

## SYNCHRONICITY, ABSTRACT SYMBOLISM AND THE USE OF VARIATIONS IN AYHAN MENTEŞ' VISUAL WORK\*



### EŞZAMANLILIK, SOYUT SEMBOLİZM VE AYHAN MENTEŞ'İN GÖRSEL ÇALIŞMASINDA VARYASYONLARIN KULLANIMI

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#### **Abstract**

The paper offers a monographic account on Turkish Cypriot artist Ayhan Menteş' experimentation with abstraction, developed parallel to his ideas on creativity, which reinterprets and appropriates ancient and Anatolian symbols through contemporary techniques and compositions. Over 60 years, Menteş accumulated a range of mythologems, collected from ancient myths and symbols, which are cleverly integrated into a distinct form of abstract symbolism based on the notions of repetition, variation and synchronicity. Among the sea of repeated subjects and symbols, the symbol of the fish is highlighted as indicative of the close affinities between Menteş' life-long interest in and exploration of the unconscious and his visual artistic production. The concept of synchronicity as discoursed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, also defined as 'meaningful coincidences', frames the paper's theoretical approach. Taking up Jung's emphasis on the significance of the simultaneity of events that are not causally linked; themes of chance, and the power of creative thought, are considered integral to Menteş' approach to life and creative processes. Menteş' work also reveals the wider reception of abstraction during the artist's student years in Turkey and later life in Cyprus.

**Keywords:** *abstract symbolism, variation, synchronicity, Turkish Cypriot art, fish imagery*

#### **Öz**

Bu makale, Kıbrıslı Türk sanatçı Ayhan Menteş'in, çağdaş teknikler ve kompozisyonlar aracılığıyla eski ve Anadolu sembollerini yeniden yorumlayan ve uygulayan yaratıcılık fikirlerine paralel olarak geliştirilen soyutlama deneyleri üzerine monografik bir açıklama sunuyor. 60 yılı aşkın bir süredir Menteş, antik mit ve sembollerden toplanan, tekrarlama, varyasyon ve eşzamanlılık kavramlarına dayanan farklı bir soyut sembolizm biçimine akıllıca entegre edilmiş bir dizi mitolog birikmiştir. Tekrarlanan

\* This paper was written based on research materials made available by the Visual Arts Archive at the Eastern Mediterranean University - Centre for Cyprus Studies (DAÜ-KAM) and with the support of the family of the artist. All reproductions that take place in this paper have been documented and provided by the Visual Arts Archive at DAÜ-KAM. The mentioned exhibition was unable to place due to a series of unfortunate events, including the death of the artist and the most recent New Covid-19 pandemic outbreak.

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denekler ve semboller denizi arasında, balığın sembolü, Menteş'in yaşam boyu bilinçsiz ve onun görsel sanatsal üretimine olan ilgisi ile keşfi arasındaki yakın yakınlığın göstergesi olarak vurgulanır. 'Anlamalı tesadüfler' olarak da tanımlanan İsviçreli psikiyatrist Carl G. Jung tarafından keşfedildiği gibi eşzamanlılık kavramı, makalenin teorik yaklaşımını çerçevelemektedir. Jung'un nedensel olarak bağlantılı olmayan olayların eşzamanlılığının önemine vurgu yapmak; şans temaları ve yaratıcı düşüncenin gücü, Menteş'in yaşama ve yaratıcı süreçlere yaklaşımının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak kabul edilir. Menteş'in çalışmaları, sanatçının Türkiye'deki öğrenci yıllarında ve Kıbrıs'ta daha sonraki daha geniş soyutlama alımını ortaya koyuyor.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Soyut sembolizm, varyasyon, eşzamanlılık, Kıbrıs Türk sanatı, balık imgesi*

### **Prelude: Meeting Ayhan Menteş**

At the edge of the ghost town of Varosha is the humble home of Ayhan Menteş, a Turkish Cypriot artist known more for his widely exhibited colourful abstract paintings and less so for his ceramic and print works that he sold in the old city of Famagusta. I met Ayhan Menteş for the first and only time on January 14, 2016 to gain an impression of the artist and his work in preparation for a comprehensive exhibition of his visual work scheduled for the following year. Menteş had been expecting the visit and seemed pleased to receive company. I shook his hand, which he took gently and with a sense of appreciation. He was a frail eighty-one-year-old, packaged in layers of warm clothes and a wool woven hat. He had prepared mugs, a pot of water ready to boil, a box of filo pastry sweets and sliced apples, browned by the wait. There were a stack of books and ephemera that stood by his chair, prepared beforehand for show and to use where necessary during our conversation. As the early afternoon stretched into late evening, Menteş shared a series of stories that seamlessly conjured one another. These stories, told in spirited detail, felt as though they had been told many times before, though perhaps not in a while. The process of archiving and preparations for the exhibition was interrupted by Menteş' deteriorating health over the course of that year, leading up to and ultimately coming to a standstill with his death on August 22.

Menteş' narrative of personal and artistic development as told by the artist himself hinges on a number of milestones from his life that came to be through what can only be described as unpredictable, yet unexplainably seemingly connected events. After the first anniversary of Menteş' passing, I resumed my research and returned to the impressions I had jotted down during and after my visit in 2016. The current text reflects the culmination of my impressions of that day, the artist and later observations on his oeuvre which are read as a series of meaningful coincidences and events.

## **Introduction**

Over the course of sixty years, Ayhan Menteş accumulated mythologems, collected from folk tales, ancient myths and symbols, frequently used in his visual works. Among the sea of repeated subject-matters and symbols, the symbol of the fish and other organic forms carry a special affinity to Menteş' lifelong interest in and exploration of the unconscious and the power of creative thought. Images of fish and aquatic life have featured in works of art for at least fourteen thousand years with early examples found in cave paintings by the Cro-Magnon people, and the tomb frescoes by ancient Egyptians. Relics of known fish images were also common among ancient civilisations around the world, and accordingly the context of their use were changed with and have been adapted to different cultural beliefs and time periods. Thus, we are able to encounter a range of images of fish and aquatic creatures as spiritual and religious symbols, superstitious totems, realistic depictions of natural habitats as well as modern investigations into the subjective life of the individual human subject. Following increased trade, industrialisation and the establishment of new public spaces such as museums and aquariums across Europe during the nineteenth century, modern artists embraced ancient motifs and symbols. The image of the fish and similar forms, consistently found in antecedent examples became a metaphor for the creative process itself in the following century, its variations being investigated in light of the modern notions of the unconscious and subconscious as fundamental to the artistic process.

