

Interview with
Naz Cuguoglu on
The Letters of
Mina Harker

By Sherry
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Naz Cuguoglu is a San Francisco and Istanbul-based curator and art writer. She received her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Social Psychology from Koç University, Istanbul, and an MA in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts, San Francisco in 2023. She is currently an assistant curator at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, following positions at organizations including KADIST, the Wattis Institute, the de Young Museum, and SFMOMA. Along with co-founding the curatorial collective Collective Çukurcuma, she has curated exhibitions and programs globally at institutions such as Documenta Fifteen, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, and Red Bull Art Around Istanbul.

She curated the show *The Letters of Mina Harker* at the Berkeley Art Center, on view from January 21 to March 12, 2023, inspired by Dodie Bellamy's novel of the same name. The book focuses on the character Mina Harker from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The exhibition showcases work by Bay Area artists Dena Al-Adeeb, Sholeh Asgary, Kerri Conlon, Red Culebra (Guillermo Galindo and Cristóbal Martínez), Madeleine Fitzpatrick, Behnaz and Baharak Khaleghi, Heesoo Kwon, Tracy Ren, Chelsea Ryoko Wong, and RupyC.Tut, who use speculative fiction to create alternative worlds and give agency to Mina's character. The exhibition explores the concept of "monsters" as symbols of outsiders and uses diasporic artistic practices to construct an alternative universe with its own language. The artists come together to form a chosen family, suggesting a new narrative that celebrates the potential of speculative fiction to build alternative worlds. That, along with speculative fiction and futuristic narratives, particularly those related to the other and the alien and what they mean for diasporic and futuristic communities, are among Cuguoglu's key interests. She started to develop the concept for this show after her graduate exhibition at the Wattis Institute, *The Word for World is Forest*, which shared a symbiotic consciousness of an alternative world out of mutual care and survival, and *Under the Waqwaq Tree*, a show dealing with the story of the "other" at / (Slash).

Cuguoglu met Bellamy through the year-long research series *Dodie Bellamy Is On My Mind* at the Wattis Institute in 2019 and found her work illuminating. "It was very exciting to meet her in person during those reading sessions. She is an inspiration and we are so lucky to be in her orbit," said Cuguoglu. Bellamy visited *Under the Waqwaq Tree* at / during the preparation process and recommended *The Letters of Mina Harker* since both the book and Naz's ongoing concept have so much in common. "When I was given the opportunity to curate an exhibition at Berkeley Art

Center, I was in the middle of reading her book. I wanted to give the spotlight to Mina Harker, so that she can channel Dodie's thoughts."

The metaphorical identity clash in the book, between Dodie Bellamy and Mina Harker, really spoke to Cuguoglu. "This clash really spoke to me as an immigrant woman in the Bay Area for the last five years and made me reflect on my diasporic experience." She experiences double identities, one from home and one from the Bay, and they alternate constantly. Desire is also a key element and a connection to Bellamy's writing, which frequently addresses that subject. "I didn't want the exhibition to solely focus on the fetishization of diasporic pain but also wanted it to bring out the joy, desire, and eroticism in Dodie's book. In line with this, the exhibition experience is very tactile; Behnaz and Baharak Khaleghi's sculpture is a good example of that."

Recently, Cuguoglu has been researching Asian futurism as part of her work at the Asian Art Museum as assistant curator, specifically the absence of Asians in imagined Asian futures related to Astria Suparak's ongoing research project *Asian Futures, Without Asians* where she talks about how Asian people are absent in Hollywood futurism movies. "For example, the diasporic experiences of women and queer communities are absent in the narratives of these white male directors. It's important to give artists agency so they can create their own narratives on these imaginative futures, much like how the Berkeley Art Center show transforms into an alternative universe." In the show, Chelsea Ryoko Wong illustrates the transformation of a figure from human to butterfly, while Behnaz and Baharak Khaleghi's sculptures are otherworldly and monstrous, suggesting intimate tangible desires to question the patriarchal paradigm. Kerri Conlon built a ceiling piece that resembles an otherworldly structure that could be a tent, a butterfly, and/or a portal to another universe. At the same time, Heesoo Kwon introduces her alternative feminist religion, "Leymusoom," in her video *Leymusoom Bridge*.

The gallery space of Berkeley Art Center is quite unique, with a wooden ceiling that has a huge presence. Cuguoglu was interested in how each artist would come together to be in a dialogue in the space. The large open room gave her the opportunity to build this oasis. "I am not interested in representing each artist separately in the space. I am more interested in creating a shared narrative and opening up a space for the audience to imagine alternative worlds." When the audience enters the exhibition, Conlon's site-specific installation covers almost half of the dome, shimmering

the lights and changing the tone of the space. The audience can take different routes and create their own narratives. The intimate dark room built for Behnaz and Baharak Khaleghi's video where one person can get in and watch the video was also a very touching addition to the show.

"What I enjoyed the most was working with this roster of artists. And I felt so special and lucky to be in dialogue with them." Having Bellamy's support was also precious to her, especially since she came and did a public reading of her book. "I also appreciate Berkeley Art Center for giving space and tremendous support to guest curators and the artists." The live performance by Dena Al-Adeeb and Sholeh Asgary is about militarized displacement and bodies in protest. During the exhibition's run, a major earthquake happened in Southern Turkey and Syria, and Berkeley Art Center encouraged their audience to make donations for the devastating event. "I really appreciate the support system and the community built around Berkeley Art Center and I hope more institutions and independent art spaces follow their example."



The Letters of Mina Harker installation view. 2023, Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley. Photo by Sherry Xiang.

Sherry Xiang is a writer, researcher, and artist who is pursuing a Master's Degree in Curatorial Practice.