

IF 6 WAS 9 –
AND YOU WERE ME

A conversation with

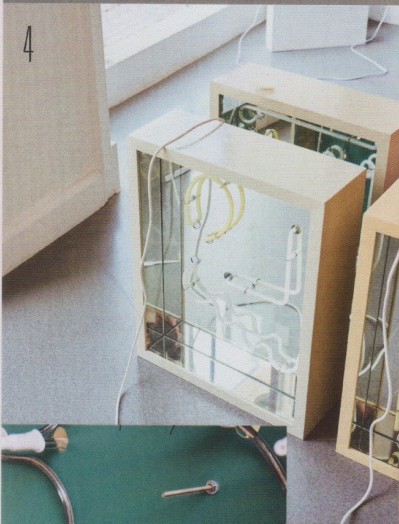
EVREN
TEKINOKTAY

What happens if you tilt your head to one side? If you observe things from a different angle and tip the story slightly? In her exhibition *If 6 was 9* at Collaborations in Copenhagen, Evren Tekinoktay philosophises about the hidden potential in opposite possibilities. During the course of three conversations taking place over a total period of 21 days in the lead-up to her solo show back in August 2019, the artist turns over the matter of her world – which, like her works, is full of melancholy and poetry as well as a generous portion of radiant happiness.

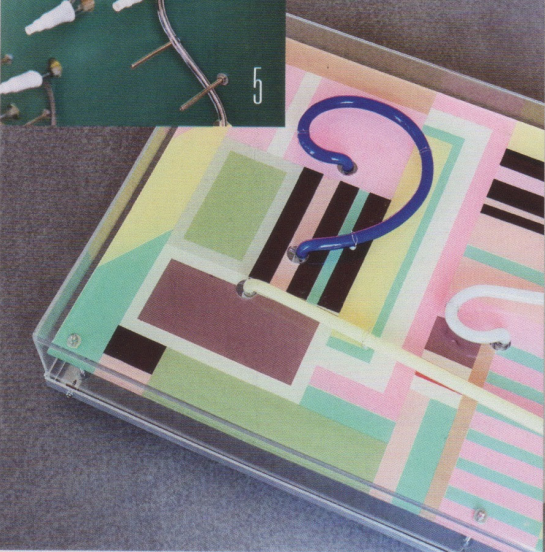
BY MILLE COLLIN FLAHERTY PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON BAUNGÅRD
EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID STJERNHOLM



Evren Tekinoktay relaxing at home after the successful opening of her solo show *If 6 was 9* at the art gallery Collaborations by Tania and Thomas Asbæk in Copenhagen. Her home, like her art, reflects her Turkish heritage and Danish upbringing.



A neon work with the title Grey Rock



EVREN TEKINOKTAY is a Danish-born visual artist residing in Copenhagen. She draws heavily on her Turkish background in her art, which spans a variety of media: kinetic sculptures of spinning shapes and colourful neon lights, low-tech video animations of magazine cut-outs, and satin quilts mounted on porthole mirrors, all sharing the same hand-made aesthetic. Evren Tekinoktay holds a BA from Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and an MA from Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. Selected solo exhibitions include *Bermuda*, David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark (2016); *Ulalume*, The Approach, London, UK (2015); *Purple Head*, Galerist, Istanbul, Turkey (2011); *U*, Imo Projects, Copenhagen, Denmark (2011); *Good Day to your eyes again*, Zwinger Galerie, Berlin, Germany (2003).

AUGUST 26TH — COLLABORATIONS, COPENHAGEN CITY CENTRE

Like a conductor before a concert she walks in circles, with restless hands in restless hair. Stops in front of a piece and tilts her head. She's unsure. About which of the large neon works should complement the sofa in the small room. Everyone else at the gallery agrees that it should be the red one, which challenges the sofa. She silently consents with folded arms. And insists on bringing in the other lighter, more minimal piece. Just to see. She's right. The room falls into place with the new piece, like a cogwheel of colours, thoughts and meetings that come to a halt with a satisfying click at exactly where it's supposed to be. It's one of those clicks you can't think but only feel your way to. You sense that Evren's world consists of those kinds of cogged wheels and their interplay of opposites, constantly making her aware of spaces, people and impressions around her. She's learned to listen – to others, but mostly to her gut feeling – and you can't help but pick up on that very special trembling synesthesia that she's charged with.

