. Inside, to the left, is a darkened room. To the right, a long saloon is watched from the bar by the backs of stool-seated drinkers and the regulars seated behind tables in front of the screened windows. A patterned carpet leads towards a fireplace at the end of the room. Firewood is heaped carelessly to the right of it next to a stage. Above the stage is a large television screen. The stage is strewn with boxes, children's toys, untidied and discarded things. To the left of the fireplace, a carpeted stair rises, with a turn to the left, to a door, a landing and another flight of stairs. The ceiling of the room above is crumbling. You go left at the top of the stairs: stores, stacks of chairs, a conference table ready for a meeting, a discussion or a lecture; a disused fireplace with a disused gas fire; tired, white-painted walls, a black-painted mantlepiece, black-painted picture rails and window sills, giving way, to the right, to a bright exhibition room, only white, hung with three large canvases and six small paintings, a towel rail attached to the wall, a plant standing near the fireplace.

Hotel Principles

> A staircase. After four treads, four risers, it splits to the right. Up a few steps, a corridor recedes into the distance under the chin of a looming, pale silhouette. Continuing its upward spiral, the stair is doubled by the rail looping over the shoulder of the same figure. The exits are vague, almost implausible. Up: to the left; ahead: down the corridor; right: through an arch; down: the empty, banister-wrapped shaft of the stairwell. A coil of rope hangs round the pale figure's neck, half-forming a noose. On the stair, where it divides, something lies abandoned, something indecisive, a disarticulated insect, an animate bra strewn in the steps of a nude descending a staircase. The cupped creature strives with halting gait, while a gull-like, pink braid contour points downward, and paint-drip traces assert the pull of gravity. (Cat. 4)

Nazım Ünal Yılmaz speaks of the hotel as a site of fear and sexual adventure; a place of encounter and anonymity; an imaginary location for nostalgia or melancholy. The painting itself stems from a photograph of a staircase inside a derelict hotel (Fig. 1). Yılmaz took the photograph in Bad Ems, the German spa town that is still celebrating the noble and notable visitors of the late Romantic era who went there for the cure.

> *I painted only those stairs at the beginning and I thought, no, it's going to look like one of those Leipzig School paintings, empty architectural spaces, which I find bourgeois and esoteric nonsense. I didn't like it for a long time and I left it. It stayed there in the studio two months. Suddenly I saw something and I painted it and it was finished. This story is a kind of adventure of a cross-dresser going to a hotel … but depressed obviously.*

Stairs, like hotels and cure resorts, are ambivalent and *unheimlich* — that is to say, places we are not at home, though strangely familiar, possibly uncanny. They appear and reappear in Yılmaz's paintings as echoes of stairs the artist has known (or we might have known), and as ciphers of ambivalence.

Strangely, you meet people there, but at the same time, in the darkness of a park or in a hotel, you hide yourself. [Those stairs] stimulated my imagination because I too had such experiences as a young gay man, and as gay man with many inferiority complexes.

While steps always seem to go up, to promise a higher, better situation, to symbolise progress,[1] they remain in-between and indifferent to the traffic. Going up with the hope of sex, sleep and forgetting; up further to the poet's attic of irrecoverable memory; down, with disappointment, to the mundane world; and lower, according the bourgeois dreamer trapped in his parents' house,[2] to the incoherent, metaphorical cellar where fear resides.

Yılmaz's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (2008, Fig. 2) is a man making his way alone. The space is indeed incoherent and obscure. The steps twist, without visible egress — without possible egress, behind an open cell door. The opening reveals a pitch black space inside and, through a spy-hole in the door, a smaller, blank landscape.[3] The man steps down, as if into a pool.

