

Semiha Berksoy. Singing in Full Color

Semiha Berksoy. Singing in Full Color is the first comprehensive retrospective in Germany dedicated to the painter and opera singer Semiha Berksoy (1910 – 2004). Throughout her life, Berksoy defied convention, seamlessly blending disciplines and leaving behind a rich and multifaceted artistic legacy.

As one of Turkey's first opera stars, Berksoy studied at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik (Music Academy) in the 1930s, returning to Turkey at the onset of World War II (1939–1945). While celebrated as a performer, she turned to painting in her late forties, developing a distinctive style characterized by bold colors and dramatic, theatrical compositions. Her work often explores recurring themes such as her devotion to family, her deep connection to opera, and her enduring ties to Berlin.

Reflecting Berksoy's life as a performer, the exhibition space is designed as a theatrical setting. Several of her large paintings are displayed like opera set pieces, while others are arranged in constellations that make the depicted figures appear as though they are characters on stage. This retrospective invites visitors to step into Semiha Berksoy's world, where the boundaries between art, life, and performance dissolve into a singular, vibrant expression.

The Early Years

Semiha Berksoy was born in 1910 into a middle-class family in Istanbul. Her mother, an amateur painter who passed away from the Spanish flu when Berksoy was just eight, had a profound influence on her. Berksoy's childhood unfolded during a time of significant change in Turkish history. In 1923, when she was 13, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) proclaimed the Republic of Turkey. Modernization became a cornerstone of the new nation, with women encouraged to play active roles in public life.

Showing an early talent for theater, Berksoy trained under the renowned Turkish actor and director Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892–1979) at the Dârülbedâyi, Istanbul's Municipal Theater. By the early 1930s, she was performing in films, plays, and operettas, quickly rising to fame. In 1934, she starred in *Özsoy*, Turkey's first opera, commissioned by Atatürk himself, marking her ascent to stardom.

A Life on Stage

By the mid-1930s, Semiha Berksoy had risen to prominence in Turkey. In 1936, she travelled to Germany to study at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik (Music Academy), where she remained for three years. Upon her return to Turkey in 1939, she starred in several operas, including *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, directed by the German actor and director Carl Ebert (1887–1980).

In 1943, Berksoy married pianist Ercüment Siyavuşoğlu (1909–1975), and in 1946, they had a daughter, Zeliha. Despite her growing family, Berksoy remained dedicated to her career, performing and travelling internationally. She gave private concerts at the Bayreuth Festival and in Vienna, among other locations. Berksoy continued to perform throughout her life, making a late stage appearance at the age of 89 in a collaboration with Robert Wilson (*1941) at New York's Lincoln Center.

Scenes from a Star's Life

This film showcases scenes from Semiha Berksoy's early theatrical career, accompanied by a recording of her 1941 performance in the opera *Tosca* in Ankara. The footage includes images of Berksoy performing as a student at the Dârülbedâyi, part of the Istanbul City Theater. The film also features clips from one of Turkey's first sound films, *Söz Bir Allah Bir (One Word, One God)* (1933), featuring Berksoy in the role of "the feminist." It was directed by Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892–1979), the head of the Dârülbedâyi. During the same period, Berksoy starred in the operetta *Lüküs Hayat (Luxurious Life)* (1933), written by the playwright Ekrem Reşit Rey (1900–1959) and composed by Cemal Reşit Rey (1904–1985).

Berksoy the Painter

Semiha Berksoy's artistic training began in the studios of the painters Refik Epikman (1902–1974) and Namık İsmail (1890–1935), both of whom had studied in Paris. She started with classical techniques, including nudes, still lifes, and self-portraits, before later exploring more abstract forms.

As her painting career developed, Berksoy often drew inspiration from her life in opera, incorporating themes from productions such as *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tosca*. Her work frequently depicted her family, including her mother, father, husband, daughter, and grandson, expressed through various styles and mediums. A recurring element in her paintings is a line bisecting her figures, symbolizing the transition between earthly existence and the afterlife.

Above all, Berksoy consistently returned to herself as a central subject. Her self-portraits, created throughout her life, reflect a profound exploration of identity and performance, capturing the many roles she inhabited both on stage and in her personal life.

Berksoy and Friends

During the early decades of the 20th century, the newly founded Republic of Turkey underwent profound cultural transformation, blending tradition with progress. Artists, writers, performers, and poets navigated the challenge of preserving cultural heritage while embracing modern forms of expression.

Semiha Berksoy was deeply engaged in Istanbul's vibrant cultural scene, frequently collaborating with prominent figures such as composer Cemal Reşit Rey (1904–1985) and his brother, playwright Ekrem Reşit Rey (1900–1959). She starred in Turkey's first sound film alongside actress Feriha Tevfik (1910–1991) and maintained lifelong connections with artists such as painter Fikret Mualla (1903–1967) and poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902–1963), of whom the latter profoundly influenced her life and work. Berksoy often honored these figures in her paintings, capturing the impact of their creative and personal relationships on her art.

A Painter in Germany

Although Semiha Berksoy left Berlin in 1939, her connection to Germany remained strong throughout her life. In her late forties, she returned to painting with renewed focus, revisiting an art form she had studied in her youth. While celebrated as an opera star in Turkey, it was primarily through her paintings that she gained recognition in Germany.

Her first international solo exhibition was held at Haus am Lützowplatz in West Berlin in 1969, earning critical acclaim before traveling to Paris. Decades later, her bedroom was displayed as an installation in the exhibition *Zeitwenden* in Bonn in 1999. In 2002, she appeared as a guest on Alfred Biolek's talk show *Boulevard Bio*. After her death in 2004, her work was featured in the exhibition *Istanbul Next Wave* at Gropius Bau in Berlin in 2009.

The Berlin Years

In 1936, German music professor Paul Lohmann (1894–1981) visited Istanbul and selected Semiha Berksoy and Saadet İkesus (1916–2007) to study at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik (Music Academy). Berksoy arrived in a Germany ruled by the fascist National Socialist Workers' Party. However, continued diplomatic ties between Turkey and Germany allowed Turkish students such as Berksoy to remain in the country and pursue their studies.

During her time in Berlin, Berksoy enjoyed a vibrant social life and gained recognition for her talent, starring in a school production of the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Her time there was cut short, however, as she was forced to return to Turkey following the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939.

In 1942, despite the ongoing war, Berksoy returned to Berlin, hoping to resume her studies at the Hochschule für Musik, but she was not readmitted. The lack of a diploma remained a lasting source of disappointment for her. Yet, despite this frustration, Berksoy maintained a lifelong connection to Germany.

The Last Years

Semiha Berksoy continued creating art and performing until the very end of her life. In 1997, she was hospitalized in Istanbul due to heart problems. During her recovery, her doctors Deniz Şener and Bingür Sönmez became recurring subjects in her notebook drawings, which also included depictions of her own frail body.

At home, Berksoy transformed her bedroom into a fantastical universe, filled with her paintings, drawings, letters, and photographs. Her final work, featured in this exhibition, was painted on a refrigerator door and depicts her last performance in Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet's (1902–1963) operetta *Bu Bir Rüya'dır (This Is a Dream)*. This piece stands as a testament to her relentless energy and creativity, even in the final chapter of her life.