"It's bloody good," she says and nods to herself with her gaze towards the new piece on the wall. "Bloody good."

We are in the middle of an Indian summer and the pastels make sense. They have appeared in different guises since Evren's emergence as a visual artist in the noughties whose collages, reliefs and mechanical light installations cleverly dissect and reflect on bodies, womanhood and the sensory – themes that flowed into her influential and now closed fine lingerie store in Copenhagen, an off-yet-on-piste project that blurred the lines between art and retail space.

Opposite page: 1. LARGE NEON ART PIECES literally light up the white gallery space at Collaborations in Copenhagen, August 2019. 2. FOR THE EXHIBITION Evren Tekinoktay has created the sofa piece *Milky Way*. 3. THE LARGE ACRYLIC BOXES with bended neon tubes have become signature pieces for Evren Tekinoktay. 4+5. THE BACKS OF THE NEON PIECES are testaments to great engineering. 6. THE NEON TUBES stand out on the painted wooden background. 7. SIX SMALLER PIECES each tell a different story. 8. THE WORKS come in pieces and are assembled at the studio.

It's the day before the curtain goes up – the second time we meet – and the small gallery is mid procedure. Evren is wearing her feelings on her sleeve. In the lead-up to an exhibition she gradually sleeps less and less, and last night only amounted to a couple of hours.

AUGUST 15TH — EVREN'S STUDIO, NØRREBRØ

She's borrowed the title for the exhibition from a Jimi Hendrix song. "Take the number six figure," she begins. "It's loaded with a certain value," she says and stops. She grabs her mouth as if to pull out the words with her hands. She pauses.

"The thing is," she says, revealing the sentence she uses when something is of particular importance. "With all of it." She leans forward. "It's this: when I had to explain this exhibition to the people I'm exhibiting with, they just sat there and looked at me with confusion. Because words, for me, only come much later. What arrives first is visual. I'm aware of what I work with. But I can't put it into words. The verbal aspect is secondary to me. But you have to have a language in order to live with other people. And when you exhibit you have to be able to express a reference. You could of course choose to call the show *Untitled* and do all the works without titles. You're free to do whatever you want." She gesticulates with ironic despair.

"But it's also a generous thing to be able to give an indication of what you've been thinking about."

For someone who doesn't consider herself to have a particularly verbal language she is remarkably eloquent. Her voice is mostly deep, but also climbs into the highest register, especially when she finishes her sentences with an affirmative "right?" In that way she demands one's presence in a conversation, in the same way that she insists on intimacy in her art. And on making an effort, in general.

"As soon as you bend something" – she pronounces the word 'bend' with long vowels while drawing and turning the number six in the air between us – "which normally appears in a certain way, then it becomes something else, becomes imbued with different values. It's about what happens when you turn a story and just tip it a little. Two people can experience the same thing and each have their own perception of what they've experienced. It's almost yin and yang. Loaded with poetry," she says. >



Evren Tekinoktay's studio on the top floor in an old Copenhagen backyard building is a myriad of colours, materials, current pieces and previous ideas. Many a night have been spent here sketching, cutting papers, painting surfaces and putting it all together in new ways. The cardboard covered floor is almost an art piece in itself.



One of Evren's neon pieces has found a place in her own sitting room next to a pair of mannequin heads.



You can start to panic about the realisation that you're bored with your own work. But that really shows that change is coming, which you need to react to rather than panic about



The artist's home is an adventurous mix of vintage finds and heirlooms, all framed by her unique sense of colour.

Evren's large collage sets the mood in the plaster painted sitting room in her apartment. Pretty much every other piece seen here is a vintage buy.



Eleven days before the opening of the show, a calm and collected Evren in her studio, despite the growing excitement.



In continuation of this she sees her works as small poems, especially the mirrored boxes. She identifies them as little riddles for the eye to solve and the mind to decide on.

"It's rather trippy not to have a firm language for what you work with. It's bloody annoying, but that's how it is. It's like saying: I'd like to have a different handwriting. A different reality. You can't. You can try to imitate both handwriting and reality, but it never becomes your own."

