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Kazakhstan Contemporary Art Moves Ahead

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the nations of Central Asia have gone through extraordinary political, social, and cultural upheavals. Throughout the region the contemporary art world has witnessed tumultuous changes as it seeks to establish a truly independent voice and aesthetic so different from that which went before. In Kazakhstan the struggle to make unique art continues even as the voices of a conservative past still have a significant influence in cultural affairs.

By Valeria Ibraeva

In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan was a country in shock from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the evaporation overnight of the Soviet "way of life" that had regulated people's lives for almost a century. The country's cultural links, domestic and foreign, unraveled and Kazakhstan was enveloped by an information vacuum even more total than that under the Soviet regime. Against this bleak, tumultuous background—general chaos, economic collapse, rampant inflation, empty shops, desperation to exchange the country's devalued currency, an unfettered press, radical changes in people's social status, and the emergence of a new affluence matched by desperate poverty and skyrocketing crime—the first unofficial art shows were held, producing a new generation of artists.

The leading creative lights of this generation have become the stars of today's contemporary art scene, yet their roots reach back to the Stalinist era of the

1940s. These two generations—the generation born during and immediately after the Second World War and the generation born later during the Khrushchev era—are the "fathers and sons" of Kazakhstan's contemporary art.

The childhood of the earlier generations fell during one of the most politically repressive periods in Soviet history, a time when half the country was locked up in prison camps while the other half

denounced their friends and neighbors. Yet it was this generation of artists that took the first steps towards creating an independent artistic heritage for Kazakhstan, refusing to restrict their art within a given professional or commercial framework. At least ten years ahead of their time, these artists mapped out the path for Kazakhstan's art in the 1990s.

Soviet art and culture developed according to a double standard as artists

gradually refused to play by the rules of the game. From the 1930s onwards, Soviet artists were obliged to belong to professional unions—the Writers' Union, Artists' Union, Composers' Union, and so forth—in order to earn a living and to be part of "the professional creative intelligentsia." The state provided them with apartments and studios, guaranteed sales of their work, and sent them off on "creative trips," a major professional perk when travel abroad was highly restricted. Moreover, only members of the Artists' Union were allowed



Erbosyn Meldebekov, Pol Pot, 2002, video installation at the *No Mad's Land* exhibition in the House of the World Cultures, Berlin, Germany. All photographs; Courtesy of the Artists and Valeria Ibraeva.

to buy the professional materials they needed for their work.

Beginning in the 1960s, artists showed again and again that they wanted more than the right to survival as a reward for bolstering the State's ideology—above all, they wanted to work freely and creatively. The artistic process began to take on a bipolar structure: official art—unofficial art. Of course, the two extremes were not always clearly defined: for instance, the Artists' Union had its own "internal" opposition movement, while underground art often lacked focus and imagination, rarely venturing beyond formal experiments or imitations of "forbidden" Western artists. In the 1970s and 1980s this artistic double standard became a central fact of Soviet life: official life followed its own rules while a discontented "kitchen opposition" flourished. Sometimes artists proceeded from kitchen debates to action, organizing educational groups, informal clubs, or unofficial art shows in apartments or basements.

