

WIDE PERSPECTIVES CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

By: Zoltán Somhegyi



Said Atabekov, Korpeshe Flags#5, 2011, C-Print, 67x100cm - Courtesy of Laura Bulian gallery, Milan.

Wide perspectives of the sublime nomad people of the steppes wandering with their animals and yurts, marvelous patterns of folk art textiles, the challenging local climate, alongside basic and influential changes in the forms of state and society are just a handful of the commonplace notions which first to mind when we think of Central Asia. We might recall some geographical coordinates, important cities, famous personalities, but I guess many of us have to confess that we still don't know the region as well as it deserves to be known. The rapid development of the art scene and the growing fame of some of the artists residing in, or originating from, the region are factors that will demand more attention and a more committed following in the coming years. One does not need to be a specialist in the field to appreciate the shifting role of contemporary arts from Central Asia. Even the average follower of the global scene could not fail to notice the growth in exhibitions, gallery-representations, and biennale and art fair participations by Central Asian artists. Therefore, we can surely consider the region as one of the new, but with still-more-to-be-discovered, areas on the map of the contemporary art world. Due to limited space, in the following text I cannot offer a detailed examination of emerging art from every country of this inspiring region, but I would like to indicate some features, important topics and significant works that might help the interested art lover to further explore the Central Asian art scene.

As for setting the geographical area, in contemporary art discourse the term Central Asia mainly refers to four countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, other countries and territories are often added to this list from the Caspian and Caucasus regions, for example Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan or Dagestan. Thus, in general, we can extend the region's geographical and cultural borders towards Turkey, Iran and further on into the Gulf countries, as well as China and Russia. But this classification is not a strict border, and we should not imagine Central Asia as an isolated territory, either culturally or in terms of the art market. In fact, Central Asia is just the contrary. The region is, in many ways, strongly connected



Taus Makhacheva, The Fast and the Furious#1, 2011, C-print, 56x85cm - Courtesy of Laura Bulian gallery, Milan.

to its neighbours, and this link is one of the features that often helps us to understand oeuvres and artists' works, but also explains the current ascension of the scene from an art economics point of view.

Though the focus on the Central Asian region cannot be automatically connected with the current leading positions of Turkey, the Middle East or the Gulf Countries' in the art world - the latter regions started their development earlier - it is likely that part of the augmented attention of the contemporary scene in some Central Asian countries is the result of the general focus on the Turkish and MENASA regions. Naturally, we all know about the phenomenon that is seeing a general shift in focus towards the "East", meaning we could expect that Central Asia will get a turn in the limelight. However, there is also another tendency that coincides with this general shift in attention by the global art scene: interest in the ex-Soviet bloc's art, not only that of the Soviet Union itself, but of all the countries that used to be under the influence of Soviet cultural politics. The "discovery" of the art of the post-Soviet countries is also an "eastward" movement, topographically starting from the Iron Curtain, with a huge interest in the art of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, which turned towards Central Asia some years after the Millennium. In my opinion, these two tendencies - the general shift of the "center of gravity" of the global art scene, plus the floating focus point in the discovery of post-Soviet art - have fortunately crossed paths in the case of Central Asia. Therefore, in the coming years, we can expect the further development of the Central Asian art scene and its art market.

In the case of such a wide region, the question automatically arises: how can we make general statements on its contemporary art scene? Is it not too arbitrary to push countries with such different cultural backgrounds and historical experiences into one single category and to try to find common characteristics? Obviously, there are huge differences between the countries of the region and their geopolitical and economical potentials. For example, how can we compare the enormous territory of Kazakhstan, rich in gas and oil, with the relatively small and economically poorer Kyrgyzstan? This is especially problematic because economic differences can strongly influence the development of the contemporary art scene by determining how much of a country's financial resources can be dedicated to the support and promotion of its art, both within the country and internationally. This process is a long-term investment but, at the same time, has a kind of self-inducing effect: the more international promotion a country's art scene receives the more the scene itself develops and, in turn, the positive feedback inspires the local actors of the scene to satisfy the growing demand. Coming back to the question of common factors, and keeping in mind the dangers of generalizations, we can still point out some features that might indicate similarities within Central Asian art. The Soviet past is definitely one of the most important common elements from the recent history of the region that influences artists' work and helps the interpreter when observing art pieces. But this past not only defines many works - we will see some examples below - , but also has an effect on the establishment of the local art scene and art institutions. The fall of the Soviet Union and the formation of the new republics paved the way for the expansion of

contemporary art, at least in the sense of individual artists' experiments. But a consequence of the newness of the scene - if we count it from the independence of the countries - also results in a common factor: the lack of institutions in the local art scene. Among these "lacking institutions", i.e. the necessary components of a well-working and constantly developing scene, we can list: gallery networks; contemporary museums of art and architecture with steadily growing collections and with variable and often changing exhibitions of both local and international artists; good systems of art education and scholarships to offer the possibility of concentrating on the search for one's own artistic way, as well as providing the potential to travel and gather experience abroad; and, last but absolutely not least, a strong base of serious "inland" collectors and art lovers who constantly invest in work both by the established, internationally known artists and by the young emerging talents and show them, preferable in an international context. Many aspects of these criteria are still missing, but the situation is far from hopeless. There is a very good example how these countries can overcome current difficulties by collaboration, for example by the common presentation in major events: since 2005 at one of the world's largest art events, the Venice Biennale, selections from the region's contemporary art is shown in the Central Asian Pavilion. In this case, common presentation is a form of collaboration due to the efficiency in promotional, logistical etc. issues, which we should not fear will lead to a false generalization or to the loss of the characteristics of any of the participating nations.

