

MIKE BERG

**HOW
DID WE
GET HERE?**

25.05.2024

YUNT

25.08.2024

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HOW DID WE GET HERE

This booklet accompanies the
exhibition "How Did We Get Here"
by Mike Berg held at YUNT between
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HOW DID WE GET HERE?

GIZEM GEDIK

*Every real form is a world.**

Kazimir Malevich

The question "How did we get here?" emphasizes the blurring of memory and the flow of time, which may resonate with people today who live and produce at an endless pace. It is a valid question that individuals, increasingly detached from the concept of time in their search for self-positioning, often ask themselves in fleeting moments.

* Robert Goldwater & Marco Treves, ed., *Artists on Art: from the 14th-20th centuries*, London, Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 452.

** "Postmodern amnesia" is used here in reference to the comments of various thinkers, including the American cultural critic Fredric Jameson, on the relationship between history, memory and postmodernism. The term suggests that the postmodern condition is characterized by the fragmentation of historical consciousness and collective amnesia due to the overwhelming influence of consumer capitalism and media saturation.

It contains elements of forgetting and remembering (postmodern amnesia)**, irony and introspective evaluations of the past. The title of the new solo exhibition by Mike Berg, who lives and works between New York, Cheney and Istanbul, refers to the integration of the artist's experiences between two geographies and cultures, the interruptions in his artistic production, the changes in the cities in which he lives, his evolving perception of the environment and the time into which he is gradually moving. Moreover, the artist poses this question in the language of 'we' and invites all those travelling with him to experience time and change and to evolve together with a sense of community awareness. The sense of togetherness is not only a conceptual background for the artworks, but also has a concrete meaning. Berg sees the craftsmen with whom he collaborates in artisanal processes such as molding, assembly and weaving, as well as the programmers and even the artists, writers and thinkers who influence his life on a conceptual level, as constant companions in the creation of his works.

Mike Berg is primarily known for his metal sculptures, but also for his works on paper, drawings and geometric carpets (kilims). Despite their calmness, modesty and lack of overt symbolism, Mike Berg's simple compositions offer new ways of understanding his series and exhibitions through the unique names he gives them. This is particularly evident in some of his most recent solo exhibitions with titles such as "What are Days For? - Days are Where We Live", "The ship that sailed" or "Persuasion", which evoke both individual and social connotations and include

explorations of memory, space and the processes that affect individuals or communities. These expressions, with their simple narratives and metaphorical overtones, open up numerous avenues of thought and allow us to recognise the new worlds created by the forms that the artist constructs through his exploration and experimentation with different materials. They also provide clues to his individual approach, his attitude and perhaps even his way of life.

YUNT is located on the site of a former horse farm, which has now been transformed into a space for art and interaction. The name YUNT is derived from the old Turkish word for "horse" and refers to its historical roots. This evolution from the past to the present serves as a pivotal point for the question "How did we get here?". The recently opened YUNT, which captivates audiences in Sultanbeyli, reflects Berg's observations of the city's changing landscape and cultural diversity. The artist's dynamic worldview, travelling between two cities known for their vibrancy and chaos, reflects the fusion of cultures and places in an interconnected and ever-evolving continuum, much like the creation of his sculptures. As Western and Eastern cultures, histories, architectures, motifs and lifestyles collide, the evolving surfaces of Berg's simple forms reflect the fusion between these two geographical realms. In addition, the artist's introspective view of his previous oeuvre, which carefully transitions from the social to the personal realm by incorporating his artistic journey and stages of development, provides a comprehensive basis for interpreting the artworks in this room.

The Potential of a Line

The stability of a straight line and the ambiguity of an oblique line; the delicacy of an empty frame in contrast to the bulkiness of lines that intertwine into a solid mass; all this is due to the mastery of the line. Although it does not occur in nature, the line serves as an instrument of perception and defines the world of objects. Berg thinks, builds and creates variations through lines. He creates textures by intersecting lines, gaps by separating them, and undefined forms by bringing them together and intertwining them. Even in his more gestural and blotchy compositions and wall sculptures, which are based on ink drawings, the continuity, jumping, dissolution or bending of the line attracts attention.