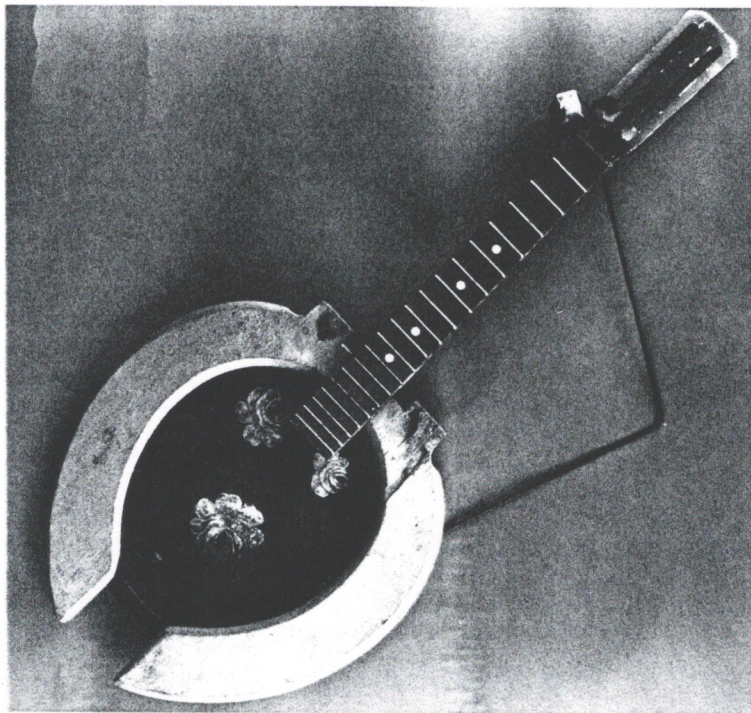
Perestroika and the ensuing Soviet collapse dragged these artists out of their basements and kitchens into a more open, competitive environment. A major reason for the emergence of an alternative artistic movement in the early 1990s was commercialization which, at least early on, played a positive role in decentralizing and demonopolizing culture. The development of democracy and a market economy in Kazakhstan led to the opening of new embassies and regional offices for international companies; as a result, a thriving market for art also developed. Independent galleries, art movements, and artists' groups sprang up overnight, then disappeared just as quickly, exhibitions of a type never seen before drew large crowds and, with the support of the Kazakhstan's new international community, many artists and critics were at last able to travel to Europe and America.

For the first time independent galleries and showrooms were able to show paintings and sculpture from all artistic movements and periods—from medieval Turkic sculpture to phantasmagorical Dali-like paintings. The extent of this revelation was a result of the vast number of artists whose work was forbidden in the Soviet era. When the floodgates opened, visually starved artists frantically processed

a tidal wave of information containing an incredible array of influences, even advertising art. Unfortunately, many artists were later unable to progress beyond their own private reworkings of Cezanne, Picasso, and Dali, especially once they discovered their imitations sold well.

But there are always unpredictable people in the art world—successful artists who suddenly turn their backs on the art that has made them financially secure in order to experiment with new art-forms. For Kazakhstan, this meant performance art, installation art, and video art. When established artists suddenly take off in a new direction, their former admirers are often alienated in the process. The experience of Kazakhstan's artists was no exception.

Kazakhstan's unpredictable art-



Shai-Zia, *The Soviet Culture*, 1989, metal, wood, 100 x 53 x 9 cm.

ists—Rustam Khalfin, Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov, Moldakul Narhymbetov, Vitaly Simakov, Saken Narynov, Sergey Maslov, Smail Bayaliev, Elena and Victor Vorobyov, and Galym Madanov—kick-started the country's contemporary art movement when they rejected the Artists' Union's rules of play and bucked commercial trends. Many of these artists ruined their health and even lost their lives in Kazakhstan's chaotic dash for freedom in the early 1990s.

Shai Ziya (the pseudonym of Ziyakhan Shaigeldinov, 1948-2000), had no special education. In the early 1990s, a man with a videocamera slung over his shoulder wandered the streets of Almaty. Sometimes he wore a long, gray military great-