In another painting, Yılmaz inscribes zigzag steps as a hieroglyph of equivocation behind the melancholy sign he says was an Egyptian symbol for virility. (Cat. 6)[4]

Pawn

This Oedipus with skinny ankles like the silhouette in Picabia's notorious 'Dessin Français' (Fig. 4), faces no sphinx, but instead climbs a stair. Because his head is hooded, he does not see the two faced but limbless pawns descending, one of them two-faced, like a baby Janus. A third pawn, this piece faceless and immobile, stands on a high plinth, towering over a naked painter and empty easel. The central figure's hood, the bag over its head, is inverted, as a skirt, to cover its sex. Whereas the cocky figure in Picabia's overpainting[5] flaunts a fig leaf and penetrates with his look, this one steps blindly, right arm amputated above the elbow, left hand poised for balance. On the left of the picture: a stormy sky over a choppy sea washing at the painter's feet. On the right, receding to the interior: in one direction the vague upstairs; in the other, a rectangular void curtained by paint drips. (Cat. 9)

This thing, it's not a hat, the American soldiers used it when they were torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib, it's a bag. I have used this image a few times since the war. I'm using it repeatedly. [...] I have some images, like the stairs, or clocks, also mirrors, or some phallic forms, like the pawns, some animals – images I use repeatedly.

The image of the hooded prisoner that first came out in 2004 after it was submitted, among hundreds more, to the Criminal Investigation Command of the United States Army, quickly became the icon of a scandal without consequences. American liberals greeted the publication of images of the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by US military personnel and contractors with shame and dismay. 'The photographs are us,' wrote Susan Sontag,[6] who was also not the only commentator to remark the 'confluence of torture and pornography'.[7] Nor was she alone in registering the confusion of acts of cruelty, acts of photography and acts of publicity.[8] Government officials strained to declare what they euphemistically called 'enhanced interrogation' lawful, to exclude its victims from the jurisdiction of laws prohibiting torture and at the same time to censor the photographs. Some low-ranking

soldiers were accused of 'abuses', court-martialled and convicted, receiving light sentences. Despite the fact that the proceedings disclosed that the 'techniques' were approved and the deeds commissioned by senior commanders in Iraq as well as officials in Washington, the investigation was not vigorously pursued. The accused soldiers' chief dereliction of duty was perceived to be the taking and sharing of photographs that resulted in America getting a bad press. The photographs the prison guards took of themselves with the prisoners they tortured, humiliated and killed were intended for circulation and affirmed, with the thumbs-up gesture, the approval they already had from their superiors. The photographs were not supposed to be incriminating evidence. They *are* evidence that the people who performed this violence on defenceless prisoners (and photographed it) did not feel they were doing anything wrong. The Iraqis are as humiliated and degraded in the pictures as they were in the prison. This portrayal of the captives' abjection and powerlessness tends to turn the ideological claim of the justice of violence into evidence, if not of the victims' guilt,[9] then at least of the victor's superiority and the right of the powerful to rule by violence over the powerless. It's not very surprising then that the images, and the acts they showed, didn't greatly disturb the general public indifference in the United States to the fate of the Iraqi people.

People in Iraq and neighbouring countries did not need a reminder of the brutality of the occupation and the conduct of America's endless 'war on terror'. While the images that came out of Abu Ghraib were held up in protest all over the world, they seem resistant to artistic *détournement*. Perhaps because, as Stephen Eisenman has suggested, they already belong to a forceful tradition.[10] Eisenman claims an iconography of degradation links the Abu Ghraib images with a central motif in Western art (using Aby Warburg's term, a 'pathos formula') in which eroticised images of bodies bound, tortured and defeated are displayed for the glorification of the powerful. His point isn't that the Abu Ghraib images merit comparison with masterpieces of art, but that art is the vector of comparable ideologies and that art history pre-figures or pre-determines the reception of the Abu Ghraib images in the West. Eisenman underlines that the counter-tradition of art works that indict the horror and cruelty of war, the tradition that stems from Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra* (1810–1820) and is exemplified, for instance, by Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) or Golub's *Interrogation* paintings (1981), is exceptional in art history and cannot be brought into relation with the Abu Ghraib images. Neither could this tradition be used to justify the artistic appropriation of the Abu Ghraib images. Whereas the celebrated icons of the evils and disasters of war were the products of enlightened subjectivity — with the artist as quasi-universal subject — the benighted subjects of Abu Ghraib were the authors at the same time of the atrocity and the exhibition of it. The objects of their violence were human beings deprived of subjectivity.

