

Crossing Borders, Shaping Futures: Academic Odyssey

Sınırları Aşmak, Geleceği Şekillendirmek: Akademik Yolculuk

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Abstract

This memoir, written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Dokuz Eylül University, recounts a personal and academic journey that began in Ulukışla, Niğde, and extends to graduate studies in the United States, along with a leadership role at the institution where it all began. The author reflects on the challenges of navigating intercultural academic systems and the determination required to pursue graduate education abroad, highlighting the transformative power of resilience, mentorship, and education. Additionally, the memoir discusses the influence of faculty members who received art and design education overseas, the formative years of the Graphic Arts program, and the author's personal transformation. It details the journey to earn a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Printmaking from Ohio University and a PhD in Art from the University of North Texas, emphasizing themes of cross-cultural engagement, resilience, and professional development. The transformative role of arts education in fostering global perspectives, critical inquiry, and academic leadership is highlighted. Ultimately, the memoir explores the author's emotional and intellectual evolution and aims to inspire future generations to discover their talents, value international education, and contribute to the arts.

Keywords: 50th anniversary, Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Memoir, graduate studies, abroad, Ohio University, University of North Texas.

Academical Disciplines/Fields: Graphic arts, painting, sculpture, textile and fashion design, art education.

Özet

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi'nin 50. kuruluş yıldönümü adına yazılan bu anı yazısı, Niğde'nin Ulukışla ilçesinde başlayan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde lisansüstü eğitime ve her şeyin başladığı kurumda üstlenilen liderlik rolüne kadar uzanan kişisel ve akademik bir yolculuğu anlatmaktadır. Yazar, dayanıklılığın, mentorluğun ve eğitimin dönüştürücü gücüne vurgu yaparak kültürler arası akademik sistemlerde gezinmenin zorluklarına ve yurtdışında lisansüstü eğitim alma kararlılığına odaklanmaktadır. Aynı zamanda, sanat ve tasarım eğitimini yurt dışında almış öğretim üyelerinin etkisi, Grafik Sanatlar programının oluşum yılları ve yazarın kişisel dönüşüm süreci ele alınmaktadır. Ohio Üniversitesi'nden Baskiresimde Güzel Sanatlar Yüksek Lisansı (MFA) ve Kuzey Teksas Üniversitesi'nden Sanat alanında Doktora derecesini (PhD.) alma yolculuğunu ayrıntılarıyla anlatan anı yazısı, kültürler arası etkileşim, dayanıklılık ve mesleki gelişim temalarını vurgulamaktadır. Küresel perspektifleri, eleştirel sorgulamayı ve akademik liderliği geliştirmede sanat eğitiminin dönüştürücü rolünün altı çizilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, yazarın duygusal ve entelektüel evrimini ele alan anı yazısı, gelecek nesillere yeteneklerini keşfetme, uluslararası eğitime değer verme ve sanata katkıda bulunma konusunda ilham verme amacı gütmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: 50.yıl, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi, anı, mezuniyet çalışmaları, yurt dışı, Ohio Üniversitesi, Kuzey Teksas Üniversitesi.

Akademik Disiplin(ler)/Alan(lar): Grafik sanatlar, resim, heykel, tekstil ve moda tasarımı, sanat eğitimi.

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From Local Roots to Global Horizons in Higher Education

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Faculty of Fine Arts, I feel compelled to reflect on the rich memories and transformative experiences that have shaped my journey. From my early days as a young student, through my time as a graduate, and later as dean, this faculty has been far more than a school—it has been a second home. Within its walls, I found lifelong friendships, creative awakenings, and countless unforgettable moments. This institution opened doors to personal and academic growth, nurturing not just our skills, but also the courage to pursue opportunities beyond its bounds.

In particular, “Crossing Borders, Shaping Futures: Academic Odyssey” is a memory I hold close to my heart. For the 50th Year Special Issue of *Yedi: Journal of Art, Design & Science*, I am honored to share this transformative experience. I hope to inspire current students to recognize the profound value of pursuing graduate studies in art abroad. By doing so, they can gain exposure to diverse artistic traditions, expand creative networks, and nurture a global perspective that enriches both personal growth and academic lives. With the strong foundation built at our faculty, I believe their potential truly knows no limits. Yet like many journeys, mine began far from where it would ultimately lead.