The following text narrates Ayhan Menteş' artistic journey through a series of unrelated yet meaningful events, tracing recurring motifs and symbols like the image of the fish as important creative tools for his development of the variations technique which consequently led to his particular style of abstract symbolism that later became a staple characteristic of his painterly works. The text glimpses into Menteş' artistic processes, his wider interests and ambitions by means of primary resources, namely his unpublished autobiographical memoir that guide a close reading to take place of his visual works.

The concept of synchronicity as discussed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung frames the paper's theoretical approach. Jung defined synchronicity as 'meaningful coincidences': events that occur with no causal relationship yet that are meaningfully related, a discovery which came to his realisation by means of the recurring theme of the fish within the course of twenty-four hours. Jung's emphasis on the significance of the simultaneity of events that are not causally linked is juxtaposed with the themes of chance, astrology, mythology, physics and the power of creative thought, all of which are integral to Ayhan Menteş' artistic process. Though each theme is not explored individually in depth, they are considered collectively in relation to Menteş' artworks that are hinged on the appropriation and variations of symbols, including, among others, the image of the fish and other organic forms.

### Early life

Born in 1935, Ayhan Menteş grew up in the predominantly Turkish Cypriot village of Avdimou (Evdim/Düzkiye), on the south coast of Cyprus in the district of Limassol. At the age of fourteen, Menteş was sent to live with his uncle Ziya Yalazi in Ankara to continue his education at the Ankara Atatürk Lyceum. In 1950, the young Menteş whilst walking on the street caught the attention of Anne Marie Faucet, who had lost her fourteen-year-old son that same year, causing her to faint at the sight of him. Upon seeing Ayhan Menteş' hat, Mrs. Faucet, the wife of Nato Public relations manager Robert Faucet, recognized it as the same hat her son would wear daily. This uncanny resemblance between the young Menteş and Mrs. Faucet's deceased son, conjured by means of this chance encounter, turned into a meaningful relationship between the couple and Menteş. During Menteş' student years in Ankara, the couple nurtured and supported his love for books and reading. Anne Marie Faucet recognised Menteş' interest and ability in art, and encouraged him to study art history. The significance of this encounter would later embed itself in the accumulation of Menteş' everlasting curiosity and thirst for knowledge and learning through books and travel.

In the early 1950s, Menteş made several portraits in pencil, pastels and watercolours; including self-portraits, portraits of young children and girls in folkloric uniform. In a portrait dated July 1953, we see a young man that can be identified as an autoportrait of Menteş (Figure 1). The pencil drawing coloured with pastel tones and watercolour depicts Menteş, who was eighteen at the time, with a content yet demure expression. Another portrait drawing made with soft pastels on paper represents a figure that resembles Menteş at a younger age, circa 1950-1952, while he was a student in Ankara (Figure 2). The figure is wearing a high collar pink sweater vest, the thick texture of the yarn emphasized by the short hard strikes of



**Figure 1.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, 1953, Lead pencil and watercolour on cardboard, 18x25 cm.



**Figure 2.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Pastel on colourful cardboard, 35x50 cm.

colour. Seated, figure presses his lips with an expressive look that denotes teenage angst and apprehension, whilst the lines that form the facial features are less assured. Menteş would continue to make portraits of his family, friends, and of children later in life. The human figure, notably the figure of the villager and women subjects in traditional dress, would continue to be featured in his work even after abstract symbolism would seemingly dominate his artistic interest and production.

In his unpublished autobiography, *Ayhan Menteş: Story of My Life*, Menteş marks his last year of school in Ankara (1953-1954) as a pivotal time that he believed would determine his success for the years to follow. In the final months of school before graduation, Menteş recalls studying furiously in order to attain good grades for a chance to continue onto Higher Education. However, Menteş' family in Ankara could no longer sustain his stay. At the time, Menteş was unable to obtain a working permit, and therefore returned to Cyprus after his graduation. Determined to earn a scholarship, he actively pursued his dreams of traveling and studying abroad by enrolling in evening English language and literature classes at the British Institute. The books, short stories, poetry as well as biographical excerpts of famous artists he read and translated during these classes would fill the lessons he would teach years later at the Namik Kemal Lyceum in Famagusta and the Eastern Mediterranean University. The year 1954 would become a milestone for Menteş for several reasons, beginning with the first exhibition of his works at a secondary school in Limassol. The exhibition was visited by artists Fay and Robin Pearce, a couple who had a broad knowledge of art and culture. Like the chance encounter with the Faucets, Menteş' meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Pearce would result in their encouragement and support of Menteş in realising his dreams of continuing his education abroad, obtaining a scholarship and travelling. The Pearces shared their stories and experiences of travelling through Africa, showing Menteş photographs of tribal paintings and sculptures with vibrant colours and compositions which would later feature in his paintings.

In 1956, with the encouragement of Cypriot artist Stelios Votsis, Menteş entered the general certificate of education (GCE) exams to study at the Omorphou Teacher's college to gain a teaching certificate with the ultimate goal of entering the London University for Education with which it was affiliated. In his autobiography, Menteş describes going to the Polemidia village nearby, sitting at the local cafe and drawing villagers.<sup>1</sup> Menteş often drew from life, recording surroundings and portraits of people in quick sketches. Menteş would continue this practice many years later in other villages near Limassol. At the age of eleven, Emin Çizenel<sup>2</sup> recalls watching Menteş in his local village cafe in Malia, where Menteş would visit his then fiance Ayten Asım. In 1958, Menteş had completed his teacher's training and was about to embark on a new journey

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1 Menteş, n.d: 22.

2 Emin Çizenel is one of the most widely recognised living Turkish Cypriot artist to this day. His works have been exhibited nationally and internationally. For further information see Artist's Webpage: Çizenel, n.d.

as an artist, inspiring young creative minds like Çizenel, who a decade later would find his way to the Istanbul State Fine Arts Academy and mark his place in the art world with commendation. That year, Menteş returned to Ankara to study at the Gazi Teacher Training Institute until 1961.

