

DISPLACEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT: BANU CENNETOĞLU

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The spaces that Banu Cennetoğlu photographs have a restrictive quality to them. Her explorations of displacement and estrangement have taken her into environments of intense mental and physical isolation infused with psychological weight – detention centers, refugee camps, and abandoned buildings. The ambiguity that arises from her images adds to the mysterious nature of the sites as if confirming the deviant purpose of their social and political role in the construction of “order” and the enforcement of the law. In her artist’s book *False Witness* (2003), she focused on the notion of measuring truth and fairness. The volume opens with a list of phrases compiled from a corpus-based database that presents the word “measure” in a variety of configurations emphasizing its semantic relationship to order, ethics, and justice. Accompanying the text are thirty-two photographs shot over a period of five years that include outdoor sites in France and Ecuador as well as interior views of such places as a registration center for asylum seekers in Ter Apel, the Netherlands. The imagery, which ranges from arid landscapes to carpeted conference rooms to close-up portraits, emanates a sense of impenetrability and is occasionally obstructed by natural or man-made barriers that demark terrain between inside and outside, alluding to the vulnerable state of the immigrant or refugee.

The span of Cennetoğlu’s work goes beyond the discipline of photography into the realm of sculpture and printed matter, where she adapts methods from the fields of psychology and architecture to stage her own system of examination and interrogation. In recent years, she has sometimes displayed her photographs in cramped, dimly lit corridors that echo the claustrophobic ambiance of a prison cell, a hallway in a governmental building, or a secret passage. Taking control of the viewer’s gaze and movement, she reaffirms the emotional and physical restraints of her subjects and reproduces their sense of vulnerability for the spectator.

Stripped of any illusion of individuality, spectators must abandon their sense of autonomy and coexist in harmony with the people standing on either side of them within this artificial limbo. This play of power repeats in the installation *Determined Barbara* (2002-2004), which consists of thirty-two photographs from Banja Luka (the de facto capital of and largest city in the newly formed Republic of Srpska) and the Glamoc Valley in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From these images emerge desolate roads and off-limits sites that symbolize the displacement of the region's prewar residents whose villages have been used as training grounds for NATO's Stabilization Force (SFOR) since 1998. In an ironic twist of fate, these people – most of whom are farmers – have been denied the right to return to their land and have thus become refugees in their own country by the direct intervention of the agencies who were there to protect them. Less concerned with providing a clear narrative, Cennetoğlu constructs an experience aimed at measuring a state of mind that takes the problems of distance and apathy to their origins as each visitor is forced to walk through the unsettling hallway and negotiate a way out. As the artist has said, her work “raises questions about photography and especially the production and distribution of information.”