

# *sic.* contemporary culture

had singing birds on me

a collaborative project between Mehmet Yashin, Panayiotis Michael and Evagoras Vanezis, celebrating Yashin's 40th Anniversary of the publication of his first poetry book

19.09 - 19.10.2024

Opening Days - Hours:

Wednesdays 17:00 - 20:00, Saturdays 11:00 - 17:00

Mehmet Yiashin is one of the most internationally acclaimed poets of Cyprus. Yashin has been at the vanguard of multilingual literature since his landmark critical study of Cypriot, Greek, and Turkish literature, "Step-Mothertongue" (Middlesex University Press, 2000). His writing draws on the Levantine tradition he remembers from his grandmother, who mingled Turkish and Greek alphabets, languages, and cultures in everyday life.

He has published 11 books of poetry, 4 novels, 6 essays, collections of interviews, anthologies, and literary studies having received numerous awards in both Turkey and the UK. His poetry and novels have been translated into more than twenty languages; the first selection of his poetry, "Don't Go Back to Kyrenia", was chosen for translation by the British Centre for Literary Translation.

Yashin's personal histories are deeply intertwined with his poetry, which places Cyprus on the international literary map while defying simple categorization. His work reflects a life shaped by loss, yet transformed into a tapestry of multiple literary identities. With a profound understanding of various cultures, particularly those of the Levant, his poetry captures what once was and what could have been.

Yashin's writing envisions a future built on multicultural identities. While his poetry is rooted in his personal experiences, it transcends any singular identity, embodying a spirit of belonging to many worlds.

For this exhibition, which follows the path of gestures, we've highlighted aspects of Yiashin's work that reflect this complexity—his identity as both poet and global citizen. The display includes personal objects, a series of photographs from his home in Neapolis, and visual reinterpretations of his poetry.

### 1. Gesture of contradictions

A video recording of a 1987 performance in Trachonas. Yashin is reciting a poem titled “Heimatlos”, which is the first poem in “My Love the Dead Soldier”, his first poetry collection. An excerpt from “Heimatlos” reads:

Wherever I go I carry  
my soul divided like my country,  
a half-built house interrupted by war,  
a ruin before completion, without paint or shutters or lights:  
the mortal pain of incompleteness within me,  
I have become a nest of weeds and vipers  
I search for harmony in vain.

That same year, he traveled to London and organized the conference “Cypriot Identity in Turkish-Cypriot Literature.” During a book tour there, he was gifted an embroidered pillowcase featuring Cyprus, which later became the cover of that very book. Around this time, a smear campaign was launched against him, with Turkish-Cypriot leadership labeling him a traitor. In 1988, he visited southern Cyprus for an international artists meeting and poetry performances in Nicosia, Larnaka, and Limassol, where he met President George Vassiliou, who expressed support for his work. Many years later, in 2005, he faced legal battles once more in northern Cyprus, the magnitude of which is reflected in the documents Yashin preserved, now available for viewing here.

### 2. Gesture of Remembering

The epigraph of “Step-mothertongue: From Nationalism to Multiculturalism” (Middlesex University Press, 2000), Yashin’s seminal critical study of Cypriot, Greek, and Turkish literatures, based on his doctoral research. This book followed his first major anthology of Turkish-Cypriot poetry, published in Istanbul in 1994, which introduced new Cypriot terminology. His 1995 essays, “Poeturka”, sparked controversy with their bold critiques of traditional Turkish poetry. In 2005, he released the anthology “A Literary Study Between Languages and Cultures: 3000 Years of Cyprus Poetry”, which won both the 2005 Memet Fuat Literary Study and Criticism Prize and the Bilgi University Prize in Istanbul.

### 3. Gesture of Capturing (memory)

This photograph of Yashin, taken in 1970 in Lefka by his school teacher, captures him in the backyard of the teachers' lodges where he and his single mother (also a teacher) lived after becoming refugees from Neapolis/Nicosia in 1964. The tree shown in the image inspired his first poem, “If Only”, written the previous year in 1969. In 1970, the poem was published in the school magazine and won an award. It was at this moment, at the age of 11, that Yashin realized his life would be intertwined with poetry.

#### IF ONLY

Oh noble tree!  
If only I, like you,  
Could reach the skies,  
Talk with the sun,  
Swap greetings with the clouds.

If only I, like you,  
Had singing birds on me,  
Joy springing inside of me  
And wind in my branches,  
Humming, humming.

If only I, like you,  
Could grow and grow...