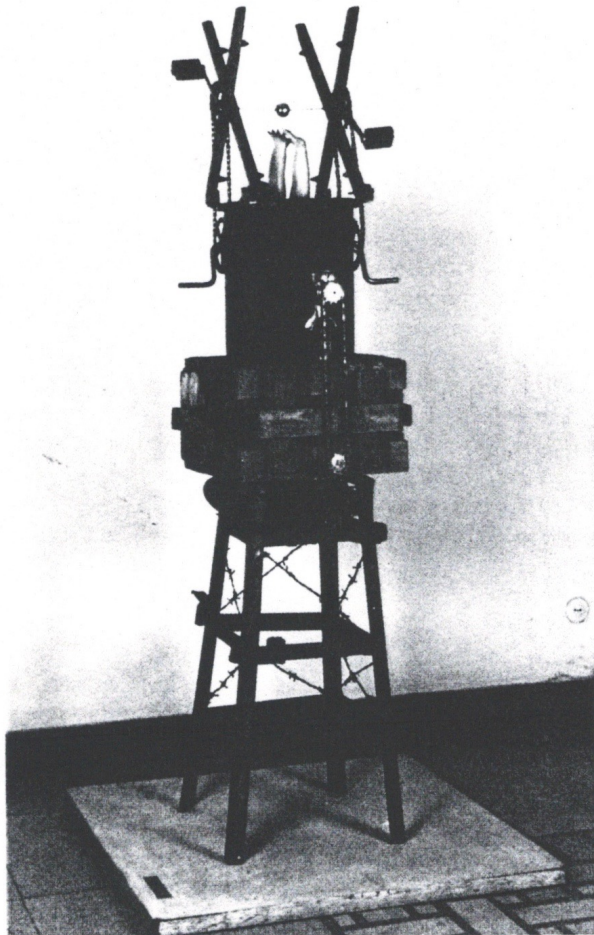
coat, sometimes an iridescent, flag-covered outfit. Shai Ziya taught people on the outskirts of Almaty their first lesson in tolerance and democracy when he set up his pop-art objects in the street and explained to his audience by phone that this was avant-garde art and anyone who didn't like it was free to ignore it.

When the police questioned him, Shai Ziya always replied with incontrovertible logic: "Why can't people gather in the street?" "Why does art have to be in a museum?" and "Why don't I have the right to say what I think?" The police always gave him a hard time and he often spent a week or more in a local precinct cell. The only work he ever sold, *The Door to Time* (1988), covered entirely by clock-faces, is now in the Norton Dodge collection of non-conformist Soviet art in the United States.

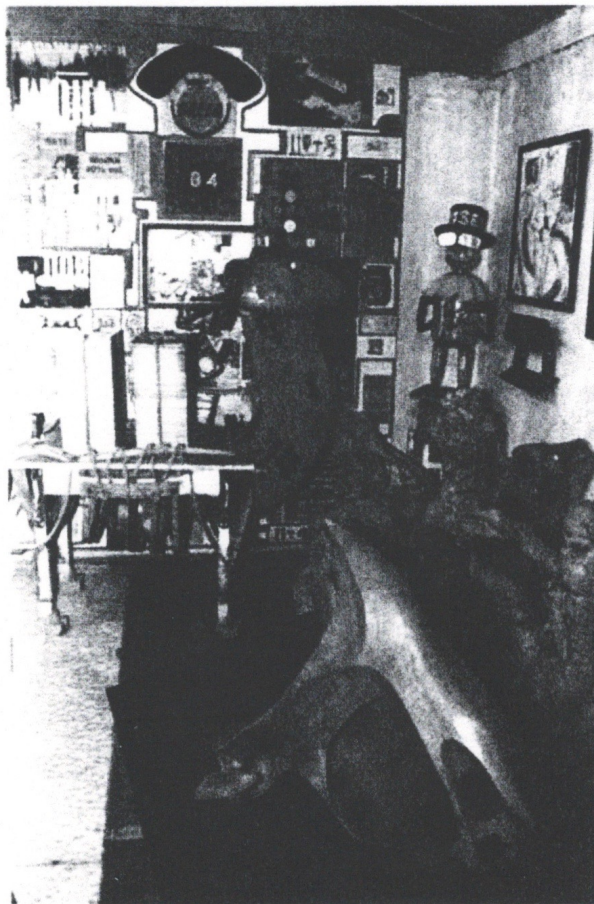
In 1994, Shai Ziya made a short film, *Anti-Butya*, based on a very simple premise: Almaty's Butya Company is holding a charity event at which Christmas presents are given to local children. Among them is a boy who has sneaked in without an invitation. This boy's excitement about his expected Christmas present is underscored by the stirring melody of *The House of the Rising Sun*. For three minutes the camera lingers on every feeling flitting across the boy's expressive face—from inspired hope to bitter disappointment. At the end, the boy is chased out of the company's offices without a present. This film was never shown at a single exhibition and in 2000 Shai Ziya, today known as "the father of Kazakh video-art," hung himself, leaving a note that

read, "Please forgive me, but I couldn't handle my life."

Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov (b. 1943), attended the Stroganov Art College, Moscow, Russia, in 1982-1983, as an independent student. Tryakin-Bukharov is the father of Kazakh pop-art and installation art. His work deals with Stalin's purges, a period that directly affected his own family. Utilizing sticks and *objets trouvés* to create compositions inspiring a sense of terror on the part of viewers, he produced works such as *A Reply to White Flight in Karaganda* (1998), an emotional response to Karaganda, a Kazakh city surrounded by endless graveyards, the final resting place for millions of prisoners exiled to Karaganda's infamous Stalinist camps.



Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov, *Requiem of XX century*, 1990, mixed media, 200 x 50 x 50 cm.



Georgy Tryakin Bukharov's Studio with his *Camel Dedicated to Mass-Media*, 2002, object.

These pioneers of Kazakhstan's alternative art scene knew almost nothing about artistic movements outside their country. In all probability they had never been near a computer and certainly never received any of the rewards granted to 'official' artists either in the Soviet or post-Soviet periods.

Two artists of this generation, Moldakul Narymbetov (b.1948) and Rustam Khalfin (b.1949), have much more in common than their age and generation. They both participated in, and led, the unofficial "autodidact" movement and the group shows that grew out of this movement, both doggedly searched for their own artistic identities, both passionately pursued their creative ambitions, and both possessed strong personal charisma.

Moldakul Narymbetov, who was born into a peasant family, graduated from the Kazakh State Pedagogical Institute in 1990. Narymbetov later lived with his family in Shymkent, where the Russian artist Vitaly Simakov settled in 1985. Simakov gathered together a group of local artists and offered to teach them about art beyond Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union—art outside this self-contained world was almost unknown and inaccessible in provincial Shymkent, which had neither specialized libraries, video collections, reading halls, museums, or art galleries. A typical example of foreign art in Shymkent might be something as innocuous as a newspaper clipping of a Casper David Friedrich painting (Friedrich was one of the most "forbidden" artists in the Soviet Union.)

Moldakul Narymbetov became the ideological leader and publicist of Simakov's group, later known as *Red Tractor*. The major impulse behind their work was to reinstate living contact with archaic cultural forms and their pre-Islamic past, which they contrasted to pseudo-classical official art. They were interested in shamans, fortune-tellers, and dervishes, whose philosophy was often depicted in rituals. Pursuing this line of thought, the group arrived at the idea of performance art without realizing this artform had already existed abroad for half a century.

A 1995 *Red Tractor* performance consisted of a long trip to

Kazygurt Mountain in southern Kazakhstan at the foot of which the artists—together with the local population—put up their wood and felt installations, played handmade musical instruments, and performed a ritual healing ceremony to cleanse the Kazakh people of their apathy and depression born of chaos and meaninglessness.

Red Tractor art translates traditional ethnic values (nomadism as a means of existence, collectivism as a means of survival, improvisation as a basic creative method) into aesthetic values through direct depictions of everyday life and rituals utilizing typical nomadic materials: leather, wood, felt. The Group's strategy is an intuitive, organic fusion of art and life that rejects the Soviet concept of artistic professionalism. This intuition imbues not only the group's artistic ideas, but also their management style.

Kyzyl Tractor (the group's current name) is a very successful group, well-known in Kazakhstan and abroad, a group that has struck a skilful balance between exotic folklore shows and an alternative to Kazakhstan's pompous official art. In the process it has rediscovered an age-old form of folk art.

