

Press Review

Art Unlimited, İbrahim Cansızoglu, Summer 2024

Art unlimited

İKİ AYDA BİR YAYIMLANIR, PARA İLE SATILMAZ, TEMMUZ-AĞUSTOS 2024, SAYI: 82, LEYLÂ GEDİZ, FOTOĞRAF: BERK KIR



LEYLÂ GEDİZ

İbrahim Cansızoglu, *Odak: Resim* kapsamında sanatçıyla pratiğine dair konuştu

RABİH MROUÉ

Ayşe Draz, Beykoz Kundura'da oyunlarını sergileyen sanatçının pratiğine dair yazdı buluştu

LEVENT DOKUZER

Merve Akar Akgün, Zorlu PSM Genel Müdür Yardımcısı ile güncel kültür hayatını konuştu

MEHTAP BAYDU

Misal Adnan Yıldız, sanatçıyla Tarabya Kültür Akademisi'nde ürettiği işler hakkında konuştu



Leyla Gediz, Photo: Berk Kır

What makes *a painting*

Interview: İbrahim Cansızoglu
Photos: Berk Kır

İbrahim Cansızoglu's *Focus: Painting* interview series started in the fall of 2019. Many names who continue their production only through painting or prioritize painting in their art practice were the guests of this series. With artists such as Sarkis, İnci Furni, Evren Sungur, Tunca, Gökçen Cabadan, İhsan Oturmak and Nuri Kuzucan, we discussed both their own practices and the position of painting in local and international contexts. Over time, *Focus: Painting* started to become cover stories. We continue our journey, that started with Fulya Çetin, with Leylâ Gediz, whose works can also be seen at the exhibition *Painting Today* at Yapı Kredi Culture and Arts this summer

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Leylâ Gediz, Serpilen exhibition view, The Pill, Istanbul, 2017, Photo: Hasan Deniz

I remember talking to you about Lisbon when you were about to make the decision to move from Istanbul. On my first visit to Lisbon, I thought that the similarities mentioned by other Istanbul residents who went to see the city were true. The hilly streets of Lisbon overlooking the sea looked very similar to Istanbul. However, the fact that it was built on the shores of an ocean made Lisbon a very different place from Istanbul. The city had an air that was similar to Istanbul, but felt much more spacious than Istanbul. Speaking in the context of your painting, what kind of mental space did Lisbon open up for you and how did the process of being accepted in art circles in Portugal progress for you?

I remember we talked about this similarity! I told you that Istanbul and Lisbon are nothing alike! First of all, I am an Istanbul lover. Not only me, the whole world admires Istanbul! How many cities can hold a candle to Istanbul? Okay, Lisbon also faces the water, but the city doesn't work both ways. When you cross the bridge, it is a different city. Almada, a city that Lisboners don't really like and even despise a bit... An ordinary Lisboner crosses Almada only when he wants to go to the beaches along the Caparica coast. There is also maritime traffic between the two cities, but where are the city line ferries and their puffing decks? The best way to experience Istanbul in all its splendor is to take a ferry and sit outside! On the Lisbon-Almada line, there is no deck, not even a window. Do you know what I mean? The only thing that makes you think of Istanbul while living in Lisbon is seeing the river, the opposite coast and the bridge from the top of the city. Otherwise Lisbon is nothing like Istanbul. Of course Lisbon will be more spacious, the area and population speak for themselves. But there is also a third factor: light! We are already talking about one of the most sunlit cities in Europe. But the reason why Lisbon shines so brightly is the cobblestones on the ground. The twisted limestones echo like a disco ball. Imagine a light ringing and singing in the air. For a painter, a photographer or a cameraman, Lisbon is heaven!

I see everything much better in the light. I feel mentally refreshed. When I was in Turkey, there was a curtain in front of my eyes. A monotonous filter that monotonizes everything, like a prison. I had to get rid of it; otherwise my art would become rote and boring. That's why I left my country, ready to start from scratch in a place where I didn't know anyone, where I didn't even speak the language. Of course, I didn't know how hard it would be... I don't know how I endured the first three years, what I held on to. Maybe I gritted my teeth so as not to be called a "lonely failure."