My journey began in Ulukışla, a small town in Niğde, where I completed secondary school between 1977 and 1980 and primary school from 1972 to 1977. But history has a way of changing our paths. In September 1980, I moved to İzmir in search of better educational opportunities. From 1980 to 1983, İzmir Atatürk High School became my new beginning—a place where I began to dream bigger and learned to adapt in a rapidly changing world.

Behind this journey, however, stood a quiet but powerful foundation: my family. My mother, born in 1927, was illiterate, and my father, born in 1924, had only completed primary school, yet their support was unwavering. My mother, despite not being able to read or write, taught me resilience through her strength and sacrifice. My father, with limited formal education, believed deeply in the power of learning and quietly worked to give us what he never had. After secondary school, it was my brother, ten years older than me and working as an English teacher in İzmir, who helped shape my academic life. At just 24 years old, he became both a mentor and a guiding light. He opened doors I couldn't yet see, shared his own books with me, and patiently helped me find my way forward. His belief in my artistic potential planted the seeds of ambition that would eventually guide me far beyond the world I had known.

While I was living with my brother in İzmir, a new period began in my life in August 1983. That is, I was accepted into the Graphic Arts program at the Faculty of Fine Arts, which was a newly established program under the Department of Applied Arts. We were pioneers, the very first students of this program, which had only ten admission places available at that time. I still vividly remember the nervous excitement I felt during the entrance exam in the main faculty building at the Alsancak campus, a moment that would shape the course of my academic and creative journey.

When the academic year started in September 1983, I discovered that our department's classes weren't held in the main faculty building, but rather in a modest building tucked behind Ege University's Computer Engineering Department. There, the Textile and Graphic Arts programs, alongside the Music Department, shared a space with just seven or eight classrooms. The newborn Painting Department shared another building with Ege University's Industrial Engineering department.

Every day, we were shuttling between practical and theoretical lessons at the Ege University campus and basic theory lessons at the Alsancak campus of the Faculty of Fine Arts. These daily commutes were filled with joy. Although our classrooms weren't fancy, they were alive with energy, passion, and dreams ready to take shape.

Those early days taught me that learning doesn't depend on where you are; it's about the people, the passion, and the journey. Even in modest buildings with only a handful of classrooms, we uncovered inspiration and built something meaningful together. We weren't just students; we were pioneers, discovering how creativity could flourish in unexpected places. Our creativity thrived most vividly in the uncertain spaces, where everything was open to possibility.

Looking back, I now see that those years taught me so much more. That is, they instilled in me a deep sense of resilience and a readiness to grow through uncertainty. Each challenge we faced was a chance to adapt, to create, and to dream beyond limits. While we may have lacked resources, we compensated with determination and creativity. And today, I realize that the true campus of an art student isn't limited to physical walls or equipment; it is shaped by the courage to create, wherever you are, and the willingness to see every new step as a hopeful beginning.

Thanks to the guidance of our professors, many of whom had studied abroad, we gained significant insights into shaping our future goals from our very first year. In this environment, the four programs felt like one large family, and the faculty staff itself was a living example of the global exchange of ideas. As the first student to graduate from the Graphic Arts program in 1987, I spent a year working in the industry in Istanbul. In 1988, I returned to Izmir to pursue my master's degree at the Institute of Social Sciences at our university. While continuing my master's studies in 1989, I began working as a research assistant at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

As I look back on my academic journey, I am profoundly grateful for the influence of four remarkable instructors—Adem Genç, Cengiz Çekil, Halil Akdeniz, and Gören Bulut—each of whom played a pivotal role in shaping my academic path. All began their careers at the Ankara Gazi Education Institute and later received scholarships to pursue advanced art studies abroad: Genç at Saint Martin's School of Art in England, Çekil at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in France, Akdeniz at the Berlin State Academy of Fine Arts in Germany, and Bulut at both Saint Martin's and Chelsea School of Art in London.

They shared their international experiences in art and design education with us with extraordinary generosity, insight, and passion. In their classes, we learned not only techniques but also new ways of seeing, thinking, and understanding art in a global context. Through their stories of their time abroad, they opened windows into distant studios, cultural dialogues, and creative risks, and made the idea of studying internationally tangible and accessible. More importantly, their global experiences created a sense of curiosity and confidence in their students, encouraging us to reach beyond familiar boundaries. Their first-hand knowledge of international art scenes inspired us to imagine ourselves in these spaces. They instilled in us the belief that our creative voices could resonate beyond our borders, and that we too had a place in the broader world of art and design.