She sits at a table that's covered in pastel-hued paper clippings. She's had her studio on the first floor of a back building in Nørrebro for a year now and the cardboard-carpeted floor bears witness to long days and nights. The coffee pot recently broke and the tea is served in a floral pot with no lid. Cans of spray paint line the shelves and standing along the walls are works that together tell the story of a 25-year oeuvre. Pink, mint, pale yellow and light purple, but also black drawings and abstractions of symbols. Mirror pieces, CDs in boxes, tens of thousands of pins in a letterbox red plastic centrepiece. Hair down, tight top, firm gaze.

We speak about her symbols, those seemingly simple hearts, arrows, circles and spirals. Are they little towers of Babel, seeking to unite those that look at them in a single non-verbal lingua franca by referencing archetypal symbols for hate and love, man and woman, up and down? Symbols aren't necessarily like that, she says, because even a heart can be interpreted by the eye that observes it.

"As an artist it's uncouth and almost stupid to go and draw, cut, bend a heart. It's so banal that it's almost embarrassing. But to me it doesn't symbolise love but life itself. It's the heart that makes it all go round."

She's got adrenaline coursing through her body. Approximately two weeks before a solo exhibition she's jolted out of her sleep rhythm and yet she feels more calm this time compared to *Bermuda*, her last show at David Risley Gallery in Copenhagen three years ago.

"This exhibition is 1:1 to how I feel. I feel awake about where I am in my life and what life is about for me."

A lot of the elements from her previous exhibition have reappeared, such as the neon tube lights and the mirrors. When she first introduced them they were about today's narcissism.

"I believe everyone is a narcissist and that it holds a kind of survival mechanism. Humans need recognition. But when it becomes detrimental to others, you're reduced to being a slave to your own ego and then it becomes a very different kind of self-destructive, loveless story."

She doesn't feel the need to get up onto the digital soapbox, she says.

"But I also don't want to feel invisible."

The smoke from her cigarette dances around her face in shapes reminiscent of her own. If 6 was 9.

AUGUST 26TH — COLLABORATIONS, COPENHAGEN CITY CENTRE

She's tired. She woke up at 3am and wondered whether her assistant had assembled the last neon work. He hadn't. That's why she woke up, apparently sensing it. She only feels like this when things matter. Like a solo exhibition.

"You're alone in taking on a room. On home turf. So it matters extra much. I've made an effort all the way. I'm annoyed when others don't do the same," she says.

But you can't do everything on your own. Even though she wishes she could.

"Then I wouldn't have to give other people the power to control my mood. And my time," she says, matter-of-factly.

She's looking forward to Thursday. To the vernissage, where things will be more festive.

You go through different phases as a practising artist, she notes, sitting on the edge of the sofa she has made for the exhibition – mostly because she didn't think the yellow one the gallery already had suited her temperament.

"You can be in a lull, feel that you're stuck, that there's a clog somewhere in the system."

She's experienced this between her last show and this one. But she feels that she's flushed out the clog by insisting on and sticking to the fact that this is what she does. About a year ago there was a period when she was bored.

"You can start to panic about the realisation that you're bored with your own work. But that really shows that change is coming, which you need to react to rather than panic about. You need to think: it's good that you're bored because then you begin a new choreography within yourself."

Even though the neon component is a repeat from the last exhibition, the works now move in a higher spiritual realm. The storytelling in her is different from the last, where she had just been through an intense period in her life. *Bermuda* opened only a year after her divorce from the artist Tal R, the father of her two children.

"That I stood there with a solo exhibition in comparison to what I'd been through in my personal life was a huge victory."

Now it's different. She thinks about how to word it:

"I've always wanted to stand alone as an artist. In that way the last exhibition was an important entrance," she says. She lowers the tone in her voice.

"Now I'm actually alone. There are no crumbs left. The last time there were several figurative elements, such as the ladies with the long necks. The exhibition was about a shadow world of reality. In these works there are no shadows," she says.

"It feels concentrated and light."

SEPTEMBER 4TH — EVREN'S HOME, COPENHAGEN CITY CENTRE

It's been four days since the opening of the show and the weather has turned. You put your collar up and the canal tours are sailing around with empty seats. There's a light drizzle but Evren has baked rolls for us. The warm, comforting kitchen is at the back of the apartment, at the other end of the view to Thorvaldsen's Museum and the riding arena at Christiansborg Palace, and it feels opposite to the dawn of autumn.