The image of the hooded prisoner first appeared in Yılmaz's painting incongruously floating above, or as if pasted on to a painterly landscape (Fig. 5). Yılmaz touches on a reality that remains outside of painting. Yet, what enters into painting is not an empty reference to torture and violence in general and their exploitation in the media, but a parallel reality mediated by the painter himself, an invisible experience represented in images.

How I became a painter is a little bit of an intimate story, because it was not my goal to be an artist. I don't even come from a middle class family. OK, my father was an architect, but he left us, so after I was ten years old I grew up with my mum.

Yılmaz recalls being a very depressed child and being bullied at school because of his effeminate behaviour.

Once I was crying in a sport course, alone in the class, and a painting teacher came to me and asked me why I was crying, and I had to admit they were making fun of me because of my feminine behaviours. Then she told me there was a high school for fine arts where there was a residence for students and I could get a scholarship. She told me, with my character, I would feel better there at this school for fine arts. That's how I came to art. Just coincidence with her advice. Before that I was expecting to study law, actually, because of my mum. She wanted me to study law, to judge my father.

I did the exam for this high school. They were taking twenty-five students and I won a scholarship. Since that time I was into art, but to be honest, it was never a plan to be an artist. I thought, probably I'm going to be a teacher or something like that. I was not really self-confident.

I was already painting a lot, even when I was a child. But from today's point of view I find myself very untalented. I was too conscious. I was too logical. The doors had to be big enough for the people to go through … If I look at a few paintings of mine from those times, I find them not so creative, not so beautiful, too realistic.

In my family, there was no one who had any idea about art or being a painter. I never visited exhibitions. The only artists I knew were Salvador Dali, Van Gogh and this guy teaching painting on television, I've forgotten his name, with curly hair … on Sundays, on state television. You know him? Rolf Harris. I was always watching and admiring how easily he does a tree and clouds.

A father in our society has the highest position in the hierarchy, but I was somehow lucky, lacking a father. It's a kind of freedom. So I didn't have to explain anything to my father, even though he wouldn't like the idea of me becoming an artist. And my mother, she never cared that much what I was doing. After my studies in Turkey, I went abroad. They never asked for money, so it was fine. When I started to earn money through art, when I started to sell, then they started to respect me as an artist too.

In Vienna I started to think more seriously about painting and what painting is. You can see pictures everywhere, but painting is something … is not something you do with colours and brushes. Painting is something that has to do with a tradition, a Western tradition especially.

Untitled painting

Puppeteers, priests, gangsters, they are laying hands on her. A white woman — brown, bobbed hair, like an actress from the 1920s, crouched naked in the middle of the scene, knees up at her chest, arms behind her back — looks up tragically at her captors. The scene is an ornate, draped interior, an hotel suite from a movie. An upholstered lady's chair is overturned in front of her. An unlit trident candlestick stands, out of reach, on a pedestal table. A hand emerges from confused strokes behind her, grabs her chin. A bare arm reaches forward, the hand is laid on as if to impart a spirit or a calling. A black-sleeved, lace-cuffed arm holds up a red cord, knotted in a loop, hanging loosely. Snagged somewhere, its arc cuts across the woman's face. A man lunges from the foreground.

Behind the shoulder of his crumpled, beige suit, three witnesses: a mirror, a disembodied surreal eyeball, a grotesque ornament. (Cat. 3)

Generally they don't have faces. This is the only painting where you see a face, a woman's face, even. I find it very problematic to paint portraits, to paint faces at all, because then I feel responsible to somebody. This is also why I avoid painting the female body especially. Besides, it's not my area and it's already been abused enough. So I decided not to paint the female body. But in this painting, I broke both these rules and I find it very, very problematic.

Who is this woman? I don't know, that's the problem with this painting. At the beginning, I wanted to make a painting about Rosa Luxemburg but, obviously, now it has almost nothing to do with Rosa Luxemburg and it became just a woman caught by a group of males.

