

MANUSCRIPT 1994

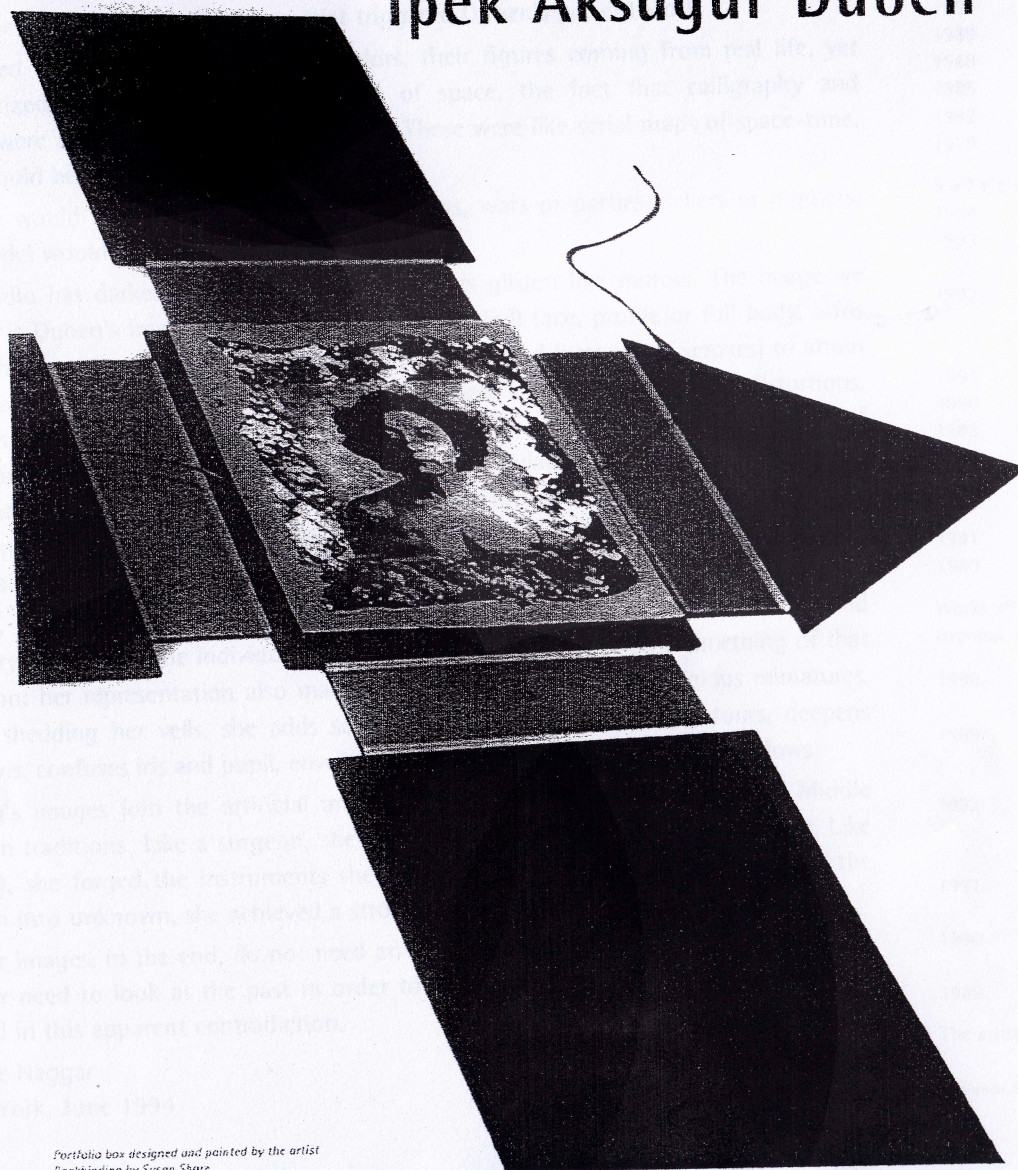
14 OCTOBER-2 NOVEMBER

ISTANBUL MUNICIPAL GALLERY

18 NOVEMBER-5 DECEMBER

ANKARA GALLERY NEV

Ipek Aksugur Duben



*Portfolio box designed and painted by the artist
Bookbinding by Susan Shore*

S c r o l l s o f t h e
F u t u r e

Carole Naggar New York, June 1994

"I say that for some mirrors have been a hieroglyph of truth in that they uncover all things presented to them, as is the custom for the truth, that cannot remain hidden. Others, on the contrary, think that mirrors are symbols of untruth, because they often show things differently from what they are."