Their mentorship encouraged me not only to refine my artistic practice but also to reimagine what was possible for my future. Among them, Adem Genç played an important role in helping me envision my future career during the early years of my art education. I still remember a conversation we had in his studio. He asked me what I planned to do after graduation and emphasized the importance of working hard from that moment onward to achieve my goals. His consistent guidance throughout my undergraduate years was instrumental in shaping my academic and artistic development.

Building on this early encouragement, another teacher of mine, Gören Bulut, planted the first seeds of my desire to study abroad. At a time when this path seemed unattainable, he guided me patiently through every step of the process. Bulut was always by my side from the early stages of my application process until I received my acceptance letter and a scholarship.

Motivated by the guidance of my professors and the prospect of studying abroad, I embarked on the graduate school application process with both excitement and resolve. Applying to study abroad for a graduate degree was both an exciting and challenging experience. For weeks, I diligently explored universities that offered strong programs in my field of interest. As I gathered my application materials, such as academic transcripts, curriculum vitae (CV), statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, and a portfolio showcasing my artworks, I experienced a heightened sense of determination. In the absence of online applications at that time, I reached out to esteemed art schools in England through traditional mail, driven by my desire to pursue graduate studies abroad.

I was overjoyed to receive an acceptance letter from the Slade School of Art. Gören Bulut and I met with the dean of the faculty to discuss this exciting opportunity. During our meeting, the dean advised me to consider applying to universities in Japan or the United States. In the end, I chose to apply to art schools in the United States. The year was 1990. I communicated with seven different art schools through traditional mail. This process of correspondence spanned about a year.

Eventually, I received an acceptance letter from Ohio University. I was thrilled, but another hurdle soon appeared. Although the start date of the academic year was September 1991, I still lacked the scholarship support I needed to study abroad. I began researching scholarship opportunities through the Council of Higher Education, my university, and Ohio University itself, hoping to find a way. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking. The start date of the academic year was September 1991, and I still didn't have the financial support I needed.

I began sending faxes to Ohio University, explaining my situation and asking if it was possible to delay my enrollment. The waiting felt endless. Then, one day, I received a letter that lifted a huge weight off my shoulders: They agreed to postpone my enrollment. I remember sitting there with the letter in my hands, feeling an overwhelming mix of relief, gratitude, and renewed determination. My dream was still alive, and

I was not ready to let it go. At the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992, our university received ten scholarships from the Council of Higher Education, specifically to send research assistants abroad for graduate education. At that time, the Council of Higher Education was sending research assistants while the Ministry of National Education was sending students with four-year bachelor's degrees to study abroad.

Looking back, I realize how pivotal it was that I already had an acceptance letter from a foreign university. It wasn't just a piece of paper—it was a lifeline, a sign that all the effort and waiting had not been in vain. That letter played an important role in my receiving one of the 10 scholarships offered to our university. Thanks to Gören Bulut's unwavering support, my dream of receiving a graduate education abroad had become a reality and an important milestone in my academic life.

Still, the road ahead required relentless effort. To attend the Spring quarter at Ohio University, I entered an intense period of preparation. I embarked on an intensive correspondence process with several official institutions, including the Council of Higher Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Directorate of Security, and the Ministry of Finance. And finally, on April 1, 1992, after months of hope and paperwork, I boarded a plane and flew to the United States, taking with me not only my luggage but also my dreams of a new life waiting for me on the horizon.

When I first received my acceptance letter from Ohio University, I expected the usual paperwork and formalities. What I didn't expect was the warmth and attentiveness that came with it. The university sent me detailed instructions on how to get to the campus, where I would be staying, and what to expect upon arrival. That small act of thoughtful communication made a lasting impression. I wasn't just another international student navigating bureaucracy; I felt genuinely welcomed and seen as a person beginning a transformative journey, not just as a name on a file.

The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Printmaking at Ohio University's College of Fine Arts became more than an academic program—it became a space for deep artistic and intellectual growth. The three-year curriculum was comprehensive and immersive, demanding the completion of 90 quarter credit hours beyond the undergraduate degree. It combined intensive studio courses, art history seminars, and cross-disciplinary electives, building not only technical mastery but also critical engagement and conceptual development.

