



Palo Gallery Presents *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* by Sarp Kerem Yavuz  
June 16-June 20, 2023



**New York, NY (June 16, 2023) — Palo Gallery** is pleased to present French-Turkish artist Sarp Kerem Yavuz's first collection of AI-generated artworks. *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* is a captivating solo exhibition of 28 Polaroid works depicting an alternate reality in which the Ottoman Empire continues to exist into the 21st century. Through artificially generated, orientalist portraits of imagined queer individuals, the artist explores the alarming parallels of contemporary Turkish and American politics in a richly envisioned tableau. The exhibition will be held from June 16 to June 20, 2023, as part of the month-long celebrations around LGBTQI+ Pride Month.

Experimenting with the Midjourney Generative Artificial Intelligence program since early 2022, Yavuz has created a series of photorealistic images that blend the dreamlike cinematic style of Alejandro Jodorowsky with the emotional sobriety of Magnum photographer Ara Güler. These AI-generated images offer a glimpse into an imagined reality featuring a present-day Ottoman Empire led by an accursed Sultan who made a pact with a djinn in 1917 to reclaim Ottoman territories lost during World War 1. The series, which began with "Curse of the Forever Sultan" in 2018, drew attention through pixel art light-boxes and neon sculptures portraying undead Ottoman soldiers. Aiming to critique present-day Middle Eastern politics using video game aesthetics and caricatures, it sparked controversy in Turkey, leading to a police raid on Yavuz's Istanbul gallery in 2019 and a declaration by the Turkish Ministry of Culture that the works were "offensive to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire."

On the heels of the newly re-elected Turkish President's escalated targeting of the LGBTQI+ community in Turkey, *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* Yavuz explores the controversial subject matter in greater visual detail. To enhance the believability of these artificially generated images, the artist chose to print them on Polaroids using the Polaroid Lab and classical 600-type Polaroid film. The nostalgic texture and

slight fuzziness of the Polaroid positives remove the uncanny valley effect, creating an illusion of authenticity. At the same time, the anachronistic use of Polaroids – which at the time of the Ottoman Empire's collapse did not exist – emphasizes the fictional nature of the depicted scenes. Familiar characters from the Forever Sultan series, including the Sultan's white Van cat with heterochromia, Lady Pastry, and Topkapi Palace guards, reappear in photorealistic form, creating a cohesive thread throughout the artist's oeuvre and inviting viewers to explore this vivid and thought-provoking universe.

In *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* Yavuz skillfully merges cutting-edge AI-generated imagery with the traditional world of photography, and the cinematic narrative of the exhibition is enhanced by the deceptive sense of documentation offered by Polaroids. The series blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction and challenges the notion of photographic authenticity.

Yavuz expresses his intention for the exhibition: "I want viewers to almost believe that these photographs depict reality. I hope that by immersing themselves in this alternative universe, viewers are prompted to contemplate on the alarming parallels between Turkish politics of the last 20 years and American politics today. Politics of queerness, oppression, and censorship set against an orientalist, cinematic, and opulent backdrop—because I think imagery of resistance, and thus resistance itself, has a longer shelf life if made beautiful."

### **About Palo Gallery**

Founded in 2018 in New York City by third-generation art collector and dealer Paul Henkel, Palo Gallery is dedicated to curating, managing, and cultivating an intersection of emerging and established artistic talents. Palo brings to bear a tradition of art scholarship and patronage, working as a true thought partner with artists to realize their visions and create dynamic activations and experiences. In 2022, Palo Gallery opened its new flagship, a 3,400-square-foot space designed by Selldorf Architects in the NoHo district of Manhattan, and is the only dedicated partner showcasing Vica by Annabelle Selldorf. Designed to be a destination of discovery, Palo Gallery's multifaceted program ranges from solo presentations to curated exhibitions across a wide breadth of artistic endeavors.

### **About Sarp Kerem Yavuz**

Born in Paris in 1991 and raised in Istanbul, Sarp Kerem Kavuz creates works that explore gender, politics, religion, and violence. His works reclaim Orientalist imagery and bring the visual legacy of the Middle East into the present. Through photography, light projection, neon sculpture and digital drawing, he creates visually provocative works of art in pursuit of peaceful coexistence.

He is the recipient of several international accolades, including the 2022 Moon & Stars Grant, the 2019 Leslie Lohman Museum Artist Fellowship, the 2016 Palm Springs Photo Festival Emerging Photographer award, presented by Leica Camera, the 2013 New Artists Society Award from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the 2013 Leah Freed Memorial Prize from the Oberlin College Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies.

His artworks are included in the permanent collections of the CICA Museum, Gimpo, South Korea; Norton Museum of Art in Florida, USA; the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Ohio, USA; the Transformer Station, Ohio, USA; as well as in The Luciano Benetton Collection as part of Imago Mundi; the JP Morgan Chase Collection; the Polaroid (Impossible Project) Collection in Berlin; the Soho House Collection in Istanbul and New York; and The Marmara Hotel Collection in New York. In 2013, he became the youngest artist to exhibit and be included in the permanent collection of the Istanbul Modern Museum. He has participated in over 40 exhibitions in Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Venice, Sydney, Amman, London, Shanghai, Dubai,

New York, Chicago and Istanbul. His artworks are published in *Turkey: Istanbul Codex*, and the *Boys!* book benefitting the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Yavuz currently lives and works between New York and Istanbul.

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