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**FLIP**

Arun Misra interviews:

**Cemre Yeşil Gönenli - Visual storytelling**

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## **Cemre Yeşil Gönenli, Visual storytelling: evoking hidden memories, bonds and relationships** Arun Misra interviews

Cemre Yeşil Gönenli is a Turkish photographer and artist living in Istanbul. Her work has been exhibited and published internationally including *The Guardian*, International Center of Photography New York, *The British Journal of Photography*, Istanbul Modern Museum, and Salt Beyoğlu.

Her 2020 book *Hayal & Hakikat* was the winner of the Best Photography Book of the Year in the international category of PhotoEspaña 2021. She was also nominated for the Foam Paul Huf Award of Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam in 2014 and 2021 and for ING Unseen Talent Award in 2016. In 2015 *The British Journal of Photography* placed her amongst the 25 most promising new talents in a global survey of emerging photographers, citing her work *For Birds' Sake* which was produced in collaboration with Maria Sturm. Her works are included in the collections of the Houston Center for Photography, Istanbul Modern Museum, Soho House London and Soho House Istanbul. She currently lectures on Falmouth University's MA Photography program and Istanbul Bilgi University's BA in Visual Communication Design.



left: from the series *Hayal & Hakikat*,  
right: from the series *Double Portrait*,  
both © Cemre Yeşil Gönenli

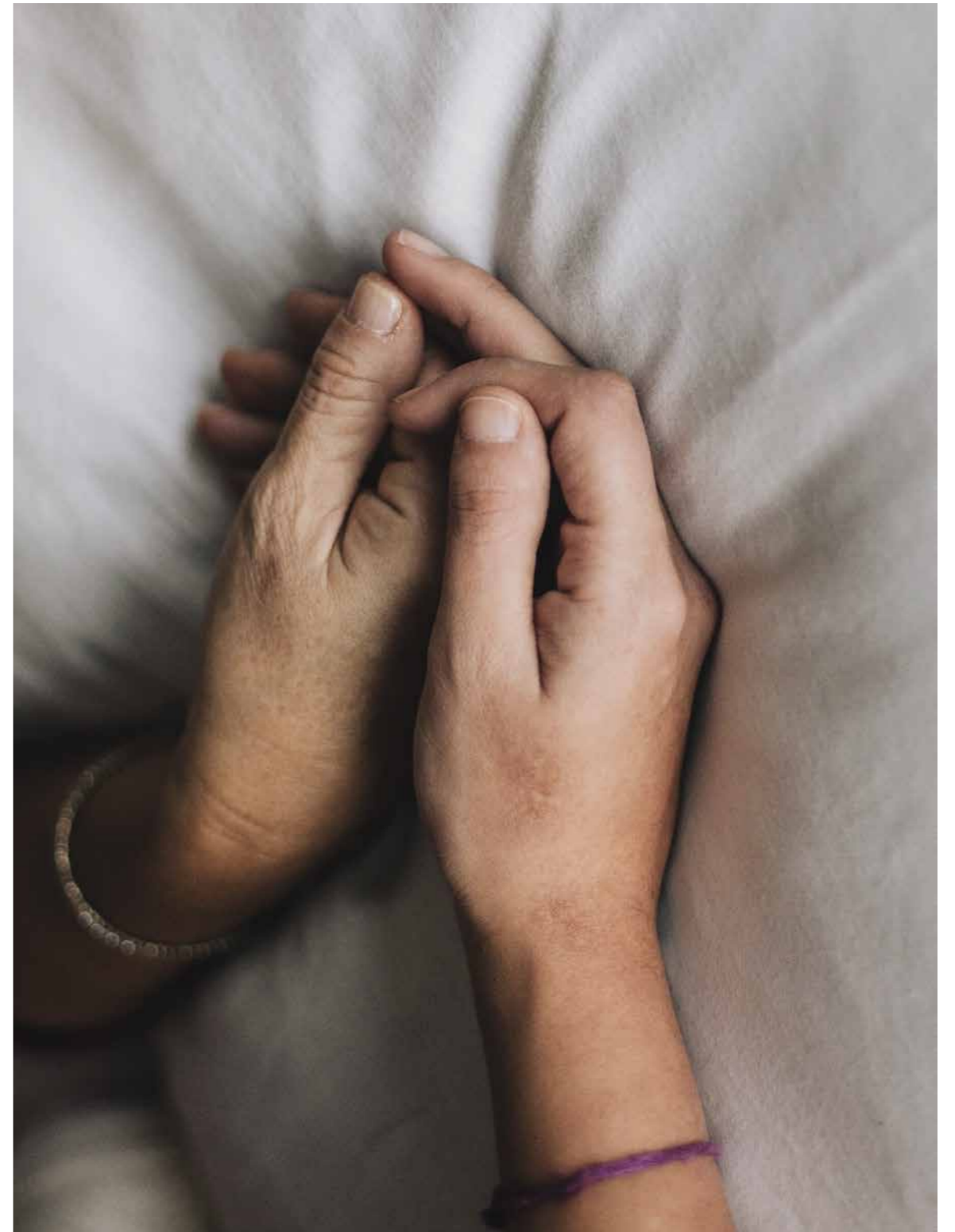
**Arun Misra** Several of your works explore human relationships and bonds. You have said that photographing helps you to see things that you cannot see with the naked eye and that the 'actual act of photographing becomes a breather in the ebb and flow of life'. Can you talk about this?