There is no photographic record of Rosa Luxemburg's brief stay at the Hotel Eden in Berlin between her arrest on 15 January 1919 and her murder the same evening. The hotel, near the zoo, was, at the time, the HQ of the Freikorps militia, the Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen-Division led by Waldemar Pabst, which had captured Luxemburg along with her comrades Karl Liebknecht, who was also killed, and Wilhelm Pieck, who was let go. After being interrogated, beaten, taken from the hotel and shot in the head, Luxemburg's body was dumped in a nearby canal. Thus ended the hopes of revolution in Germany.[11]

A body recovered from the canal after the thaw was brought to the place where an empty coffin had been interred in January alongside Liebknecht's remains and those of other comrades killed in the earlier fighting and subsequent police actions. Fresh corpses had also been buried there while Luxemburg's lay under the ice. Luxemburg's second burial was not her last, nor was it the last funeral rite in which her portrait would be carried in procession as the icon of a martyr. (Fig. 6)

The revolutionary struggle continued hopelessly, sporadically. The Socialist-led government, which had assumed the mantle of the state when the old regime quit the scene, relied on right-wing forces such as Pabst's to suppress any challenge from the left. While it was Germany's workers, by observing a general strike, that thwarted the right-wing military coup attempt of 1920 (in which Pabst was a leading figure), the outcome was only further accommodation of the military, loss of Socialist influence and brutal repression of the Communist insurgency.

The revolution was finally laid to rest with the erection of a monument at the burial site, initiated by the Communist Party towards the end of 1923 and unveiled in 1926. The 'Revolutionsdenkmal' became the backdrop for regular funeral demonstrations — 'LLL-Feiern', Liebknecht-Luxemburg-Lenin ceremonies, took place every 15 January — as well as for the burials of new victims, until 1933, when the Nazis took power. The monument was demolished by the Nazis in 1935.[12]

The undying image of Rosa Luxemburg that sails into the future, with the legend 'Ich war, ich bin, ich werde sein' (Fig. 6),[13] though venerated as if it were a saint's, is not an image of Christian suffering, but a bourgeois portrait. The memento carried aloft by the mourning

crowd is descended from an older tradition. The death mask, from which the Roman practice of funerary portraiture was derived, stands behind both the sentimental and the naturalistic aspects of portraiture that are inherited and fulfilled in the nineteenth century by photography, in the guise of social portraiture and in the guise of forensic, post-mortem photography.[14]

The face that appears in Yılmaz's paintings, if it isn't the uncanny face of the pawn, if it isn't turned away, blanked, veiled, hooded and masked — and often when it is — the face that appears is the painter's self-portrait, or his avatar's, appearing in a mirror.

> *As a boy, in Trabzon, I started to discover sexuality. I thought I'm sick and I'm the only one. The only image I had that I could empathise with was a transgender singer. I thought I had to be a female, so I tried to wear my mum's clothes. I was checking myself in front of the mirror and then I was crying … I can do something with my … but what should I do with this nose, it's masculine! It was a crisis, one I still have in my paintings.*
>
> *When I had to leave home some nights, I shared a room with prostitutes, where I met transexuals. I believe, if I didn't get a chance to study in that high school for fine arts, it could be that I would be a prostitute, living with transgender people. Maybe somewhere in a parallel world I have this life too. Regularly I do paintings about some transgender friends, their life and their deaths. Murders of transexuals are very common in Turkey.*
>
> *In several paintings I have a figure doing their hair or makeup. One image comes from a murder that took place in Turkey, a transgender friend was murdered from behind by her pimp and macho boyfriend while she was making up.* (Fig. 7)

Self-portrait with a Gorilla

> The artist pictures himself as a naked ascetic taken from behind by a gorilla. Or is that a man in a gorilla suit? The landscape, a fitting enough setting for a painterly *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, comes by way of a pornographic Arcadia. The naked human figure lifts its head and right arm towards a disembodied brain, glowing in front of him. (Fig. 8)

The *Object Calling Me* intersects with Yılmaz's equivocal *Virility* at ninety degrees — the two paintings are installed as a corner piece (Cat. 6). In the former, a slender figure resembling the artist embraces what looks like a piece of modernist furniture. Three interlocking prisms, 'let's say, an IKEA bookcase, a symbol of modern intellectuality,' Yılmaz suggests. This object 'gets a hand and is grabbing the guy's arse.'