She slept last night, for the first time in weeks. This morning she got up but fell asleep again until 9.30am. She's rested and even past the mental nosedive that she usually gets after a solo show.

"It's like being hit with a bucket of cold water: hello, you're back in everyday life," she says.

She's been here before and recognises the feeling of meaninglessness, describing her younger self as "extremely nihilistically inclined".

"I felt like nothing made sense; I was despondent. Didn't have any hope. Everything ended with death anyway," she says and looks up.

At the age of 16 she found her father lying dead in his bed.

"It was a great shock at such a young age. You can do all kinds of things, insist on being brave in life and decent also," – she speaks in a monotone as if she were dragging the words behind her in trousers that were too large – "and yet, bam, then you die. I couldn't deal with that, what shall we say, reality. I was bloody afraid. Of existing. It was a long and tough struggle to arrive at the realisation that yes, you're going to die and so what, and somehow try to create some kind of meaning. Right now. I of course transfer that into my work."

She can sometimes still hear that condensed voice that says: "What's the fucking use." But she tries to acknowledge it rather than flee from it.

"That feeling has been a primary condition for me since I was sixteen and I'm affected by it less and less the older I get. If you had the awareness when you were young that you do now, you'd feel so awesome all the way through life. It's hard when you're young. Having to navigate feelings, ambitions, find meaning, also within relationships."

She shrugs.

"I'm no longer anxious about those feelings."

Her father died of heart failure. It sparked a monumental grief in her young mind. It was tough. But it's also given her a sense of gravity in the shape of a search for what the human disposition is. What it's comprised of and how you get through such a colossal crisis. >

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"I wouldn't say I got through it well back then because it developed into anxiety. But even that you can learn from. You can choose not to be a slave to the different states of mind that appear throughout life."

She couldn't do that as a 16-year-old. She was deeply heartbroken.

"I found him in the morning when I got up. I was in my first year of upper secondary school."

Her phone rings and it sounds like bells chiming. It's gallery owner Tania Asbæk from Collaborations calling. They talk about the bees.

"They're dying," she says, apropos into the phone. The town hall bells ring. "You've not heard?" she says when the conversation ends.

The last work, the round one, was completed Monday evening ahead of the Thursday vernissage. When she went to pick it up on the Tuesday morning she noticed a buzzing sound, but it was only when she turned towards the glass door that she realised it was black with wasps. Sitting in layers, hundreds of them. She had backed away, walking backwards down the stairs, away from a wasp nest, which must have been inside the wall and burrowed its way out.

"Just as the last work is completed. There's a certain poetry to it. You can't work anymore now," she says in the voice of the bees.

"We've taken over your place. Have a nice show."

Her father had a bad heart but he wasn't ill. He worked as a journalist.

"It wasn't a case of us thinking he was dying, but I did check on him to see if he was still alive every morning. There was this latent unease," she remembers.

Her father was buried in Istanbul. This was where he was from and where he'd met her mother.

"My father had been to Denmark on a trip to Europe and he liked the country. I think it was the blonde girls. That was before he was married," she laughs.

Her father was offered a position as a correspondent for a Turkish newspaper in Denmark. They were only supposed to be here for a couple of years – her mother arrived here in 1966, her father a bit before then.

"There was this underlying premise that we were going back. That's probably also why they didn't give us Danish names. My mother missed Turkey terribly."

When a permanent position arose at the newspaper the family ended up staying. They lived in an apartment in Østerbro, right below members of the rocker group Bullshit. Big American cars like those in *Grease* were parked just down the street. Her mother taught immigrant women to sew and cook before she got a job at the Turkish embassy.

"My parents may have spoken circus Danish but they were pretty integrat-

ed into Danish society. When they realised that they weren't going to be moving back home they went all in on the Danish."

Her parents had a large vinyl collection with Turkish music, but there were also Bjørn Wiinblad plates on the walls. Evren herself was into Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, partly because they shared a set of initials, partly because she felt like she could identify with the little alien. She spent all her savings on a plastic figurine with a light-up finger and watched the film again and again at the cinema. Like *E.T.* she was extremely shy, hypersensitive, delicate. Timid by nature. But she also needed to be seen. She attended theatre classes and dreamed of becoming a singer. Or an actress. Or a journalist, like her father.