**Cemre Yeşil Gönenli** Yes, my work generally operates as relationship portraits and I define myself as a visual story teller. Generally, if I cannot resolve something within a certain relationship, it turns into a potential project for me to work on and to tell a story. In a way, photography opens an abstract yet factual path for me to explore something in depth. So, for me, photography is a great tool to investigate human psyche and human relations. Yet photography is still not strong enough to convey a story and text becomes a part of the narrative. Mostly, the topics I explore through

my work are things that I really want to grasp so the final work is where I invite the viewer to think together with me. It becomes a process of learning and sharing.

**AM** How did you first become interested in photography? What were your early influences?

**CG** My father was an amateur photographer and was quite involved with photography. He even had a dark room in our house before I was born. So in a way, it was already a part of my life growing up. I learnt how to use a camera from him when I was in high school. During the same period I was obsessed with my handy cam, constantly recording my family, friends and surroundings. Then when it occurred to me that I need to set myself a goal in adult life, I decided to study photography, and I had the most inspiring photography professor who really gave me a great perspective. I was





from the series *Hayal & Hakikat* © Cemre Yeşil Gönenli

always amazed by good teachers, and I also had an amazing literature teacher in high school who also was very encouraging for me to speak my heart. So my very early inspirations were my father, my literature teacher Nazan Ustun, and my photography teacher Orhan Cem Cetin. Also I was very engaged with music and I believe that also gave me an artistic foundation.

**AM** *You are a visual story teller. You explore human emotions and anxieties such as relationships, bonds, motherhood but also some of the darker and more sinister aspects of human traits, an example is your award winning book *Hayal and Hakikat*. What attracts you to this subject matter? How do you decide to approach it?*

**CG** The history of photography and the ontology of photography is a great inspiration for me. I am very much interested in exploring and questioning relationships, the portrait traditions and the psychological aspect of photography, and how the context of historical imagery changes over time. There is always a duality or an understanding of doubleness in my work; I believe the human condition or the human psyche always operates in relation to the 'other'. Therefore, my investigation always conveys a concept of twoness. My latest two projects *Hayal & Hakikat (Dream & Fact)* and *Double Portrait* both carry this context. Another common theme that occurs in my work is hiddenness and invisibility. Although the nature of photography seems like it is all about 'showing', I believe the true power of photography lies in what a photograph doesn't show but evokes in the viewer's mind. The way I would approach a subject would really depend on the nature of the subject, how I feel about it and what I want to learn more about it. So I think my two artistic drives come from the desire for self-expression and curiosity.