### **Interest in abstract art and use of variations**

At the Gazi Institute, Menteş trained under leading Turkish artists like Refik Epikman, Adnan Turani, and Şinasi Barutcu. In the 1950s and 1960s, some Turkish artists, especially those who experimented with abstract tendencies had taken up a more autonomous approach to expression. By the 1970s, non-figurative practices have led to artworks that combine the artists' imaginary with an inward exploration of subjective experience.<sup>3</sup> Although Turkish art was responding to the western expansion of the definition of art in post-medium practices, art education followed more stringent training methods that focused on attaining formal and technical skills. Menteş writes of the resistance he encountered against his experiments in abstract painting while training at Gazi:

During my second year I began painting my abstract pictures. But my drawing teacher was furious. He insisted that I must have a good drawing from nude modelling first. But I [felt] that I had to do some abstract paintings. I felt a great urge in this direction. Art was the expression of the inner self. And I went on to paint even bigger pictures.<sup>4</sup>

Against the advice of his instructors, Menteş followed his desire to experiment with expressive modes of production and abstract painting. The reactions to Menteş taking liberties in painting, however, is less a reflection of the instructors' outlook or outdated approach to art production than evidence of the rigid education structure. Adnan Turani, who trained in different parts of Germany during the 1950s, was an abstract painter himself, and one of Menteş' instructors who expressed appreciation for his innovative experiments with expressionism and abstraction. Regardless, this recognition and merit did not translate into Menteş's evaluation as a student:

One day I was working on a semi-abstract work in the class. The teachers praised it by saying that it was a work of art. Later, they graded it as two out of ten. Ali (Atakan) protested before I could. He stood up and called them to account by saying "when you previously saw this work, you praised it to the skies and said well-done, and now, you give it a two. Would you grade it as minus two had you thought it was mediocre?"<sup>5</sup>

While Menteş' abstract paintings date back to his training at Gazi Institute, his interest in abstract painting started several years prior, during his last year in Ankara

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3 Yıldız, 2008.; 23.

4 Menteş, n.d: 60.

5 Menteş, 2010, 122.

as a schoolboy around 1953-1954. Menteş recalls frequently visiting a local stand that sold magazines by his lyceum and coming across reproductions of abstract paintings by chance:

We had a man [in an alleyway] by our school who sold old foreign language magazines. One day I found there a portfolio of abstract paintings. Among them there was a reproduction by Willi Baumeister. I loved it deeply, because it had very good composition... I bargained with the man and he gave it to me at a fair price.<sup>6</sup>

The encounter with abstraction and Baumeister's visual composition had a profound and lasting impression on the young Menteş, one could say becoming a pivotal moment in his aspirations as an artist. Willi Baumeister, who was closely associated with well-known artists like Oskar Kokoschka, Fernand Leger, Paul Klee and Le Corbusier, exhibited his work widely during his lifetime. The publication bought and discussed by Menteş is 'The Studio', a popular illustrated art magazine published in England between the years 1893 and 1964. The dissemination of well-known works by Baumeister would have continued and possibly become even more popular after his death in 1955. Although we do not know the particular work Menteş is referring to, it is likely that he would have encountered Baumeister's abstract work of the late 1930s or early 1940s, rather than his work of the constructivist period in the 1920s. Menteş identifies composition as his primary interest in Baumeister's work, a feature that is integral to the creative process. Composition, the nature in which things are arranged and configured, enters Menteş' creative process as a central concern early on and continues to be a formative quality throughout his experimentation with symbolic variations. In *The Unknown in Art* (1947), Baumeister wrote about the artist's relation to the process of creation in terms of a 'self-engendered vision':

Even when the artist carves or paints, moved by an incomparable act of volition and in full consciousness of his action, he will welcome the surprise that develops in his hand. Trusting in simple existence, he possesses the intensity that assures consistency and leads him along a path without compromise. Because he does not comply with a tangible model, and believing in the pre-existence of his work, he can create original, unique, artistic values.<sup>7</sup>

The act of making, described by Baumeister, combines the elements of knowledge (conscious volition) and chance (creative rendering) which are blended in the psyche of the artist that collects and makes use of various symbols and patterns. This entails the artist actively using his power in his willing harmony with openly and passively welcoming elements of unexpected and uncontrolled surprises. The harmony between the use of known symbols and its automatist variations is developed over the course of

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6 Menteş, n.d: 10.

7 Baumeister, 2012, 53.



Menteş' artistic career and is especially recognisable in his later paintings that literally combined both active and passive faculties in the process of creation. In a painting dated 1988/95 (Figure 3), a highly composed and colourful combination of abstract symbols are arranged and painted in acrylic on cardboard.



**Figure 3.**

Ayhan Menteş,  
*Sevgi ve Birlik*  
(*Love and Unity*),  
1988/1995, Acrylic  
on cardboard,  
57x43 cm.

The painting titled *Sevgi ve Birlik* (Love and Unity) is one example of the many paintings Menteş re-worked from sketches or drawings, taking an older drawing and repainting it to create a new work, hence each date referring to the original date of creation and secondary intervention. This approach to making and re-using existing images at different times can be seen in other examples where Menteş would laser print pastel sketches on canvas and paint over these in acrylics. These automatic scribbles of known symbols are used as an under drawing and painted over in carefully selected colours, reconstructing the image in a highly controlled and contrived manner.

Menteş' interest in and use of ancient and Anatolian symbols can be traced back to the mid-1950s, around the same time he became interested in abstract art. Menteş frequently visited the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations, previously known as the Hittite Museum in Ankara. The museum was formed to house a large collection of artefacts uncovered at excavations started in the 1910s by a German archaeology team in Alacahöyük. The excavations continued throughout the decade up to the founding of the Republic of Turkey and was supported and personally funded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was keen on forming a museum of excavated artefacts. Interested in understanding ancient civilisations, Menteş examined symbols that were central to the representation of the collective identity of a nation. The sun disc in particular, the symbol of the Hittite Empire, became one of the first symbols Menteş would use as part of his exploration of abstract symbolism.