Sometimes he leaves the line standing independently, while elsewhere he transforms it into geometric forms such as cubes, triangles, rectangles or irregular shapes and interweaves these elementary forms. Occasionally he bends linear elements into circular forms or juxtaposes

curves with sharp lines and corners. The boundless potential inherent in the line allows it to move freely in the vast realm of forms.

In this context, Berg's sculpture entitled "Kafes" (Cage), located in the courtyard of YUNT's outdoor space, is a significant testament to the power of line and transition. The artwork, which was originally exhibited at Galeri Nev Istanbul in 2015 and is now on display in the outdoor area, envelops the void in a way that allows the surrounding air to flow through. With just four lines, it acts as a border to the outside world and blends seamlessly into its surroundings thanks to the airflow. The explicit naming invites the viewer to reflect on the structure and concept of a "cage". From Max Weber's metaphor of the "iron cage", which symbolizes bureaucracy's resistance to freedom and autonomy, to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which was designed in the 18th century and was developed by Michel Foucault, the "cage" is a symbol of the "cage". From birdcages or gilded cages to grid systems in architectural designs; from skyscrapers labelled as steel cages to various forms of control, the viewer is drawn into a flow of thought about the possibilities of entry and exit and the structure of action within the cage. The asymmetrical arrangement of elegant metal bars disrupts the classic cage plan and places the viewer on a delicate threshold between encirclement and being encircled. This interesting structure offers a world of form and meaning that seeks its own freedom, transforms and metamorphoses.

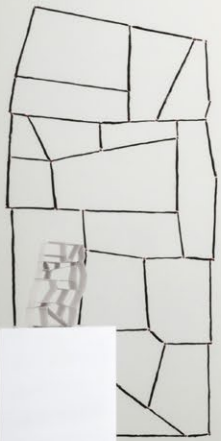
Inside, we are greeted by transitional spaces where glass meets walls and floor. Thanks to the possibilities offered by YUNT's space, the artist brings the diversity, stages and results of his production together with the public in a comprehensive way, allocating a special space to the phases that lead from the birth of an idea to the moment it is realized and exhibited. While kilims and a site-specific amorphous pattern are placed on the walls and drawings and plans about the process on the windows, voluminous, delicate or massive masses lie on the floor of the room, waiting for us to position our bodies and gaze accordingly. When interpreting these artworks as part of a whole, their forms can change dynamically depending on the viewer's perspective. This change in form is made clear by the careful modelling, which is particularly evident in Berg's three-dimensional works.

The large-scale, massive metal sculpture, which contrasts with the artist's series of cages or elegant patterns, dominates the exhibition space and grips the emptiness with all its weight, as if emerging from a giant mold. The cold, smooth, asymmetrical and opaque sculpture

waits to rust and transform itself through its surface alone, without allowing air to enter or exit. Just like metal, canvas, ink or paint, rust is an important material for Berg, emphasizing the transformation of his works and reflecting the flow of time. This large sculpture is as fluid as the pouring of dozens of steels from a container, as safe and stable as a bunker and as lonely as the solitude of a curved line.

Berg's artistic process involves working with a variety of surfaces such as paper, canvas and metal, focusing on enhancing the quality and expression of each material. One of his methods for achieving expressionistic textures is woven kilims. Working closely with skilled artisans in Istanbul, Berg collaborates closely with weavers who translate his drawings into intricate flat-woven carpets. These collaborative works reflect a harmonious fusion of Western abstract art with the rich variety of colours and shapes of traditional weaving techniques. Berg's ability to transfer the gestural quality of his drawings and patterns to metal or textiles, while retaining the essence of painting, represents a deeply satisfying phase in his artistic process.

Berg experiences a phase of maturity in his art, constantly travelling from one city and studio to another, transferring his own narrative and forms from the centres in which he has long resided, this time to another 'periphery'. The meeting of an artist who confronts his past and questions individual and social variables, with the public in a space that remains faithful to its past and looks to the future, opens up in the context of form, material, texture, city, culture, architecture, art history and different concepts, making us ask ourselves once again "how we got here"; by uniting in a small, imaginary line.



