

# *Pinar Yolaçan: Body-Image*

## Curatorial Statement

Katherine Behar

The New Media Artspace is pleased to present *Pinar Yolaçan: Body-Image*, the first exhibition to bring together studio and documentary image and video works from this acclaimed Turkish artist. *Body-Image* includes carefully posed studio images in which the artist painstakingly paints and adorns the bodies of her subjects, alongside more recent documentary work with Kayapó (Mebêngôkre) Indigenous communities in the Brazilian Amazon, among the only ethnicities to practice full body painting in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Seen side-by-side, these diverse series illuminate one another, yielding fresh insights on Yolaçan's work. Together, they show how presenting women's bodies as images concerns not merely images as works of art in a painterly tradition, but also images as objects of media that attain currency in circulation. Documenting women deploying their body-images as a means to self-possessed empowerment, *Body-Image* echoes with this demand to be seen.

Yolaçan's "body-images" are the result of intensive collaborations with marginalized people who may seem unlikely to wield authority over their own representations. However, before ever collaborating with Yolaçan, her subjects—ranging from SSBBW subcultural internet stars to Indigenous groups—had become sophisticated media users who deploy their body-images toward self-determination. *Body-Image* makes clear that women are not necessarily disempowered or silenced when their bodies become images as the conventional critique of photographic and ethnographic objectification might have it. Yolaçan's work shows the opposite dynamic unfolding: produced through trusting relationships often built over the course of years, her works reveal—and more recently deploy—the power of her subjects.<sup>2</sup>

*Pinar Yolaçan: Body-Image* is a hybrid online and in-person exhibition organized in three parts. Part I incorporates an interactive element inviting viewers into an aspect of Yolaçan's process; by manipulating crops of the images, viewers are encouraged to spend time concentrating on the images and can create their own temporary compositions. Part II also highlights process and duration, this time sharing never-before-published frames from a photoshoot that documents Kayapó Chief Tuire painting the body of a young woman in her community; these images show Tuire's evolving process in paint. Part III consists of a film which documents an extended conversation between Tuire and Yolaçan that gives voice to Tuire's concerns and shares her knowledge; here too process and duration are integral, as Yolaçan intentionally includes time in translation, which more conventional documentarians might edit out. The exhibition appears online in its entirety, with Part III also on view in-person.

### I.

Yolaçan first received widespread recognition for works of portraiture that conceived bodily flesh as a site of slippage between human and nonhuman organisms. In contrast, the body-images in Part I are coolly artifactual and seemingly inorganic. With these works, Yolaçan veers headlong into the nonhuman, forsaking even the organicism of flesh. In place of flesh, these works evoke material misrecognition, picturing bodies—in part or whole—as iconic, powerful, even totemic. Among her varied sources of inspiration, Yolaçan cites a Pre-Neolithic anthropomorphic vessel that borrows the

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<sup>1</sup> The Kayapó, the Xikrin, and the Assuruni are the only ethnicities using body painting in the form of full body covering. Personal correspondence with the author, February, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Akin to this, I have discussed self-possession and political power in objecthood in Katherine Behar, "An Introduction to OOF" in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, edited by Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

shape of a woman's body,<sup>3</sup> as well as modern and contemporary painters from Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian Futurists. Across archaeology and Modernist abstract painting, Part I shows body-images of women mimicking the forms of objects that mimic the forms of women.

Culled from distinct series, Part I's highly stylized photographs are punctuated by short videos all shot in controlled studio settings. In sequence, they travel from mimetic abstraction with bodies retaining a referential quality, into high abstraction with bodies appearing as pure color and shape. In works from the *Mother Goddess* series (2009), textured and ornamented bodies recognizably reference ancient objects like vessels and statues celebrating feminine powers of fertility. By comparison, coated in a single vibrant hue of latex, bodies in the series *Like a Stone* (2011), appear as absolute form, like a singular brush stroke of paint standing out against a contrasting solid ground. These graphic body-images might be becoming the gestures and materials of painting. Finally, in the *Corpo Mechanico* (2013–2014) and *Nudes* (2012) series, bodies meld with and move against their backgrounds. *Corpo Mechanico* seems to recall surrealist Roger Caillois's famous depiction of insects that so successfully camouflage themselves as their leafy surroundings that they cannot discern the difference between their kind and their setting—resulting in cannibalism. For Caillois, such non-adaptive mimicry is “a luxury and even a dangerous luxury.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, Yolaçan's non-adaptive mimicry incites movement. In *Corpo Mechanico*, movement on the surface of body-images seems to vibrate, burnishing figures to blur into grounds. *Nudes* takes movement further, capturing a body in ongoing motion as a frozen image.

