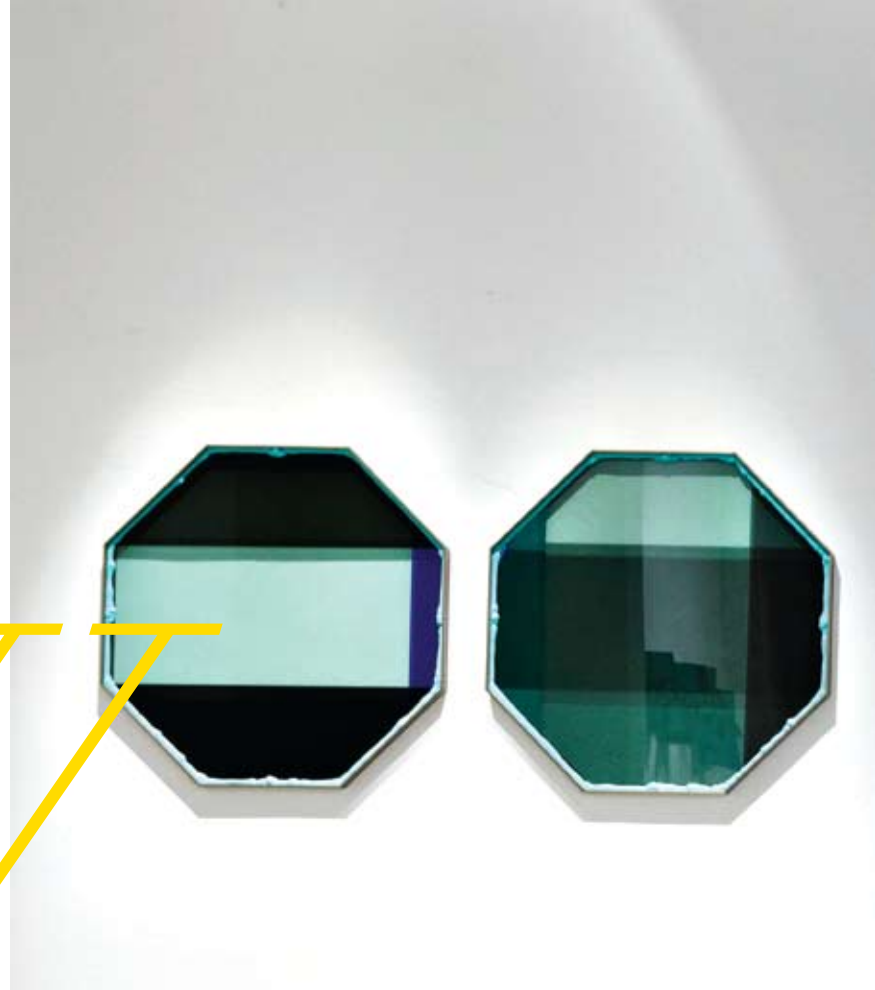






FAR FROM  
*THE MADDING*  
CROWD  
:MENTALKLINIK

Husband-and-wife team :mentalkLINIK operate on the fringes of the Istanbul art establishment, challenging formal artistic representation through often fantastical and cutting-edge works. **Ayla Jean Yackley** meets Yasemin Baydar and Birol Demir in Istanbul.



When Turkish art duo :mentalkLINIK opened the exhibition *That's F\*\*\*\*\*g Awesome* last year in a former factory in a working-class Istanbul district, enthusiastic residents flocked to the space for a peek. "They came to wish us well, thinking it was a hospital that was opening," says Yasemin Baydar, one half of :mentalkLINIK, which also includes her husband Birol Demir. Both are used to causing confusion. After insomniacs mistakenly came to the first show *Sleep* in 2000, Demir and Baydar felt compelled to find an institute for sleep disorders that could help them. A year later, parents showed up with small children to the exhibit, *Game*.

Misunderstood by the masses and the Istanbul art elite alike, from its name onwards, :mentalkLINIK confounds. "If you look at us from the perspective of the Turkish art scene, what we do is madness. We take our time, we don't follow a schedule, our shows can last a couple of weeks or as long as two years," says Demir. "You have to immerse yourself in :mentalkLINIK to understand it. It's not clear from the outside; we keep the window onto our world shut. We are trying to create an inner world that is separate from the real one," adds Baydar.



## ABSTRACTED AND OVERSIZED

Most of their collectors are in Europe or the Middle East. :mentalkLINIK has yet to find as large a following on its home turf, where figurative and decorative techniques still hold sway, five centuries after the first Ottoman miniatures. "We want to open a space for abstract thinking. That's something that collectors here are not used to," says Baydar. Also vexing is :mentalkLINIK's embrace of mass production and anonymity. It is left up to the viewer to decide whether what it does is art or not. In 2003 :mentalkLINIK produced giant sticks of chewing gum, called *Mimesis*, which the couple sold for about \$6 each. One could chew the gum or save it for posterity.