Migratory-White-Bird-Rhinoceros

SINAN EREN ERK

Sculpture differs from other fundamental art disciplines in its physical relationship to the three-dimensional world. This discipline, which brings together the abstract level of thought with the physical concreteness of volume, material and mass, has transformed itself from representations of reality, of things claimed as real or as dreams, into a method of expression that is used today in the search for a much more complex semantic fiction, as well as sometimes in the search for a purely intellectual level, for forms and images. The relationship that sculpture establishes with reality has a unique effect on the viewer due to the experience it creates through the sense of touch, one of the primary methods of learning, as it materialises on the three-dimensional level of perception. Sculpture, which sometimes attempts to create an image of reality, sometimes enlivens the reproduction of reality with abstractions, an alternative or perhaps a different state that is valid for the artist. Although contemporary art discourse today is mostly based on the relationship between discourses of content, Mike Berg is one of the artists who continues to pursue new forms of expression within this discipline. The forms that characterise his style reveal the physical characteristics of sculpture together with various environmental factors such as cultures, architecture, geography, economy and life routines in relation to it. In the contemporary art scene, where disciplines and images merge and definitions are shaped by prevailing discourses, and where originality is increasingly contested for this reason, Berg favours a different discourse and sets his own priorities by following his feelings. His works are the result of a gaze that questions the possibilities of forms waiting to be revealed by reconstructing them in various combinations with each other, without expressing the concepts clearly and explicitly and even leaving the "oracle" about them largely to the viewer. Berg's sculptures, which consider the possibilities of forms together with the material itself, often evolve from simple geometric shapes to masses that become complex and asymmetrical, forming their

own centre of gravity. These structures, sometimes resembling a cage, create open and voluminous connections with their surroundings as if they were breathing, paving the way to reconsider both the sculpture and the space and feelings created by this encounter.

Berg's sculptures make these comparisons with a subjective gaze and perhaps with a kind of curious playfulness, an experimental and powerful perception that is always in search of new possibilities. Every form is waiting to be rediscovered by him, every space to be tested with new shapes and feelings. In this way, the artist works with a free spirit, in his own time, and allows images and forms to produce themselves. He moulds his discourse around the concepts based on visual aesthetics, not only for specific eras, but for every era, and which can be included in the general questioning of art. In this process, perhaps alone, but undoubtedly away from the constraints hidden in the appeal of the popular, he reveals the traces of his own life. Thus these forms, which are subject only to the laws of physics as they are "realised", become examples of the artist's intertemporal narrative and interspatial way of working.

"How Did We Get Here?" can be read as a summary of Mike Berg's evolving, changing and even "nomadic" artistic career on an intellectual level, despite the weight of his works, an exhibition made up of records he has kept at different times of his artistic vision, transformed into something else by temporal, psychological and geographical influences. On the other hand, the title of the exhibition, simple and unadorned in its own way and created in a very natural reflex, also implies another connection between inside and outside, similar to the permeability of the artist's works. The exhibition, which opened at YUNT in Sultanbeyli, a district of Istanbul that is far from the usual art routes and is undergoing a socio-cultural transformation with new buildings, shows a point of view that runs counter to the popular approach, but does not reject it and even proves that it can coexist with it. Mike Berg's sculpture, placed in the public space in front of YUNT, has the potential to challenge the concept of strangeness by establishing a complex relationship with the surrounding life with its unusual mass and shape compared to its surroundings, which is open to multiple readings.

Berg, who is already an "outsider" in terms of his style and the focus of his artistic production, with his stance outside the "attractive" tendencies of the concept of contemporary art, this time, with an exhibition in one of the surrounding districts on the Anatolian side of the city, puts this foreignness caused by the shift in the centres of gravity

*Sohrab Sepehri, *Bütün Şiirleri*, İstanbul, Kapı Yayınları, 2022, p. 159.

with the change in the perceived, political, demographic, cultural or economic internal dynamics of Istanbul on his own shoulders. Despite the nature of the material, Berg meets this burden with abstraction, openness to change and the fleeting nature of his work with a lightness of touch, in the spirit of the lines by the Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri: "Life is the feeling of foreignness of a migratory bird."* But the layers of foreignness are not limited to this. While this neighbourhood, whose face is changing day by day with new buildings, is in a state of questioning foreignness, as in all other transformed neighbourhoods, the exhibition of Berg's works in an art space that has focused on these themes in previous exhibitions can be seen as one of the steps towards reconciliation on the urban axis.

