

Istanbul Modern presents the most comprehensive exhibition of Şahin Kaygun, the artist who provided the first examples of an interdisciplinary approach in photography

The Pioneer Of Turkey's Contemporary Photography

Istanbul Modern Photography Gallery presents the most comprehensive exhibition of Şahin Kaygun, the pioneer of an interdisciplinary approach to photography in Turkey, from **November 20, 2014** to **February 15, 2015**. The self-titled exhibition **Şahin Kaygun** extends from the artist's experimental photographic Polaroid works to his cinematic productions as well as to his late works in which he gradually exceeds the boundary between photography and painting. Curated by **Sena Çakırkaya**, the exhibition includes **89 works produced by Kaygun from 1978 to 1991** and traces the technical and conceptual transformation of the artist's working practices and photography series.

Kaygun implemented new and astounding applications in relation to photographic techniques by utilizing the boundless opportunities presented by creativity and brought together different disciplines such as painting, graphic arts and cinema under 1980s culture of photography at a time when the concept of interdisciplinary studies was yet to take its place in Turkey's agenda.

Şahin Kaygun, who lost his life in 1992 at the age of 41, researched the possibilities of the expression of a new and distinct language of art through meticulous working practices. He challenged the boundaries between different techniques through a contemporary interpretation and with his protean, pioneering and creative identity and his incessant concern for surpassing his abilities. Every single work that he created with an innovative outlook constituted a new area of thinking and production in relation to photography. In photographer **Orhan Cem Çetin's** view, Şahin Kaygun *"deeply influenced the young generation of artists with his inspiring works, singlehandedly blazed an important trail for photographers who produced unconventional works, set an example with his determined and stubborn attitude, enabled new approaches to be discussed and paved the way for photography to be exhibited in galleries."* On the other hand, photographer and writer **Merih Akoğul** emphasizes that what Şahin Kaygun wanted to achieve in his photography was to share his fantasy world on a visual plane through a genuine and new aesthetic understanding: *"Everyday life, as we all live it, has similar reverberations in our subconscious; yet when these merged with the art of Şahin Kaygun, they were transformed into a different dimension in line with his aesthetic style. Kaygun produced his works independently of any school or artistic movement. He had his own distinctive approaches while also preserving a compositional integrity. "Through a fantastical insight, he made all his impressions relating to life visible."*

Siding with the idea of "different branches of art interacting with one another" Şahin Kaygun attempted to add his inner world to the photographs he shot and attained a brand-new language by experimenting with the new, the previously unseen and unfamiliar. In Kaygun's oeuvre collages, various symbols, fantastical constructs and a search for surreal spaces were accommodated in an expressionist attitude and a diligent graphic disposition.

In works which he probed the theme of life and death, Kaygun reflected his distinct view of the world and his understanding of aesthetics through symbols and images. After all, it was Kaygun who so aptly stated: “I’d rather create the incident than adopt the approach of a documentarist. The artist should create his epoch instead of documenting it.” He aspired to sustain the continuity of the effect of photographs with his approach as an experimental researcher, and for the photographs to, in turn, generate new meanings and diversify the ideas behind them.

Kaygun’s Creative Process and Films

The idea for organizing an exhibition of Şahin Kaygun’s work emerged after a detailed study of the artist’s archive. Over twenty-thousand negatives and slides from the archive of his family were scanned, an inventory of his works in collections was collated and twenty-nine collectors of his works were contacted after a long and diligent period of research. The exhibition showcases the original prints of Kaygun’s works from ten different collections. Bringing together photographs that emerged during the archival research with Kaygun’s late works, the exhibition also provides the opportunity to observe Şahin Kaygun’s creative process. The screen credits of the film *A Widow*, of which Şahin Kaygun was the artistic director and in which his photographs were used as well as the originals of the photographs; the film *Full Moon* and slides of the shots from the film are also displayed in the exhibition space.