Yolaçan credits shooting the dynamic images in *Nudes* in improvisation with her subjects as impetus for her moving image works punctuating Part I. Each short video results from a years-long relationship and rapport cultivated between Yolaçan and the individual performers: a Turkish belly dancer, an Indian Kathak dancer, and a Brazilian funk dancer. Across these diverse cultural contexts, Yolaçan considers changing cultural and historical perceptions of body-images among dance practitioners and in the public eye. Her videos highlight feminine power in these dance forms which all center on the female body.

## II.

Body-images appear “in the making” in Part II, in images Yolaçan shot with the Kayapó. While these images document everyday life, they have something in common with the staged images in Part I: they were made possible through her subjects' willing collaboration.

It is no simple matter to visit, much less to photograph, Indigenous communities in Brazil. After much effort and research laying groundwork, Yolaçan was invited to Mojkârâko village by Chief Ak'jaboro. She would be allowed to take her photographs, in exchange for agreeing to create media on their behalf. Leveraging her role as a photographer, she could help publicize an urgent political issue—PEC 215, a bill threatening demarcation of Indigenous territories—in the international press.<sup>5</sup> Defying the

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<sup>3</sup> Yolaçan shared with me a photo of an anthropomorphic artifact from the excavations at Hacilar and Catalhoyuk (Pre-Neolithic matriarchal societies in Anatolia). This object resides in the Museum of Anatolia Civilizations in Ankara. Personal correspondence with the author, January, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia.” *October* vol 31 (Winter 1984): 16–32. [First published in *Minotaur* 7, 1935.]

<sup>5</sup> In summer of 2016, Yolaçan was invited to the Mojkarako village in Kayapo territory in the Brazilian State of Para by Chief Ak'jaboro Kayapó during the “seed exchange week,” an official meeting where different ethnicities gather to exchange seeds and senior Indigenous leaders, like Kayapo Chief Raoni, discuss territorial and environmental issues threatening Indigenous people. At the seed exchange, Yolaçan learned about the issues under discussion, including proposed legislation that would affect demarcation of Indigenous territories. The bill, PEC 215, was poised to pass, presenting an urgent threat in the same year that a soft coup had overthrown Dilma Rousseff and instated former

stereotypes of naïve, passive objects of ethnographic representation, the Kayapó community members thoughtfully negotiated the circulation of their own images. Such astuteness on the part of remote Amazonian villagers to the function of images in global media contexts might seem surprising; however, Kayapó people have been active participants in their own media representations for decades. In the late 1980s, anthropologist Terence Turner (a leading expert on Kayapó cultures) worked with filmmaker Vincent Carelli to help initiate the first-of-its-kind Kayapó Video Project. Kayapó people have been deploying new media from video to recent Internet and social media campaigns to proactively document, promote, and protect their culture and stories ever since. Of the Kayapó Video Project, Turner wrote, “The Kayapo goals of self-education and self-representation, to outsiders, required a degree of self-objectification and analysis of their own culture.”<sup>6</sup> Such self-determination through self-objectification aligns with the notion of *Body-Image* and the priorities of this exhibition.

Perhaps it is an overly-simplistic suggestion, but Kayapó people’s deft deployment of their representations in media campaigns might reflect their immersion in another form of media: body painting. As Chief Tuire explains, and scholars like Turner elaborate, body paint functions as a communication system, conveying information about the wearer to the community. Different forms of paint are worn at specific times of life and to indicate particular kinships, milestones, or occasions.<sup>7</sup> For Turner, Kayapó body paint—like fashion—is a visual communication practice that mediates individual and community. In other words, for a Kayapó person wearing body paint, their body already functions as an image that circulates as communications media. As such, it is a short step to conceiving of one’s own body-image as a potent unit of media. Political theorist Jodi Dean asserts that media objects accrue value and power through their circulation.<sup>8</sup> So self-possession of one’s body-image, and indeed borrowing Turner’s term “self-objectification” as a body-image become necessary political weapons when navigating contemporary media culture, as Kayapó community members do so keenly.

Part II shows images of Chief Tuire, one of the only female chiefs of the Kayapó, in the traditional process of painting the body of young women from her village. The image sequence emphasizes the development of pattern over time.