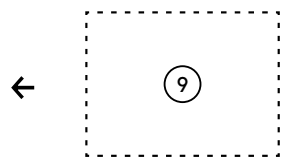
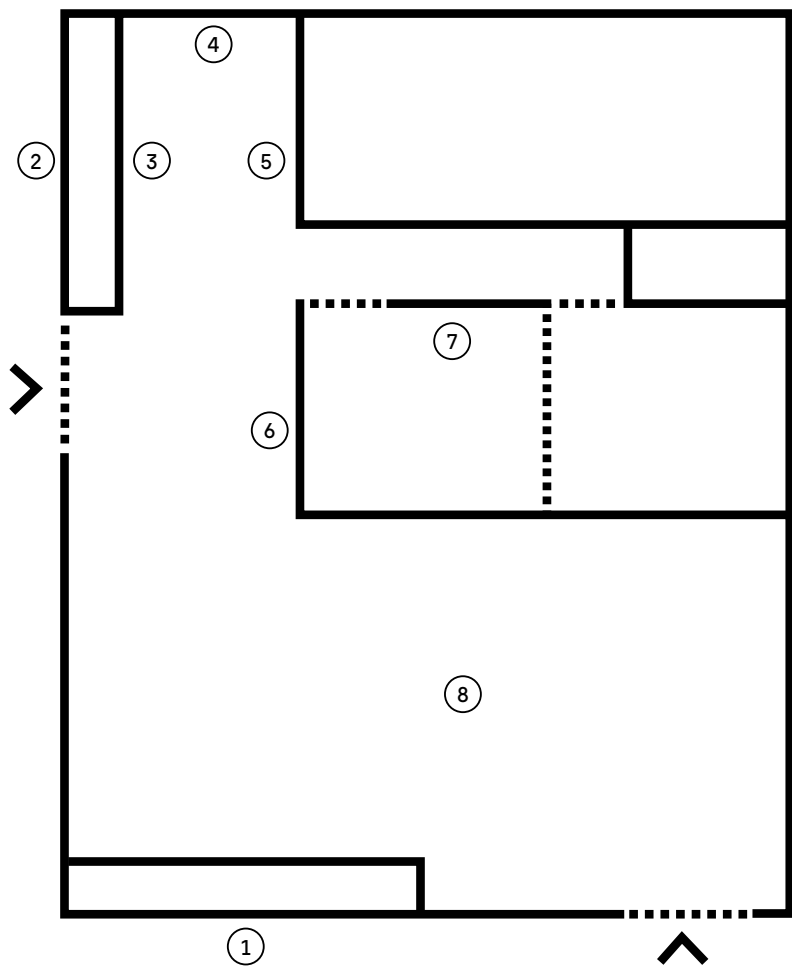
A similar attempt to reach a compromise or mutual agreement can also be found in the artist's two carpets. These carpets, on which Mike Berg's abstractions are embroidered, show on the one hand the artist's attachment to the Turkish culture he has long witnessed and how he interprets this culture from his own perspective, and on the other hand they present him to the viewer with a sincere experiment that does not focus on just one discipline, on different ways of thinking or different forms of expression. As the carpets take their place on the walls like a badge of friendship, Berg thanks them in their language for what he has learnt from the "strangers" he has become a bit like each time.

The sculpture entitled "Pyramid", which the artist created for this exhibition, opens a discussion about where his artistic vision has developed since the beginning of his career and where it has evolved with what he has lived, learnt and experienced, with reference to his works that bear traces of his past periods. In contrast to Berg's earlier cages, one of which was placed outside the exhibition space, this sculpture with its flat surfaces gives the impression of a heavy, cumbersome block, a rough, unhewn, raw mass, while retaining its asymmetrical structure and the artist's abstract-geometric style, which, as in his earlier works, is based on a simple randomness. Like a metal white rhinoceros in the middle of the concrete savannah with its thick carapace and disquieting body, or like a rock that has not found its place and hides unknown surprises inside, or even like an ancient monolith whose shape has been deliberately distorted, this structure can perhaps be read as an expression of the artist's attitude towards the dominant discourse. Once again, this monument of resistance, which is paradoxically "alien" and can become familiar over time and create its own breach in the mind of the viewer, becomes one of the important traces that Berg, perhaps far away from the land of his birth, has left together with all the other works in the exhibition like an amorphous black box.

