

Contemporary Art / Turkish

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LOT 14

TANER CEYLAN

B. 1967

1879 (FROM THE LOST PAINTING SERIES)

signed

oil on canvas

170 by 180cm.; 66 7/8 by 70 7/8 in.

Executed in 2011.

ESTIMATE ₺ 50,000 - 70,000 GBP

CATALOGUE NOTE

In this recent piece from his *Lost Painting Series*, following *1881* (2010) and *1923* (2010), the photorealist painter Taner Ceylan engages with the questions of history and Orientalism by creating yet another visual allegory. The mischievous gaze of the smoking Ottoman boy in *1881* and the homoerotic farewell scene in *1923* are followed this time by an ingenious montage of Pascal Sébah's photograph from the 1880s and Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*, 1866).

In this intricately crafted oil painting, Ceylan juxtaposes different yet related histories of artistic style and connoisseurship to trigger a rethinking of Orientalism, femininity, the veil and the gaze. Recovering and drawing together forgotten legacies and silenced voices in a brilliantly imagined new setting, Ceylan invites the viewer to look behind the veil of Orientalism and the politics of representation. Rather than offering a corrective, the artist amalgamates irony, playfulness and realism to recast Orientalism as heterogeneous and susceptible to negotiation, contestation and even subversion.

Standing in front of *L'Origine du monde*, a now well-renowned oil on canvas painted by the French artist Gustave Courbet in 1866, the veiled lady wearing a transparent white yashmak and a wrapper (*ferace*) embellished by a rather elegant stole is actually reproduced from an albumen photograph, which Ceylan relocates within his own painting. The photograph entitled *Dame turque voilée* (*Veiled Turkish Lady*) was taken by Pascal Sébah (1823-1886), the nineteenth-century Ottoman pioneer of photography, who photographed models for Osman Hamdi Bey's ambivalently Orientalist paintings, as well as for the photographic album of traditional Ottoman dress entitled the *Elbise-i Osmaniyye: Les costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873*. Sébah was also well-known for his depictions of order, prosperity and progress within a framework of Ottoman modernity as a unique, indigenous project.

Ceylan's intriguingly novel setting in which the veiled Ottoman lady poses in front of Courbet's blatantly realistic depiction of female genitalia further unsettles the politics of representation if one remembers the often neglected fact that it was Khalil Bey (1831-1879), the Egypt-born Ottoman diplomat and art collector, who commissioned from Courbet *L'Origine du monde*. The art historian Francis Haskell has shown that Khalil Bey, from the perspective of his French contemporaries, was no more than a profligate and frivolous art collector, "a prince from an Oriental tale...who remained Turkish through his lavish generosity and taste for women and gambling, but became Parisian through his wit, his elegance, his love of the theatre and the arts..." (Francis Haskell, "A Turk and His Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Paris", in: *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 5:1, 1982, p. 41) Khalil Bey's collection of more than a hundred paintings included such confrontationally realist works like *L'Origine du monde* and *Les Dormeuses* (*The Sleepers*), as well as a considerable number of works by those French painters (Chassériau, Marilhat, Gérôme, Ingres and Delacroix) who painted 'Oriental' subjects.

Revisiting Khalil Bey's complex legacy, Taner Ceylan presents a seemingly stark contrast between the two female embodiments on canvas without necessarily reproducing a rigid gendered distinction between the East and the West. In doing so, he challenges the representational status of the two bodies, as well as of the Orient and the Occident, by invoking the very multiplicity of desire in terms of both artistic gaze and taste in art patronage.

The painterly rigour and eroticism in Ceylan's art-practice have hitherto drawn on many contemporary figures of inspiration not necessarily limited to photorealists and hyperrealists. The baroque art of Caravaggio, the portraiture of Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin, and the intermedial artistic practice of David Hockney can easily be addressed in appreciating the artist's engagement with photographic embodiment. Ceylan treats the medium as *tableau vivant*: he creates a fiction, documents it as an actual photographic image and translates that fictive document onto canvas. Compared to his early homoerotic works, however, precision and mimicry in Ceylan's paintings gain a further dramatic meaning in the present work. Reframing Sébah and Courbet in such a peculiar *mise-en-scène*, the artist designs a new photograph and speculates on its documentary status as historical evidence. Thus, Taner Ceylan's brilliant masterpiece enacts an imagined photograph which could have been possibly taken but has never been.

This catalogue note is written by Cuneyt Cakırlar (University College London) and Serkan Delice (University of the Arts London).