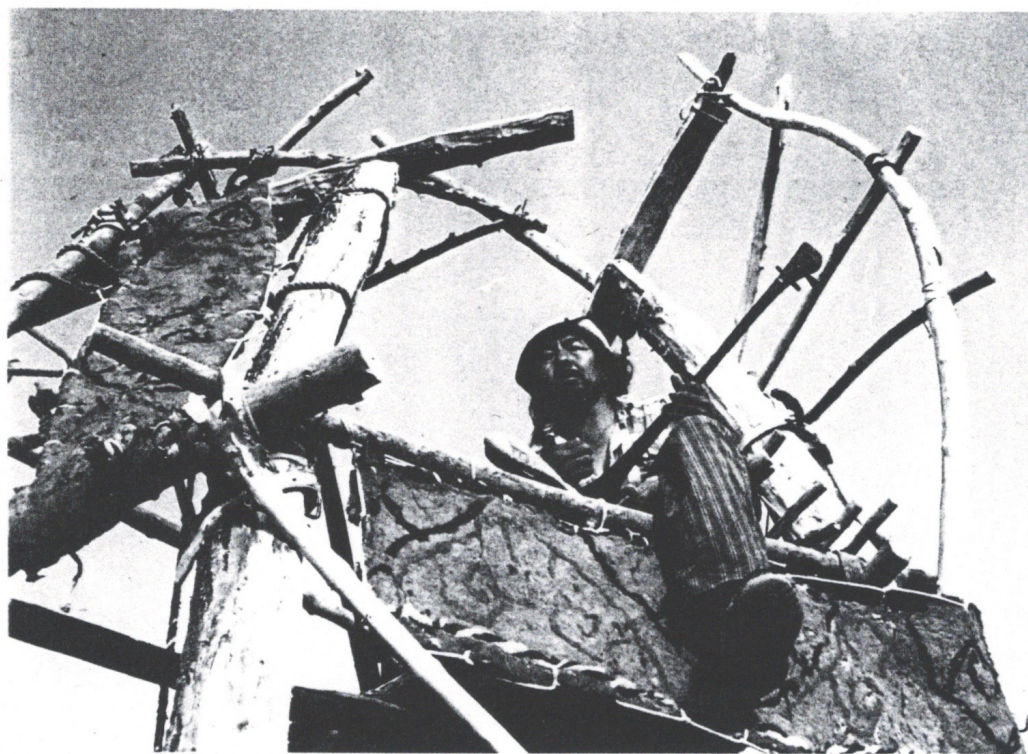
Rustam Khalfin is a highly educated artist who graduated in 1972 from the Moscow Institute of Architecture, Russia, and a friend of the most respected Russian artists. He always responded acutely to the latest trends and generously shared his knowledge in the intellectual circles he frequented. From 1979 on he actively participated in alternative art shows in Moscow and Leningrad, seeking to create similar space for art in Almaty by holding shows in his apartment. Kazakhstan's radically transformed art scene today is largely due to his effort, passion, and influence.

Khalfin was a prophet, leader, teacher, and stern critic who created a dynamic intellectual environment around himself. His rejection of bureaucracy was the result of his long career as an architect and urban planner, especially his work on designing the public square in front of the Communist Party's Central Committee headquarters in Almaty (1972-1975). The constraints on Khalfin's professional life made officialdom and its temptations intolerable to him. In response, he created his own circle where new books and art could be discussed, an intellectual world that provided him with an escape into a more compatible environment.

For Rustam Khalfin art replaced life. He would go about Almaty in a floppy-brimmed felt hat and in 1998 his installation, *The Big Mirror*, was created as a polemic with Marcel Duchamp. Khalfin's art synthesized concepts from around the world in his own unique manner. To understand the human body he turned to the French post-modernist philosophers, as well as to the Moscow philosopher, Valery Podoroga. The result was a large cycle of installations entitled *Zero Level. The Clay Project* (1998-1999). Khalfin's fascination with nomadic culture led to his video-project, *Northern Barbarians*, the Chinese term for nomads.

The first video in this project relates traditions Khalfin read about in the work of James Kestle, a 17th-century English explorer, according to which a young man and his intended bride were only allowed a glimpse of each other through the yurt's lattice-work wall. Intercourse on horseback is the theme of the second film based on a Chinese engraving in *Chinese Eroticism* by the Sinologist A. Kobzev.