I'm not someone who gives up easily anyway. But no matter how hard I tried, I had to wait four years to step on stage. The pandemic was behind us. Everyone was mobilized to revive the market, new expansions, business lines, opportunity campaigns, announcement after announcement were coming. The art world would not be left behind! One day, at a meeting of friends, I heard a call for support for artists being mentioned. One of the friends who was talking fervently stopped, turned to me and said, "Everyone is applying, you should apply too." I immediately took action. Later I heard that Margarida Mendes backed my project, she convinced the jury. Thanks to the Gulbenkian Foundation! When I received the news, I was aware that this was a milestone. For the first time, Portugal was opening its hand and giving me something. I savored this moment to the fullest, celebrated it with my circle. Everyone from friends and family got involved, the venue was found, the paintings were finished, installed, the book was prepared, interviews were organized... In other words, it was a complete exhibition.

I had spent close to two years in the studio with some of the paintings I showed, and the isolation of the pandemic allowed me to give them my full attention. So, they were very serene. I would say meditative. They were based on delicate equations, like the anatomy of fragility, and they contained metaphysical games/propositions that only the language of painting made possible. Technically, none of them were finished. Over time, this state turned into a perception of fate. They were comfortable as if they had found themselves in the ambiguity of unfinishedness. I saw that there was no point in pushing, so I finally accepted the paintings as they were and signed the backs.

In the following year, with the initiative of my gallery, I had exhibitions in Paris and London. At the end of this work, I started to receive exhibition offers from Portugal, one after the other, which I couldn't even imagine. Of course, I couldn't say no to any of them, after all, I've been waiting for this moment for years! So, inevitably, I found myself in the middle of a terrible work traffic. I got into a lot of stress. As the exhibitions opened, naturally, my visibility increased and my circle became wider, but frankly, I couldn't pay much attention to the environment in the rush to work on projects such as exhibitions and books. For example, how many exhibitions have I missed in the past months, exhibitions of artists I love and follow... This is unheard of me! In this new busy schedule, because I don't have as much time to paint as I used to, my solutions to technical problems also change, my

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expectations change, I rethink about aesthetics, form, tactics, everything, I make decisions and then go back to the painting. If the painting goes back to its usual way, I have to stop and listen. Before the end of 2024, I will have new exhibitions in Istanbul and Portugal. I miss painting without fighting with myself, not with panic, but with serenity. I hope I will find the recipe!

In 2022, at the *Cosa Mentale* exhibition you organized at L'Atlas Gallery in Paris, you exhibited your recent works on displacement and migration. I think the phrase "archaeology of emotions" in the exhibition's introductory text makes it easier to understand the networks of relationships you have established between everyday objects and still life, as well as autobiography and portraiture. Would you like to talk about the perspective of this exhibition?

A poetic exhibition text. It likens me to an archaeologist studying "slices of everyday life" and more concretely claims that I am working on an excavation to unearth the emotions emanating from these slices. Really, kudos to whoever wrote it; isn't this Expressionism? I didn't realize I was so close to expressionism! Since my figurative expression/figure language is based on photography, I have always associated myself with the Realist movement. It's a historical mistake for someone who drifts in the whirlpool of emotions, but this self-satisfied version of Realism is absurd anyway! Anyway, the author is right! Because both still life and portrait are carriers. What they carry is important - and that is emotions. If I go further, I can also say this: Emotions are what make a painting. Going back to *Cosa Mentale*, it was an exhibition where I questioned the relationship between ground and figure. In most of my paintings, I constructed this relationship as an illusion without reality. In cases of displacement, displacement or migration, there is a landslide. Can the migrant's relationship with the land be the same as that of the ancient citizen? Isn't the landless person liberated to the extent that he or she is freed from gravity? To summarize, the relationship between the ground and the figure, which is one of the fundamental issues of painting, is as much political as it is formal. When we first met to talk about this interview, you were packing up your belongings and notes from the house you once used as a studio in Istanbul. After a long separation and moving to a new city, what did this retrospective make you think, feel and what did it trigger for you? I had embarked on quite a feverish spring cleaning, and it was a good thing! In September 2017, when we pulled the door shut and moved to Lisbon, I left behind my studio as it was. Of course, I've had some minor tidying up attempts here and there, but this time was different. It's like reformatting the computer and updating the applications. First of all, I got rid of all the unnecessary

