



Power in a Look: Oracles and Amulets

The woman's hand holding the frame looks strong; it, and hence she, can bear the heavy frame, the weight of the culture that frames her. Mieke Bal

In new paintings, rugs, and works on paper, Isabelle Schipper and Basak Kilicbeyli complicate what it is to be perceived. Wittily exploring gender and how it is performed, embodied, and mythologized, their artworks prompt a breakdown between subject and object, active and passive, watcher and watched.

Both artists play in the archetypes that would not only mark a person as one thing or another but press them into an ideal form. Basak Kilicbeyli queers and deconstructs mythic archetypes, turning gods into objects and objects into gods in the process. Isabelle Schipper works with constructions of femininity: makeup, dolls, and arching mouths. Lipsticked girls peep out from high towers. Sometimes they melt into the architecture itself, barricading themselves in and shutting spectators out. Schipper's paintings fix the viewer with a stare that sometimes weeps and sometimes tricks. Kilicbeyli's invocation of the *nazar* or evil eye wards away the ill intent of an onlooker as much as it dazzles and adorns. This is a gaze that gazes back.

"Lookout" is a warning but also a faithful friend, a sentinel at her post, a battlement.



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In the Anatolian tradition of rug making and the weaving of symbols into a pattern that can protect one's home, loved ones, and belongings, Kilicbeyli conjures mythological beings that she imagines as guardian figures possessed of fluid identities. *Sekhmet* is the artist's portrayal of the lion-headed goddess whose domains are war, pestilence, and destruction, but also healing. Floods of color rush and river into one another, fill up into forms that congeal into a body that is monstrous, shifting, beautiful, and undefined. For Kilicbeyli, the feline goddess' rage is righteous and misunderstood; her warring answers injustices. Her eyes are all cunning. And yet she has a softness, too, a domestic or familiar kind of godliness. In a separate drawing of the goddess, Kilicbeyli presents *Sekhmet* again but this time as a black housecat ornamented with her headdress of sun rays. Her eyes stare asymmetrically, she appears to mewl a complaint.

The *Apotropaic* series takes its name from the Greek *apotrópaios*, to deflect or turn away ill omens. Each is an interpretation of the nazar, a powerful amulet which absorbs and displaces malevolent energy through its gaze. In Kilicbeyli's handling, the ancient concept of the evil eye is transfigured through further anthropomorphization: her eyes grow appendages and personalities and are layered with personal significance. *Apotropaic #2 (Baseerat)* is a creature of insight. Personifying wisdom, her eye looks through to the future with an intimate understanding of the past. Her body fluxes between masculine, feminine, and other. Her hairy arms reach for the sky. Pointed, painted fingernails speak for her flamboyance. There is something deeply endearing about this amulet-being, this protector. *Apotropaic #3 (Mahalle)* meanwhile refers to the watchful eyes of one's immediate community. It is a neighborhood of gossipers and wagging tongues, the everyday arbiters we are measured and flanked by at all times. With their crowd of pupils in vibrant blue-green-yellow, they resemble the hundred eyes of Argus the all-seeing. Nothing escapes them.

Well, we are in gender-spectacle all the time. It is in how we wear our hair, how we ornament our bodies, how we hold a gait or let a word fly. As Butler pronounces, it is this many-mantled thing we put on in the morning. Or at a different scale, it is the thing that we put ourselves toward in the constant becoming of being a body in society.¹

We are aware of the roles being played. People of color, trans people, nonbinary people, women, the gays and the queer, those "not from here," those who are divergent or disabled, any of those people who



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are outside the dominant center of white-male-cis-straight-Western-abled are most aware, excessively aware, because we must be. We watch, we signal.

Schipper and Kilicbeyli's artworks acknowledge this. The eyes in Schipper's paintings haunt the viewer, following us around the room. Their gaze turns the haunting loose on the viewer because they are so troubled by their situation, a situation we are implicated in. It is a situation that was set for them. Their sadness and disdain leaks out and stains us. In one drawing, a girl has spirals for eyes; she appears dizzied by the world. *Hourglass (Sandy)* references the idealized shape of a woman's figure and also the fact of the decay that will catch up to her. A woman's time, and therefore her beauty, and therefore her value, runs short, if the conventional narrative of femininity and its valuation is to be believed.

