

Semiha Berksoy: A Retrospective at Hamburger Bahnhof

Sam Bardaouil

This comprehensive exhibition on Semiha Berksoy at Hamburger Bahnhof, the first to date in Germany, presents a layered exploration of an artist who eluded simplistic categorization. More than a retrospective, it offers an immersive passage into the intersections of Berksoy's multifaceted career, where the visual, the performative, and the personal converge. Across over 100 works, including paintings and drawings, along with film footage, sound recordings, and archival documents, the exhibition is structured as a reflective space for understanding Berksoy's artistry, which defies the linearity of conventional biographical narratives.

The Antechamber: The First Encounter

The visitor's journey begins in a dimly lit antechamber, where Semiha Berksoy first comes into view through a floating screen in the center of the room, illuminated by archival footage from her life. This is not merely an introduction but a portal into the life of a woman whose identity was continuously in flux. Flanking the screen, vitrines on both sides display further archival materials, along with delicate sketches and early works on paper of an expressive style that defies categorization, reflecting her years of training under artists such as Namik İsmail and Refik Epikman.

This initial room establishes the premise that Berksoy's identity cannot be constrained within a singular frame of reference. She was an artist engaged in multiple dialogues—public and private, personal and political—continuously shaping and reshaping her self-expression.

The Stage: Performing the Self

Leaving the introspective quiet of the antechamber, visitors enter a bright, stage-like space, where the exhibition transforms into a theater of its own. The walls rise like towering set pieces, flanking the gallery as if to evoke the wings of an opera stage. Here, eight monumental paintings of Berksoy's operatic roles—Ariadne, Salome, Tosca—dominate the room. These figures do not merely illustrate her performances but embody her self-construction as both performer and creator.

The curatorial choice to present these works as stage elements rather than gallery pieces shifts the frame of reference: these are not just paintings, but avatars of a life spent in performance. The decision to bathe the room in yellow accentuates the theatricality of the space, reminding visitors that Berksoy's art is as much about the roles she played on stage as it is about the spaces in between those performances. Walking further, the visitor encounters personal portraits, notably that of Berksoy's mother in *Annem Ressam Fatma Saime* [My Mother the Painter Fatma Saime] (1965). The spiritual resonance of this piece, with its saint-like depiction of her mother, underscores a recurring theme in Berksoy's work: the persistence of memory, as rendered in the stark black line that runs through much of her oeuvre. Her mother's early death shaped Berksoy's life and art, imbuing her work with an aura of unresolved grief and longing.

The Fragmented Narrative: A Non-linear Chronology

The exhibition resists the temptation of chronology, instead opting for a thematic and stylistic grouping of works that emphasizes the fragmented nature of Berksoy's life. This curatorial approach mirrors her own experience of moving between genres and disciplines, spaces and identities. Works from different periods are juxtaposed, sometimes as diptychs or triptychs, creating a dialogue between her early operatic career, her later visual works, and the personal relationships that permeate her art.

The spatial configuration invites the visitor to engage directly with the space. As one sits on the steps, designed like an amphitheater rising among her paintings, and surrounded by Berksoy's characters, the experience becomes immersive. Audio recordings of Berksoy's voice, her operatic performances, and interviews filter through the room, creating a sensory interaction with her work.

The Third Space: Ariadne and the Return to Türkiye

At the far end of the gallery, an image of Berksoy as Ariadne from the 1939 Berlin Music Academy production of Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* draws the visitor's eye. This large-scale portrait initially appears to be a final barrier, a climactic end to the exhibition. It captures the moment when Berksoy's career reached a peak:

performing for the composer's 75th birthday in Berlin. Yet, history intervened. The Second World War forced her return to Türkiye, disrupting her ascent on the European stage. The gauze surface on which this image is printed heightens the sense of fragility, of a dream disrupted.

However, this wall is not an endpoint. As light filters through the gauze, it reveals another dimension: a deeper, more intimate space. The wall becomes transparent, revealing a film playing in the distance, projected onto a large surface, with some of Berksoy's paintings illuminated in front of it.

Behind this film, a final specter emerges: the image of Nâzım Hikmet, the Turkish poet and revolutionary, who shared an intimate, albeit fraught, relationship with Berksoy. A political prisoner for many years, Hikmet's presence is ghost-like, existing on the edges of her life and art. Their relationship, risk-laden for Berksoy due to Hikmet's communist affiliations, was one of both personal and political significance. The inclusion of his image here, revealed only in the final stages of the exhibition, speaks to the layered nature of Berksoy's identity—shaped not only by her public roles but also by the personal risks and sacrifices that defined her life.

The Reverse Perspective: Unveiling the Private

As visitors turn to exit, the back of the towering walls reveals yet another dimension of the exhibition. The theatrical front of these walls gives way to large-format black-and-white archival photographs of Semiha at different stages of her life. These images—her as a young child, a rising star, and an aging artist—trace the arch of her personal journey.

Vitrines, placed on the back of these walls, contain drawings from various chapters of her life, and archival materials: letters, personal correspondence, sketches, and official documents. These materials offer a rare glimpse into the person behind the public persona. Here, the juxtaposition is clear—the grand operatic figure contrasted with the human being behind the mask. The displayed elements highlight the fragility and contradictions that shaped her life and art, revealing a woman who, despite her public success, was continuously negotiating the boundaries between self, performance, and the demands of a fractured world.

An Interwoven Life: The Structure of Identity

The exhibition's structure is built around a powerful juxtaposition of Berksoy's public and private selves, reflecting the deep complexity of her artistic identity. She is positioned not simply as an opera singer or a painter, but as an artist whose work transcends conventional categories, embodying the tensions between reality and art.

Berksoy's legacy is one that defies classification—she was both a pioneering figure in Turkish opera and a visual artist whose work

confronts the boundaries between different forms of expression. The exhibition's non-linear format mirrors the disjunctions in her own life, where the personal and the political, the public and the private coexisted in a constant state of negotiation. Through this structure, the visitor is invited to engage with Berksoy not as a static, historical figure but as a continuing force—an artist whose negotiation of identity, art, and politics remains deeply relevant in our time.