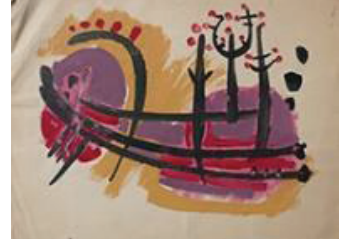




**Figure 4.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, 1959, Gouache on paper, 30,5x21 cm.



**Figure 5.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, 1960, Acrylic on paper, unknown dimensions.



**Figure 6.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Acrylic on paper, 23x31.5 cm.

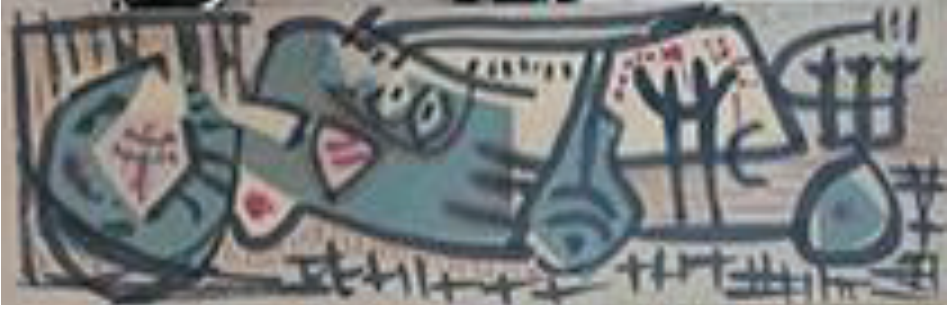
Abstract symbolism, a form of art that combines abstracted designs taken from real or imagined things, makes use of symbols which provide meaning or significance. Observing symbols and their meanings at the Hittite Museum, Menteş started building a vocabulary which he would appropriate in his paintings for years to come. Menteş marked his interest in ancient civilisations as “the beginning of abstraction in [his] work,”<sup>8</sup> which he would continue to research several years later completing his undergraduate thesis on the subject of Hittite Art and Civilisations. The shape of the sun disc, as observed in the Hittite Museum as well as in books on Alacahöyük by archaeologist Hamit Zübeyir Koşar from his excavations in Hattusha made a lasting impression on Menteş. The various incarnations of the image of the sun disc through the region and at different times ignited a curiosity in Menteş, leading him to discover the significance of variations for the act of creativity:

In this [book] I saw many shapes of sun discs. So I realized that to produce variations was a way leading to creativity... I would design variations of a theme or a motive; this gave great satisfaction to me. In order to find all aspects of variations, sometimes I would use transparent paper and draw variations on them.<sup>9</sup>

One of the earliest known examples of the sun disc imagery can be seen in a small painting made in 1959 (Figure 4). The circular form covers the right side of the rectangular page as the horn-like protrusions dominate the left. The meaning of the circular disc varies from representing the earth or sun, whilst the symbols on the left which are often found at the top of the disc are known to represent fertility, procreation and the freedom of nature. The artist’s signature at the bottom right corner suggests the image is to be viewed horizontally, whilst the symbol of the sun disc can also be read vertically. Similar variations of this symbol can be seen in the works done on paper and cardboard roughly on the same scale as in Figures 5 and 6.

8 Menteş, n.d: 19.

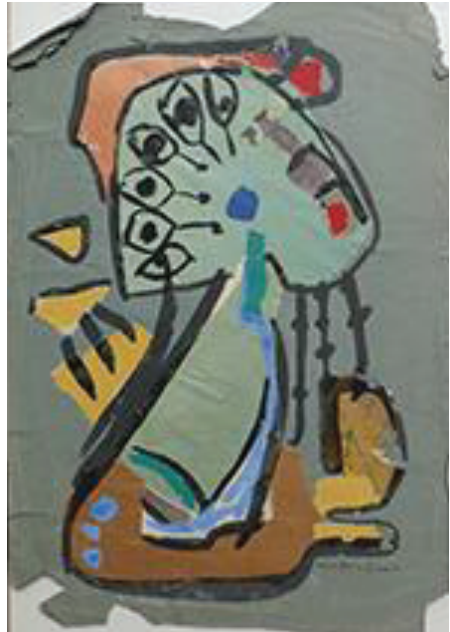
9 Menteş, n.d: 19.



**Figure 7.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, 1960, Collage on cardboard, unknown dimensions.

Another one of Menteş' earliest known and dated abstract works is on a small oblong-shaped cardboard made in 1960 whilst studying at the Gazi Institute (Figure 7). Symbolic motifs are evenly distributed across the image, composed of simple brush strokes, using a few fluorescent colours. Blocks of aqua blue, boldly outlined by lines of grey, create impressions of abstracted forms, combined with wedge-shaped marks that resemble ancient scripture, such as later abstracted cuneiform used to write in the Hittite language. Touches of fuchsia and orange pop against backgrounds of blue, white and light grey. The composition, in comparison to Menteş' later acrylic paintings, appear much more fluid and could be identified as a quick sketch. In an almost automatic manner, one can imagine Menteş first applying blocks of the aqua blue and white and then using these to form shapes by swiftly outlining the silhouettes with the darker shades of grey. Other works of the same scale, made on found materials like cardboard or wrapping paper, date back to this period and feature similar characteristics of experimenting with blocks of colour accompanied by darker lines.

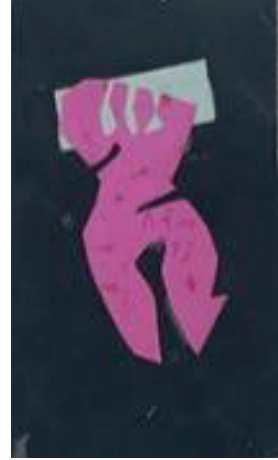
On a frail blue cardboard surface, the imagery of the disc is transformed into an anthropomorphic form standing upright. The collage titled *Sevgiye giden Sezgi* [Intuition that Leads to Love] (Figure 8) is composed of different papers such as brown pouch paper and coloured pages from magazines. The pieces of paper, some torn by hand and others carefully cut out, are arranged on the surface to form a composition. The composition is then outlined and painted over, redefining



**Figure 8.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Collage on blue cardboard, 35x25 cm.



**Figure 9.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Pastel on cardboard, 50x35 cm.



**Figure 10.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Collage on cardboard, unknown dimensions.

the motif in black bold lines. Menteş' use of symbols in compounds interweaves the signs with associated intuitions, emotion and sensorial experience, building a vocabulary that recalls Henri Matisse's portfolio *Themes and Variations* completed in 1943. In his introductory essay to Matisse's portfolio, Louis Aragon quoted a statement made by the artist during their conversation the year prior to the publication:

