Exploding Contexts: The Locks of Fatoş İrwen

Between the years 2017 - 2020 the kurdish artist Fatoş İrwen from Diyarbakır was imprisoned for demonstrating against state violence and gender inequality. In the darkness of her prison cell, once vanished from public sight, she worked with the material that gives form to her artistic practice, her own hair.

/ Matt Hanson February 12, 2026

Lock One

As one of nine siblings growing up in the historic core of Diyarbakır, Fatoş İrwen could disappear for three days at a time without being noticed. She would go out alone and get lost in the streets for entertainment, sometimes taking refuge at her grandmother’s house. In the beating heart of Turkey’s Kurdish region, where most people’s first language is shared with a stateless minority that inhabit the borderlands in and around Iran, Iraq and Syria, she recalls that there were “many crazy people” who lived out in the open.

One day, her sister saw children teasing and throwing stones at a "crazy man," as she recalled, watching him try to protect himself by covering his head with his hands. Their yelling fell on deaf ears so they used their bodies as barriers to shield the man and even threw stones back. "It turned into a bloody street fight that day," İrwen told me this summer, in a written interview.

"The harm inflicted by those who consider themselves normal on people outside the norms of normality has always been a serious concern for me. For this reason, I can say that I have tried to form a more genuine relationship with non-human beings. For example, I used to collect insects. Even now, my greatest dream is to be able to talk to insects,” she continued.

“The dark sides of humanity, violence, feelings of mercy, normal and abnormal patterns and the ways we approach them are all interconnected issues. Each quality reveals its reality, intensity, and agree when it encounters another, the other.”

İrwen relished in invisibility. It was in the imagination of her disappearance in the minds of others that cultivated the ground on which she planted seeds of lifelong creativity that would nourish her even during the darkest periods of her life, such as when she was imprisoned in Diyarbakır from 2017 to 2020 for demonstrating against state violence and gender inequality. In the darkness of her prison cell, once vanished from public sight, she worked with the material that gives form to her artistic practice, her own hair.

The physical vitality of womanhood, colored strands of protein that grow the length of limbs from scalps, is mostly covered, unseen, in the lands of her origin. In her piece *Covered Up* for *The New Yorker*, Turkish-American writer Elif Batuman wrote about the headscarf in Batman, not far from Diyarbakır, explaining: “It meant whatever the woman wearing it wanted it to mean — and that was what made it so unsettling to everyone else.”

İrwen, emerging from that world as an art teacher in Istanbul and an artist in the center of Turkey’s contemporary culture, exposes hair itself, her own, as multivalent. Whether rolled into tightly bound or fraying spheres of varying circumferences and hues from black to amber for *Cannonballs* (2019), a title that ironically alludes to the harmlessness of the material so prized by Kurdish culture, or tracing the inner architecture of prison, *Fragile* (2019), her art practice of collecting her own hair derived from both maternal superstition and personal obsession.

“My mother would say that if I threw my hair on the floor or in the trash, I would get a headache and get sick. So I would collect and save it. Since childhood, I had been engaged in a project involving the hair I had collected,” she said.

Cannonballs.jpeg



[1]

***Cannonballs*, 2019,** Site specific installation, Variable dimensions,(the Installation from Mardin Biennale also includes *Safety Net for Women*)
courtesy of the artist and Zilberman

“During my university years, the hair I had accumulated became part of my artistic ideas and found its place in my creations […] Over the years, it became an area that seemed to carry all my strength.”

Lock Two

As a young girl, İrwen went to work. Art was not valued in her home, nor in the surrounding communities amid constant political crisis. Longing for independence, she learned to solve problems by herself, to face catastrophe head on and confront issues that would otherwise bind her to a life not of her choosing. What emerged was a stubbornness that is, for İrwen, like many creative people, the core, defining characteristic of the will to become a working artist.

