



Mutlu Çerkez, *Untitled: 14 April 2023*, 2003, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 23cm; private collection, Melbourne; photo: Andrew Curtis

Mutlu Çerkez

Fake or fortune?

Audrey Schmidt, Melbourne

In the first pages of the impressive tome-like catalogue for ‘Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065’ at the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) in Melbourne, Director Charlotte Day describes the death of the Turkish Cypriot–Australian artist as ‘untimely’ – an apt choice of words considering Çerkez’s obsession with the passage of time. In fact, from Callum Morton’s February opening speech, cut short for reasons unknown, describing the works lost in a fire at Istanbul airport in 2006, to the attendance of Çerkez’s extended family (or future Çerkez generations) at the opening, the dialectic of presence and absence and the eerie disruption of linear time gave the ‘retrospective’ exhibition the peculiar feel of a vintage sci-fi film set in ‘the not-too-distant future’. Certainly, with its generic sans-serif text and precise paint-by-numbers execution, Çerkez’s paintings in the echoey gallery setting had a depersonalised and austere texture not unlike a spacecraft.

The title of the exhibition refers to the year of the earliest artwork included in the exhibition to the last year in which Çerkez had planned to ‘remake’ one of these artworks – a method that defined his practice and dating system. Although each work includes both the date of its initial conception and its potential remake, most of the remakes never materialised with the exception of two (of six) with second dates that fell during Çerkez’s lifetime. These also happen to be two of the three that had a gap of less than ten years between the date of their conception and proposed remake, with the average gap being 26 years. This detail distances his practice and dating system from a ‘practical methodology’ and, instead, draws attention to the operational definition of time as historical, religious and political text – or, more precisely, as social construct, and a rule that was made to be broken.

With the works being made and remade, exhibited and re-exhibited, what interested Çerkez was variation: between original and ‘bootleg’ in the case of vinyl recordings, or between ‘fake’ and ‘fortune’ – citing Giorgio de Chirico’s late-career forgeries of early-career paintings as a key inspiration for his dating system. At play here is an interrogation of traditional art historical approaches that are obsessed with authorship, provenance, authenticity and value. Such an approach is one that is neatly packaged by the BBC television series *Fake or For-*

tune?, which sees the hosts work to establish the provenance of a given notable artwork by working backwards from the present day to the time of the work’s creation using forensics, available literature and ‘the hand’ of the artist, which is then presented as evidence to ‘established authorities’ to authenticate and admit it to the relevant catalogue raisonné. During this process, the works would often be elaborately and painstakingly restored for resale. It is this tradition that Çerkez playfully sought to disrupt with his dual dating system and attention to the remake, the bootleg and their relationship to ‘authenticity’. This focus is also illustrated materially through a protracted process of reproduction with early-career works such as *Untitled 18185 (1 July 2014)* of 1998, which depicts a laminated photographic print on canvas of a time-stamped television screen displaying a still-life drawing.

To continue with the *Fake or Fortune?* sentiment, and to begin from the end, the video work *Untitled: 23 February 2037* (2005) was the exhibition’s last work made by Çerkez prior to his death. It was produced during a residency in Japan and features handheld footage of Tokyo pedestrians wearing slogan T-shirts with vague sentiments of love, beauty and the meaning of life infused with the poetics of ‘bad’ translations. The video work sits to the left of an accompanying work, a poster-painting transcribing the slogans in the format of a poem in the same style and format of five other works from Çerkez’s ‘Various responses’ series of 2004. Transcribed in his characteristic sans-serif font, in lower-case, with no punctuation and inclusive of ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’, this series anonymously documented messages left for him on a phone dating service. Hesitant, yet vulnerable and intimate in their stream-of-consciousness delivery, the respondents detail why they might appeal to the artist and, in turn, why and how he appeals to them. In terms of not being privy to Çerkez’s initial message to which these messages respond, the dialectic of presence and absence is again invoked – the noticeable absence being the voice of the artist himself. Even in moments of more traditional ‘modern-realist’ self-portraiture as with *Untitled: 14 April 2023* (2003) and *Untitled: 17 April 2023* (2004), Çerkez feels distant and aloof – providing very little in the way of externalising his inner world, maintaining a kind of ‘uniform-camouflage’ sensibility. Or, in the case of *Dead: 4 August 2027*

