

Babur Ismailov: Profile and Full Face

By Nigora Akhmedova



Samarkand gate, 2008, oil on canvas, 100x200cm. Courtesy of Alif gallery.

Babur Ismailov has his own identity and makes an interesting writing subject for several reasons. Firstly, the start of his career was a remarkable success. He immediately got into the spotlight: upon graduation from the Tashkent State Institute of Art, he was noted for his first solo exhibition in the House of Cinematography in 1998. At that time, and subsequently, the young artist, however, did not have to speak “on behalf” of his generation, which had not yet become clear in its tendencies. Neither did he follow someone else’s ideas. Right from the start, Ismailov explored his own themes, characters and artistic language that appealed to the national aesthetics in the spirit of the last decades’ mainstream. Secondly, over the past years he has

evolved into an international artist revealing his talent in a variety of creative pursuits. The artist naturally “flows” from one artistic dimension into the other: theatre and cinema – understandably, for his professional training, to add painting, design, graphic arts, and, finally, video-art. He travels the world, presenting the contemporary art of his country, and almost annually exhibits his new pieces in the Tashkent showrooms. Although being busy and in demand, he always manages to work thoughtfully, without haste. Now it is time to take a look at the distance covered by the artist.

In his early works Ismailov created a kind of a theatrical world. His favourite motifs – empty houses in the old city, quiet courtyards behind adobe walls – come from

his childhood experiences, old books, photographs and films, while his techniques are learned from theatre. Many of his paintings are symbolic, yet without sophisticated literary layering or the famous characters of oriental poetry. It is more of a visual stratum that is easy to read and expound without complicated interpretations or hidden meanings. The essence of his work with memory and traditions is different: he exposes play, artistic freedom of imagination and postmodernist irony. The use of Surrealism that is thought to be there to disrupt the habitual and “correct” logic of the subject and composition is definitely absent from his works. The artist’s manner may show some techniques of the method, yet his objective is not to look “beyond the conscious”. He developed his own poetics of complex stylistic origins, very distant from the photography of a “dead hand” widely known from surrealist paintings. The spirit of free bricolage play lives in many of Ismailov’s works, which are not burdened by known standards and conventional traditions. The French word ‘bricolage’ means not only achieving a result by taking a bypass, but also making things from random, handy materials. This method was popular among avant-garde artists who “playfully” surrendered to the power of the boundless freedom of ideas, imagining different characters and bringing them together in a conventional space, governed by laws only they knew. In Ismailov’s paintings, this principle is enriched by images-masks, symbols and techniques coming from theatre. Naturally, they also reflect the modern master’s contemplation of the perpetual conflicts of the world, hidden monologues touched by sadness and addressed to the characters of his fictional theatre, as well as splashes of play, mischief and subtle irony. The artist’s postmodernist intonations suggest that “everything has already been said about this world’s drama”. And yet he keeps searching for his own language, his own “key” to the answers to the troubles in life. In his paintings “Samarqand Gate” and “Pomegranate Juice”, the centre of the composition is highlighted like a dais, similarly to a theatre stage, hiding the surroundings and capturing the characters’ figures. Yet these are only the outward features of theatricality. Important here is the artist’s understanding that it is theatre that manifests its “intermediate” nature: action unfolds in

a space between real and unreal, between life and the deceptive appearance of an artistic image. He surely does not intend to translate theatre into painting, yet the metamorphosis that captivated the artist, his searching for answers to the riddles of life, and his desire to come closer to a certain mystery inevitably results in the “theatricalization” of his method, the emergence of characters from his theatre-world and his memorable masks. This is exactly the method that allows the artist to constantly develop the potential of his talent, enriching once discovered techniques or abandoning them completely for new ones. Semantics of diptychs “Touch”, “Reflection”, and “Window” do not lie on the surface. Yet in these works, as before, Ismailov’s method, while recreating a special intermediate space between reality and myth, resists simple interpretation of the works, slipping away, taking the viewer’s perception to the point where real life meets the conventions of a play and the contemporaneity borders on stories from distant times. These small-sized, defiantly laconic, compositions by Ismailov reduce all the details to nil. His pensive characters appear in the frame of a small window glowing on a solid black wall, or in solitude, among impervious backgrounds. Even though they may be lost in this strange world, their peculiar silent introspect and detachment lend them a kind of majestic dignity reminiscent of the austere profiles from a fresco. In the diptych “Touch”, one can see detachment, like an everlasting stay of the heroes in zero gravity, which makes the piece akin to metaphysical painting. The strange numbness of the characters, as if frozen in eternity, is made particularly expressive by the latent power of red, glowing like in the Pompeian murals. Transfiguration and the mystery of understatement, the poignant clarity of graceful shapes, both magnetic and frightening in their exquisite artificiality, alongside postmodernist collages with memory – these are the new revelations in Ismailov’s painting, which he found to contemplate loneliness and indifference to the world around him. In his “Sister”, the same motif is present, now warmed by the emotion of the nearests and dearests. Characters in weird headdresses and voluminous skirts are surrounded by mysterious symbols and ornaments amidst complex colouring in ochre, reddish and amber. Characters, situations and stories, like theatre

