



CANAN TOLON:

I SEE THIS AWARD NOT AS
A DESTINATION, BUT AS
A MOTIVATION TO MOVE
FORWARD



A conversation with Canan Tolon, this year's recipient of the Vehbi Koç Award, on a practice that spans architecture and multi-layered art-making, the guiding role of materials, and the nature of works that are simultaneously constructed and undone.

You studied architecture in Edinburgh, interior design in Germany, and design in London, before completing a master's degree in architecture in California. After such an intensive architectural formation, you turned your focus to art. This transition is often described as a choice. Was it a deliberate choice for you or the inevitable continuation of a different way of thinking and making?

I grew up immersed in books from childhood - picture books first, then coloring books, colored pencils... Later, in my family's home, I was surrounded by books on architecture. It is, in truth, impossible to draw a sharp line between architecture and art. A building can move us no less than a painting or a sculpture. Architecture is, in a sense, the art that envelops us. Whether oppressive or generous, the space we inhabit shapes who we are. We build a space, and that space, in turn, builds us.

So I cannot say I preferred art over architecture. Being an artist was never a planned profession for me, yet it was always a part of my life from very early on. I chose architecture precisely because it was the field closest to art and I was drawn to it. I wanted to study and make it my profession. Art, by contrast, was never something to be "learned."

Art was already a form of expression for me, a means of communication, especially when language alone fell short. I spent part of my childhood in hospital, and drawing became the way I reached adults, doctors, and sometimes even my own family. In time, I came to realize that working in architectural offices was not what I was seeking. I had no desire to participate in the creating impersonal spaces. Working for others had also begun to feel remote to me.

Meanwhile, I observed that my artworks were drawing increasing attention. I began to sense that they held meaning for others and opened a space in which I could share my observations and my concerns. This is what led me to turn in that direction. And gradually, my artistic practice became my profession.

I cannot claim to have chosen an easier path. On the contrary, artistic practice is a far more uncertain and demanding one, and I had no academic preparation for it. And yet it felt inevitable for me. Demanding, yet meaningful. At the very least, it is unlikely to cause the kind of harm that poor architecture can.

I never experienced this as a sharp shift or a conscious turning point. It was more like the same mode of thinking expanding into another territory. Architecture taught me how to conceive, create, and organize space. What I do in painting and installation is not that different. Here, function falls away and what remains is a more open, more ambiguous, more intuitive space. Less a choice, and more an inevitable continuity.

How has living and working across different geographies shaped your practice?

Living and working across different geographies has certainly shaped my practice in profound ways. Being immersed in diverse cultures and languages from a very young age influenced my thinking and, consequently, my way of seeing and making. Everything you encounter, witness, and absorb throughout life accumulates within you. It is only in retrospect that you see how they have formed you and directed your thoughts and perceptions.

In my work, this often manifests as dynamic, continuous movement, overlapping images, clashing perspectives, exits that fail to align... At times it resembles passing from one space to the next, like frames on a strip of film, or like the landscapes glimpsed from a fast-moving vehicle, continuously shifting and beginning to blur. On the surface, this might suggest intensity or even chaos. But for me, it is more about multiple perspectives existing simultaneously, like thinking in several languages at once.

I do not experience this as distance or disconnection; quite the opposite, it is what has shaped me. At the same time, it does not allow me to settle into a single viewpoint. What I look at and where I stand never quite converge and perhaps it is precisely this tension that makes the work possible.

Your works feature natural landscapes, topographical images, cityscapes, and tectonic structures — post-industrial terrains, in a sense. Yet, these images rarely settle on a fixed place or moment; they hang suspended between the familiar and the uncertain. Could we say that what determines meaning in your work is not so much what we look at as how we look at it?

Yes, that feels like a close interpretation. For me, it is about allowing a perspective to emerge rather than defining what we are looking at. Images may evoke a landscape or a structure, but they are never fixed on a single image. They hang suspended between the familiar and the uncertain, functioning more like cut and juxtaposed fragments - almost like a strip of film or a contact sheet. Different perspectives, moments, and scales interweave without ever quite coinciding.

These are not propositions. Rather than offering answers or resolutions, this is a space in which I pose questions and express my concerns. It challenges not only what we look at, but also our perspective. The viewer constantly tries to focus on and hold the image. But the image is fluid, the more intently you look, the more it disperses, taking on another form and drawing you somewhere else. More than what we see, it is about how we look and where we situate ourselves within that gaze.