Opposite top:

Mutlu Çerkez: 1988-2065, exhibition installation view, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2018; photo: Andrew Curtis

Opposite bottom:

Mutlu Çerkez, *As long as I have you, 17 April 2012*, 2001, 12-inch vinyl records in perspex box; 11 records: each 30cm diam.; box: 34 x 33 x 5cm; edition of 10; image courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; photo: Andrew Curtis

reference – *Untitled 22095 (15 March 2025)*, 1992, *Untitled 22108 (28 March 2025)*, 1992 (1997), supposedly lifeless, yet blankly peering out of one half-open eye at the viewer.¹

The 'Various responses' series and T-shirt slogan work comment on the evolution of love and intimacy, disembodied and depersonalised by cyberspace, lost in translation. Indeed, it was only a few years earlier that *Lost in Translation*, the post-romantic comedy-drama of the moment was released, also set in Japan, where the theme du jour was alienation – from the characters' lives, relationships and homes. In that sense, it could be seen as somewhat of a post-Craigslist 'alienated-in-Japan' tourism Zeitgeist.

Beyond these themes, the slogan T-shirt has a very particular relationship to the history of advertising, branding and the bootleg that fits rather neatly into Çerkez's interest in the remake, and remains exceptionally relevant to the 'present' exhibition. It was only the day prior to the 10 February opening of 'Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065' that Diesel launched their new 'Go With the Fake' campaign, which advertised a 'one-of-a-kind, limited-edition *Deisel* knock-off collection' available for a limited time at a pop-up shop on Canal Street in New York. This reflects the increasing self-aware or self-referential nature of the fashion industry that, in many ways, pioneered the counterfeit or bootleg.² The bootleg reflects fandom, but is also a means to an otherwise inaccessible end. In fashion, the inaccessibility usually refers to an exorbitant price tag on brand-name clothing, but in the case of music merchandise it relates more closely to plain availability.

With vinyl records readily catalogued and available on Discogs and eBay, the bootleg itself is now often fetishised as a 'rare', and therefore desirable and expensive, object in and of itself. For Çerkez's 'New album cover designs for bootleg recordings of Led Zeppelin' series of 1996, he pulls into question the sanctity and singularity of the artwork and, by proxy, the artist – often including his own name and title on the bootleg works. Or, mocking the paradigm of 'the collector' and the 'collection', as with *As long as I have you, 17 April 2012* (2001), which was a box set of all the bootlegs Çerkez could find of the Led Zeppelin song 'As Long As I Have You'.³

The nature of live recordings again returns to the notion of presence and absence in that a performance is typified by a transience and 'felt' immediacy that is strangely immortalised yet divorced from its intended corporeal reception in the context of a recording – particularly in the case of an unauthorised one. So, as opposed to a traditional 'fake or fortune' methodology, Çerkez favoured a more fluid approach to the potentiality of the (in)authentic that has since become harnessed and reincorporated into the status quo in more recent years in the fashion

and music industries. Being so completely on-trend in 2018, perhaps this thematic finds itself, ironically, a little 'dated' in a contemporary context – or, at least, finds new connotations under these conditions.