#### 4. Gesture of capturing (present)

Photographs from Yashin's house, taken by artist Savella Michael in August 2024. Feel free to browse for different ones and take as many as would like, keeping in mind that the stack will not be replenished. This is the house where Yashin was staying when his family became refugees after the "Bloody Christmas of 1963". Upon returning to it post-1974, he realised that he had lost his native cosmopolitan neighbourhood Neapolis forever. The old furniture of the photographs is what remained from the 1963 burning and looting of their house, are kept until now, and find their place in his poetry.

#### 5. Gesture of multiplicity: crr a a a c k goes cra ack the ox'stail whiiip.

An onomatopoeic line, notoriously difficult to translate. Written in 1981 for a short story and published as a part of the novel "Your Kinsman Pisces" in 1995. The book won the Cevdet Kudret Novel Prize. As Doğan Hizlan, well known Turkish literary critic mentions on the prize's rationale: "The awarding of the novel by Mehmet Yashin will trigger discussions in Turkey. The book brings to the fore people like the novel's characters, who instead of living permanently in a particular country, reside in different territories for as long as they can. With Mehmet Yashin's cosmopolitan fictional characters, the period of minority heroes begins in Turkish literature. Just when we were saying that the "village novel" has given way to the "city novel", Mehmet Yashin sends the "city novel" to the dustbin with his novel. Instead, he brings to Turkish literature the "globalized novel". I support Mehmet Yashin's new, global man without geographical constraints. He is the new fictional hero of the modern world". Some thirty years later, the line is given to many others who repeat it on paper: a form of exorcism.

#### 6. Gesture of (re)turning

"Don't Go Back to Kyrenia" is a poem written in 1980 and revised in 1985. Drawing from a well-known Ottoman-Cypriot nursery rhyme, Yashin weaves together themes of displacement and war, intertwining childhood and coming of age with images of castles and endlessly spinning disco balls. The poem captures the sadness, confusion, and rebellious spirit of a young person in post-1974 occupied Kyrenia. If there is a poem that embodies the experience of being Cypriot without conforming to a pre-defined identity, this is it. Here, you can listen to Yashin recite the poem in Turkish, Greek, and English.

#### 7. Gesture of rewriting

"Zincir," the Turkish word for "chain," originally appeared in Yashin's poem "My Lover's Song". However, Yashin later changed the word to "kelepçe," meaning "handcuff." The exact reasons for this change remain unclear, though the poet believes he may have chosen "handcuff" for its more unexpected metaphor and the smoother flow of its sound. Written in 1978, when Yashin was just 19, this revision occurred immediately after the poem was first typed. By revisiting and inscribing the word on the wall, we highlight the subtle choices and processes that shape the act of writing. One of the poem's lines, "My love, the dead soldier," became the title of Yashin's first published poetry collection. The poem reads:

"I can hear,  
they sing the best songs for peace, those who died in war."

## 8. Gesture of Collaging

This piece is part of a series of pastel drawings and collages Yashin created around 1994-1995. His artistic activity during this time led to his deportation from Turkey as he was deemed "a foreigner against Turkish national interests." This followed the success of his first poetry book, which won the Turkish Academy First Prize of Poetry and the A. Kadir Prize, gaining popularity in both Turkey and Cyprus. Despite its success, the book was banned by Turkish military authorities, though it went through new editions. From 1986 to 1993, Yashin was prohibited from entering Turkey and, by de facto extension, northern Cyprus, preventing him from returning home. Each pastel drawing in this collection is inspired by different areas of Cyprus and is connected to his poetry series "Old Songs in Neapolis".

## 9. Gesture of becoming 1

White cotton t-shirt on which Yashin drew the Cypriot flag in 1973 when he found himself at the International Mediterranean Dance Festival as a young child representing Cyprus. Lacking a t-shirt with a Cypriot flag, he created his own.

## 10. Gesture of becoming 2

"Why I Am Not a Cypriot Poet" (he originally wrote it in Greek) is the title of a Facebook post by Yashin in 2019, later published in the popular Istanbul literary journal "Oggito.com" (July 10, 2021) under the title "Being a Poet in Between the Triangle of Turkey-Greece-Cyprus". The post was written after Yashin was recognized as a "borderline Greek poet" in the anthology "Austerity Measures: Recent Greek Poetry", published by Penguin Books. Being recognized as one of the poets from Greece is followed by a series of other labels —poet of Turkey, of Turkish-Cypriots, of the Southeastern European, of Europe, of post-colonial Britain, of the Mediterranean, of the Levant— but never simply "Cypriot."