productions, are often repeated in Ismailov's painting. According to the artist himself, "they tour his paintings", either beckoning the viewer to the Old City, or veering suddenly outdoors, making one stand still in admiration of nature's silence and mystery. "The First Snow", "White", "Detachment", "Daddy". Black and white asceticism and quiet shades of white snow in these paintings encourage unhurried viewing, demand attention and make the viewer want to stop. Everything is more natural and human, and the viewer experiences afresh his elated willingness to embrace reality as he knows it. But then the artist again gets carried away by the game spirit, by free and mischievous market-place show. His recent works, such as "Myths of the Old City" and "Carousel", present characters similar to the actors we are already familiar with: merry mummers, always ready to transform. Images in the paintings are born from the play of volatile meanings. Essentially, it is a theatrical performance being created before one's eyes. The large multi-figure painting "Carousel" shows the element of traditional fun booths, entertainers, street circus performers and musicians. The language of this art is known and dear to everyone as it comes from somewhere in our childhood, from holidays and folk festivals. The artist's gift of composition makes it fitting to contrast and combine: classical painting with cinematography; a wooden horse in patchwork cloth in Uzbek style with an old gramophone. All the characters – disproportionately large, clumsy, and ugly ones – participate in the jolly whirl of the game. Putting it all together, the artist achieves the effect of the dynamic motion of a carousel going round, turning everything upside down. Asking when and where it all happens is impossible, looking at the Ismailov's works. This is the world of a game where everything is possible; this is the cycle of space and time in the big world of Art. Therefore, searching for the key to the code of his painting refers one to the "Book of Culture, Life as Culture" (Roland Barthes). Babur Ismailov's solo exhibition "Mots", in April 2013, reported on his trip to Paris where he worked on a series called "Words". Along with paintings about puppets inspired by blues and lyrical reflections, the artist presented his newly explored non-figurative painting. The opening day, naturally, evoked very different responses. Many expected Babur

to demonstrate works like those that people had grown accustomed to and loved, but he surprised everyone with new aspects in his art. Intuitively, he may realize that every exhibition should make a precedent of discovery and surprise, to broaden the aesthetic perception of the modern audience. In a sequence of exhibitions in recent years where many things turned out as expected and predicted, which is generally not bad in terms of "sustainable development", as they say, this display of Ismailov's stood out in the sense that his works were thought-provoking, highlighting the individuality of the master and his increasingly complicated relations with the world.

Many artists standing on the verge of changes and having learned the limits and boundaries of what they have already attained turn to abstract art. While Ismailov approached this transformation as part of his purely personal experience in Paris (artistic environment, wave of impressions from the megalopolis of art and the centre of avant-garde), in the local context the problem has existed for a long time. In national painting, even in the environment of creative freedom, modernist discoveries have not been thoroughly mastered as a territory of plastic experimentation. Abstraction, however, has a special quality: it is always modern, despite its history of more than a hundred years. It always brings something new, for avant-garde runs in its "blood", or perhaps because it was "forbidden" for many years.

Babur Ismailov experienced the matching of external with internal. Conceptualization of his objectives and perspectives was followed by the need to get to the original meaning of painting and paint turned to the depths of the subconscious, and to work, abandoning all, guided by sensations! He sensed the moment when he could liberate his red, purple and black, once lurking in multi-figured scenes and colourful carnival compositions, and declare boldly their independent power and beauty, triumphantly conquering the entire space of large canvases. In some paintings all this spilled out spontaneously and naturally, resembling the automatic hand of abstract surrealism. Here, important for the artist was to communicate his independence from habitual subjects and cloying traditional motifs, and most of all – his desire of silence, clarity and purity of the basics of painting. Abstraction, like poetry with





The fruit, 2010, oil on canvas, 90x130cm. Courtesy of Alif gallery.

one or two words in a verse, always evokes a heightened sense of coming close to the origins of a word or form. The artist realized that more important for him is to actualize the question about the meaning of colour, form and space in painting than to repeat universal truths. Ismailov was not motivated by desire to act in spite of all or to be original; it came from his character trait of deciding independently which direction to go. In the context of contemporary painting, his move is very to-date. The artist's large canvases, which breathe rarefied air, show some kind of new existentialism. It manifests itself in a romantic perception of the big and complex world: either through the anxious charge of a

free red space, or in the hidden energy of ochre, or in exquisite purple colours enhanced by black. Decorative details burst into the abstract language, but there are also elegant, almost monochrome, canvases where color is subtly nuanced. White compositions convey something timeless as a meaning of any abstraction. The artist also created austere and exquisite abstractions resembling graphic black-and-white prints, showing the oriental refinement that is inherent in his drawings. During the years of the artist's creative evolution, in the flow of energy emancipated from the old dogmas, people were searching for new aesthetics and design, the issue being variations in ethnic and cultural preferences



Pomegranate Juice, 2008, oil on canvas, 100x200cm. Courtesy of Alif gallery.

and tastes. Ismailov and his co-thinkers were among the first to understand where to go and what to do. They began to create a new oriental style that became prominent in the trademark of interior design and propagated far beyond national borders.

Over the years, Ismailov's special gift as a stylist and refined designer has bloomed: any object in the interior or an outline drawn on a piece of paper instantly turned into art. Yet, behind the deceptive ease in his performance there is always a serious attitude to artistic problems and a keen understanding of the essence of a particular art form, genre or style.

A regular participant of the international contemporary art project, "The Signs of Time", Ismailov created a few interesting video pieces. One particularly good one is "Face", also demonstrated at a prestigious video art festival "Rencontres Internationales" (Paris – Berlin – Madrid). In response to energetic feminist lunges and the audacious corporal practices of Western artists, the Uzbek artist tells a story about an oriental woman, her

mystery and essence in a subtle and philosophically deep manner. Working in contemporary art, he has not become a social activist, nor has he explored the problem through potent remedies offered by actual art – this is not his creed. He gravitates more to solitary reflection expressed in his inherent aesthetics. Whatever Babur Ismailov does, he keeps the most important quality of his gift – the ability to fascinate with the poetics of language, extracting new meanings consonant with time from traditions.

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