Arguably the most interesting variation to be found in the exhibition was not one intended by Çerkez. Initially installed at Melbourne's Anna Schwartz Gallery in 2003, *Untitled: 10 November 2009* (and *11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 26, 30 November*) is a series of panels or frieze that traces the circumference of the walls where they meet the ceiling. However, due to their being acrylic paint on canvas, the artist had initially sliced through the backing board, leaving the canvas intact in order to neatly fold them into the corners of the gallery walls and form a continuous line. These fold marks in the canvas' surface remain visible, with a panel halting in one corner at 'Çerk' before continuing on an adjacent wall at 'ez' – a break in continuity. Although this curatorial decision was likely made with concern to the practicalities of installing the panels in a new space, the gaps, fissures and folds in these works, re-exhibited at MUMA as such, seem to extend on the artist's sentiment of the work of art being in a perpetual state of unresolved mutability. It also recalls the series of black-backgrounded paintings paired with mirror-reversed canvases and identical titles, with the grid lines and draft numbers faintly visible on the white substrate acting as a window to the underlying artistic process.⁴

To return to the retro sci-fi analogy, and regrettably to television, the 2010 series *Ancient Aliens* used the Mayan calendar among other historical texts and archaeology to present the hypothesis (presented as evidence) of past human-extraterrestrial contact. Just as *Ancient Aliens* presented pseudoscience and pseudo-history to support their (although not *entirely* unreasonable) conspiracy theory, in many ways Çerkez used the same methods and kind of Y2K conspiracism to support his own canonisation and perpetual, timeless relevance during his own lifetime – with a palpable fear of death permeating the artist's oeuvre. Intriguingly, the only mention of Çerkez's death in the catalogue is in the chronology compiled by Michael Graf in the final pages that, under the year 2005, reads: 'ends his life in Melbourne, 10 December, on the anniversary of his maternal grandfather's death.'⁵ What problematises Çerkez's methodology now, in the context of 'Mutlu Çerkez 1988–2065', is that this is, after all, a posthumous monograph; and despite the future dating system, in many ways these works are now just 'regular' artefacts that predate 2005. Çerkez said of his dating system that the 'interesting thing would be the missing ones – the ones dated after I die',⁶ and the MUMA curatorial team have ardently received the baton in Çerkez's own speculative authorship relay.



Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065, exhibition installation view, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2018; photo: Andrew Curtis

1. The 'reference' to *Untitled 22095 (15 March 2025)* (1992) is interesting here as it refers to an oil-on-canvas work that sees the artist underwater in a pose that recalls Nirvana's 1991 *Nevermind* album featuring an infant swimming underwater towards a dollar bill as a fish to bait – a clear reference to the circle of life in this context. The baby in question, Spencer Elden, also re-enacted the photo 25 years later in 2016.

2. Of course, this trend follows last year's Fake Gucci T-shirts for their Resort 2017 collection based on counterfeit designs that were popular in the 1980s, and the 2016 Vetements 'Official Fake' garage sale outside Seoul – a nod to the proliferation of Vetements bootlegs in that city.

3. It is noted in the catalogue that artist and friend Marco Fusinato recalled that the set was designed for 'collector scum' and that Peter Stathopoulos of Vicious Sloth record store in Malvern sold a copy of the set to a collector: *Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065*, exhibition catalogue, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, p. 260.

4. Eight paintings were on display but only six were paired with identical titles: *26963 13 July 2038* (1994) and *26963 13 July 2038* (1994); *26969 19 July 2038* (1994) and *26969 19 July 2038* (1994); *26980 30 July 2038* (1994) and *26980 30 July 2038* (1994). All are from a larger series that were originally exhibited at Melbourne's Anna Schwartz Gallery in 1994. *26809 09 February 2038* (1994) as well as *00000 00 000 0000* (1994) were also included in Gallery Two at MUMA without their match, the latter noticeably missing its second future-date, or alternatively dated '0000'.

5. *Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065*, exhibition catalogue, op. cit., p. 232.

6. Çerkez cited in Robyn McKenzie, 'Mutlu Çerkez: Life and times', republished in *ibid.*, p. 193.

'*Mutlu Çerkez: 1988–2065*' is on display at the Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, until 14 April 2018.



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