Raphael Mirami, 1582 (Compendiosa Introductio alia prima parte de Specularia Ferrare, 1582)

The studio is filled with light. More light seems to radiate from the walls, but still I am not sure of what I am looking at. As if in an obscure place, learning a new language, I blink my eyes and make out a female body, a face, repeated at regular intervals like music notes on a score, gilded frames of gold or silver, pages of unreadable text, merely scratches etched on a surface that makes me think of polished landscape stones - agates, obsidians or marbles: they look artificial, yet they are hieroglyphs of nature. And I feel like an archeologist who just chanced upon a cache and unrolls a long scroll, slowly with respectful hands.

A hundred and fifty years ago, people who first saw faces on daguerreotypes thought that the minuscule eyes were looking back at them; such exact replicas of the world's surface, such perfect imprints, could only be linked to magic. There was a danger to them. Though in Turkey, Duben's native country, there is not the resistance to the street photographer that can be found in other Middle Eastern countries, the relationship to figure and representation is still problematic, more so if it is feminine representation. Traditional art discourages mimetic representation entirely.

So even though Turkey is a modernized, somewhat westernized country, we must remember that the influence of Islamic tradition is still strong: in that tradition, idol worship and representation are a sin, and a worse one if the female is the model. It is as though the sacred book was equaling, in some ways, women to God, establishing the same ambivalent relationship between the viewer and woman as between God and His worshipper: an oscillation between fear and idealization. A woman, the Koran says, should remain hidden from all but her husband under her veils, in just the same way that God is hidden by a thousand veils, so that His Glow will not blind the faithful, Ipek Aksugur Duben remembers walking in museums in Istanbul and Ankara, looking at nineteenth-century paintings inspired by French painters such as Gerome. She felt their awkwardness in front of the model.

This encounter might have triggered her quest and her desire to pull forward what had been repressed in her tradition, the female figure: When later she worked on her series "Sherifé", she found that her model, a peasant woman, would not sit for her Duben's next step was buying a dress, the kind that Sherifé would have worn, stuff it with cushions, and paint that archetypal "Sherifé".

Seven years ago, she reached the conclusion that the style of her work, abstract expressionism, did not correspond to her life in Turkey or to Istanbul, a city at the junction of the very old and the very new, where everything coexists side by side: "my painting" Duben says "was outside my skin."

Though proficient in the international language of art and familiar with life in the West, she understood that she had to turn back to her roots. It is her intense encounter with Turkish miniatures that triggered Duben's present work.

She loved the miniatures: their vivid colors, their figures coming from real life, yet schematized, the non-mimetic treatment of space, the fact that calligraphy and frames were as important as representation.

These were like serial maps of space-time. They would be her starting point.

But she would not paint parades or coronations, wars or parties, sellers or jugglers. The model would be herself, unveiled.

The studio has darkened. On the walls, the sheets glisten like mirrors. The image we look at is Duben's image, yet a complete stranger. Full face, profile or full body, arms erect, the images are arranged in series, often recombined (xeroxes of xeroxes) to attain an almost archetypal quality, that evokes Giacometti's statues or Kertesz's distortions. There is a repetitive, almost monotonous feeling to the series, a sense of acceptance of life's sameness. Here, time is not linear, but has circularity that reminded me of my encounters with mystical sects such as the Mevlevi, or the Bektashi, who, by repeating the

same movements (bending back and forth or whirling faster and faster) induce a mystical trance that brings them close to God.

Duben, by representing herself in the nude, opposes a tradition of subservience and modesty that denies the individual. But at the same she appropriates something of that tradition: her representation also makes us think of the Virgin in religious miniatures. While shedding her veils, she adds some, too: reproduction blurs contours, deepens shadows, confuses iris and pupil, envelops the body-in a robe of light and shadows. Duben's images join the artificial and the natural, Western techniques and Middle Eastern traditions. Like a surgeon, she stitched together her past and her vision. Like a poet, she forged the instruments she needed for her work, and thus, turning the known into unknown, she achieved a strong, almost hypnotic emotional quality. So her images, in the end, do not need an archeologist: it is of the future they speak, of our need to look at the past in order to go forward. Her whole endeavor is contained in this apparent contradiction.