

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM

Mustafa Hulusi

MELIKSETIAN | BRIGGS



Mustafa Hulusi, *Recollections of Underdevelopment 8*, 2015, ink-jet print on Dibond, 65 × 47".

One encountered "Recollections of Underdevelopment," an arresting exhibition of new photo-based works by Mustafa Hulusi, before even setting foot in the gallery. Eye-catching photographs of bloodred pomegranates on newsprint lined the insides of the space's windowpanes, making a colorful wall of images visible from the sidewalk. The fruits in the British artist's "Pomegranate" series, 2014–, are depicted in various states of ripeness and decay. In some pictures, pomegranates appear on parched patches of dirt amid desiccated leaves. In others, images of the fruit are twice removed: These photographs document mural-size posters of pomegranates pasted on stone walls, corrugated fences, billboards, and other outdoor surfaces in London, where the artist has been wheat-pasting posters since the late 1990s. (A survey of these street interventions was on view this past fall at London Metropolitan University's Cass Bank Gallery.) Upon entering Meliksetian | Briggs, one found additional copies of the newsprint sheets crumpled and scattered around the floor; in a corner of the room, a selection from the series, printed in tabloid format, was available as a takeaway. The centuries-old vanitas conceit of rotting fruit was here updated to address the transience of the images themselves (and perhaps the increasing brevity of our relationship to images more generally), highlighting the reproductions' cheap materiality and fleeting shelf life, and thereby underscoring the series' somber message of fleshy mortality.

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In contrast to the ephemerality of the “Pomegranate” series were six large-scale photographs printed on glossy Dibond. These were drawn from the series “Recollections of Underdevelopment,” 2013–, from which the exhibition took its title. Standing over five feet tall, the photographs depict sumptuously colored and finely detailed images of skies and picturesque landscapes. One presents the ruins of an age-old, decrepit brick structure, only the facade of which still stands. In another, an ancient olive tree with a massive twisting trunk rises from a brushy, sandy foreground. The photographs portray vistas and sites in northern Cyprus that the London-born Hulusi, who is of Turkish Cypriot descent, had visited as a child. Whereas a number of the artist’s previous works have employed iconography associated with the larger geographical and cultural region of the Mediterranean and the Levant—for example, the citrus fruits, figs, and pomegranates that appear in his 2005–2007 series “The Elysian Paintings,” or the poppy fields in his 2009 video installation *Afyon*—“Recollections of Underdevelopment” is steeped in the historical specificity and present social reality of a particular place. Part of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (recognized only by Turkey), the land represented shows the effects of international isolation on this de facto state: an absence of bodies and a pervasive sense of lying fallow.

Lest one misinterpret undeveloped terrain as forgotten space, however, the series’ foregrounding of photographic technique suggests a visual metaphor for the strategic monitoring of this region (which, as the artist points out, is the closest part of the island to civil-war-torn Syria, sixty-some miles away across the sea). Such context also makes one reflexively aware of the intrinsic mediation of the photographs in the first place. The images were taken digitally, transferred to medium-format negatives, printed photochemically on C-type paper, and then scanned again to produce the final prints. A conspicuous black frame borders all of the photographs, as if the images were negatives contained in filmstrip holders. Bands of graduated tones run diagonally across them; the photographs appear as enlarged analog test strips, the trial prints in which a test paper is regularly divided into increasing exposure times to determine the length of proper exposure for the final print. Upon closer inspection, the occasional white dot (evidence of dust on the film) or fine line (indicating a wisp of hair left unretouched) was also spotted. The viewer was thus continually thwarted in suspending his or her disbelief and slipping into an easy enjoyment of the seemingly idyllic scenes conveyed in the “underdeveloped” images. Instead, one confronted the visible calculations of the photographs’ material processing and handling as much as the physical land and situation to which they indexically refer.

—*Kavior Moon*