The importance of an artist is to be measured by the number of new signs he has introduced into the language of art... it was absolutely necessary that I prepare, by the search of signs, for a new development in my life as a painter.<sup>10</sup>

The drawings which would be ground breaking for Matisse was the beginning of Matisse's use of signs, or what Matisse would later describe as 'plastic signs'. These (plastic) signs allowed Matisse to search for a new kind of pictorial space and questions concerning the rapport between drawing and colour, between the world of material reality and the artist's inner mental reality. In Menteş' early abstract work, his use of colour can be loosely related to an exploration of pictorial space; creating flat compartments and clusters in which symbols and colours play together and against one another. Significantly, Menteş' interest in Matisse's work and his exploration of the object in relation to its presence and variations in reality can be seen in several works Menteş made as homage to Matisse's cut outs and colourful compositions (Figures 9 and 10).

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10 Aragon, 1943, 3.

Menteş' curiosity and interest towards diverse cultures and artists over the years throughout his college education and artistic training would lay the groundwork for the type of work he would create over the course of the next four decades. Graduating from the Gazi Institute, Mentesh returned to Cyprus, began teaching at the Bekir Pasha Lyceum in Larnaca and started a family with his wife Ayten. Mentesh continued to create and show work through the tumultuous years of 1963-1964, all the while holding on to his dream of travelling and continuing learning abroad, which would come true in 1969.

### **Knowledge and the power of creative thought**

In 1969, after several years of postponement, Mentesh was awarded a scholarship to study at the London University in England. Over the course of that year, Mentesh travelled to continental Europe, visiting museums and galleries in Paris, Brussels, Munich, and Vienna, studying and observing western masters like Matisse, Picasso and Klimt firsthand. Mentesh had experimented with different mediums, such as ceramics and printmaking as early as the 1950s whilst working at the King Richard School in the village of Prodromos in Cyprus. During his travels, Mentesh observed how artists used familiar and conventional materials such as paper and clay to form collages and ceramics in unconventional and innovative ways. Picasso in particular, who famously started creating ceramic works at the end of the 1940s and continued this until his death in 1973, drew Mentesh' attention with his simple utilitarian objects, such as plates and bowls, and later more ambitious forms, such as pitchers and vases. Several ceramic objects Mentesh made in the 1970s and 1980s, including plates and pitchers that imitate Picasso's forms with the image of the fish, can be observed as Mentesh' homage to the artist (Figure 11 and 12).

Menteş' ideas on the use of variations can be observed to spill into the application and appropriation of style and forms in different mediums like ceramic and printmaking. Known for combining Anatolian motifs with modern techniques and styles, Turkish artist Bedri Rahmi Eyyüpoğlu's mosaic wall *Mavi Yolculuk* (Blue Voyage) (1958) and series of prints on fabric titled *Yazma* (Manuscript) (1959) are contemporaneous examples that drew Mentesh' interest and admiration. Commenting on Bedri Rahmi Eyyüpoğlu's dedication to Anatolian motifs, mythology and iconography, Ömer Faruk Şerifoğlu notes that "even as [Behri Rahmi] is looking at Picasso or Matisse during his years of youth in Paris, his heart is set on Anatolia; he is eager to incorporate colour and structure he learns from these paintings with Anatolia."<sup>11</sup> Taking both Picasso and Bedri Rahmi as inspiration, Mentesh seamlessly worked with the image of the fish and other Anatolian motifs through different media, making sketches (Figure 13) and using ready found photocopied images of hieroglyphics, depictions of fish and other symbols from books and transferring them onto lino prints (Figure 14) as well as three-dimensional sculptures (Figure 15) and ceramic plates.

In September 1970, Mentesh showed a number of works he produced throughout the year at the Pisces Gallery in London, significantly named after the astrological sign

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11 Pehlivaner, 2019, 74.



◀ **Figure 11.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Baked clay, 18x2.5 cm.



▶ **Figure 12.** Ayhan Menteş, *Design 74*, Undated, Baked clay, 22x3 cm.



**Figure 13.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, 1991, Pastel and gouache on print, 50x70 cm.



**Figure 14.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Embossed print on cardboard, 50x70 cm.



**Figure 15.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Baked clay, 12x20x10 cm.

that is represented by the emblem of the fish. That same year, Menteş writes about visiting his lecturer Dr. Brend to discuss the Salvador Dali and Picasso exhibitions he viewed in London. After a discussion on the meaning and premise of ‘creativity’, Menteş recalls a quotation Dr. Brend shared with him that day, taken from a book about Albert Einstein: “While knowledge limits us, imagination gives endless scope for development.”<sup>12</sup> The quote, which made a considerable impression on Menteş, is most likely in reference to Einstein’s widely quoted statement “imagination is more important than knowledge”, inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the many philosophers Einstein was inspired by and widely read.<sup>13</sup>

Menteş’ interests extended into the realms of physics, anthropology and psychology as well as the cross-pollinations and connections between such disciplines and art. As an extension of his interest in creativity, he was familiar with studies on the unconscious, particularly the writings of psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung. In 1913, Jung initiated a process of self-experimentation, which he called the ‘active imagination’; this process involved noting down his fantasies in private journals. Jung’s journals, known as

12 Menteş, n.d: 79.

13 Malik, 2019.



the *Black Books*, were edited and compiled in the *Red Book* (Liber Novus), where Jung made some of the first references to the notion of ‘synchronicity’, a principle which was to become a key for two of his most notorious concepts: archetypes and the collective unconscious. Jung defined the concept of synchronicity as ‘meaningful coincidences’, a concept he used to characterise the significance of the simultaneity of events that could not be causally linked, giving examples of the I Ching, the coincidences in Chinese and European periods of style and astrology. With the collaboration of Wolfgang Pauli, Jung published *The Interpretation of Nature and the Psyche*, in which they attempted to reform the conception of the physical universe and its interdependence with the human psyche. With the idea of synchronicity, Jung sought to make the exploration of such experiences more credible, somewhat scientific, and to move it away from the stigma around the pseudo-realms of fantasy, magic and superstition.