A further common factor uniting the region is the experience of an important novelty that contemporary artists of the post-Soviet era from Central Europe through Central Asia had to face: the changing role of the state as a commissioner of artworks. Working for the free market encompasses advantages and disadvantages. While losing many restrictions, not having to work for the official state propaganda-commissions also often means not having regular work. Thus the artist needs luck and the capability to learn the techniques and tricks of self-management, especially when the institutionalization of the art world is not yet fully established. On the other hand, the freedom of possibilities and the variety of means and of ways of thinking definitely help elevate the aesthetic level of the contemporary arts, letting artists use approaches that were not common in previous eras. This important phenomenon is what Nazira Alymbaeva, a Bishkek-born researcher of contemporary arts currently based in Berlin highlights in her work: "While earlier it was hard to find works with irony and humor, now there are more and more. Artists quickly realize that in the field of contemporary arts and new media - still a new phenomenon for Central Asian countries - there are more favorable conditions for cooperation than in traditional kinds of creative work." In fact, in the region those artists will definitely be among the leading ones, who realize the possibilities in these challenges, and are able to use new means of expression.

Actually, the relationship between medium and content is also a very characteristic issue in the region's scene. Even if contemporary art is a young phenomenon in these countries, both among older and new generation artists we find greater exploration of the possibilities of new media, especially that of photo, video and installation - but they use these

media to express new reflections and interpretations of not only current issues, but also of classical traditions, old rituals and archaic symbols. This dichotomy between the freshness of the media and the classical content results in particularly interesting oeuvres that beautifully illustrate how the wish to elaborate the socio-cultural heritage of the past and the search for identity can lead to significant works. These works are significant as they do not only have local importance but merit an international audience since they question universal issues. Thus, the elaboration of very significant local heritage and characteristics is another important reason why today's art world is paying more and attention and giving special consideration to the Central Asian region.

Still, to complete the features mentioned above, as an important addition we have to highlight the significance of research into the cultural mixture of the region. The mapping of connections also leads to the (re)discovery of the "nomad" past, and its parallel with today's migration in a global context. This is exactly what Sara Raza was examining in a show she curated in 2012 at Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, entitled *Migrasophia*. Taking the term from the Azerbaijani philosopher and artist Zeigam Azizov, who created it by mixing "migration" and "philosophy", it indicates migration not simply as a sociological phenomenon but reflects it from a philosophical perspective. This leads to the argument that migration, forced or voluntary change of geographical context, lost and regained identity, encounter of cultures, local heritage and global issues creates a complex coordinate system that defines, influences and modifies identity, cultural memory and the practice of creating artworks.

If we look at some series from artists, we can easily trace these topics. The Tajikistan-born Jamshed Kholikov (1962), in his series entitled "Bus Stops" documented around 200 different bus stops from various Central Asian countries, showing their really huge diversity in style and construction. Their particularity is that even if they are considered as functional buildings - offering shelter for the time spent waiting for the bus - they can also refer to different approaches: evoking traditional folk-art motifs or classical avant-garde forms. On the one hand the corpus of these works evokes the classical concept and life-metaphor of constant departure and arrival. Beral Madra also featured this interpretation when analyzing the works: "For Kholikov they (the bus stops - Z. S.) are like stops in our voyage from birth to death that give opportunity to pause and think. They are the beginning and the end of our trips, our wasted hopes and wasted illusions and they are the stops when people ask themselves the well-known post-Soviet question: What to do now?"¹⁷ On the other hand, in the series Kholikov manages to integrate many characteristics of the region in a single body of works: constant migration; mixture of cultural references and overlaying of time-shifts; archaic age mediated by the folk art motifs; the Soviet recent-past; and even the artist's own time, both the time when still a user of these stops and the time when he revisited them, some of them already abandoned and starting to disintegrate. Another notable example which shows the overlapping of different time and cultural segments - even with implicit references to the much-discussed questions of western Orientalism - is the series entitled "Korpesh-Flags" of the Uzbekistan-born and Kazakhstan-residing Said Atabekov (1965).



Faiq Ahmed, Flood of Yellow Weigh, 2007, woolen handmade carpet, 150x100cm - Courtesy of the artist, YAY gallery & Leila Heller gallery.