### III.

Continuing Yolaçan’s work with the Kayapó, Part III consists of an hour-long interview between Chief Tuire and Yolaçan, conducted in Kayapó language and Portuguese, with real-time translation by Tuire’s brother, and subtitled with English and Turkish translations by Yolaçan. This candid film eschews many of the constructs of ethnographic documentary filmmaking. Tuire appears seated in a simple chair in her village, while Yolaçan’s presence behind the camera, the translator’s interventions and perhaps omissions in the conversation, and the presence of other activity in the village are all evident in the extended Q&A section that concludes the film. While Yolaçan directs the conversation in the second half, Tuire clearly leads the film’s first section, boldly voicing her concerns and appealing forcefully to the

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member of the military dictatorship Michel Temer as president. Personal correspondence with the author, January–February, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Terence Turner, “The Kayapo Video Project: A Progress Report.” 1990. *CVA Review* (Commission on Visual Anthropology, Montreal) (Fall): 7–10. Reprinted in *Independent* (January–February 1991): 34–40. Cited in Terence Turner, “Representation, Polyphony, and the Construction of Power in a Kayapó Video” in *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation, and the State in Latin America*, edited by Kay B. Warren and Jean E. Jackson. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See Tuire in Pinar Yolaçan, *Tuire Kayapó (First Contact)*, 2021 and Terence Turner, “The Second Skin.” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 486–504. [First published in *Not work alone: A cross-cultural view of activities superfluous to survival*, edited by Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin. (London: Temple Smith, 1980) 112–140.]

<sup>8</sup> See Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics.” *Cultural Politics* 1: 1 (2005) 51–75.

international community to intervene in the plight of her community in the face of what she condemns as government corruption.

A striking moment in the film comes when Yolaçan asks Tuire about a famous photograph taken in her youth, before she became a chief. The photograph, taken during a press conference for the Altamira protest meeting between members of different Indigenous communities and engineers for the Belo Monte Dam (which would eventually devastate Kayapó territories),<sup>9</sup> captures a moment when the young Tuire lunges across a bargaining table, holding her machete to a male engineer's face. The image was circulated widely in the press at the time and one has the sense that Tuire might have intuitively masterminded the image at least in part as a savvy media stunt. That is, that she wielded her machete as she did, knowing that her gesture would be photographed by the assembled press, and knowing that the resulting body-image would travel far and wide in a way that her physical body might not. Yet, in response to Yolaçan's query, Tuire explains a slightly different motivation. She put her machete to this engineer because she wanted him to truly see her. "...I heard all of this and I said ... the day of the Altamira meeting I will look into the engineer's eyes. And he is going to see me."<sup>10</sup> By making herself into an image, she was also making herself into something more than an image: an outright demand to be seen.

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*Pinar Yolaçan: Body-Image* is curated by Katherine Behar, Associate Professor in the Fine and Performing Arts Department in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Baruch College, CUNY and is produced by the New Media Artspace Student Docent Team. The exhibition is made possible further by support from the Baruch Computing and Technology Center (BCTC), the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, and the Newman Library. All images appear courtesy of the artist.

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## Artist Bio

Born in Ankara, Turkey in 1981, Pinar Yolacan studied fashion at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and Fine Art Media in Chelsea School of Art before graduating from The Cooper Union with a BFA in 2004. Yolacan had solo shows at YKY in Istanbul, Finnish Museum of Photography in Helsinki, Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos, and Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm. Her work was included in important group shows such as *Turkish Realities; Positions in Contemporary Photography* from Turkey Fotografie Forum International, Frankfurt, *Tracking Traces* KIASMA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, *The Third ICP Triennial of Photography and Video* International Center of Photography, New York, *Istanbul Next Wave: Istanbul Modern Collection* Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, *Greater New York* MoMA PS1, NY. New York, *Vanitas; Fashion and Art* Bass Museum of Art, Miami, *Expanded Geographies* Lianzhou Photo Festival, Lianzhou, *Out of Focus* Saatchi Gallery, London, *Rites of Spring* CAMH, Houston, *The State of the Art Photography* NRW-Forum Dusseldorf. Since 1997, reviews about her work regularly appeared in *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *ArtReview*, *Bidoun*, *Dutch*, *Rolling*

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<sup>9</sup> For further information on the Altamira meeting, including footage of this scene, see *The Kayapo: Out of the Forest*, directed by Michael Beckham with Terence Turner (1989: Granada Television; Distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute).

<sup>10</sup> Pinar Yolaçan, *Tuire Kayapó (First Contact)*, 2021. English quote appears subtitled starting at 17:14. Accessed February 12, 2022, <https://youtu.be/AKj3BDfztq8?t=1034>.

*Stone* and *i-D* magazines. Yolacan's work is in the permanent collections of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Museum of Fine Art, Boston, KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki and International Center of Photography in New York. Yolacan lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.