:mentalkLINIK offers few hints about the artists' origins; the usual tropes about identity that Turks are accustomed to seeing are absent. "History, memory and identity dominate here, but we don't believe in that. Our take on history is different, and so we are outsiders," says Baydar. "The world we have created has always been disconnected and fantastical." The closest :mentalkLINIK comes to saluting the homeland is when it needles



stereotypes. In *Untitled 152* from 2011, a hand-woven Oriental woollen rug is drained of its colours and pierced by brass studs. The patterns are authentic but form an asymmetric jumble of symbols and regional motifs. It's an urban take on the most rural of Anatolian traditions, masculinity spiking a feminine craft. More typically, :mentalKLINIK exists in the Pop Art historical space. They often recycle and remix recognis-

able works by other artists. *Moët* from 2011 is an homage to Claes Oldenburg's small-made-big monumentalism. The two oversized aluminium muselets from champagne bottles neatly echo the Swedish-American sculptor's rendering of a discarded object at a moment frozen forever. The scale makes it more profound than the off-screen revelry that the champagne is meant to lubricate.

Opening spread: *Slider-1101*. 2011. Glass, micro-layered polyester films and anodised aluminium. Four pieces, 103 x 203 cm each. Unique piece. Photography by Griduo.

Facing page: *Superhero 04*. 2010. Stuffed toy teddy bear (1925). Fibre Epoxy. 26 x 26 x 35 cm. Unique piece. Photography by Mustafa Nurdogdu.

This page: *Double Cherry*. 2011. Aluminium cast and high gloss spray paint finish. 117 x 72 x 170 cm. Photography by Ahmet Ünver.

**:mentalKLINIK's work [is] darkly humorous, self-contained and as much concerned with design as with content.**





This page, above: *Bias 01*. 2009. Anodic oxidation aluminum and liquid polymer resin. 16 x 18 x 415 cm. Unique piece. Photography by Griduo.

Below: *She's Awfully Beautiful* (left) and *He's Disgustingly Handsome* (right). Both 2011. Nails and nail holders. Variable dimensions. Photography by Ahmet Ünver.

Facing page: *Moët-1101/1102*. 2011. Aluminium. 80 x 56 x 77 cm each. Unique piece. Photography by Reha Arcan.

Heretics, it has been said, are the only remedy against intellectual entropy. *Puff*, from 2009, takes the absurdist's view of our inevitable decline. Eight hockey-puck-shaped, robotic vacuum cleaners glide across a hexagonal black stage, sucking up the glitter that is periodically ejected like cascades of water from fountain spouts. Again and again, *ad nauseum*, the vacuums undertake their Sisyphean task. :mentalkLINIK illuminates the stage with banks of miniature floodlights, as if the audience is observing an experiment and the sleek robots are animals in the lab. (This is where the 'clinic' part of the moniker becomes clear). Like the shoal of vacuum cleaners in Joseph Beuys's 1969 piece *The Pack*, the inherent silliness of the appliance – their odd shapes, the frantic noise they make – is a reminder of the fallacy that they liberate us from the drudgery of everyday life. Quite the contrary, we are trapped by mundanity and pointlessness. *Puff* is also beautiful. It is typical of much of :mentalkLINIK's work: darkly humorous, self-contained and as much concerned with design as with content.

## MAKING MAGIC

"Their work is like a disco ball, different facets that are all connected together. As the ball turns, it makes magic," says Jérôme Sans, the French curator who put together *That's F\*\*\*\*\*g Awesome*. "The work is droll, light; it can look very playful and fun, like a party. At the same time, it is violent, very abrasive, very questioning of the world we live in." Sans first encountered :mentalkLINIK while strolling down a Hong Kong street, when he literally stopped in his tracks after spotting its work on the wall of a gallery. "I was totally fascinated," he says. Meeting the duo only confirmed his interest: "They are very exciting. They are the new emerging artists of their generation. They use a Pop vocabulary that gives their work a relationship with different references and backgrounds. At the same time, it's



**“:mentalkLINIK is the third person in our relationship, which allows us to create something distinct from ourselves.”**

not a simple reverence for the past. For me their work is highly actual. They are opening the door of tomorrow.”

