Too early Too late

Canan Tolon

***Too early* Too late** revisits an exhibition I conceived thirty-seven years ago, in the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is not a reconstruction, but a return to the concerns that gave rise to it, concerns that have remained remarkably unchanged even as the world around them has undergone profound transformations.

California is a land of earthquakes. Having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for decades, I am no stranger to the collective denial that seems to accompany life there. We all know that another major earthquake is inevitable, yet we continue to live as though it might never happen. Each tremor becomes another rite of passage, until the ground suddenly gives way beneath that reassuring familiarity.

The Loma Prieta earthquake was so violent that building materials lay entangled with trees and vegetation. I was struck by the strange compositions formed by the debris, living and inert materials caught together in precarious arrangements. They bore a strange resemblance to classical *natures mortes*, only this time nature had prevailed. The illusion of human dominance had been pulverised.

I began gathering discarded materials, along with living natural elements, and arranging them in precarious balance, as though the slightest movement might bring everything down again. I exhibited them leaning against the gallery's pristine walls, alongside unstretched painted canvases that served as backdrops. Living materials continued to grow, deteriorate and change throughout the exhibition. The installation seemed to anticipate another disturbance, a sudden jolt that might flatten the entire arrangement. But it never came.

I was not particularly interested in the aesthetic possibilities of discarded objects, nor in their longevity. What mattered was what the debris revealed about the vulnerability of our constructed environment, our dependence on natural resources, and the precarious balance between human activity and the world that sustains it. The earthquake had made visible, in a matter of seconds, a fragility that ordinarily remained concealed.

What brings me back to these concerns today is a troubling sense of *déjà vu*. I recognise in the anxieties of younger generations much of what I felt when I first made these works: the uncertainty about the future, the awareness of the fragility of our environment, and the frustration at the apparent indifference with which we continue to exhaust the resources on which we depend.

Yet there is a fundamental difference. At their age, I believed that there was still time to reverse the damage, that some form of equilibrium might be restored. Today, what once seemed a distant possibility has become part of our everyday reality. The young people who now express these concerns are confronting the consequences of decisions made long before they could have any say in them.

Unlike the sudden violence of an earthquake, the destruction that concerns me today is often gradual, almost imperceptible. It takes place through the accumulation of seemingly insignificant changes, through familiar landscapes slowly transformed, through the normalisation of conditions that would once have seemed alarming. There is no single moment of rupture, no jolt that brings everything down. We simply become accustomed to what is disappearing.

It is this altered sense of time that informs ***Too early*** **Too late**. The works are new, but the gesture of gathering and assembling discarded materials is no longer unusual. What once appeared as a curiosity in a gallery has become a familiar sight, just as the evidence of environmental destruction has become familiar beyond its walls. I am returning to these materials not because they offer something new, but because the questions they raised thirty-seven years ago remain unresolved. Their familiarity is precisely what troubles me.

There is nothing new about a pile of discarded materials. What is different today is that their accumulation no longer requires a catastrophe. Our landscapes bear the traces of gradual deterioration, while our cities reveal other forms of precarious existence, from abandoned structures to makeshift shelters. These conditions have become so familiar that we risk accepting them as part of the ordinary landscape.

In 1990, when I presented the earlier work at Maçka Sanat Galerisi in Istanbul, Rabia Çapa, who had invited me to exhibit these still lifes, sensed the perplexity with which visitors encountered them. 'It's a little too early,' she remarked. I remember those words today, as I return to concerns that seemed premature then and now risk being regarded as commonplace.

What was curiosity then has become evidence now. What seemed premature has become overdue. The danger is no longer that we fail to recognise the evidence, but that we have learned to live with it.

Canan Tolon (b. 1955, Istanbul) studied Literature and Philosophy at the French Lycée in Istanbul. In 1976, she attended Edinburgh Napier University and Fachhochschule Trier for design, later studying interior architecture at A.A. Middlesex University in London. She completed her Master's degree in architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1983. Her selected solo exhibitions include *Too early* Too late, Dirimart London, London (2026); *Refrain*, Dirimart Pera, Istanbul (2025); *About the Weather*, Dirimart Dolapdere, Istanbul (2023); *Tunnel Vision*, Dirimart Pera, Istanbul (2022); *Limbo*, Cocoon by CIF, Fişekhane, Istanbul (2022); *You Tell Me*, Istanbul Modern, Istanbul (2019); *Where were we*, Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco (2018); *I will not say I told you so*, Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles (2017); *Heavy, Galeri Nev*, Istanbul (2015); *LIKE*, Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles (2014); *Sidesteps*, Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London (2014) and *Then, and Then*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco (2012). Her selected group exhibitions are *Floating Islands*, Istanbul Modern, Istanbul (2023); *Precaution*, ARTER, Istanbul (2021); *Memory and Continuity: A Selection from the Huma Kabakcı Collection*, Pera Museum, Istanbul (2016); *Before It Is Too Late*, Istanbul Modern, Istanbul (2016); *Poetry and Exile*, The British Museum, London (2014); *Zwölf im Zwölfen*, Tanas, Berlin (2012); *Confessions of Dangerous Minds*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2011); *Istanbul Next Wave*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2009); *Modern and Beyond*, SantralIstanbul, Istanbul (2007) and *2nd Yaya Exhibition*, Karaköy, Istanbul (2005). Her works are held in the collections of esteemed institutions such as The British Museum (London), ARTER (Istanbul), and Istanbul Modern (Istanbul). Canan Tolon lives and works between Istanbul and San Francisco.