Jung had been tampering with the concept of synchronicity as early as the 1910s, discussing it with Albert Einstein before the First World War, although he developed it much later in 1951, publishing the book *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* the following year. In a letter to Carl Seelig, dated February 25, 1953, Jung writes of getting to know Einstein through one of his pupils, and inviting Einstein as his guest on several occasions at dinner. Jung writes about his initial response to hearing Einstein talk about the elements of his first theory of relativity: “As non-mathematicians, we psychiatrists had difficulty in following his argument. Even so, I understood enough to form a powerful impression of him.”<sup>14</sup> Jung writes that it was Einstein that inspired him to think about a possible relativity of time as well as space and psychic conditionality. This stimulus eventually led to Jung’s thesis on psychic synchronicity. Jung’s theory is in part an exploration of the individual in relation to the universal, as well as an attempt to bring the theory of synchronicity as an extension the paranormal within the bounds of intelligibility. Over the course of several years, Menteş ferments his approach to and understanding of creativity and attempts a similar feat by dissecting and reconstructing basic art elements in different variations. In an undated sketchbook, we can observe a visual mapping of this process (Figure 16). Here, Menteş engineers an algorithm of successful production, marking the steps and possible variations of forms and symbols.

Several years later, after he settled back in Cyprus in the early 1970s, Menteş became involved with local art associations, and began writing on the topic of creativity and the power of creative thought. These concepts would remain one of the central occupations of Menteş’s artistic career, thinking through, establishing and practicing its tenets, as well as publishing on the subject in art journals and newspapers during the 1980s and 1990s. In his short article *Düşünen İnsan – Yaratıcı Düşünce* (Thinking Human – Creative Thinking) (1999), Menteş considers the human brain as humanity’s most important asset, described as “your built-in success mechanism.”<sup>15</sup> Listing a number of traits and

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14 Jung, 1976, 108-109.

15 Menteş, 1999, 18.



habits one can practice, the article can be read as a self-improvement guide, a number of which he followed himself and aspired to. In the first issue of the same publication, Menteş writes about cultural wealth: “We cannot predict the future; however, if we manage to arrange our education, relationships and time according to our goals, we can be better equipped to welcome the future.”<sup>16</sup> As if responding to Jung’s question “What will the future bring?” in the opening paragraph of *The Undiscovered Self*, Menteş highlights that human effort and aims can be made attainable by shaping our lives and surrounding ourselves with things that will help us reach set goals, such as using new technologies, expanding our knowledge of different cultures and immersing ourselves in our natural instincts. For Menteş, education and understanding different languages and cultures is central to this: “we should place significance to foreign language education to familiarize ourselves with the important works of other cultures to lead high-level cultural lives.”<sup>17</sup> Menteş made the most of his time in England and Europe, taking in all stimuli, not only in art museums and galleries but the wider visual world and culture available to him.

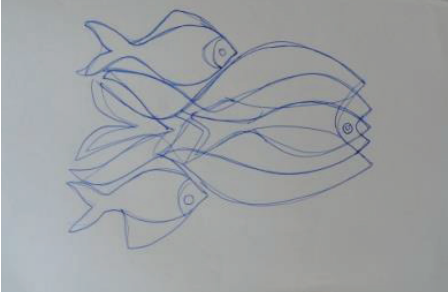


**Figure 16.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, unknown dimensions.

Prior to his move back to Cyprus in 1970, in addition to museums and art galleries, Menteş visited the Trocadero Aquarium in Paris with his wife Ayten during her visit in May, and encountered a magical world of colour and movement. A broad range of sketches and drawings of fish in different mediums, including prints, coloured photocopies, sketches in books and on loose-leaf papers may be dated to this period (Figure 17). These can be observed as Menteş’ growing interest in the image of the fish. During this period, Menteş produced a large number of scientific drawings by observing various fishes and added the booklet *Aquarium World* to his library. He experimented with singular fish drawings in different compositions and carried the image of fish to

16 Menteş, 1999, 18. Also see Menteş, 2001, 15-19.

17 Menteş, 1985, 4.



**Figure 17.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, unknown dimensions.



**Figure 18.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Gouache on colourful paper, 38x56 cm.

print and acrylic paintings through realistic representations to gradual abstraction. In an undated gouache painting on paper, a blue platter of three fish are centred against a backdrop formed of flat blocks of colour (Figure 18). The tones of blue, grey and ash fade into pale background as the magenta fish pops to the fore. The image of fish centred against a blue background recalls Paul Klee's *Around the Fish* (1926), known for its symbolism and allusions to human consciousness. Klee believed his personal hieroglyphs and figurative elements had wide connotations: "The object grows beyond its appearance through our knowledge of its inner being, through the knowledge that the thing is more than its outward aspect suggests."<sup>18</sup> In another undated series of drawings, the form of the fish is taken as base and is integrated into abstracted sketches (Figure 19 and 20).



**Figure 19.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Pastel on cardboard, 52x32cm.



**Figure 20.** Ayhan Menteş, *Untitled*, Undated, Pastel on cardboard, 52x32cm.

Together with the canonisation of theories on the human psyche, twentieth century artists drew inspiration from ancient symbols and myths, including the image of the fish, as metaphor for these newly established terrains. Yet, most of all, these artists' fascination with the image of the fish centered on the associated symbolism with the unconscious, which was most often sexual, intuitive and therefore uncontrollable. Modern artists and movements, notably dada and surrealism, embraced all sources and

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18 Moyle & Moyle, 1991, 16-17. Also see Museum of Modern Art Webpage, 2020.

methods for exploring the unconscious, and championed these seemingly taboo subjects. Famously, Klee had an aquarium in his house and was fascinated by the movement of his fish in three dimensions. Klee would discuss the aquarium with his students and make it the subject for several paintings through the 1920s.