“I was in a crowded environment, in a house where most of the people were women, and naturally, all issues related to womanhood were intertwined with various elements of violence created by the general political atmosphere,” she explained. “I had built a space of freedom created by invisibility. Therefore, invisibility was not a complex problem for me; on the contrary, it became a space where I experienced freedom.”

Still, she describes her upbringing as endangered by constant threats to her personal liberty. Permanent risk and relentless conflict upended optimism in the future, even the thought that there could be anything beyond the present at all. Dreaming, that is, believing that another time will come, required an introverted, protective sensibility that she harbored toward herself.

“In such an environment, art can seem both unnecessary and futile, as if it contributes nothing to the future. Because there is no future,” she explained. “But dreaming, even if it is about a future that does not exist, is the only thing that transforms and enriches life, that moment, and creates a reason for the next moment.”

Despite the complete lack of support for her creativity and education, she produced and studied, often alone and in secret, without pride, without self -announcement. This tenacity to remain hidden yet pursuant throughout her childhood prepared her, albeit indirectly, to survive as an artist enduring incarceration. Upon her release, she has continued to work and creates uninterrupted as her oeuvre encompasses the works she made even while behind bars.

“The responsibility of doing something secretly on my own was heavy enough, and I did many things secretly so as not to make my burden even heavier,” she told me. “Looking back now, I’m glad I did it. Without that experience from the past, I don’t think I could have produced so much work and smuggled it out despite all the pressure in prison.”

Lock Three

During the 5th Mardin Biennial, held from May to June 2022, İrwen was reminded of the inequalities that women face in her region. Mardin, like Batman and Diyarbakır, is part of Turkey’s majority-Kurdish region, and suffers from much of the religious, cultural conservatism that disproportionately affects women, especially in terms of public life. As a participating artist deeply aware of the inner-workings of traditional community standards among the Kurds of Turkey, İrwen observed that women artists were more wary of the passage of time. Their ability to meet, never mind party till dawn like many male artists, was checked by the fact that, by five or six o’clock in the evening, they would return home, and not entirely by choice.

“I can say that artists, curators, or anyone else from the West always contributed to this negative structure,” she explained. “They tried to learn about the existence of female artists through male artists. By selecting a few male artists, working with them, and ignoring female artists in a region full of inequality, curators created even greater inequality.”

Branching out from the art world, İrwen is unafraid to testify to the broader conflict that emerges as micro-aggressions and absences in more benign cultural activities. Whether Expanding perspectives or exploding contexts, it is clear that culture, whether it is defined autonomously or imposed externally, is one of the many battlefields on which the struggle for collective equities are being co-opted by a hypocritical order of state power.

“I believe that in Turkey, where there is systematic state violence, the oppression of Kurds is an issue that directly affects women,” she says, specifically in reference to the ongoing resistance of the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement. “The state structure, which is aware of cultural and

traditional codes and sensitivities in this regard, has nourished and encouraged this traditional violence. Cultural assimilation, genocide, and colonialism are intertwined components of a state of war. As we know, in every war, women and children suffer the most.”

Unlike most women, İrwen has stood out as an exemplary and very visible Kurdish woman in Turkey’s art world because of her lifelong infatuation with loneliness and stubbornness that grew out of a desire for freedom. She has been able to accommodate misunderstanding and strangeness by establishing equal relationships with everyone she meets, foregoing favoritism common in friendships so as to practice a radical egalitarianism that might be mistaken for antisocial tendencies, but which is instead built on a foundation of self-love born of solitude and universalism. As İrwen explains, pithily, “Sincerity can be confused with familiarity.”

As a student of Painting and Art Education in Dicle University in Diyarbakır, İrwen avoided overcrowded, shared art studio practices. She opted for the fields, and alternative spaces that most would never conceive of as productive workspaces, including, in one case, a basement filled with mice. She bought the guard a cup of coffee, and he let her work late, so much so that on certain occasions she would lose track of time. As the department was located outside of the city on a country road without public transportation, she often hitchhiked to the center on the back of a tractor or pickup truck.

