

**Between Heaven and Earth: Contemporary Art from the Centre of
Asia**

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‘Between’ is a position that Central Asians are historically and geographically familiar with. Artists are caught between the pressure to make art that wears an internationalist face, and that which honestly reveals both the subtle and overt identity of a vast region. The work of 26 artists from the post-Soviet areas centred on Kazakhstan is carefully juxtaposed over two galleries: the result, described by the curator David Elliott at the opening, is a show that is overridingly suggestive of passion.

Duba (cleaning the soul), 2007, by Shaarbek Amankul, is a video work with a large-scale image of the round face of an Asian woman with a shawl who violently rocks to and fro, making sounds of spitting, hissing, vomiting, chanting, belching, crying, wailing and talking in tongues, while her expressions contort akin to Antonin Artaud’s cathartic screaming. The impact, unease and scale make this an experience of the other as gargantuan.

Shaarbeck Amankul isn’t an artist as shaman, rather the artist’s

role is diminished; he is documenting the methods of the shaman in the film as symptomatic of wider cultural needs in an era of change.

The public space of the corridor of a train is transformed into an ascetic interruption of crawling prayer, meditation and the Caravaggesque re-enactment of crucifixion in Ulan Djarov's small, understated video *Train Art*, 2003-05. For those of us brought up to think that religion is the opiate of the masses, this work initially looks to be a counter-reformation-type resurgence of religion following the dissolution of Soviet power. However the extreme out of context nature of the work enables it to raise questions rather than affirm religious practice.

Many of the artists in the show are keenly aware of how they are perceived by both the West and by the East. They play to stereotypes about Central Asia. *Northern Barbarians*, 2000, a film by Rustam Khalifin, is adjacent to *Duba* in the exhibition, it has a similar scale and directness. Developed from 19th-century Chinese erotic drawings, a newly-wed couple affectionately make love on horseback in a nostalgic, orange-tinted film conjuring a Hellenic, Scythian golden age of Barbarian life. The film is gently tongue in cheek while celebrating the sensual mystique of nomads. The catalogue fills in the reality behind the scenes: the leading lady is

from the red-light district in Almaty and her dalliance has been given leave from the Kazak army to make the film. The couple are certainly not pornographically wooden; they appear to be glad for a reprieve from their neo-liberal era 'jobs'. Whereas the bravado, authenticity and primitivism of Mongolia are satirised for an artistic, bourgeois audience, the celebration of erotic stereotype likely aggravates the perception of vulnerable people in oil-boom states.

The tin pot materialism of industrial products is melded to heavenly heights in Erbossyn Meldibekov's *Seasons in the Hindu Kush*, 2009. Four enamelled kitchen pots have been crushed, embossed and hammered into a paradoxically sensitively sculpted topography of mountainous landscapes. These four upside-down pots from a distance have the appearance of humorously animated, battered helmets, ham-fisted into shape. Close-up, each terrarium has a summit with ridges and valleys with accumulated dust, where the enamel paint splinters into contours and tonal variation.

The Great Game, called the Tournament of Shadows by Asians and popularised by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*, consisted of power play between Russian and British empires, focused on Afghanistan. That the Great Game is still operating through the political manoeuvring and exploitation of natural resources with

consequent social upheaval is the subject of Galim Madanov and Zauresh Terekbay's 40 A4-size acrylic paintings that appear to be bronze plaques with small embellished texts. 'K Leverman the Great Game Blood and Oil in Central Asia', is one example. The paintings, together called the *Defragmentation of History*, 2010, provide political markers where the art game of *trompe l'oeil* facilitates a monumental archive of political truths.

The Aral Sea is dying; the rivers that support the sea have been diverted to irrigate the cotton industry. There are also several ex-soviet toxic sites in Kazakhstan. Almagul Menlibayeva's film, *Transoxiana Dreams*, 2011, takes as point of departure the accumulation of cultural deserts. Dreams occur in the film centred on the magical inferences of a child in relation to her sister and father and their comprehension of life in a dust bowl village at the edge of the dried-up sea: 'Ashes from my dead ancestors cover the windows.' 'Today at school my sister read Gogol and has awakened the centaurs and foxes who have stolen the sea.' Like Noah, her father heroically searches for and finds the lush sea. His driving quest is vividly depicted in the film as black and white upside-down footage along the dry sea bed. The centaurs are Soviet costumed temptresses, responsible for toxic deeds and, with additional legs, they cut alluring images. They dance

mischievously with their friends the foxes among the rusting hulks of once proud fishing boats. The magical realism and careful composition of the shapes of boats, hats and symbolic figures, upside-down footage and dusty homeland scenes bring the visual and narrative forms together with convincing precision. Almagul's work has been described as 'archaic atavism'. She describes her intention thus: 'historical roots enable people to look to the future with confidence'

The title of Aleksander Ugay's film *Bastion*, 2007, can be applied alternatively across two metaphorical images. Again the format is a large-scale, grainy black and white movie exuding nostalgia where the recent past seems archaic. Three adult Kazhaks sit on a bench talking, gazing at the sea. They testify to the survival of central Asian community through generations, just as a grand image of Tatlin's tower ghosts by, accompanied by the sounds of a wooden sailing ship. The tower epitomises the aspirations of the Russian avant garde, two dialectical cones weave around one another thrusting toward the heavens while anchored in materialism. The tower was never built – it is a dream tower. As a spectre of a Marxist revolution it is perhaps too close, as is the living memory of the three people on the bench, to the ghosts of Stalin for us to yet be able to re-envision its spirit.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor and a writer.