stuff from the babyhood of our 9-year-old son, including the furniture. Don't worry, I won't actually list all the junk I've collected here, but I'll get to the point: old images. The reason I went through them was to find a favorite, award-winning painting of mine from my student years. This painting is a thin-long vertical rectangle. At the bottom of the painting there are some regular stripes that can be considered an abstract composition. Towards the middle of the painting these stripes form the outline of a wardrobe. The door of the closet is not fully closed, it is slightly ajar, but not enough to show the inside of the closet. Towards the top of the painting, one can clearly see a black suitcase lying on its side on top of the closet. Just as the lower part of the painting/the buttonholes of the closet was abstract, the top of the painting is surreal because there is a blue sky when we should see a ceiling. If the closet is a pedestal, the suitcase is a sculpture and it seems to be located in the open air, in a public space or on a metaphysical plane (like an ancient city). Anyway, we were talking about displacement, migration... My migration life started when I went to London to study at university. This is a painting of my longing for home, for my country, for the sky that surrounds my country. The suitcase is an inviting, seductive object insofar as it signals that I can pack up and leave at any moment, but it is also a cruel object insofar as it keeps feeding this impossible dream. It fascinates me that it's been 25 years since I painted it, but it hasn't lost any of its relevance and freshness!

In *The Crab Trainer*, you depict your son Anka standing with playful curiosity among the cardboard boxes that we often see in your recent works. The references to and interrogations of Turkey's canvas painting tradition, which began in the Ottoman period and continues to the present day, contain a plurality and depth that a careful observer of your practice will be confronted with in many different dimensions. What would you like to say about the creative process of this work, which indirectly references Osman Hamdi's *Tortoise Trainer*, and the different ways in which it has been exhibited so far?

The Crab Trainer was exhibited once in Vienna and appeared in the printed media. But there was something about it that didn't feel right, so when it came back from Vienna, I reworked the painting. The painting was exhibited in its renewed, final form in Paris this time and then it left my hands. I prefer to have finished a painting in my head before I start it, because then my work is easier and my mind is at peace. That's what happened with this one too. When I started working, there was no figure in the composition, our boy. I was playing with pieces of paper, cardboard and styrofoam. Play is the first and most important stage of my creative

Leyla Gediz, *The Crab Trainer*,
160 x 180 x 4,5 cm, Oil on linen,
2022 Photo: João Neves



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process. At this stage I question the nature of matter. I approach the objects I choose as building blocks or theater props, and with them I experiment with all kinds of architectural, spatial, relational (aesthetic) and theatrical (narrative) possibilities (whatever my imagination allows). On one such day, I was turning over a piece of cardboard when I realized that from a certain angle it looked like a crab. As the game continued, I thought of my son. The previous week I had taken a photo of him by the sea looking at the potholes. I thought that if I replaced the pothole with a crab, the two of them would talk. It was natural that I remembered *The Tortoise Trainer*. How many paintings are there in which a human figure standing in the center observes animal figures walking on the ground? It was funny, the similarity between the misery of the tortoises and the trinkets I had made for myself. Just as *The Tortoise Trainer* can be interpreted as a self-portrait, *The Crab Trainer* is of course not simply a painting of my son Anka; it is a self-portrait in the form of Anka. And so the painting was finished in my mind and its name was given. *The Crab Trainer* brought me together with Osman Hamdi; if he were in my place, he would have looked at that crab and laughed. This is friendship, something we need like water, like air; a friend who understands our situation, who laughs with us and cries with us, even if he lived in a different era! I had such contact with Hâle Asaf, Ercüment Kalmuk and Philip Guston... May their souls rest in peace!

I know that at first you were not very warm to the habit of evaluating a painter's works within the framework of different periods in art history studies. From where you stand today, what do the concepts of period and style mean to you in the context of painting?

Yes, I really hated this thing called style! When I think back to my twenties, of course I find myself a bit naive, but I am not totally wrong in my reaction. At the end of the day, the history of art is a cultural construction shaped by economic, political and social preferences. Like every pile, it has an overwhelming power. For example, it can exclude dark-skinned people or women for centuries. It determines what is art and what is not. As you said, looking at art production in terms of periods and style has become a habit, a tradition. These concepts may work for art historians, but for the artist, every repetition is a sanction, every concept is an imposition. If the artist produces what art history writes instead of the artist producing and writing art history, a new page will never be added to art history. The way to enter art history is paradoxical, that is, it requires thinking and producing outside art history. To summarize, none of the art historical concepts work for the artists, they only tire their jaw!

