

VAHAP AVŞAR

Turkish, born Malatya, Turkey, 1965

Gece Vardiyası 3 / Night Shift 3, 1988, printed 2015

Chromogenic print, 56 x 44 inches (frame)

Gift of Melih and Zeynep Keyman, 2015.4

Vahap Avşar's *Night Shift 3* depicts a sculpture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the military leader of the Turkish National Movement and the first president of Turkey. The sculpture is seen against a background of artist Cengiz Çekil's (1945–2015) ramshackle studio, with scattered tools and dark curtains.

The image of Atatürk—"the father Turk"—is familiar, even for those who have little knowledge about Turkey. Laws and regulations were implemented to ensure that Atatürk would continue to be present not only in history books, museums, and monuments dedicated to his memory but also in places where people go about their everyday lives, such as schools, public offices, bridges, parks, airports, and police stations. First utilized in the 1930s and 1940s to consolidate the Republican regime, and to write its history on Turkey's landscape, monuments and busts bearing Atatürk's image became central to the restoration of state order following the brutal military coup in 1980. Capturing the centrality of his image and its omnipresence in Turkey, *Night Shift 3* provides an allegory of the cult of Atatürk at the time.

Yet there is something unfamiliar about Atatürk in Avşar's work: He is sitting down instead of standing up as the vanguard, as in most other statues of him; the photograph depicts his sculpture unfinished, out of focus, and dimly lit. These details hint at the irony embedded in the cult of one of the most, if not the most, portrayed statespersons in the history of the world. As a sociologist, I see two aspects to this irony. By turning his camera on the creation process of this image in the shadowy art studio, Avşar debunks the completeness of the Atatürk myth, hence, that of his historical cult. *Night Shift 3* also testifies to the ideological and aesthetic rigidity of the political milieu of the 1980s when this photograph was taken, which required two conceptual artists, Cengiz Çekil—an artist known for his outstanding contemporary artwork in Turkey and abroad—and Avşar himself (as Çekil's assistant at the time), to contribute to the dominant symbolic order in the country, to make ends meet.

—Ayça Alemdaroğlu

Assistant Professor of Research in Sociology, Northwestern University,
2015–19

Associate Director of the Program on Turkey, Stanford University