**AM** **Hayal & Hakikat* is actually two books. One concerned with forgiveness and the other with punishment. What inspired you to create this work?*

**CG** I was commissioned by one of the leading contemporary art institutions in Turkey, Salt

Beyoglu, to create a body of work departing from the amazing work of Resad Ekrem Kocu, a Turkish writer and historian. In the mid-20th century, Kocu began compiling the Istanbul Encyclopedia: a very subjective encyclopedia that speaks about the writer's experience of the city. Salt was in the process of the digitisation of this archive and they organized many side events with their long term research project on the encyclopedia. They invited three artists to interpret his work. Luckily, I was one of them, and went straight for the letter F, searching for an entry about photography ('fotografcilik' in Turkish). There, I found a mention of Abdul Hamid II's archive, which eventually led me to the Rare Items Library at the University of Istanbul. Within this archive, I came across hundreds of photographs of prisoners, all posing identically, exposing their hands in an unnatural way. I was stunned. Someone must have asked them to be photographed like this. I took copies of the images, and showed them to an expert in Abdul Hamid II's life, who revealed their true purpose. I was just dying to know about why the prisoners who were photographed in this specific way for the possibility to be free again thanks to Sultan's decision of amnesty to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his crown. This is how the journey of *Hayal & Hakikat* started.

**AM** *As you say this book depicts hands of prisoners taken from the photograph albums of Abdul Hamid II. These photographs are reminiscent of 19thC pseudo-scientific phrenology images of heads which were believed to provide insights into a person's character. Hamid II was using these images as the basis for deciding the fate of prisoners. What attracted you to these images?*

**CG** For some reason, I have always been attracted to photographs of hands and, as a first time viewer of this collection of images, I was really drawn to the very much exposed hands of prisoners. I immediately understood that this was a given brief because their body language was not natural: they were told to make sure their hands are shown in the photographs. Although you see the faces of the prisoners in this collection, they were almost irrelevant for me. The absurdity of



above & right: from the series *For Birds' Sake*  
both © Cemre Yeşil Gönenli

Sultan's way of deciding freedom for the prisoners also resonated with the political climate and justice system of the current Turkish government. So, in this body of work, I decided to crop the heads of prisoners in order to make a statement and re-contextualize the archive. In addition to this group of images showing hands, I found another collection that portrayed prisoners that had nothing to do with the amnesty in question, they were all sentenced to death. You would see men with enormous chains around their body. So the clash between freedom and captivity, forgiveness and punishment, dream and fact that I found in this archival investigation became the conceptual basis of the work I produced.

**AM** *Your installations make use of all manner of devices such as sinister sounds, chains and cages. Why?*

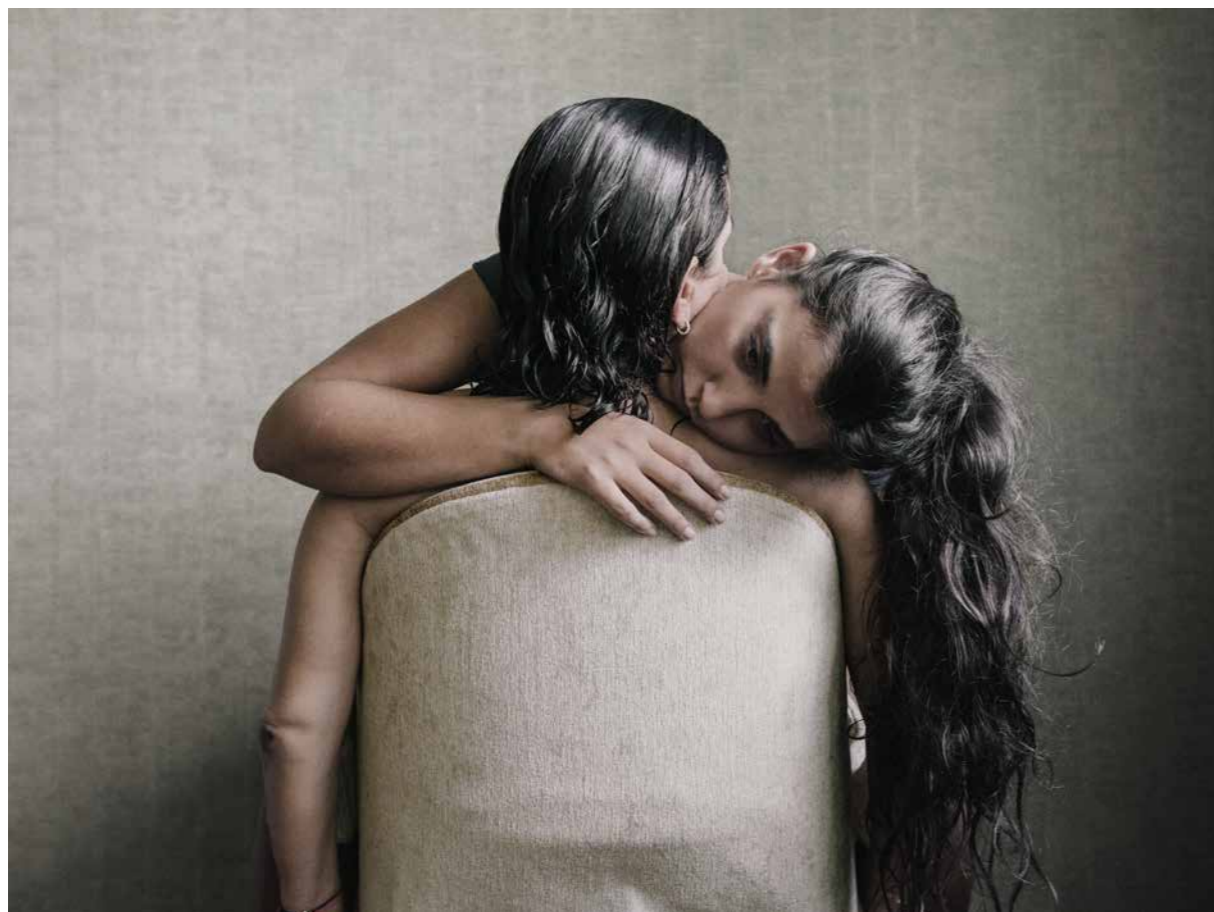
**CG** Although I primarily use photography as my artistic medium, I enjoy an interdisciplinary approach. And as I said, sometimes photography alone cannot convey a certain narrative I want to pass to the reader and I begin to think about how the narrative could be delivered in the strongest way perhaps by utilizing other mediums such as sound, sculpture, text, installation etc.

