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Home: Leaving One for Another

Since the very beginnings, humanity has been on the move. Originally, we moved our bodies to find food for ourselves, to hunt animals and gather berries, plants and insects. Then, some 10,000 years ago, in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, we came up with the idea of growing grains and vegetables and shepherding animals. Today, our nomadic way of life has largely come to an end; however, this does not mean that the need to move from one place to another has.

At this point in time, more people than ever live in countries where they were not born: as of 2019, the UN estimates that there are around 272 million migrants. The largest category consists of those who move in search of work or other economic opportunities, or because they want to study and settle with family members. Others move as the result of natural disasters or the effects of climate change, while some are trying to escape armed conflict or violations of human rights.[1] The latter, quite properly, receive the most attention in news reports, often because of the deplorable conditions in which they are living, the political game that is being played on the borders of the EU, or the extreme reactions their arrival provokes. Yet, most migrants move voluntarily and in a safe and regulated manner, just as they have done for centuries.

Olgaç Bozalp originally comes from Konya, an industrial city in the pious heartland of Anatolia, Turkey. The city is still a place of pilgrimage, because the Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī (Mevlânâ) came from Afghanistan to settle there in the 13th century. Its population is more religious and conservative than, for example, that of the Aegean coast.

After a brief adventure in Cyprus, where Bozalp began and dismissed theatrical studies, he moved from Konya to London in 2009. There, he hoped to make his new dream a reality and created a life for himself as a photographer. For the first three years he struggled with the language and took casual jobs. Then he began making portfolios for modelling agencies. From his studio in Hackney Wick, where he worked and slept, he contacted virtually every Turkish magazine. Bozalp's work is characterised by a playful mix of travel reportage and stylised fashion shoots, in which he quite frequently photographs models he meets on the streets anywhere from the Middle East, Asia and Europe, such as Turkey, Iran, Uzbekistan, Fez, Belfast, Berlin or Georgia. He likes to capture their true, sincere personalities.

However, he wanted to diversify his portfolio and from 2016 onwards he focused on personal projects. *Home: Leaving One for Another* is an ongoing series in which Bozalp draws upon his personal history as a migrant, as well as telling a more general story about the diverse reasons for migrating. He started the series in 2019, when he briefly returned to Konya. One of the photographs he made shows a person in a shalwar, loose trousers that are gathered around the ankles and traditionally worn in the countryside by those who migrate from rural areas to the city. The type of shalwar in the photo is usually worn by women. The two 'headscarves' allow the viewer to see her head in two different ways. Both the green and the turquoise fabric might be the top of the head, if you see them separately from the body, at least. The absurd nature of the photo is further magnified by the fact that the woman is lying in a narrow aquarium, her slippers floating on the water. On the wall hangs a portrait of Turgut Özal, the former president of Turkey. Next to

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it is a clock decorated with a traditional British telephone box and that famous icon of London, Big Ben. The photo plays with the contrast between Konya, Bozalp's hometown during his formative childhood years, and his present-day home, London.

Another of the photos in the same series presents a more abstract perspective, showing a collection of objects against the background of waves coming in from the sea and a setting sun. It immediately calls to mind the desperate people trying to reach Europe by boat. A striking element at variance with that impression, however, is the glittering rubber dinghy. Bozalp is here referring to the tension between the cheap and unsafe materials people use to cross the sea and the sums of money they are charged for it by people smugglers. Such a fee would be sufficient, so to speak, to pay for a boat studded with Swarovski diamonds.

On closer inspection, Bozalp's seemingly straightforward photographs turn out to be images whose composition is powerfully symbolic. He makes them in collaboration with stylist Raphael Hirsch. The two met ten years ago, when Bozalp moved from Turkey to settle in London and Hirsch came to the English capital from Nigeria. For a book set to be published next year, Bozalp and Hirsch combine these constructed images with documentary photos taken during Bozalp's many travels. The latter are reflections of what he came across along the way, without any intervention by the photographer.

He says: 'Peoples' desire to move from one place to another has always fascinated me, both on a political and personal level. I started this series to explore the reasons why and see how they measure to those of my own'.[2] Whether it's a matter of finding financial happiness or the possibility of self-expression, or of fleeing areas of conflict, the series *Home: Leaving One for Another* is Bozalp's visual portrayal of the challenges faced by people who look for a new beginning by leaving. It's a desire as old as humanity, deeply anchored somewhere in the DNA of each one of us.

— Text by Kim Knoppers

1
Based on the World Migration Report 2020, by the UN's International Organization for Migration.

2
Quoted from a feature in Odunpazarı Modern Museum's website.

All images from the series *Home: Leaving One for Another* © Olgaç Bozalp, courtesy of the artist

OLGAÇ BOZALP's cultural awareness and sensitivity to personal identities mixed with fashion and documentary is what makes his work feel simultaneously nostalgic and alien. Olgaç explores the world of his subjects by frequently shooting in their homes, providing an intimate portrayal between subject and photographer that is undeniably captivating and informative. He was featured in British Journal of Photography's 2019 'Ones to Watch', and Aperture's 'Element of Style' issue. Olgaç's work has also been published by Dazed, Le Monde, Atmos and his work has been exhibited in the Aperture Gallery, The National Portrait Gallery and Odunpazarı Modern Museum.

KIM KNOPPERS is an independent curator and art historian graduated from University of Amsterdam. She has been curator at Foam between 2010 and 2021. Since 2011, she has worked on group and solo exhibitions, most recently Johny Pitts' *Afropean: Travels in Black Europe*, *Extendable Ears* by Sheng-Wen Lo and Lorenzo Vitturi's *Materia Impura*. She has contributed to various magazines including Foam Magazine, Unseen and Aperture and has written essays for catalogues. Also a lecturer on the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne, there she initiated and developed the course *Do Not Disturb — Curating in Progress*. Currently Kim is based between Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Selçuk, Turkey.

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