My MFA experience at Ohio University (1992) was defined by a deeply immersive, advisor-guided studio practice. Under the guidance of my advisor, Professor Mary Manusos, I was encouraged to cultivate a personal artistic voice while engaging rigorously with both material processes and critical theory. The program challenged me to explore the intersection of form, meaning, and context, ultimately shaping my approach to making and thinking as an artist. This journey culminated in my MFA Thesis Exhibition in 1994—a pivotal moment that synthesized years of creative inquiry into a coherent body of work. It was more than an exhibition; it was a declaration of identity, merging scholarship, reflection, and cultural narrative. The themes I explored—cultural boundaries, visual language, and societal critique—continue to resonate in my practice today. These ideas were first fully articulated in my artist statement for the exhibition, which I have included here as a reflection of that formative period.

I have lived in Turkey and have experienced the ancient signs of the Mesopotamian civilization. Even though Turkey has great diversity in culture (Islamic, Byzantine, Greek, etc.), I still felt closely integrated in my society. It was difficult, however, to know much about contemporary western art and culture outside of Turkey. Since being in the U.S., however, cultural borders have been broken for me. I feel I can communicate cross-culturally. But my life is advancing so quickly that I must constantly adapt to fit into the changing world in which I find myself.

This new environment, as an international artist, is a very broad topic to apply to my studies. Everything looks "like new" to me. I have found a very positive learning environment and developed new perspectives on art. The period in which I have lived and will live are important for me. I have reflected on my prints with an aesthetic value impacted by social and environmental issues within this society. That is, I am questioning this period in which I live and am forming my conceptual views of art. In addition, I have been organizing my concepts, thoughts and thinking critically about my prints.

In my prints, I have always synthesized form and content into personal visual language. For me, mass media, maps, advertising, transportation, some art

movements from art history, and artists, such as Kitaj, Salle, Bacon, Polke, Rivers, and Haring have given me a kind of "visual vocabulary" to work with. From such multiple sources I have developed visual symbols and forms in my work. I have always observed myself and society. I question and think; who am I within this society? I always ask myself the question Why? What? and How?

In my compositions, I use a mix of various viewpoints, symbolic forms as potential aesthetic material, and interior space perspectives. In my larger prints I juxtapose these cultural forms and my personal point of view in a visual and conceptual synthesis. The forms I use have multiple meanings. These multiple meanings change from circumstance to circumstance, from society to society, and from viewer to viewer. At this point, I want to invite an active participation by the viewer in discovering meanings and interpretations. In fact, I have been questioning both this society and myself through multiple elements. My impression is that American society is degenerating due to drugs, an isolating life style, double standards, etc., and my work reflects these issues.

The juxtaposing of my images is illogical, unexpected, and unexplainable. Because of this, my prints can be thought of as mysteries. I presented my works horizontally and used the fragmented multiple viewpoints to disorientate the viewer since I don't want to locate the viewer in any specific position. I use common elements, maps, license plates, etc., that are seen within this society. The compositions of the prints unsettle the viewer. My larger prints have no single focus. The elements I use create an unnatural illusion of depth. Mystery and ambiguity are key elements of my prints. My works are a combination of elements that have allegorical meanings that cannot be resolved. (Öztuna, 1994)

Although I already held a master's degree in Turkey, I chose to pursue the MFA because of its unique standing in the field. In the United States, the MFA is regarded as a terminal degree in studio art and design—the highest academic qualification necessary for both professional practice and university-level teaching in the visual arts. Unlike traditional academic models that progress from a master's to a doctoral degree, the MFA serves both as a rigorous professional credential and an academic endpoint within studio-based disciplines.

This distinction is significant. MFA programs typically require 60 semester or 90 quarter credits over two to three years, integrating advanced studio work, critical theory, and pedagogical training. In contrast, the MA is often a one- to two-year program, focused more on theoretical frameworks or historical analysis than on studio practice. While PhD programs in studio arts are rare in the U.S., the MFA fills that academic and professional gap fully, particularly in fields like graphic design, painting, sculpture, printmaking, fashion design, ceramics, photography, and performance arts (National Association, 2020).

In Turkey, however, the structure of graduate education is different. Students complete a Master's program and then a Proficiency in Art (Sanatta Yeterlik) program, each requiring seven courses (21 local credits). The Proficiency in Art degree is considered the terminal qualification in the field, often equated to a doctorate in terms of academic prestige and research rigor.

Yet, in a pivotal decision by the Interuniversity Council, it was ruled that the MFA obtained in the United States could not be considered equivalent to the Proficiency in Art degree in Turkey. Their rationale stated that the MFA was not the highest degree available in the U.S., noting the existence of doctoral programs in art (Üniversitelerarası Kurul, 1995). This decision, though formally binding, reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of the academic landscape in the U.S., where the MFA is the terminal degree for studio disciplines.