**AM** *Let's talk about *For Birds' Sake*. This work is about the cultural tradition in Istanbul of keeping of songbirds which are mostly hidden from view. Why did you embark on this? What does this work say about this deep rooted practice? Invisibility, relationships, power and control?*

**CG** In depth, I think this work was also rooted in my quest for finding the true power of photography through what a photograph doesn't show but evokes in the viewer's mind. Although it was a cultural story, for me what was even more inviting to explore was the fact that the bird cages were always covered and as an outsider, you would never see the birds although everything surrounding this culture was filled with the imagery of birds. Also I must say this is a collaborative body of work with a good friend of mine, Maria Sturm and another reason for me to embark on this story was our common curiosity and desire to explore this world that is filled with contradictions about love, possession, freedom, desire. So this work questions these topics through a cultural phenomenon that is vanishing while offering a ground which would invite the viewer to put whatever they want into these covered cages. Meanwhile, it tries to understand this complicated relationship that a man has with his bird and how this relates to many different layers regarding power, society, reputation, gender, politics and so on.

**AM** *This work is also about the threat to Istanbul's birdmen from Turkey's desire to join the European Union. Can you talk about how you engaged with the birdmen?*





above & right: from the series *Double Portrait*,  
both © Cemre Yeşil Gönenli

**CG** Although this is a very rooted tradition, it is illegal and very underground. So it wasn't quick. As two women photographers, we jumped into the men's world. For the birdmen community, what we were after was such an unconventional thing to do. First, we had to be friends with them and make sure that they understand that the reason we photograph is not to criticize what they do but that we were there to understand and narrate their practice, community, culture and language.

**AM** *Shadow, sound and invisibility are all intertwined in this work. Can you talk about how these elements are brought to the fore?*

**CG** Although *For Birds' Sake* is a visual

photographic story, it actually mingles our senses other than sight. Sound is the primary element in the world of *For Birds' Sake*: all the birdmen have these singing birds because they are almost addicted to listen to their songs. There is a huge subculture of bird singing competitions taking place in birdmen cafes and the love for the bird songs are the foundation of this community and practice. The bird cages are always covered because the birdmen think birds sing nicer in darkness. So all these intertwined concepts are coming from certain factual and conceptual aspects embedded within the story itself. So these concepts are brought to the foreground.

**AM** You use the term 'shrouded relationship' to

describe the relationship between the birdmen and the birds. There seems to be a connection between this and your long term project, *Double Portrait*. What is *Double Portrait* about and what inspired you to do it?