“I never liked school throughout my life. When I was in primary school I always ran away from school. I was terribly bored. I would immediately throw myself into a place where I could be alone with myself,” she said, though she would later work as an art instructor in Batman, Diyarbakır and Istanbul. “I only became a teacher because it involved art. And I’m glad I did, because I knew how to reach children like myself and those who were different.".

Vague 1.jpg **[2]**



Vague 2 **[3]**



Vague، 2015، قماش على ورموش شعر، 40 × 40 سم **[4]**



[5]

***Vague*, 2015 Hair and eyelashes on canvas 40 × 40 cm**
courtesy of the artist and Zilberman

Lock Four

In her artwork, which often takes the form of painting, sculpture, installation and performance, İrwen is almost always personal. That said, Kurdish oppression is never explicit in a crude sense. “I am interested in the social reality in which I grew up, power, the state, the political environment, feudalism, traditionalism and the situations and psychological processes I experienced as an individual struggling for freedom within all of this,” she declared.

Ultimately, it is her childhood that informs her life’s work in art. In the face of vicious cycles of violence and racism between Turks and Kurds, İrwen has a hard time swallowing the pain of falsified histories, the weight that accumulates due to the indigestibility of the issues at hand. And in the process, time is not linear.

“My own process began with witnessing, observing, and struggling with what was happening in my own family and community. Over time, it took on a dimension and form that evolved from crude struggle to more creative action,” she explained.

Growing up, İrwen was not allowed to cut her hair short. But even if she could, she wouldn’t. She felt that her hair gave her wings. And she used each strand to fly away. Her escapes were her first

performances.

In an art world where cultural workers of all stripes are increasingly resorting to forms of disengagement as a political stance to the overarching deadlock of political imprisonment in Turkey, İrwen's artistic bearing is increasingly shared. In response to assimilation and lawlessness, her performances are emblematic of resistance, she justifies that inner migration that came to encapsulate the experiences of antifascist thinkers under Nazism, resistance poets under Zionism, and freedom fighters worldwide.

In İrwen's performance piece, *Şiryan* (2012-2015), which comes from the Kurdish word for "flow", she pierced her skin with a need that she would use as a child, essentially disfiguring her fingerprints to disrupt the system of corrupt policing that racially profiles Kurds in Turkey.

Salt, 2013, סאונד, גבוהה איכות, דיגיטלי וידאו; טורקיה, המלח אגם; פרפורמנס וידאו סטריאו 3 דקות ו-30 שניות **[6]**



[7]
***Şiryan*, 2012-2015, Video 28'39''**
courtesy of the artist and Zilberman

And to reckon with Turkey's history of executing Kurds in public, she created her performance *Salt* (2012) after members of her family were lynched for being Kurdish. She went to places infamous for lynching Kurds, and performed in Turkey's Salt Lake, in search of earthly healing.

Salt, 2013, סאונד, גבוהה איכות, דיגיטלי וידאו; טורקיה, המלח אגם; פרפורמנס וידאו סטריאו 3 דקות ו-30 שניות **[8]**



[9]
***Salt*, 2013, Performance video; Salt Lake, Turkey; DV, HD, stereo sound**
3'30"
courtesy of the artist and Zilberman

The three-minute video that resulted from İrwen’s one-day performance frames her walk through the extremely dry flats of Turkey’s Salt Lake. In memory of family members attacked and lynched throughout Turkey, including her mother, who suffered violence in that arid region. Walking for hours knee-deep in the hyper-saline water until her feet bled, despite the jeers of local observers, İrwen exposed her body, wearing nothing but the gauzy, tülbent scarf worn by Kurdish Peace Mothers who have protested every week in the heart of Istanbul to memorialize their missing and murdered sons disappeared by the state.

The mindset that seeks to eradicate a language and culture through assimilation policies destroys bodies, but that is not enough; it destroys the body it has already destroyed, over and over again,” she said. “I constantly think about what can be done in the face of unsatisfactory evil. We can turn our backs and walk away. We can fight it. Or we can transform it by creating something else.”

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