In *Blondie (Dancing Girls)*, a woman stares out rigidly from her frame, while vivid, dream-like afterimages of girls tread over and through her, marching hand in hand. These stick-figure girls appear to be her eyelashes turned animate. This, too, is a motif that repeats itself across paintings and mediums. A line of paper cutouts, more marching girls wearing matching frocks, dangles sweetly on the wall. Hidden in their ranks are several brides who lean forward and press their lips to one another's. The marching girls push back and forth between being the innocent toy of a child and the signal of something sinister. Are they a string of perfect, obedient girls? Do they allow difference into their ranks? Are they guardians, or chains?

Eyelids can be blinds, Schipper suggests, shuttering a room or an inner space. The architecture of the look, is, itself, a kind of protection. Not everyone is allowed in. *Face* and *Little Girl and Moon* have a false set of eyes that peer out at the viewer while their true eyes sneak a petulant look at the ceiling, watching us sidelong. Maybe they are laughing at us or rolling their eyes. But in some of the paintings, we are permitted to come nearer. In *the highest room in the tallest tower* and *Purple Tears* mirror each other in this compositionally. The woman's right eye is a window, the arc of her eyelid turning into an arch. A ladder has been left for someone to climb up and go inside. Tears cascade down into a basin of sorrow. She is lonely, after all. She's a fortress under her own guard.

From Schipper's stick-figure girls to Kilicbeyli's spiky nazars, each of the artworks in *LOOKOUT* embraces a language of mark-making that is reminiscent of a child's hand. This childish language is faux-naïf – the artists, and their artworks, are shrewd, knowing. The childishness in a mark lends directness, but it also has the power to point to something else. Drawing with yarn and scribbling with



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crayon and colored pencil into intense layers of color, Kilicbeyli's strategy of describing is playful, squirmy, and strange. Her gods and object-beings won't stay still. Their desire to change valence echoes the transformation of pubescence and adolescence; they are in-between, they are becoming. This is the virtue of queerness and its norm-breaking ability to complicate categories.

By contrast, Schipper's touch in her paintings is solemn in its nostalgia. Singsong-titled *Miss Mary Mack (Moon over Water)* is a nighttime apparition, carved from a dark ground like a child's scratchpad etching. Sometimes, the touch becomes violent. *Contusion* looks out at us with bleary eyes while mascara dribbles down her cheeks and chin. A sort of washed out rainbow is scrawled over her hair. A bruise of purple is rubbed into her brow. These femme figures are also in some state of becoming, wobbling between girlhood and womanhood, though they seem trapped in tragedy. Worse, they are all Cassandras. They see the tragedy coming.

But the brides kiss. But the gaze defends. The hair on her arms is lovely. The shimmer of her tears gleams like a beacon, inviting connection. And *Baseerat* reminds us that to possess wisdom, to possess a seer's Sight, is to possess power.

I'll leave the ponderings of Cixous here, seer that she is.

I questioned might – its use, its value; through a world of fiction and myths, ... I asked everywhere: where does your strength come from? What have you done with your power? ... I watched the 'masters' especially closely – the kings, chiefs, judges, leaders, all those I thought could have changed society; and then the 'heroes': that is to say, the persons endowed with an individual strength but without authority, those who were isolated, eccentric, the intruders ... who were at odds with the Law.²

She goes on, in this text, to imagine herself inhabiting the story of each of the mythic heroes, looking out at us through their eyes. Cixous slips into the skins of Medea, Achilles, Dido, Joan of Arc, and Samson, but still laments: "I look for myself throughout the centuries and don't see myself anywhere." She wants a place to stand, a mirror to locate herself in. She wants a love and a respect in relationship that is unafraid of difference and the inevitability of otherness. But even the heroic figures in these stories cannot give it to her; she'll need something more underhanded, more revolutionary.



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Schipper sometimes talks about the eyes in her paintings as oracles. The eyes in Kilicbeyli's nazar rugs are more than just physical parts; their seeing is their skill and their strangeness. Then what does it mean to see? What does it mean to foresee?

It is blessing and it is curse.

It runs ahead of us.

It sloughs off the ordinary. It sees past, slices through. Its seeing is a cut.

An omen. Warning.

The strength to know what others won't.

Addison Namnoun

NOTES

¹ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31.

² Cixous, Helene. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays." *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1986, pp. 63–132.