**CG** *Double Portrait* is a reverie in the form of images and words, a communication of my artistic calling through photography and an archive of my personal journey of fear of loss. It's about the joy of love and birth and a questioning of the psychological aspect of photography. This hybrid photo-text book was launched in 2021 with an exhibition of the project at Milli Reasurans Art Gallery, Istanbul. In a culture in which images of the mother-child relationship are clichéd conspicuously in and outside of the realms of art, popular culture and everyday life, I re-address the cultural, and reach a more raw and natural state of expression with these intimate shots. *Double Portrait* is cartography towards the unfolding process of motherhood; a visual response to the unimaginable death of everyone's mother. It invites the viewer to remember what it means to be held, and to experience what it means to hold regardless of cultural norms related to gender. The project is the result of nine years of research into a real-time system of observation on the mother-child relationship through different lenses. It speaks of something we all know about emotionally, but can't articulate all that easily.

The main inspiration for this work was a photographic tradition called 'hidden mother'. In the nineteenth century, when photographing a baby, it was common for the mother to be present in the photo but to be hidden under a cloth. The reason is that the baby can't stay still during the long exposure time. These double portraits are the starting point of my work which originally was in the centre of my practice-based PhD in London College of Communication before I dropped out. I was stunned by these historical images and how the lack of technology transforms into a new context in today's understanding, both photographically and socially. In addition to this, from a personal perspective, as a daughter in my mid 20's, I somehow had empathy for the babies in these images in terms of needing the support of

the mother, although I was an adult. I was trying to familiarize myself with the collapse of conventional roles in the mother-child relationship and how you suddenly become your own mother's mother. So, contemplating the hidden embrace of the mother's presence, I created my own versions of double portraits while the portraits of my mother and my son, both becoming mirrors of myself, I explored the embrace as a symbolic gesture for the comforting maternal presence.

**AM** *Double Portrait* has been widely exhibited already. How do you see the work developing from where it is now?

**CG** For me, even being able to complete such





a long term project was a dream come true. As it was initially a PhD work, it had a deep theoretical and historical ground, but it took me 5 years to understand that an academic framework jailed my artistic voice. I would never forget the feedback I once got from one of my supervisors: “You are writing like an artist, not like a researcher”. At the end of the book the readers see the letter I wrote to my supervisors regarding my decision to drop out— which was a very difficult one to take. So the point I want to make is, *Double Portrait* changed a lot through time, it grew with me in 9 long years. However, I can’t even picture a better outcome of the project. With the great team I worked with (visual editor: Gonzalo Golpe, designer: Marina Meyer, text editor: Federica Chiocchetti, production assistant: Cagla Demirbas), I was able to rewrite the work. We have a beautiful book that means a lot to me. We had the first show in Istanbul. Then last summer it was exhibited in Verzasca Photo Festival 2021 as a photo-performance in 9 acts which turned into a living exhibition in Southern Alps and continued to be performed by the visitors. Currently, we are building an online web experience of *Double Portrait* with Marina Meyer, as well as preparing for the third show in Foam Amsterdam’s new community space called MAQAM to be opened in February 2022. The *Double Portrait* artist’s book was presented in the official artist talk program in Paris Photo 2021 Artist Talks organized by The Eyes. The work was a part of the 2021 group exhibition titled “What is Your Name When You’re

at Home?” in Penumbra Foundation New York, curated by Sabrina Mandanici. Finally, the book was shortlisted in the PHotoESPAÑA 2021 Best Photography Book of the Year and was a finalist at FELIFA Festival de Libros de Fotos de Autor 2021

**AM** *You also run a publishing house, FilBooks, and have produced several titles of your own. What makes a photo book engaging and successful?*

**CG** Although I am very much involved with photobooks, I don’t think all photographic projects work well as books. When I make a book, I always question this in depth: “Why should this work exist in a book form?” I try to build a strong relationship between the book as an object and the story I am trying to convey. I spend a lot of time on conceptualization to create a base for the sequencing and the overall narrative of a book and this has been a key method for me. I also can say that good team work is a must and I see myself very lucky to collaborate with super-talented people.