During the late seventies the so-called Bomb Man haunted Copenhagen. He blew up phone boxes and no one knew who he was or why he did it.

"Yesterday my daughter said to me: 'the world is going to end in 17 months.' It's not going to, but there's always a threat of some sort. Your world can end any day, and you have to learn to navigate that," she says.

For Evren the child, the threat was the Bomb Man and the idea that Ronald Reagan could simply push a button and everything would disappear.

"I was afraid of nuclear war and bombs in our community, and then I did collages. That was where I began to find peace," she says.

After upper secondary school she visited the Gerrit Rietveld Academie art school in Amsterdam on a study trip with her folk high school. She instinctively felt drawn to the environment.

"I got in without an entrance exam. It was bizarre. As bizarre as the wasps. I don't know if it was an error. But it was my luck. I'm certain I wouldn't have made it if I'd had to speak with them because I was so shy," she says.

The school in Amsterdam felt like a reset. She fought with the medium that is the painting during the entire four years and never felt happy about her work.

"I tried to control the painting and at that stage I couldn't. As soon as I picked up the brush, a kind of being took over. It was like going out into the Sound between Denmark and Sweden in the middle of a giant storm, every day."

After four years she was ready to go home, but a teacher convinced her to apply to the art academy Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. She secretly hoped that she wouldn't get in so she'd have a legitimate excuse to go home, but also here she was accepted without much ado.

"I was a misfit there because the things I was doing were expressive and not very theoretical. I'd ended up at a highly theoretical and conceptual school. But I stuck it out for two years. Then I graduated and moved home and got married. That's another story." >

Some of the decorative accents in Evren's bedroom, from an eighties leather lounge chair to a Moroccan rug and a mirrored art deco dressing table.



A set of Swedish chairs and green vintage glass lamps frame the large dining table often doubling as a work desk.



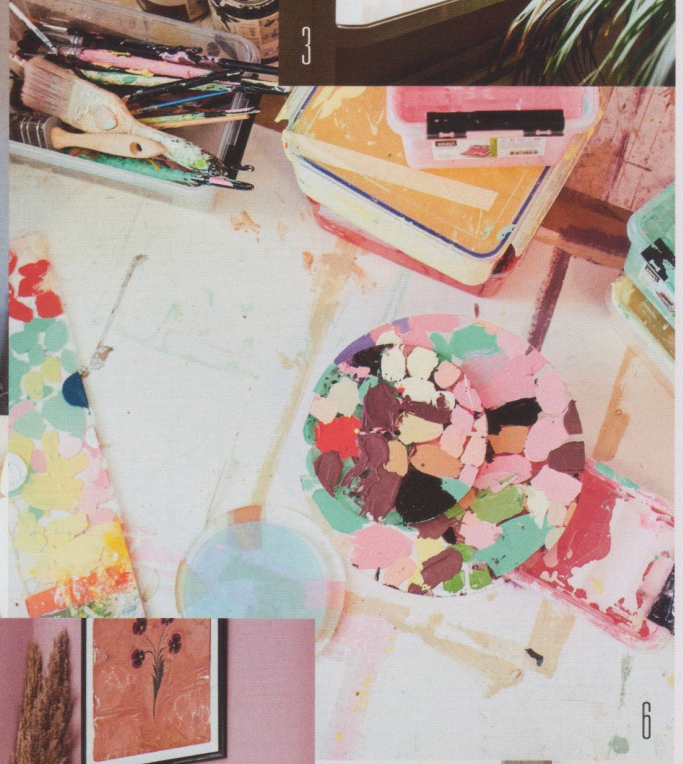
The doors and floors are all crooked in the old 1800s town house. From the kitchen you can see through the dining room to the sitting room facing the street.



The white ceiling makes the muted blush pink kitchen appear larger, underscored by the freestanding wooden beams.

The cosy kitchen is situated to the back of the apartment, leaving it unspoiled by any urban noise except the sound of the bell tower of the nearby city hall.





The short version is that she found something recognisable in her ex-husband Tal R's artistic language.

"The thing is," she says, "...that as a female artist you need to run faster." She tosses her head. "Look around: at museums and galleries. We're so underrepresented. Even though many of us are bloody good. Because we live in a patriarchal society. That's it."

She's not whining. She simply states it as fact.