In this case, Atabekov transformed the traditional Central Asian textile, the korpeshes - that is normally used as a bedspread and for bedding - into flags of different nations, mainly of Western countries. Naturally, here the inspiring dichotomy lies between the symbol of the nomadic culture, i.e. the korpeshes used in the tents of the wandering Kazakhs, and the flag as a standard symbol of "stable" countries and nations. But this mixture thus has more profound references too, which were again alluding to questions of migration, history and differences in the approach and interpretation of the concept of home. We can agree with Boris Chukhovich when he writes: "A nomad is not tied to a territory, can move in any direction, is open to all winds, and is not subject to any nostalgic trauma. For him, national borders and symbols, such as flags, have meaning only in one sense: how to cross them in order to move on. Therefore, state attributes on the flag-Korpeshes change while the trans-cultural patterned background remains unchanged"⁽²⁾. Archaic and modern times, western and eastern interpretation of state and political ideology, national and nationalistic ideologies meet in this very refined series. Also, for the Azerbaijani Faiq Ahmed (1982), a traditional

textile was the starting point when creating his carpet series. The much-valued tradition of beautiful, handmade woolen carpets is reinterpreted when he inserts "errors" in them, thus changing the visual effect. As some examples: a completely different-style, figure or motif - a cartoon-like rabbit, an "op-art" cone, or illusionist shapes like a Vasarely-image - comes over the tradition pattern. In other cases the pattern seems to melt, or float and gutter down as on the lower edge of an abstract expressionist painting. On some carpets, well-known effects from digital photo-manipulations, e.g. large pixels, a bump, or gradually changing color-tones can be observed, while in other cases he inserts graffiti onto the surface. These "errors" are not purely for the sake of a visual joke, but inserted to examine the encounter of different cultural traditions - cultures where the function and the role of the art also differs. As the title of one of the recent shows of his carpets in New York says: "East in twist" - traditional carpets are "twisted" with a Western approach, which is why among the re-elaboration of the carpets we can find such diverse ideas and references to classical, avant-garde and post-war art (abstract expressionism), as well as to popular culture (cartoons),

urban subculture and street-art (graffiti), and to current optical tricks. This confronts the traditional technique with as many "Western" twists as possible, thus allowing the viewer to learn from these interactions. The multi-layered reference-system is something we can highlight from the works of the Dagestani Taus Makhacheva (1983). In her project entitled "The Fast and the Furious", which consists of an action, through video documentation and C-prints she investigates issues related to both construction and changing identity - with strong references to the recent past - and the status of women in contemporary society. In her action Makhacheva participated in a car race in Dagestan, in fact, this in itself could be enough as an "artwork" since it is considered a macho-type activity, and because the exaggeratedly decorated appearance of the vehicles also belongs to the race. However, this is where Makhacheva puts her "twist" when she entirely covers her car with fur, and changes the normal windows into opaque ones, thus not letting the male competitors understand her real (female) identity. Thus we get a multiplex network of references again to high and popular culture, "Eastern" and "Western" traditions as well as artistic and socio-political issues. The action's title can bear allusions explicitly to the famous action movies with the same title, and implicitly to the novel and film "Venus in Furs", or to the aggressive and animalistic character of the race, and even to women's fur coats, a much-desired and rarely-achieved status symbol in socialist countries⁽³⁾. From all this we can see that even though we have a huge territory when looking at Central Asia, which always makes it difficult to find general features, there are still important characteristics that are easily traceable in the oeuvre of artists from different countries of the region. To summarize the most important ones:

1. The constant wish of the reinterpretation of the past, researching the values of local heritage.
2. The positioning of one's own country, the region and its art scene in relation to "East" and "West", the neighbors already in global focus or also with other and distant cultures.

3. Seeking possibilities for synthesizing traditional culture with modern artistic approaches.
4. Multi-layered works, not only in their meaning and references, but also in their approach and style, i.e. combining "serious" issues with a good sense of humor, sometimes even through ironic and satirical means. And last but not least.
5. An enviably self-confident wish to actively shape the present situation of the artist by learning from the past and examining the region's potentials. Keeping in mind this final goal, we can quote Viktor Misiano's 2011 text on Said Atabekov as his affirmation seems to be valid not only about Atabekov, but also clearly describes many of the region's other artist's intentions as well: "Said Atabekov's work is not simply about history, but also a duel with her. As an artist and individual he does not want to be a toy of historical circumstances, and wants to create his-own historical temporality. He does not want to forget what seems to him important to remember, even if that recollection is fraught with trauma and pain"⁽⁴⁾.

About the Writer

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Jamshed Kholikov, Bus Stop, 2005-2008, digital photography, 40x60cm - Courtesy of the artist.

End Notes

1. Beral Madra: Making Interstices. in: Making Interstices. Catalogue of the Central Asia Pavilion at the 53. Biennale di Venezia, 2009, p. 11.
2. See his article on Said Atabekov in: http://universes-in-universe.org/enq/nafas/articles/2011/said_atabekov (last accessed on 31 July 2013).
3. See further considerations in Sara Raza's interpretation on the project in the catalogue of the exhibition "Migrasophia", in Marayya Art Centre, Sharjah, 2012, p. 30.
4. Viktor Misiano's text was published in the catalogue of Prince Claus Award 2011.