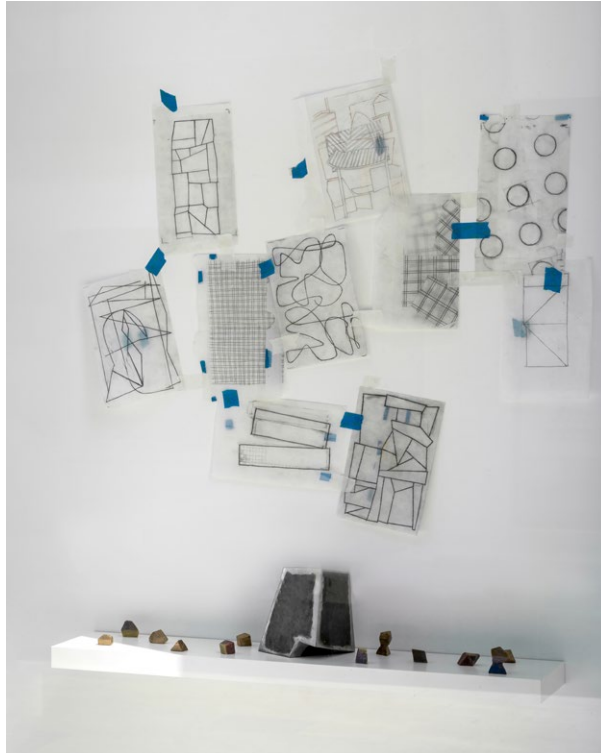
The exhibition "How Did We Get Here?", which brings together Mike Berg's most recent works, opens itself up only to the curious viewer with a narrative language that manages to make itself independent of familiar symbols and to progress only through the references and ways of thinking that it creates. It makes it possible to think the narrative of the sculpture together with the concept of space, environment, city, time and transformation.

A white rhinoceros stands before a migrating bird and a migrating rhinoceros stands before a white bird; the concepts are interwoven, time is a flowing whole. We do not know exactly where we are and who we are in this ocean in which we swim.

How did we get here?



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| <p>① How I Roll
2023-24
Installation
Sketches and maquettes
for Pyramid sculpture</p> <p>② Blue Square
2020
Wool, goat hair
152 × 137 cm</p> <p>③ Maquette for Chamber Tower
2024
Paper
11 × 12 × 28 cm</p> <p>④ Chamber Tower Wall Painting
2024
Pencil and acrylic
210 × 90 cm</p> <p>⑤ Prototype
2024
Pencil and acrylic on Indian
handmade paper
29 × 19 cm</p> | <p>⑥ In Living Color
2023
Wool, cotton, linen, goat hair
128 × 222 cm</p> <p>⑦ Mike Berg's Chamber Tower Wall
Painting Process
2024
Video
34'08"</p> <p>⑧ Pyramid
2024
Steel
150 × 150 × 160 cm</p> <p>⑨ Cage
2015
Corten steel
400 × 300 × 200 cm</p> |
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①