Yılmaz's ambivalence is the distance that remains in the embrace. Without debt to father or fatherland, Yılmaz inhabits the unfamiliar. In painting, even as a boy, even as he keeps his own company, Yılmaz enters a tradition in which he confronts himself as other. In painting, as in a mirror, Yılmaz cradles an unfound object, new furniture sprouting on his breast (Fig. 9), a different adolescence, absurd melancholy.

> *The object was taking me and calling me to solitude.*

Figures (paintings by Nazım Ünal Yılmaz unless otherwise stated)

1 Hotel Villa Balzer, Bad Ems, Germany, photograph, 2014 (previous page)
2 *Nude Descending a Staircase,* 180 × 160 cm, 2006
3 *Straight,* 180 × 160 cm, 2005
4 Francis Picabia (1879–1953), *La feuille de vigne* (*The Fig-Leaf*), 200 × 160 cm, 1922

5 *Landscape with Iraqi Captive*, 25 × 30 cm, 2007
6 Banner carried by mourners at Rosa Luxemburg's second funeral, Berlin, 13 June 1919
7 *Murder of Sibel*, 180 × 160 cm, 2014

8 *Self-portrait with a Gorilla*, 160 × 140 cm, 2007
9 *New Furniture*, 50 × 40 cm, 2013

Notes

1 *[Stairs are] a kind of symbol for improvement or development, which is for me something generally disappointing*. Yılmaz's words are from an interview recorded by Dunya Kalantery at The Function Room, London, 6 October 2015.

2 Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) is the prototype of philosophy as self-help literature: asserting the triviality of bourgeois experience and its confused aspirations as the universal truth.

3 The cell door, apparently, is from the notorious Sinop Fortress prison on the Black Sea where many Turkish political prisoners, including notable writers and intellectuals, were held during its operation 1887–1997. Yılmaz's painting also recalls Matisse's *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* (1914), which confronts the viewer with an indefinite, black opening. While the cell door remains open, the smaller opening in the door — an observation or feeding hatch — appears as it would from inside the cell. Compare the aperture in Yilmaz's landscape painting, *Straight*, 2004. (Fig. 3)

4 *I painted it as if it were a kind of sad flower, or a sad sperm coming from a flower pot, and I added a very simple symbol of stairs, because, virility, being a man, has a strong association with civilisation, with improvement. I decided to combine them because this is a symbol of disappointed masculinity, disappointment of being a man. From all this patriarchy and masculinity not only do women suffer, also men suffer.*

5 *La feuille de vigne* (*The Fig-Leaf*, 1922, Tate, London) is painted over another work entitled *Les yeux chauds*. The original painting, which was based on a technical drawing of a turbine brake, was designed to cause a scandal when submitted to the Paris Salon d'Automne of 1921. The overpainting was shown in the same salon in 1922.

6 Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the torture of others', *New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004, pp. 24–29, 42. (26)

7 It was seriously suggested by a conservative American commentator that the ubiquity of pornography, rather than American foreign policy, was to blame for the 'abuses' of Abu Ghraib.

8 'No,' Sontag writes, 'the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken.' (26)

9 Most of the prisoners are said to have been arrested by mistake.

10 Stephen F. Eisenman,*The Abu Ghraib Effect*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007.

11 Details of the murder came out during the trial of low-ranking militiamen who carried it out. Needless to say, they were not severely punished. Pabst, who was never tried, explained his role in the killing in an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1962 (No. 16, pp. 38–44).

12 In 1946, the post-war regime re-instituted the rites of 15 January in front a makeshift replica of the Revolutionsdenkmal. Luxemburg's body could not be found when, on Wilhelm Pieck's initiative and to his design, the DDR government built a new Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten as the focal point for SED ceremonies (inaugurated 1951). Rosa Luxemburg's new granite sarcophagus was symbolically sprinkled with earth from the previous burial site.