Sans and :mentalkLINIK quickly agreed to work together, and *That's F\*\*\*\*\*g Awesome* opened in September 2011. The pop-up exhibit in a section of the 30,000 square-metre old Hasköy Yarn Factory on the banks of the Golden Horn featured some 35 pieces of :mentalkLINIK's work from the last decade and drew 1500 people in the month it opened. Sans insisted it not be called a retrospective but an introspective, a view onto the inner workings of :mentalkLINIK. Like the name of the exhibit, the show was a mix of oxymora and paradoxes. The 2011 works

*She's Awfully Beautiful* and *He's Disgustingly Handsome* use two quirks of the English language written large in nails hammered into the wall. The *Faker* series, also in the show from 2011, are more sober, hyper-modernised Rothko-esque works made of glass coated in coloured film and framed with a tough-as-bone anodised liquid resin that Baydar and Demir concocted in an Istanbul chemical lab.

“The show was made to look flawless, like a product right out of its package, something that excites you and prompts you to ask, ‘how was this made?’ The gadget aesthetic is very important,” adds Baydar. “Art is consumed. We don't see a problem in addressing the audience as con-





This page above and below (detail): *Untitled 152*. 2011. Wool, handwoven carpet and high polished bronze. 169 x 237 cm. Unique piece. Photography by Kuntay Alpman.

Facing page: *Whiff*. 2010. Single channel video with colour and no sound. Variable dimensions. Two plus one artist's proof. Photography by Kuntay Alpman.



sumers. At this point, to say art and consumption are distinct is rather naïve. We tread the line between creating works of art and making products," ventures Demir.

*That's F\*\*\*\*\*g Awesome* coincided with the 12th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, now one of the biggest events in the art world. The Biennial Baydar argues, has become preoccupied with the themes of identity, history and memory that :mentalkLINIK eschews. The duo doesn't take its cue just from the art world, anyway. Baydar and Demir are avid readers, devouring books and articles on science and technology, fashion and philosophy. Curiosity informs their work. "They are in a back-and-forth with so many disciplines because Contemporary art in Turkey is relatively new, and much of it is superficial," says Galerist's Eda Berkman, who represents the duo. ":mentalkLINIK have had to seek out other branches, whether it's film or technology, to find nourishment."

### THIRD PARTIES

Demir, 45, and Baydar, 40, met in 1994 as art students at Istanbul's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, where he studied ceramics and glassmaking and she worked with textiles and took painting classes. :mentalkLINIK was established in 1998, and *Sleep* came two years later. More than a decade on, they have published five books, maintain an archive of collected textual, visual and other material called docu:mentalklinik and are in the early stages of making a film. They are planning to open a studio in New York later in 2012, where they will work for part of the year. "Our personalities are very different. Birol is more emotional and acts more sensitively, whereas I use my head more than my heart. We are constantly deconstructing each other," says Baydar, a pretty brunette whose short bob keeps her curls in check. Demir sports Karl Marx-style long hair and a beard, and both are dressed entirely in black. ":mentalkLINIK is the third person in our relationship, which allows us to create something distinct from ourselves," Demir says over coffee and cigarillos at a sidewalk café in upmar-



ket Topağac, once Istanbul's main gallery district until it handed the baton to Beyoğlu. Across a small green verge is their studio on the ground floor of an apartment block that also houses medical clinics. “:mentalkLINIK made sure that the space was open to any passer-by and the locals of the neighbourhood,” adds Ayşe Draz, a member of the performance group Studio Players, who began formally collaborating with the duo in 2006. “The new form of exhibiting they had devised was something I had not witnessed anywhere else before.”

The duo also works with game theorists, film critics, physicists and astronomers. The approach to production is also collaborative, with as many as a dozen people helping them produce certain items. :mentalkLINIK work with local manufacturers, who are sometimes bewildered by their requests to make new materials, such as the sealant for the *Faker* series or the fibre epoxy coating for *Superhero* (2010), the teddy bears that are painful to the touch. Both are examples of the minimalist strain that runs through the work. This lack of grandiosity may

## “There is a therapeutic quality to :mentalkLINIK.”

cause the viewer to err and think that the work is simplistic. In fact, it is the product of painstaking labour. Draz described an “obsession” to make the pieces playful to engage the audience. “They somehow manage to transform the anxiety of always looking for new forms and devising new experiences into a very productive process,” she says.

Much of the work is tension-fuelled but it is adeptly managed, like the orderliness at, well, a hospital. “There is a therapeutic quality to :mentalkLINIK,” says Baydar. “It can be lyrical and calming, but just beneath there is cutting, shattering, violence – the other side of therapy. Everyone needs a mental clinic.” 🗣️

For more information visit [www.mentalklinik.com](http://www.mentalklinik.com) and [www.galerist.com.tr](http://www.galerist.com.tr)