Throughout the duration of the Şahin Kaygun exhibition, films such as *Afife Jale* and *Full Moon* directed by the artist, who viewed cinema as the meeting-point of all arts and as the subject-area in which he stated he could most intensely reflect his individuality, as well as Atif Yılmaz’s films *A Widow*, *Vasfiye is Her Name* and *Oh Belinda* and Ömer Kavur’s *Motherland Hotel* in which Kaygun was the artistic director will also be screened at Istanbul Modern Cinema.

The exhibition catalogue includes an assessment of the period in which Şahin Kaygun produced his works, his influence on Turkey’s understanding of photography, the transformation of his experimental approach over time and on the cinematography of Şahin Kaygun. The assessment that was conducted in the form of question and answer was gleaned from the news-clippings found in the artist’s archive, interviews conducted with him and the views of the professionals currently working in the subject area of photography. The catalogue also features an article about Şahin Kaygun by Merih Akoğul.

Şahin Kaygun’s Artistic Adventure

In Şahin Kaygun’s black and white period in the 1970s graphic tendencies and documentary photographs with intense portraiture generally come to the forefront. The forms of expression and techniques he used from the 1980s onwards connote a striking change. This change manifests itself in important areas such as photographic language, interpretation, and theme alongside his forms of expression.

It was also at this time that Kaygun made serious initial attempts to use Polaroid film. By interfering with the material right from the start and drawing on it he created an unfamiliar imagery on the photographs. The artist opened the first Polaroid exhibition in Turkey in 1984 and transformed the material into a tool and revealed “worlds of his own construct” above and beyond the visuality that photographs technically offer. Following the exhibition, the artist became the first photographer to receive the Ankara Art Foundation Award for which he competed alongside artists such as Erol Akyavaş and Eren Eyüboğlu. This paved the way for the precepts of the award to be changed which was a result of Kaygun’s endeavors to bring together different branches of art. Kaygun’s Polaroids in the International Polaroid Collection are in the WestLicht Museum of Photography in Vienna, who purchased the collection in 2011.

Kaygun continued using Polaroid while also testing out different materials. When methods inherent to photography were united with painterly intervention and a fictional narrative, works that were external to strict

definitions and that bordered between photography and painting emerged. During this process collages, fantastical installations, and symbolic narratives began to take place in the artist's works with an expressionist approach. Existential subjects such as humanity, life, and death that can be observed in his early photographs gain heightened symbolism and continue to potently appear in his works. In his recurring themes such as the female body, dolls, sea shells and dead bird, reverie and reality are intertwined. The further his subjects are removed from reality, the more the layers and experimental interventions in his photographs gradually increase.

Kaygun's last series titled, *In the Ancient Seas* is founded upon the sculptures the artist photographed at the British Museum. He draws figures of the ancient times into the tales of his self-constructed world *"with the excitement of setting forth on new voyages, discovering uncharted lands and creating new worlds filled with mystery."* Kaygun adds: *"Every little sculpture or figure takes you to a different realm. All this allows the emergence of other images in your mind. The people who made these sculptures, the periods in which they lived, those civilizations and the stories of the people whose sculptures were made... All that has mixed into the stories I ascribed to them and have transformed into a new set of stories... Thus, they have become the protagonists of my stories."*

"Smitten with Cinema"

Starting with photography and intimately kneading the visual arts together with all kinds of different materials throughout his artistic life, Kaygun also steered towards cinema which he referred to as being smitten with because it brought together almost all branches of art. Şahin Kaygun also wrote scripts and in some of the films he directed, he came up with certain implementations that emphasized the importance of the role of the "art director" during the production of a film. He directed *Afife Jale* in 1987 and *Full Moon* in 1988. *Full Moon* was selected to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival and was one of the seven films that were included in *Semaine de la Critique*. Critic Alain Bellet commented, "Folkloric Turkey, laden with exoticism and good feelings, leaves the stage here," and delivered the idea that Kaygun's film dealt with the problematique of mere existence in a magnificent manner.