



Berlin, 4 December 2024

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart**

Invalidenstraße 50/51, 10557 Berlin, Germany

Tue, Wed, Fri 10 am – 6 p.m., Thu 10 am – 8 pm, Sat + Sun 11 am – 6 pm

**Semiha Berksoy. Singing in Full Colour**

6 December 2024 – 11 May 2025

A special exhibition by Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

**Press preview:** Wednesday, 4 December 2024, 11 am

**Opening:** Thursday, 5 December 2024, 7 pm

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**Hamburger Bahnhof presents the first comprehensive retrospective of the renowned Turkish painter and opera singer Semiha Berksoy (1910-2004) in Germany. From 1936 to 1939, Berksoy studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin, captivating audiences with her talent. The exhibition spans over six decades of artistic creation, focusing on Berksoy's paintings and tracing her lasting connection to Berlin. It highlights central themes in her work, including her bond with her mother, painter Fatma Saime, her relationships with Turkish artists such as the poet Nazim Hikmet, iconic opera roles, and the key places and events that shaped her career. With more than 100 paintings and works on paper, as well over 150 archival documents, film excerpts, and audio recordings, the exhibition showcases Berksoy's significant influence on the cultural landscape of Turkey and beyond. This layered presentation invites visitors to explore the intersections of Berksoy's public and private selves, blending the visual, performative, and personal dimensions of her identity.**

„Semiha Berksoy. Singing in Full Colour“ at Hamburger Bahnhof opens with a dimly lit antechamber, where archival footage introduces visitors to Berksoy's life. In the center of the room is a floating screen, showing impressions of Berksoy's life. Vitrines showcase photographs and historical documents from her childhood until the 1950s, when she had become an established Opera Star in Turkey and beyond. This room sets the tone, emphasizing Berksoy's fluid identity and the constant dialogue between her personal and political worlds. The audio recordings of Berksoy's voice, her opera performances, and interviews fill the entire space, allowing her work to be experienced through multiple senses.

Visitors then enter a brightly lit, stage-like space where the exhibition itself transforms into a theatrical experience. The room is dominated by six monumental paintings, each over two meters high, dedicated to Berksoy's operatic roles—Ariadne, Salome, Tosca. These figures come to life like characters on stage, engaging the audience directly. The paintings serve as powerful representations of her self-construction, both as a performer and as a visual artist. A selection of works draws attention to Berksoy's personal connections, including a portrait of her mother, *Annem Ressam Fatma Saime [My Mother, the Painter Fatma Saime]* (1965), which was featured at this year's Venice Biennale. Also on display is a portrait of the Turkish poet and revolutionary Nâzım Hikmet, with whom Berksoy shared a complex intimate relationship. Hikmet, a political prisoner for many

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years, and Berksoy's relationship - shaped by his communist affiliations - was both personally risky and politically significant.

At the far end of the exhibition, a portrait of Semiha Berksoy as Ariadne, taken from the 1939 Berliner Musikakademie production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, is on display. This image captures Berksoy at the height of her career, marking her performance for Richard Strauss's 75th birthday in Berlin. Unfortunately, history intervened. The outbreak of World War II forced her return to Turkey, putting an abrupt end to her promising career in Europe. Towards the exhibition's conclusion, display cases present drawings from various phases of her life, alongside archival materials such as letters, personal correspondence, sketches, and official documents. These artifacts provide a rare and personal insight into the life of the artist behind the public figure.

The exhibition's structure revolves around a dynamic interplay between Berksoy's public and private selves, capturing the complexity of her artistic identity. An interdisciplinary artist, Berksoy seamlessly wove together her personal life, opera career, and painting, rejecting any attempt to categorize her work, whether as Expressionism or Fauvism. The exhibition brings to life the "Semiha-ism" that she embodied both on stage and in the intimacy of her home. More than just an opera singer or a painter, Berksoy emerges as an artist whose work transcends conventional labels, reflecting the tension between reality and art. Her legacy resists classification—she was both a pioneering force in Turkish opera and a visual artist who challenged the boundaries between different forms of expression. The exhibition's non-linear format mirrors the fragmented nature of her life, where the personal and political, the public and private, were in constant negotiation. Through this immersive approach, visitors are invited to experience Berksoy not as a static historical figure, but as a continuing force—an artist whose exploration of identity, art, and politics remains deeply relevant to this day.

Accompanying the exhibition, a catalog series edition from Hamburger Bahnhof is being published by Silvana Editoriale Milano, featuring texts by Deniz Pehlivaner Gündüz, Ayşe Güngör, and others (20 euros).

The exhibition is curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, directors of Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart. Assistant curators Emily Finkelstein and Agnes Rameder, Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart.

The Show will open in Istanbul at Istanbul Modern in early 2026.

The exhibition is supported by the Hamburger Bahnhof International Companions e.V.

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