How I Roll

2023-24, Installation, Sketches and maquettes for **Pyramid** sculpture



②

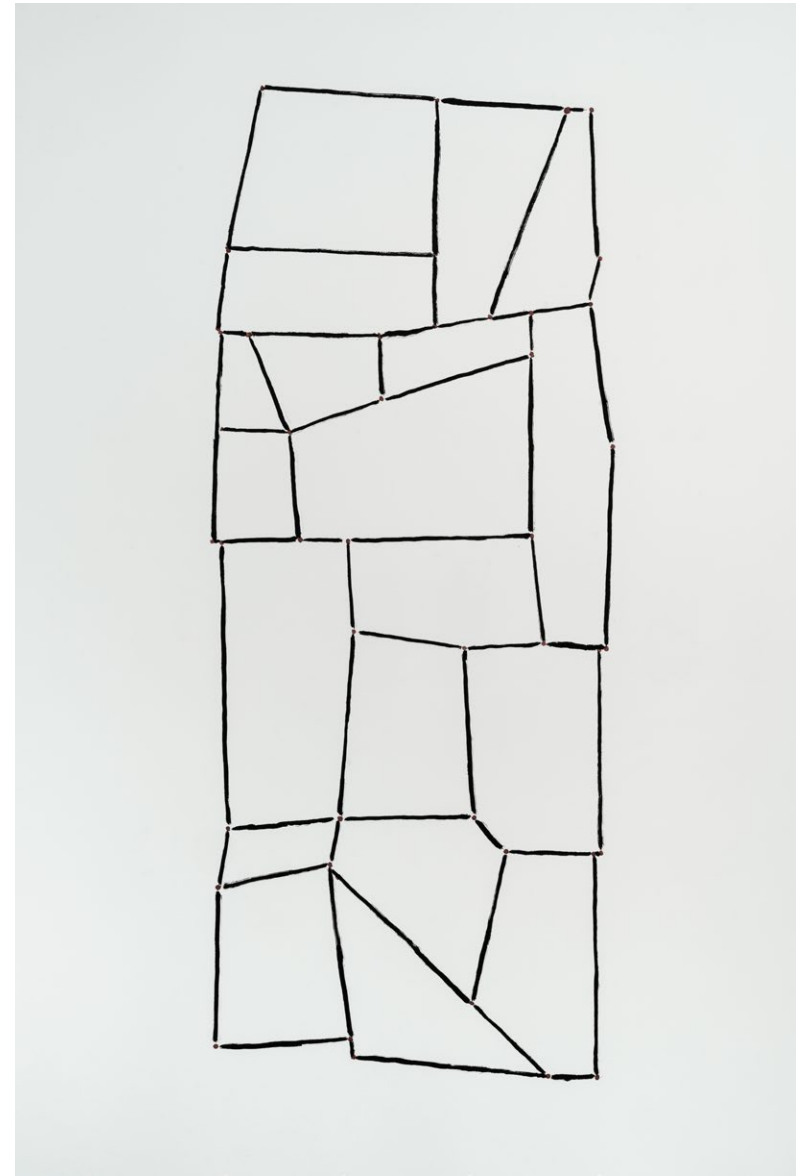
Blue Square

2020, Wool, goat hair, 152 × 137 cm





③ **Maquette for Chamber Tower**
2024, Paper, 11 × 12 × 28 cm



④ **Chamber Tower Wall Painting**
2024, Pencil and acrylic, 210 × 90 cm





⑤ **Prototype**
2024, Pencil and acrylic on Indian handmade paper, 29 × 19 cm



⑥ **In Living Color**
2023, Wool, cotton, linen, goat hair, 128 × 222 cm



7 Mike Berg's **Chamber Tower Wall Painting Process**
2024, Video, 34'08"



8 **Pyramid**
2024, Steel, 150 × 150 × 160 cm



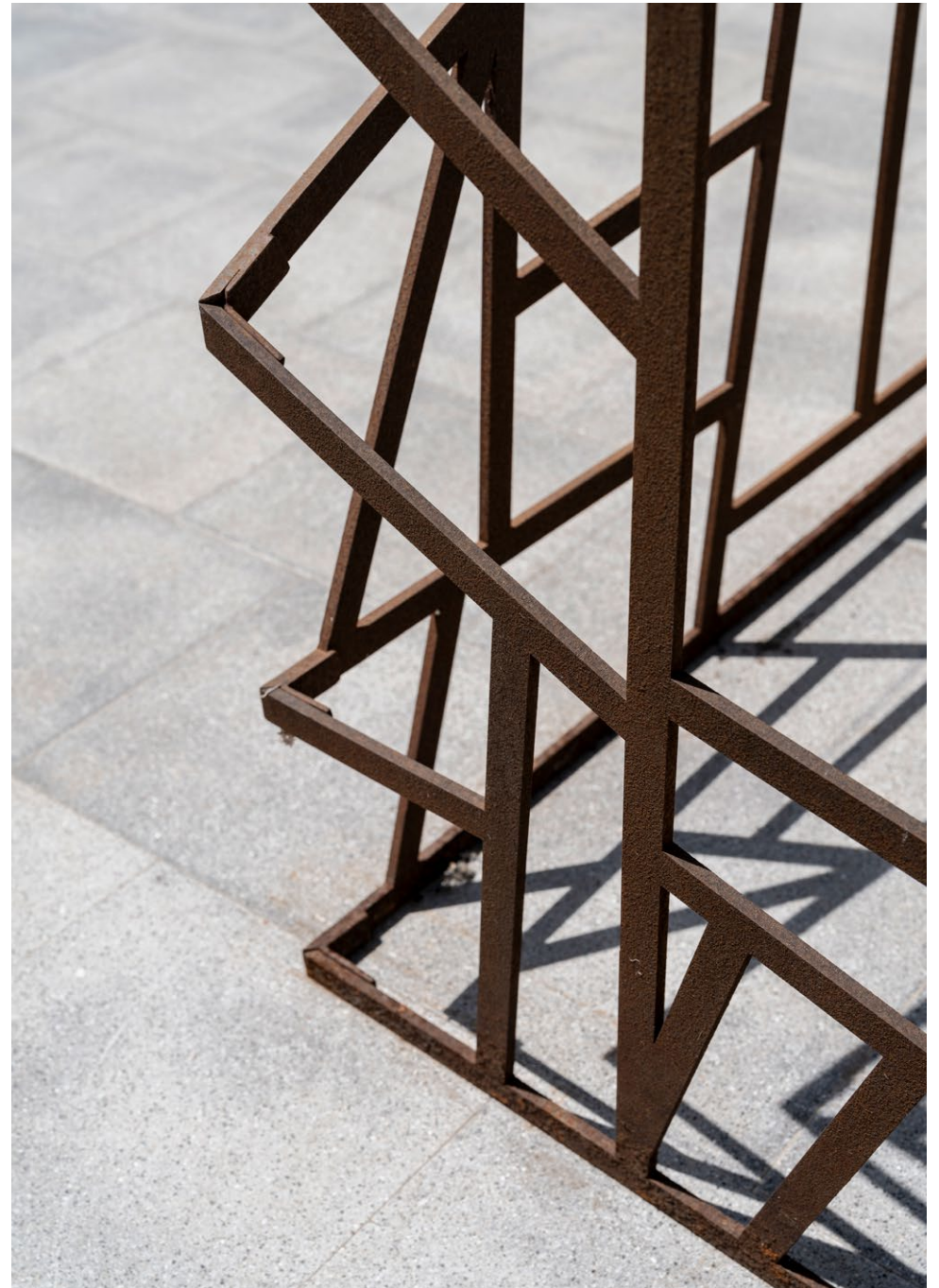
MERKEZ HAYAT
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9 **Cage**
2015, Corten steel, 400 × 300 × 200 cm







P: Ulaş Tosun

MIKE BERG (1948, Oregon) lives and works in New York, Cheney and Istanbul. He graduated from the University of Washington, Seattle and completed his master's degree at Fort Wright College, Spokane. The artist, who participated in the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Summer Program, continued his education at New York Studio School with a scholarship. Berg's solo exhibitions, which took place mostly in New York and Istanbul include; Adas (Istanbul, 2018), Galeri Nev İstanbul (2006-2018), Galeri Siyah Beyaz (Ankara, 2018), Museum of Contemporary Art (San Diego, 2013 & 2014), CoCA (Seattle, 2006), 56 Bleecker Street Gallery (New York, 1989), and Earl MacGrath Gallery (Los Angeles, 1989). Some of the group exhibitions and biennials he participated in are; Galeri Nev İstanbul (2002-2017), 3rd Mardin Biennial (Mardin, 2014), Baksı Museum (Bayburt, 2014), Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (San Diego, 2012), Anita Friedman Fine Arts (New York, 2002) and Armand Hammer Museum (Los Angeles, 1998).

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