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Visitors to the Bozlu Art Project in Istanbul's Sisli district will rediscover Fahrelnissa Zeid's massive abstracts as well as portraits featured under the title 'Towards a Storm'

If Fahrelnissa Zeid were still alive today, she would have been 120 years old. The pioneering artist came from a family of preeminent figures.

'Her uncle was grand vizier Cevat Pasha, her elder brother was the 'Fisherman of Halicarnassus' [writer] Cevat Sakir Kabaagacı, her sister was [engraver and painter] Aliye Berger, her son was [abstract painter] Nejad Melih Devrim, her daughter was [actress] Sirin Devrim, her niece was [ceramics artist] Fureya Koral. An incredible family,' says curator Oguz Erten of Bozlu Art Project in Sisli, Istanbul, where a retrospective of her work will be shown starting September 21, 2021.

Zeid was born in Istanbul in January 1901 to a family of artists and intellectuals. She enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts for Women in 1919, and got married a year later to novelist Izzet Melih Devrim. One of their children died at a young age because of scarlet fever, but Nejad Devrim would become a painter while Shirin Devrim would become an actress.

Yahsi Baraz's monograph on Fahrelnissa Zeid accompanies the exhibition. (Courtesy of Bozlu Art Project) Zeid studied painting in Paris in 1928 and returned to Istanbul in 1929, leaving behind her figurative works for expressionist figurativism. She continued to study art at the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts.

She got divorced from her first husband and married an Iraqi Prince, Zeid bin Hussein, who was the first ambassador of the Kingdom of Iraq to Germany in 1935. In 1938 the family was recalled to Baghdad. Fahrelnissa Zeid, diagnosed with depression, would travel to Europe and Istanbul on doctor's orders. She opened her first personal exhibition in her home in Macka, Istanbul in 1945.

'She held an exhibition at her home when there were no galleries in Istanbul,' Erten says. 'Then in 1948 she had an exhibition in London, after the UK had come out of WWII, as a Turkish 'woman' artist.'

Zeid has started a workshop in Paris in the following years, and her name is mentioned alongside the School of Paris painters, exhibiting in the most important museums and galleries. Erten also mentions that 'She has been a character that has attracted attention everywhere she went with her art and her personality, and there was a major retrospective exhibition at one of the most important museums of the world, the Tate Modern in London in 2017.'

Fahrelnissa Zeid, abstract composition, 1950s, mixed media on paper, 104 x 74 cm (Courtesy of Bozlu Art Project) Erten points out that the exhibition at the Bozlu Art Project, Towards a Storm, was inspired by the book written by Yahsi Baraz, owner of Galeri Baraz and a doyen of the Turkish art scene, and edited by

enriched the exhibition with photographs and documents,' he explains.

Yahsi Baraz, art historian and gallery owner, says he has been working on the book for the last three or four years. 'But I've had this project in my mind for at least 30 years,' he tells TRT World in a phone interview.

He reminisces about a 1964 exhibition in which he saw Zeid's paintings for the first time: 'It was an extraordinary exhibition. For the first time in my life I saw canvases that large, paintings that were 2.5-3 metres long. It really impressed me. I was a first-year art student, someone who didn't know the first thing about art.'

He tells of the impression that Zeid left on him: 'Her actions, her outfits, she was out of this world. Turks were living a regular life in the 1960s. Fahrelnissa Zeid was a world-class lady.' But according to Baraz, in 1964, with the exception of a couple of artists, abstract painting was not popular, everybody painted figurative paintings. The people who were famous then were Nuri Abac, Nuri Iyem, Zeki Faik Izer, figurative painters.

Fahrelnissa Zeid, self-portrait, 1930s, pencil on paper, 19.5 x 15.5 cm (Courtesy of Bozlu Art Project) 'She was grand but her paintings created some kind of 'allergy' in people,' he says. 'They set up a visitors' log book. Visitors to the exhibition wrote in it. I went and read them while the exhibition was up. They were very negative: 'These are terrible pictures.' 'Are these paintings?!' 'These are so bad,' people wrote.'

He guffaws, and says 'If we had that visitors' book today I would have put it in my book [about Fahrelnissa Zeid]. The people who were so negative towards Zeid in 1964 surely would be embarrassed today. Their lack of foresight would be evident.'

Baraz says he saw her paintings once more at the Arab World Institute (Institut du Monde Arabe - IMA). 'IMA is a museum established with the support of 18 Arab countries to showcase both contemporary and older works. Zeid had a big exhibition there to which I went with Selim Turan, an artist friend of mine. I was awed when I saw her paintings. The exhibition hall was much nicer than what we had at the Fine Arts Academy, too. By that time, by 1990, my level of consciousness was higher so I was able to view the exhibition with a clearer vision. I wanted to bring her paintings to Turkey.'

Baraz got in touch with Zeid through her daughter Sirin Devrim, and visited her in Jordan, with the hopes of convincing the artist: 'She said 'I don't want to open an exhibition, and I have nothing for sale.'

Baraz says that within a few months, Zeid passed away, in September 1991. He visited Jordan again and met with Prince Ra'ad bin Zeid and agreed on making an exhibition. 'We bought her pictures from her family, which is a big turning point for me because I brought these paintings into Turkey. If I hadn't gone and bought them all, everyone would have bought a piece and the collection would be dispersed.'

'With the Erol Aksoy Foundation, EKAV as it is now called, in 1994, we staged a fantastic exhibition. Still she wasn't widely known, only the arts scene and the intellectuals knew about her,' Baraz notes. 'We organised another exhibition in 2000. 8:37 This exhibition was well publicised.' And in 2004 Istanbul Modern opened [Istanbul's contemporary arts museum]. They also arranged a show called Nejad Devrim and Fahrelnissa Zeid: Mother and Son.

Zeid's abstract painting Break of the Atom and Vegetal Life (1962) was sold in 2013 by Christie's in Dubai at the Jumeirah Hotel for \$2,741,000 to Turkish collector Zafer Yildirim, the largest sum ever paid for a modern Turkish artwork.

'Then there was an exhibition in 2017 at the Tate Modern which once again put her in the spotlight. Today in Turkish painting she is the most expensive artist,' he points out. 'She didn't much like publicity or extravagant events, she was an introverted lady. But she is considered a pioneer now in Turkish painting, both with the prices her works command, and also because of the avant garde nature of her work, she is at the forefront of Turkish painting.'

Fahrelnissa Zeid / Towards a Storm exhibition will be on view at the Bozlu Art Project in Istanbul's Sisli neighbourhood until October 30, 2021.

Headline and cover photographs courtesy of Yahsi Baraz archives.