I think only those who have visited the house you once used as a studio in Istanbul have had the chance to see some of the canvases you produced when you were still a student. In these canvases, it is possible to sense some of the approaches that would later form the basis of your painting practice, such as monumentalizing furniture and presenting the landscape in an abstract order. If you were to exhibit these early works today, how would you choose to do it?

First of all, I want you to know that I don't show those paintings to everyone! But I couldn't get enough of looking at them with you, your observations and observations were extremely valuable for me too. As for your question, dear Emre Baykal actually gave a very good answer to this question within the scope of the *OyunBu* exhibition he curated at ARTER in 2022. Again, on his initiative, he exhibited three paintings from my student years, which have been in the collection since 2016, in a group of their own, one above the other, in a marvelous way. I couldn't have done better. I would have exhibited them again in groups, close to each other. Maybe I would have laid one on the floor and leaned the other against the wall, just to detach it from the wall. As you have identified, it is quite easy and enjoyable to imagine those depicting furniture-like objects side by side with my current paintings due to their thematic kinship. As for landscapes... I have not painted landscapes for a long time, I wonder why? Could it be that I have forgotten the distance and lost my wide-sightedness due to focusing on the near? Should we necessarily understand the outdoors when we say landscape? Don't the exhibitions I set up constitute a mental landscape? What if a giant painting covers the entire field of vision like a theater stage, even if it has no natural motifs, is it not a landscape? I think what I would do is to place my most abstract and poetic landscapes as stops between my newly designed painting collectives, to use them as promenades.

In 2017, in your exhibition *Serpilen* at The Pill, you had a work in which you depicted a man examining a canvas he was holding in his hand. As part of the exhibition, you also produced a poster with this work and you gave me one of them as a gift. I hung this poster on a wall in my house. That rectangular strip separating the man looking at the canvas; and the canvas, the same color as the background of the painting, had a great effect on me from the first moment I saw it. I don't remember how long I watched that image. Looking at it from today's point of view, I realize that this painting is the basis for my five-year-long *Focus: Painting* interview series. Where did you encounter the image in this work and how did you decide to paint it?

Are you serious? What a nice compliment; I'm so happy that my painting inspired you! Now it makes sense that it's my turn in the interview series! Let me put it this way; I have a large family. We read a lot and every house has a library that is always overflowing. When a house or office closes (due to the death of the landlord, a house being rented out without furniture, a workplace closing/moving), the remaining belongings are distributed. At such times, my studio is not forgotten and whatever is thought to be useful to me, is mailed to me. One day, at the door of my studio, I found 15-20 burgundy bound books, A3 sized and about 10 cm thick (you guess the weight), lying on top of each other in columns. These were Life magazines that a family member had collected over the years. Although I can't remember the exact date range of the collection, let's say post-World War II. Of course, I took them all in, and then I went through each page one by one, marking the pages



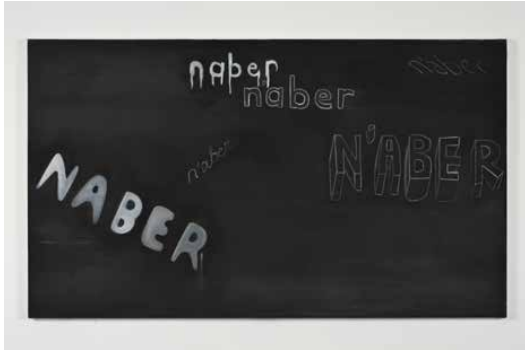
Leylâ Gediz, *Mnemonic*, 170 x 100 x 4 cm, Oil on linen, 2022
Photo: João Neves

with the images that interested me. The man you are talking about was an expert. The painting he was holding was a Christian-themed, classical painting that had changed hands for the first time in many years. Unfortunately, I couldn't memorize the name of the painter, but the painting had been auctioned and appreciated in value. The man was approaching the painting with great seriousness. However, the painting I saw did not have a number, all paintings of the period resemble each other; it was impossible to detect the difference in such a small black-and-white reproduction. I thought, what can I give the man? So I replaced the painting with an abstract scribble/stain. I was amused by the idea of making his job difficult. What I didn't tell him at the time was that this image was right in the middle of the layout in the magazine, cut off in the printing and only reunited in the index. The man was on the left page and the image in his hand was on the right page. When I opened the book wide open to scan the image, this disconnect became apparent, that line you see in between. When I transferred the image to the canvas, I had two options: transfer this line or close it. It seemed more interesting to me to transfer it, because if you didn't know the story, you would surely trip over that gap and fall into it - like you did! I did it right! It is always necessary to leave something intriguing in a painting, an incompleteness, a riddle... These things trigger the viewer's imagination, give them the possibility of interpretation, open up space. In short, they involve the viewer in the painting!