Contemporary art is increasingly associated with speed, visibility, and creating impact. Yet you suggest that speed belongs more to production than to creativity. So it is clear that you prefer to work at your own rhythm. How would you describe the relationship between an artist's responsibility to be visible and to remain honest?

For the most part, speed and visibility are about production, not about thinking or making. Some works take a long time, while some are never quite finished. You should not force a work to its end.



Curiosity slows down the process, which usually tends to advance through questions and enquiry. You have to allow it to unfold.

But this is not the same as being opposed to speed. Every work moves at its own pace. Some are quick and dynamic, carrying a sense of urgency. Others require time. What matters is to give it time and not to drive the work toward a conclusion. I sometimes set a painting aside and return to it years later. More often than not, I allow the material to run its own course - reaction, contraction, rust... So I do not decide when a work is finished. It tells me.

I tend to work in series. But there are also periods of withdrawal - reading, travelling, changing surroundings... At times the studio can sit empty for weeks. I have no disciplined daily routine. It comes in waves, sometimes intense and urgent, sometimes stretched across long silences. So rather than negotiating a balance between visibility

and honesty, I would follow the rhythm of the work itself. Give it time on its own terms, not on anyone else's.

I do not experience this as a contradiction. Visibility finds its own form, in accordance with the work's rhythm. What matters is not to compromise the work's integrity by forcing the process. That rhythm may at times be slow, even invisible, but it keeps the work open and alive.

If you were to look at your body of work from the outside today, would you interpret it more as a process of construction or of disintegration?

I don't think these two processes can be separated, certainly not in my work. Every creative act involves a form of destruction. The moment you intervene in the blankness of the canvas, or any other surface you are working on, you disturb that initial state. The process begins to transform the medium, evolving it toward something else, another meaning.

The process is always like a jigsaw puzzle that is assembled and simultaneously taken apart; and something new emerges from this process. A construction is underway: images converge, layers accumulate. But at the same time, a disintegration, even a kind of undoing, occurs. I do not impose this; it arises from the material itself. The materials react, sometimes against each other, and over time they exhaust their own energies. What remains on the surface, the traces of what has taken place, is like a record of that process. The work does not move in a single direction. It is built and unmade at once.

The Vehbi Koç Foundation, Türkiye's first private foundation, presents the annual Vehbi Koç Award in the fields of culture, education, and healthcare. What does receiving this award mean to you?

This award carries a great deal of meaning for me. That a long process, and all the work that goes into it, should be recognized in this way is of immense value. But more than that: knowing that my work can matter to others and that it might create a space we share is what feels truly significant. To me, this award is not an end or a destination, but a motivation to keep moving forward rather than looking back.





ABOUT CANAN TOLON

Canan Tolon graduated from Ecole Française d'Istanbul (Baccalauréat, Philosophie-Lettres). She studied design at Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland (1976) and Fachhochschule, Trier, Germany (1979), followed by interior architecture at Middlesex University/Architectural Association, London, England (1980). She earned her master's degree in architecture at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983. Some of her notable solo exhibitions include: Nakarat, Dirimart Pera, İstanbul (2025); Havadan Sudan, Dirimart Dolapdere, İstanbul (2023); Tunnel Vision, Dirimart Pera, İstanbul (2022); Limbo, Cocoon by CIF, Fişekhane, İstanbul (2022); "You Tell Me," İstanbul Modern, İstanbul (2019); "Where were we," Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco, CA (2018); "I will not say I told you so," Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2017); Ağır/Heavy, Galeri Nev, İstanbul (2015); LIKE, Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles (2014); Sidesteps, Parasol unit, Foundation for Contemporary Art, London (2014); Then, and Then, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA (2012). She has also participated in several group exhibitions: Yüzen Adalar, İstanbul Modern, İstanbul (2023); Tedbir/Precaution, Arter, İstanbul (2021); Memory and Continuity; a selection of the Huma Kabakci collection, Pera Museum, İstanbul (2016); "Till It's Gone," İstanbul Modern Museum, İstanbul (2016); Poetry and Exile from the permanent collection, British Museum, London (2014); Zwölf im Zwölften, Tanas, Berlin (2012); Confessions of Dangerous Minds, Saatchi Gallery, London (2011); İstanbul Next Wave, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin (2009); Modern and Beyond, Santralİstanbul, İstanbul (2007), 2nd Pedestrian Exhibitions, Karaköy, İstanbul (2005). Canan Tolon, whose works are held in public collections of institutions such as the British Museum, Arter, and İstanbul Modern, lives and works between İstanbul and San Francisco.