**AM** *Your photo books are beautifully produced and unmistakably evoke sentiments and feelings imbedded in your photographs. How do you decide on the visual and physical treatments?*

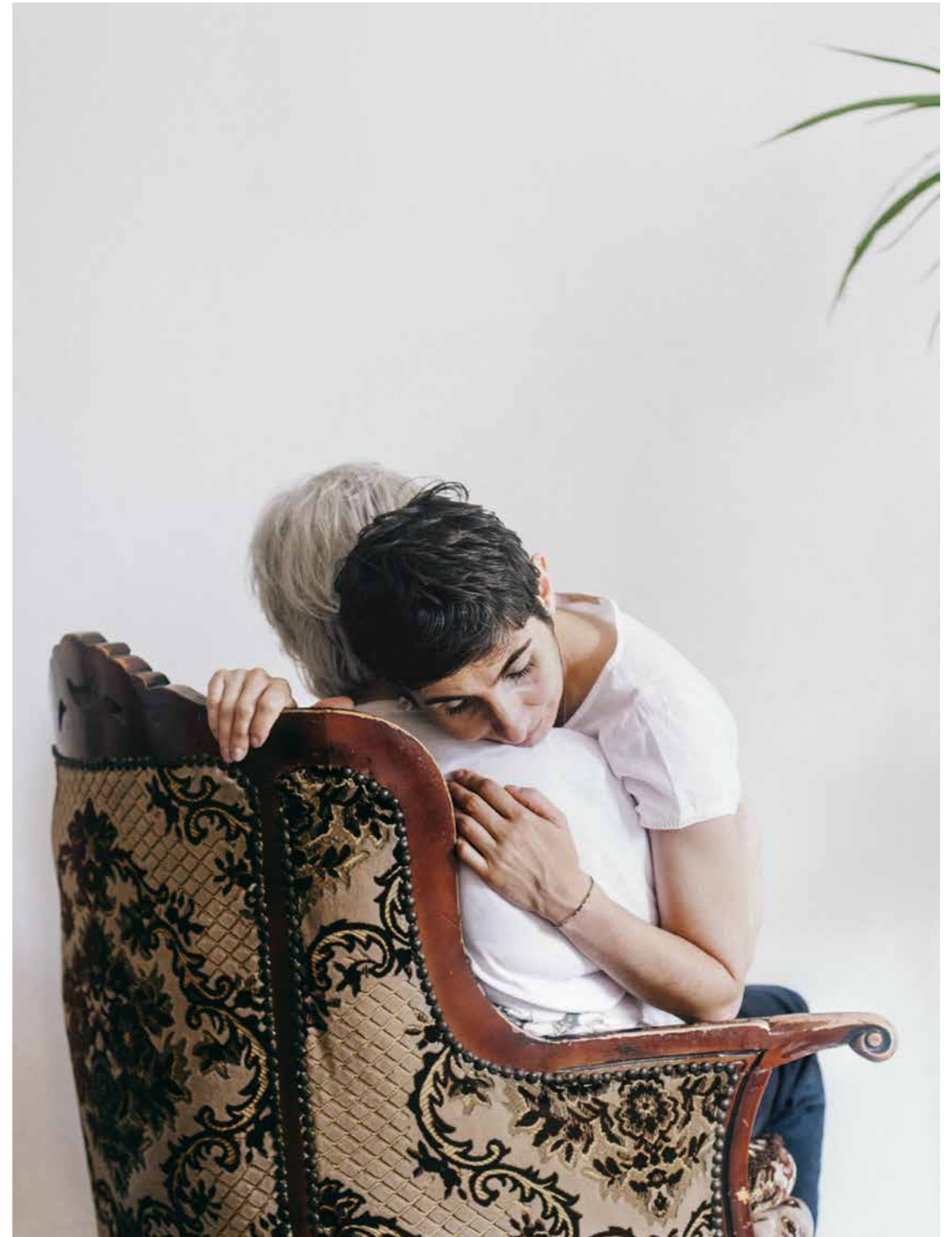
**CG** Firstly, thanks a lot for such a comment. For me any decision regarding the design and the physicality of the work is a continuation of the story. So all the physical experiments come through the elements or concepts I become obsessed about within the work I develop.

**AM** *What do you enjoy doing besides photography?*

**CG** Spending time with my family is always special. I also really enjoy teaching, and curating other people’s works as well as travelling, playing squash, and sailing.

**AM** *Cemre, it’s been delightful talking to you and thank you for giving this interview and sharing your ideas and experiences with us.*

**CG** Thank you for being interested in my work.



above & right: from the series *Double Portrait*, both © Cemre Yeşil Gönenli