Although autobiography is always a constitutive element in your work, you manage to make paintings that are not only introverted, but on the contrary, deeply connected with the viewer. I think one of your most extraordinary works is *What's up* (2009) considering the distances between your life, painting and the viewer that you transform constantly. How did this painting come about?

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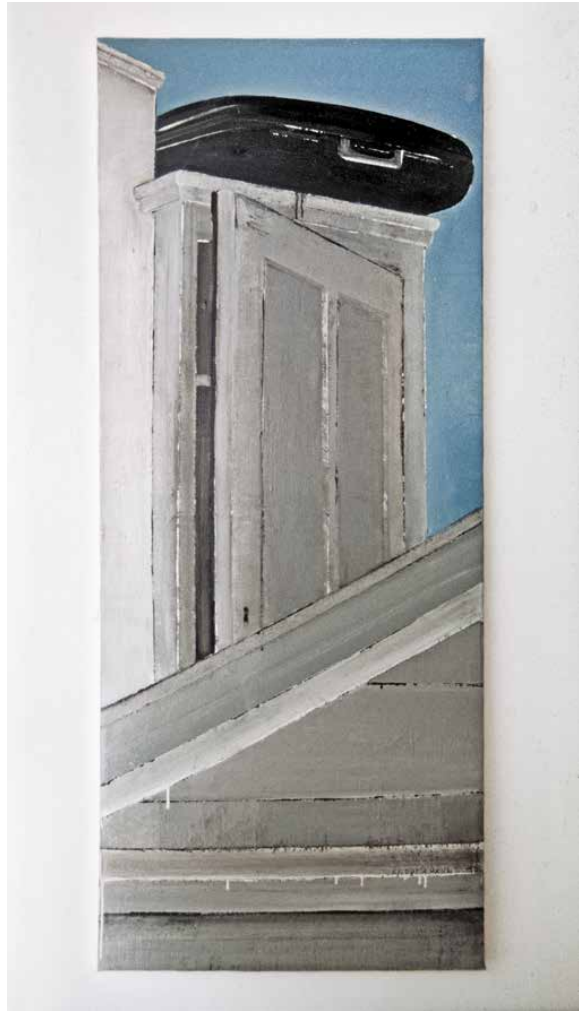
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I can't believe you asked about *What's up*. I thought very few people knew or remembered that painting, let alone dwell on it. I don't remember when I exhibited *What's up*, or if I exhibited it. Where could you have seen it? Maybe on my website? If so, come to me again one day in Istanbul and I will show you the original. It is a painting I love very much. My paintings with words on them already have a special place in my heart. Do you know what is the coolest thing about writing words on a canvas with paint? Within the framework of the autonomy principle of painting, even if the world knows that you wrote the words, the painting itself seems to be speaking. I remember a similar feeling from my school years: When I was a student, there were blackboards and chalk in the classrooms. Many classes were held in the same classroom, but for some classes we had to vacate the classroom. Classes such as sports, painting and music had their own halls, and the biology and chemistry laboratories were separate. Sometimes we would leave these classes and come back to the classroom to find notes written on the chalkboard and pictures drawn in our absence. Most of the time the content was deer, that is, jokes that we all knew. But on rare occasions, what was waiting for us on the blackboard would really puzzle us, and we would be stunned and bewildered by it. I've had such attempts, I've drawn pictures on the blackboards of other classes, I've quoted song lyrics or written poems. In 2009, inspired by these times, I made a series of works with anonymous messages. *What's up* is one of them. As in the whole series, there is an uncanny in this work. The painting clings to a mold that affirms the existence of the other, that initiates a conversation by asking how you are doing, but instead of using it for its intended purpose, it toys with it. It twists and turns it, multiplies it, disguises it... In this way, a line of questioning ceases to be a means of communication and turns into a dark parody of itself. It was a period when I was playing with fire a bit, but I think the painting conveys the feeling of isolation quite well, even revitalizes it. I'm not sure if it connects with the viewer or not, to be honest, but this is how it makes me feel.

You are among the artists of the exhibition *Painting Today*, which opened last May at YKKS. With which work are you participating in this exhibition and what would you like to say about the exhibition?