"And when you're then in a relationship with a man who's a big deal, then forget about it. Unless you latch onto him and take advantage of his status. I'm not that way inclined. My growth as an artist stopped. It was like waking up to a cold turkey, ironically. But my drive was bigger than just being able to swallow it," she says.

Since she'd trained abroad, no one knew her at home. But they did know him.

"I wasn't part of that scene, which made it really difficult to come home and try to take up a tiny bit of space. I was so pleased for him about everything that was happening for him. It wasn't a power struggle. I thought he was bloody good. At the same time I could barely cope with it on an existential level."

The idea for Tekinoktay Finest Lingerie came to her on a trip to Berlin where the family, which by then also included her son Yunus, lived for three months.

"I saw a store, Blush, where the proprietor had done something different to a shop space than what you're used to. It was a revelation. I'd worked around femininity in my art and somehow it made sense to work with underwear in the shape of a shop. Really the store was an art installation that lasted 9 ½ years."

Alongside the store she exhibited at galleries in Berlin, Istanbul and London, but was perhaps curbed a bit by the speed with which her husband moved at home. On the other hand the shop placed her on the Copenhagen map – both as a shop owner and an artist.

"The entrance I made with the store lifted the bar for what you do to a space that people can walk into. I think you have an aesthetic responsibility when you rent a room that's open to the public. I needed to show Copenhagen that I could do something that was magical and amazing," she says.

When she ran out of steam ten years later in 2013, she closed up the shop and began spending more time in her atelier. She focused mainly on her

colourful collages, which she had originally started working on in Maastricht and which now took up more space, not least because of the inspiration from the store.

"I made giant collages with women in lingerie. It happened naturally," she explains.

Inspiration has also always come from the eighties, referencing night-clubs, burger joints, pop music, disco dancing. And Prince.

"Your childhood takes up space your whole life. The first aesthetic that shapes you – that's stuck with me. It would be very odd for me to work with a noughties aesthetic. It doesn't speak to me at all."

She ponders.

"It's difficult to speak diplomatically about such a large entity."

She's referring to the divorce in 2015. After recovering from the shock there was an extreme sense of rebellion, which was important as it had an innate driving force.

"I acted completely on instinct. It was as if I had a light inside me. You've got no manual for what you do when your entire world is turned upside down. What you thought was a yes is a no. It was incredibly intense to discover that your reality isn't what you thought it was. It was a massive motive power to move on from that relationship," she says. "I'm still riding that wave."

She gathers her hair between her hands and lets it fall down around her shoulders again.

"The thing about being connected to another successful artist is difficult. Especially if you're a woman. Whenever you're invited somewhere you're the plus one, the companion. You can accept that for many years, but it's bittersweet. Now I'm me. I'm no longer interested in being someone's plus one, in that world."

AUGUST 15TH – EVREN'S STUDIO, NØRREBRO

She began making the neon works in 2014. She needed to do a different kind of movement, so to speak, and thought about how she could make a collage that was alive.

"To me it was an evolution of the collages, just in a different form. Collages that breathe. With engines that make the figures turn and which you can turn on and off."

The new works don't have engines and nothing turns.

"I needed to do something sharp and uncorrupted. An engine and things that twirl around blind the eye and seduce the senses. I don't have to seduce anyone now," she says.

The tube lights sit white and silent behind framed glass. It's only when the switch is flicked that you can see what colour they are. That's because, she explains, it's mostly the gas that's coloured rather than the glass itself. That's why the tubes appear white when the works are turned off. How long does the gas last, I ask. "Forever?"

She tilts her head as if it's a silly question and then says, in a tone of voice as ephemeral as the gas in the glass: "Well, nothing lasts forever." /

Opposite page: 1. AN OLD SWEDISH CHEST supports a collection of books and a ceramic vintage lamp. 2. PRIOR TO THE COLOURFUL collages and paintings, Evren primarily worked in black and white. 3. A WINDOW FRAME of expressive vintage vases and glasses. 4. EVERY SQUARE METRE of the studio is stacked with materials and potential. 5. ETHNOGRAPHIC ARTEFACTS in a corner of the bedroom. 6. THE COLOURS are often inspired by those found in the bazaars of Istanbul, where Evren's family is from. 7. ONCE YOU ARE WEARING THOSE GLASSES, everything becomes 6s and 9s.