13 ‘I was, I am, I will be.’ The final words of Luxemburg’s last published article in *Die Rote Fahne*. Luxemburg got the words from the nineteenth-century poem ‘Die Revolution’ by Ferdinand Freiligrath. The phrase crops up in Schiller’s essay ‘The Mission of Moses’ and in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (both 1790). Kant cites ‘the well-known inscription’ as the most sublime utterance of an ‘aesthetic idea’. Beethoven is said to have kept the quotation from Schiller on his desk.

14 The bodies of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were both photographed post mortem more than once, with different intentions, and their conventional life-time portraits were turned into posthumous icons. The body of Karl Liebknecht was first photographed in the morgue where it was taken anonymously after he was killed. These photographs are still circulated as a condemnation of the corpse — as an illegitimate, criminal body. After it was claimed by Liebknecht’s family, the body was washed, dressed and photographed again lying in repose. The family also invited the artist Käthe Kollwitz to sketch the corpse. She produced a memorial wood-block print on the model of a Lamentation of Christ. A partly decomposed corpse supposed to be Rosa Luxemburg’s was photographed in 1919 and was supposed to have been buried. In 2009, the pathologist Michael Tsokos of Berlin’s Charité hospital found a body preserved in the basement of the hospital that he claimed could be Rosa Luxemburg’s. This waxen torso was photographed undergoing a CT scan in the hospital supervised by Tsokos and an assistant in white coats — an image which seemed to combine the celebration of the forensic scientist’s technological eye and the veneration of a saintly relic. See *Der Spiegel*, 30 May 2009, 106–108.

Anthony Auerbach
London, 2016

Works in the exhibition

Paintings, oil on canvas

1 *Night Smoking*
50 × 40 cm, 2013

2 *Kids’ Room*
50 × 40 cm, 2009

3 Untitled
160 × 140 cm, 2015

4 *Hotel Principles*
160 × 140 cm, 2015

5 *Metatheologic Time*
50 × 40 cm, 2014

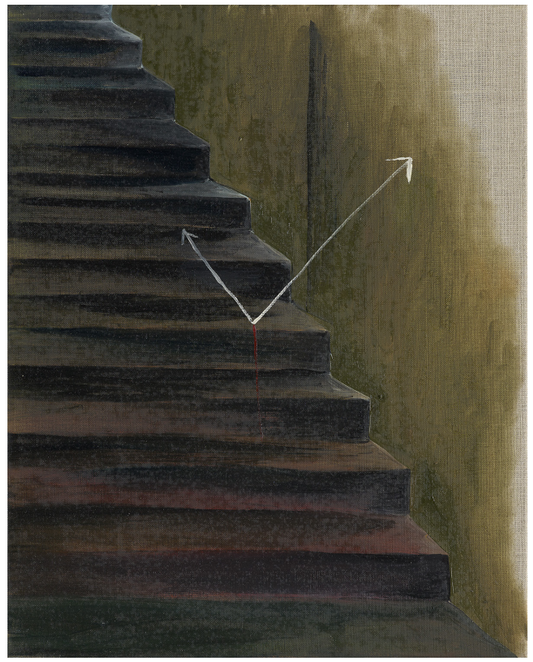
6 *Virility* and *Object Calling Me*
each 50 × 40 cm, 2011

7 *Circumcision Throne*
50 × 40 cm, 2010

8 *Butterfies Couldn’t Help*
50 × 40 cm, 2012

9 *Pawn*
160 × 120 cm, 2011

1 *Night Smoking*
2 *Kids' Room*
3 Untitled



4 *Hotel Principles*
5 *Metatheologic Time*

6 *Object Calling Me*
Virility

7 *Circumcision Throne*
8 *Butterfies Couldn't Help*

9 *Pawn*

Following pages: Appendices (photographs by Anthony Auerbach)

A The studio with *Murder of Sibel*, Gstaltmeyrgasse, Vienna, 19 August 2013
B *Nazım's Sunday Afternoon Cornucopia or Nature Morte with Abundant Fruits*, The Function Room, London, 4 October 2015

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