Ah, I would like to thank dear Didem Yazıcı and dear Burcu Çimen for this beautiful initiative and Tülay Güngen for embracing us all! On the occasion of the opening of this exhibition, meeting them, their valuable technical team members, my dear artist friends and the Istanbul art audience that I have been longing for - especially in the heart of Beyoğlu... It was like a dream! Who knows how long it had been since I had participated in an exhibition of this caliber, which deals with painting as a discipline in itself and explores its different applications! Wouldn't it be nice if such exhibitions were repeated at regular intervals and became a tradition? The synergy of the crowd that flocked to YKKS on the opening day alone said it all. What should we do if not be grateful to the host institution for bringing hundreds of people together under the same roof in one of the most controversial squares of the city and hosting them generously? We should embrace these institutions and keep them alive together. Of course, there will be aspects to criticize in the selection and presentation, language and expression of the exhibition! Let's criticize, let's shape, let's make the second, the third, always better, more comprehensive, more coherent and exciting exhibitions. Because this is good for us. For my part, I tried to bring as much of my practice as possible to the exhibition. I have an installation in front of the security gate as soon as you step into the building. This work, titled *Intro II*, is a semi-permeable curtain/fly screen covering the doorway and consists of standard, one-way lined canvas strips. Camouflaging the security passage, the installation instead allows the visitor to come into contact with the canvas first. On the other hand, in this spilling, fringed form, *Intro II* is in a pleasing affinity with İlhan Koman's Mediterranean sculpture and winks at the Şadi Çalık sculpture in the square, which is also based on the repetition of sections of another material (stainless steel). You know how important these friendships are for me. Inside, of course, I am in contact with the other artworks in the exhibition. My wall is in a very public place. My curators' desire was for me to take an alternative stance as much as possible. So I covered the wall with Photoshop's infinite background and presented my paintings on this wallpaper in order to em-



Leylâ Gediz, *What's up*, Oil on canvas, 70 x 120 x 2,5 cm, Photo: Nathalie Barki

Leylâ Gediz, *Suitcase*, Enamel on canvas, Winner of Still Life Competition, The Slade School of Fine Art, London, 1996

Leylâ Gediz, *Untitled (Homage à Guston)*, 40 x 40 x 4 cm, Oil on linen, 2022

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Leylâ Gediz, *Eu Estou Aqui* exhibition view,
Curator: Isabel Carlos, 119 Marvila Studios, Lisbon, 2024

Leylâ Gediz, *Missing Cat*, 50 x 40 x 4 cm,
Oil on linen, 2024



phasize the concern for process that underlies my work. Finally, as part of the exhibition panels, I gave a reading. In this, in memory of my beloved Komet, I performed the poems I selected from his book *Olabilir Olabilir*, published in 2007.

From the very beginning we talked about publishing this interview in a summer issue. When we talk about summer, it is impossible not to remember the *Sahibinden Sayfiye* exhibition organized at Depo in 2014, curated by Borga Kantürk, in which you participated with an installation. Would you like to talk about the projects you will continue to work on this summer?

In *Sahibinden Sayfiye*, I brought together two of my works. One of them was my sky series titled *Five Days in Buenos Aires*, which I painted by observing the weather during my visit to the city (*buones aires* means good weather). The second was my portable studio installation, which we positioned close to the only airy window of the Depo. As a reference to being a painter in the countryside, I had set up my painting *Butterfly*, which I was working on at the time, on a very light easel, with my tiny work table right next to it, the plastic soap box that inspired *Butterfly* on the table, the wet paint palette, a few brushes, the metal turpentine bowl and everything else. It was a complete scene and gave me the feeling that I would come back and continue painting at any moment. If you ask me where I will set up my easel this summer, I think I will spend the whole summer in Lisbon. We are currently working on a monograph with my gallery The Pill and we are planning to launch the book in September with a boutique exhibition. For reasons beyond our control, it could be October or November, it's not finalized at the moment. In mid-July, I will have a solo project titled *Tracey Leaving* at an artist initiative called Figura Avuls in Lisbon and I will be doing a prose-poetry reading performance. For the new season, I have shaken hands with a gallery called Dialogue in Lisbon; they have given me a *carte blanche*, let's see, it's not time to concentrate on that exhibition yet, but I will continue the way I started this year, that is, they will all be projects where I will work on painting and writing together. This is what excites me the most right now: the dance of painting and poetry! 🐾