Although keeping fish can be traced all the way back to around 4 BC, to Lykia, the aquarium, as we know it today, is an entirely modern invention that was developed in nineteenth century. The people of Lykia, a region southwest of modern-day Turkey, apparently played flutes to lure fish, known as Holy Fish or oracular fish to the surface of the water of ponds to ask them questions about the future.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, centuries later the symbolism of the fish representing the unknown or unreachable can be seen in the nineteenth-century imagination. Aquariums gave the already vivacious imagination of the nineteenth century a visual palette with which to paint endless stories and images. Up until the eighteenth century, human knowledge and images of the animal kingdom was almost entirely dominated by land animals, and human understanding of the ocean was formed by narratives inspired by ancient myths and sailors' anecdotes, which had deemed it a place of fear and of the unknown. Publications of illustrated natural science books and magazines such as *The Garden House*, which Gosse co-founded in 1853, led to a wider knowledge and curiosity of aquatic life, inspiring a generation of writers, poets and artists. *The Garden House* declared the invention of the aquarium tank as a way in which humans conquered the once feared and taboo ocean: "the tyrannical, omnipotent, ungovernable ocean floods onto our tables as the never-ending source of joy of our gatherings and our loneliness. We don't even have to wet our feet or sacrifice the usual tribute from our stomach."<sup>20</sup> Tracing the history of the development of the aquarium, Bernard Brunner writes about it as a unique invention that brought the ocean into the home: "people were confronted with a strange new world filled with amazing creatures and exciting new life-forms."<sup>21</sup> Jeanne Villepreux-Power invented the first recognizable glass aquarium in 1832. However, it was in the works of British naturalist Philip Gosse that the term first took on its modern meaning as a vessel in which aquatic animals, as well as plants, can be held.

In the same year that *The Garden House* was printed, display aquariums were opened to the public. The first at Regent's Park in London was quickly followed by aquariums in Berlin, Naples, and Paris and later at the American Museum in New York City. In these large public aquariums efforts were made to create the illusion that the spectator was entering into the underwater world. Such displays were not easily viewed or experienced by the public. German doctor and natural scientist Gustav Jäger noted that he often observed visitors visibly struggling to orient themselves in such unconventional and new settings: "I have witnessed cases in which educated individuals after long periods

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19 Brunner, 2005, 21.

20 Brunner, 2005, 60.

21 Brunner, 2005, 7.

of moving from one tank to the next walked out and asked the ticket officer angrily; ‘what in heaven’s name am I actually supposed to see in here?’”<sup>22</sup> Referring to these viewers’ confusion and inhibitions to fight against their conventional beliefs of what constitutes a public viewing space (cabinets of curiosities, museum and morgues often containing static objects), Jäger’s description of first time visitors are likened to fish out of water: “the first time visitor to an aquarium strolls around searching and contemplating... his curiosity is so great that he can hardly enjoy the moment; I am sorry, but he looks so helpless, as if he has suddenly found himself among people whose language he neither speaks nor understands.”<sup>23</sup>

Together with the formation of new public spaces in the nineteenth century, the Euclidean world of sensibility, symmetry and rationality known and delicately peaked during the Renaissance had been shattered, introducing new systems of thinking about the world. A curious parallel can be drawn between the reception of the nineteenth-century aquariums and twentieth-century modern painting, where viewers experienced a similar sense of unfamiliarity and bewilderment. Jäger’s description of first time visitors are akin to viewer’s confusion and disappointment seeing Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket*, Cezanne’s landscapes of L’Estaque, or Monet’s *Haystacks* series, Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* and the list goes on. Such reactions and the reception of modern art, especially of abstract painting, are perhaps best captured in Ad Reinhardt’s satirical cartoons that play on the notions of perception and understanding. By composing paintings and art objects that had no logical consistency and no easy interpretation, modern art permanently changed the fundamental dictum that art had to be understood. With modern painting came new perspectives of looking and thinking about the world; “once people began to see space in non-Euclidean ways, they could begin to think about it in new ways too.”<sup>24</sup> The introduction of the notion of time in painting through colour and serial processes assisted this transformative expansion of the capacity of visual representation. Menteş’ early experiments with abstraction, developed by means of his approach to and ideas on creativity can be considered as a significant Turkish Cypriot example of this current; seeking to explore, reinterpret and appropriate ancient and Anatolian symbols through contemporary techniques and compositions. Similarly, Menteş abstracts the fish symbol in his visual works and enters the complex terrain of the history of abstract art.

### **Reception of Menteş and his work**

Over the span of his prolific career, Menteş’ artistic oeuvre comprises over a thousand works on paper, hundreds of acrylic paintings, and a sizable collection of three-dimensional objects. Exhibiting his works as early as 1954, Menteş entered a more regular cycle of production and display during the late 1980s and 1990s. This coincides with the

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22 Brunner, 2005, 8.

23 Brunner, 2005, 7.

24 Shlain, 1991, 118.

'golden age' of Turkish Cypriot art; the long decade in which a series of regular events and activities were organised with individual and collective efforts. The dynamic decade was ignited further by the inauguration of the Ataturk Cultural Centre in 1984, becoming the first dedicated cultural centre in Nicosia. Among this wave of activity, the following year Ayhan Menteş had his first retrospective exhibition at the Ataturk Cultural Centre which gathered early works dated back to his years in training together with later, more contemporaneous works. The exhibition became the most comprehensive retrospective of the artist's oeuvre, showcasing over seventy paintings alongside lino prints and ceramics. The exhibition, simply titled 'Ayhan Menteş Resim Sergisi' (Ayhan Menteş painting exhibition) received attention in newspapers as well as being featured in the second issue of the periodical *Kültür Sanat Dergisi* in February 1986: "since the years of studentship, we pursued all the new understandings around figures, embarking on quests for abstract forms and more recently, print try-outs."<sup>25</sup>

The news coverage and reviews of the exhibition mostly focussed on the sheer volume of works, commenting on Menteş' artistic approach with relatively generic descriptions such as "perpetual quests for the experimental and the different". The handful of documents and reviews available on Menteş' exhibitions all concur on a feature that stands out; the vibrant colours used in his compositions: "we see the years-long accumulation of soft sensitivity towards painting, especially his passion for colours, in Menteş' paintings."<sup>26</sup> Menteş' use of bright and vivacious colours is arguably one of the most distinct and recognisable aspects of his work; in turn, this characteristic is used as a basis for criticising the artists' poor selection of works in curatorial terms: "an artist who can use paint and colour this well has a significant responsibility in the choice of works that can be exhibited together. We cannot say that Menteş made a very good selection, at least in the case of this exhibition."<sup>27</sup> One might imagine that viewing a large amount of Menteş' vibrant paintings, which are often dominated by tones of blue, at once, can be likened to the experience of walking through tanks of brightly coloured fish in aquariums; each like a glowing vivarium, equally dynamic, beautiful and perplexing. Similar to Jager's description of confused aquarium visitors ("What am I supposed to be seeing here?"), Menteş' work when viewed in large quantities can appear repetitive, almost redundant to a spectator's eye because the spectator does not often have insight into Menteş' 'language' or approach to creativity and productivity. Variation of such forms, signs and symbols evoked the same confusion aroused by looking at first aquariums; not because they were not aesthetically pleasing but rather because people did not often understand what they were looking at. Thus, by recycling recurring images, symbols and signs in variations, Menteş' work can be said to fall short in obtaining the spectators' interest and in offering them an accessible and unique form.