The gap between these two academic systems placed me in a difficult position. Despite having completed a terminal degree, I was now expected to pursue a doctorate to gain academic recognition in my home country. I began researching doctoral options, only to find that PhD programs in applied arts were exceedingly rare in the United States. When I shared my concerns with my academic advisor, she was surprised. "No one expects MFA graduates here to pursue a PhD," she told me with a kind smile. "The MFA is a terminal degree. With it, you're already qualified to teach at the university level." Her words lingered with me. I had always assumed there was another academic rung to climb—but in that moment, I began to understand the value of the path I had already chosen.

Even so, I pressed on, driven by the regulatory expectations in Turkey. I explored PhD programs in art history, believing them to be the closest fit. Yet these applications were unsuccessful—understandably so, given that my prior training was in practice-based fields rather than historical or theoretical study.

Finally, I found the Ph.D. in Art at the University of North Texas—a program that bridged my interests and offered a scholarly path forward. When I was accepted, it was more than relief—it was a new chapter. The PhD program was structured to support rigorous research in visual art education, history, and theory. With 60 post-master's credits divided among a doctoral core, teaching field, minor concentration, and dissertation research, it provided an interdisciplinary framework. A language requirement ensured depth in research methodology and global engagement (University of North Texas, 1994).

Earning a PhD in Art at the University of North Texas was a defining turning point in my life. My scholarship for graduate study enabled me to complete both the MA and PhD in six years. This required me to finish the PhD program in four years, engaging in intensive and uninterrupted study during the summer, fall, and spring semesters. During this time, I did not visit my home country. Having previously completed a two-year master's program in Ohio, I felt prepared for the demands at the master's level, but the PhD presented a different kind of challenge. It demanded sustained intellectual discipline, advanced research, and critical engagement with complex theoretical material. Balancing the requirements of such an intensive program tested my limits, yet it also enhanced my ability to think deeply, write clearly, and articulate complex ideas.

After completing my PhD in 1998, I returned to the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Türkiye, equipped not only with advanced academic knowledge but also with a renewed sense of purpose. My education evolved into a deeply conceptual foundation, shaped through years of critical inquiry, engagement with cultural theory, and interdisciplinary study. As an educator, I often return to a moment during my doctoral studies that quietly but profoundly reshaped my path. I was wrestling with a particularly dense piece of cultural theory—frustrated, uncertain, and tempted to retreat into safer, more familiar territory. But with time, patience, and the encouragement of a mentor who urged me to sit with the discomfort, I began to see complexity not as a barrier, but as an invitation. That experience instilled in me the values I now try to pass on to my students: intellectual curiosity that pushes beyond easy answers, disciplined research grounded in integrity, and the courage to engage with ideas that challenge their assumptions. Teaching, for me, is an extension of that moment—a space where students are encouraged to explore, question, and find their voices in the process. The lessons I learned during my own struggles continue to shape how I teach, create, and contribute to the academic and artistic communities that have become my home.

This journey, filled with paperwork, preparation, setbacks, and inspiring discoveries, has significantly shaped who I am today. It showed me that education is not just about getting a diploma, but about dreaming bigger. In the end, I didn't just earn degrees—I cultivated resilience, cross-cultural understanding, and a renewed commitment to the value of art and education.

That spirit of resilience and ambition carried me forward into my years at the Faculty of Fine Arts, where those early lessons in perseverance took shape through both art and academia. The transformation from a small-town student to a research assistant with international aspirations was not a simple one, but it was made possible by the strong roots I planted at our faculty, surrounded by teachers who believed in my potential and peers who inspired me daily.

Looking back now, I see how each step—each obstacle, decision, and breakthrough—prepared me to cross borders not only geographically, but also intellectually and artistically. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of this remarkable institution, I am grateful to my faculty for everything. This faculty not only prepared me for a career but also opened doors to a global perspective and gave me the courage to pursue dreams that once felt far beyond reach. I hope that students today will recognize the same potential within themselves and they, too, can go beyond boundaries and contribute to the ever-evolving world of art with boldness, curiosity, and heart.

Above all, what I feel most deeply is my love and gratitude for the Faculty of Fine Arts. I first walked through its doors as a hopeful young student, filled with dreams and uncertainty. Today, I have the honor of serving as its dean—an experience that continues to humble and inspire me. I am deeply thankful to my university and the professors who believed in me, nurtured my growth, and made everything possible.

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