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25 Azgın, 1986, 37.

26 Azgın, 1986, 37.

27 Azgın, 1986, 37.

Menteş often sold his work albeit in small numbers throughout his active years, and even received interest from German tourists and collectors, notably Helga Kritzler, in the 1980s. Despite his relative success, during my interview with Mentesh in 2016, he expressed that he believed his paintings were not wholly understood or perhaps even appreciated for most of his career. Similar to the unwelcoming early reception of modern painters, Mentesh too was confronted by a bewildered audience in Cyprus, often criticising or commenting on his work as “nonsensical scrawls.”<sup>28</sup> It was only in the mid-1990s when German psychiatrist and scholar Winald Stroppe began studying Mentesh’s works, paying close introspect, that Mentesh fully felt his work had been *seen*. Mentesh writes of his encounter with Winald Stroppe in his autobiography as a significant event, prompting the publication of a monographic book in 2009, together with holding several exhibitions of his work in Germany and Cyprus.<sup>29</sup> The series of events and dedicated exhibitions, as well as the attention of a foreign academic figure was picked up by the local media and spun as the height of Mentesh’s career. One day in the same year, Italian curator and art historian Bruno Cora stops by Mentesh’s gallery in Famagusta and sees some of his pieces. Having his work interpreted by such an estimable person, even though in haste, gets imprinted in memories as a crucial encounter for the artist. This encounter also leads to the production of a documentary about the artist’s life and work under the guidance of Ümit İnatçı and Hakan Çakmak.<sup>30</sup> Mentesh himself regarded this sequence of events as his artistic peak, claiming “at last, it wasn’t all for nothing.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Meaningful coincidences: concluding remarks**

The nineteenth century exposed new systems of thinking about and seeing the world that continue to shape and drive human curiosity to explore further to this day. The innovative technologies in display and maintenance of aquatic life in glass tanks, as well as Jung’s pioneering approaches to understanding the human psyche on a collective/grand scale are but two small examples of the revolutionary moments that reconstructed the modern world. The reaction of people and their encounters with the unknown (yet inherent) can be traced throughout this transient period, in the world of aquatic life, the unconscious realms of our minds, as well as echoed in audiences’ encounter with abstraction and abstract symbolism.

In Mentesh’s work, symbols can be read as not solely representational of certain signs or meaning to exist or be read by its contemporaneous viewer but as an eternal language that connects and ties an endless exploration of variations. Thus, it is less

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28 Plümer Bardak, 2016.

29 See Kıbrıs Gazetesi, 1995, 33; Sadıkoğlu, 1998a, 33; Sadıkoğlu, 1998b, 33.

30 The mentioned documentary was started as part of a series of films produced by the library association on Turkish Cyprus artists. Two documentaries were made under the project on İsmet Vehit Güney and Cevdet Çağdaş, making Ayhan Mentesh the third in the series. Unfortunately, the production was left incomplete and was not made public.

31 Plümer Bardak, 2016.



important to decipher meaning in individual drawings or paintings. Rather, these can be seen as conscious volition and creative rendering of symbols that coincide and are repeated at certain intervals. The recurrence of certain symbols and particular subject matter in Menteş' oeuvre, such as the image of the fish highlighted in this exhibition, can be considered in relation to the phenomenon known as extra-sensory perception (ESP): a concept that describes how the subconscious works in relation to selecting certain information and images. In this context, the process of selection during the act of creation is closely linked to synchronicity and seriality. The symbols or images that appear and reappear at certain periods coincide with Menteş' interest or subjects that linger in the external world, and materialise in the internal world of images and objects.

Looking through Menteş' two- and three-dimensional work can feel like travelling through temporal series of recurring events and motifs; these motifs appear as cyclical processes, the waves along the time-axis of the space-time continuum. Menteş' unique storytelling ability allowed him to time-travel through space-time; seemingly random pieces of information somehow find their way of connecting through thin vessels, delicately merging and interacting. This ability is recognisably echoed as a significant feature of his visual work. The concepts of knowledge and the power of creative thought are not simple words thrown around by Menteş, but must rather be read as a mantra that shapes and forms his way of life and thought. The sheer volume of his work is a by-product of this, closely knit with his work ethic and method of production. Similar to Aragon's description of Matisse's significance, Menteş' importance can be regarded in light of the variation of signs and symbols that in turn introduce a new language to Turkish Cypriot art. For Menteş, these variations, whether conjured by chance or contrivance, gave him great satisfaction and were for him the path to creativity.

In essence, creativity for Menteş was not simply about gathering and expanding knowledge but about how to use it. He spent a considerable amount of time not only producing work, but thinking about how he could improve his production levels and his creativity in relation to education and self-development. Similar to Baumeister's definition of the creative act, creativity could not be based on knowledge and the conscious volition alone, but must be in harmony with the unexpected, unconscious encounters one could welcome via chance. Ayhan Menteş' paintings like glowing vivariums, as well as his ceramics and print work remind us that we must never stop wondering, stay open to learning and continue creating, against all odds and by means of meaningful coincidences.

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Ege Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi

**Sanat Tarihi Dergisi**

ISSN 1300-5707

Cilt: XXIX, Sayı: 2 Ekim 2020

*Ege University, Faculty of Letters*

***Journal of Art History***

e-ISSN 2636-8064

*Volume: XXIX, Issue: 2 October 2020*

İnternet Sayfası (Acık Erisim)

Internet Page (Open Access)

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*Sanat Tarihi Dergisi* hakemli, bilimsel bir dergidir; Nisan ve Ekim aylarında olmak üzere yılda iki kez yayınlanır.

*Journal of Art History* is a peer-reviewed, scholarly, periodical journal published biannually, in April and October.

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