Whether Khalfin drew his ideas from indirect sources or from life is unimportant. His art is a typical product of post-modernism, a relatively rare phenomenon for Kazakhstan. The result is a balance between exotic eroticism and the artistic depiction of intimate nomadic customs intended to *épater la bourgeoisie* who tend to see the sexual revolution from their own limited perspective. The general public—until recently shocked at the subversive thought: “Did Lenin go to the bathroom?”—has the choice of either admiring the bronze geldings on Khalfin's public square or visiting his shows in Moscow, Barcelona, and the United States. Tragically, Khalfin's stressful life and struggle to discover new paths in art cost



Moldakul Narymbetov, *The Letter to Tengry*, 1999, performance.

him his health: after suffering a debilitating stroke in 2001, his artistic output declined drastically.

Sergey Maslov (1952-2000), graduated in 1978 from the Kazakh State Pedagogical Institute and received his Ph.D. in Pedagogical Science, Moscow, Russia, in 1986. Maslov was born into the family of a prominent journalist who, unlike ordinary Soviets, had access to information about the world outside the Soviet Union. Because journalists—regarded as “ideological workers”—needed to be informed about “the enemy,” the Maslov home was able to listen to Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe and to subscribe to magazines such *America* or *England* which, even though adapted for Soviet readers, contained at least some information about “the capitalist world.”

Although this privileged family's life

was comfortable and carefree, they all knew that breaking the rules of the game would entail severe punishment—and not just the loss of their privileges. In the Soviet Union it was common to confine malcontents in psychiatric wards or prison camps, which Kazakhstan had in abundance.

Maslov may have thought he had chosen an easy life for himself—he defended his dissertation and began professional life teaching at an institute. Under the Soviet system only the privileged few could hope for this type of career—lecturing didn't require much time or effort, yet was relatively well-paid. And so Maslov, who was on the Arts Faculty at the Semipalatinsk Teacher Training Institute, could visit his parents in Almaty almost every week and travel to Moscow at least once a month to see the capital's art shows, many including work by Western artists and therefore having a broader scope than Almaty's art shows.

Soviet reality was of no interest to Maslov and so, through his broad reading, he developed an interest not only in art trends, but also in mystical teachings and extraterrestrial worlds. In Moscow, Maslov found his way to the avant-garde art shows on Malaya Gruzinskaya Street which fascinated him because they were so different from anything shown officially. He desperately wanted to take part in them but hesitated, aware that almost all the artists in these shows had KGB files.

But then, Maslov's work wouldn't have been accepted anywhere else, for his paintings were crude and distorted like children's drawings: even worse, they poked fun at the holy ideals of socialist realism. They had no saving graces: no heroes, no inspiring landscapes, no patriotism. Instead they contained crude references to love, decadent landscapes, and cynical figures. And so, *faute de mieux*, Maslov began to show his work at the



Moldakul Narymbetov, *Dedicated to Matisse*, 2000, performance



Sergei Maslov, *Nomad's Dance*, 1998, oil on canvas, 65 x 85 cm.



Sergei Maslov, *Baikonur - 2*, no date given, computer graphic.

Malaya Gruzinskaya Gallery.

He was incredibly lucky not to have been arrested or to have had his work confiscated. His timing was right: *perestroika* began and everything changed inside the Soviet Union. Thinking everything was now possible, Maslov and another artist, Alexander Popov, organized the *Night Tram* Group in Almaty to mount alternative art shows and to begin construction (literally) of a Museum of Children's Art, for the Night Tram artists believed that children and children's art could save the world from the web of lies that ensnared it. They bought a plot of land and began to lay the Museum's foundation. Unfortunately, *perestroika* soon gave way to national independence under which it seemed not everyone had the right to own land—certainly not artists, at any rate.

Maslov then began to take part more actively in other Almaty exhibitions, but in his own distinctive way—for instance, by taking a funeral wreath to a museum opening with a ribbon reading: "For the innocents who died at Maslov's hands." At another exhibition he showed dust-covered portraits of Russian grandees. Then in a piece of performance art, *The Orient is Discreet*, he demonstrated literally how "an artist paints with his own blood," for which he was fired from the staff of the Art Academy where he had taught for many years.

At the Soros Center of Contemporary Art's first show Maslov exhibited a newspaper photo of himself lying in a coffin alongside an obituary

reporting he had died of love for Whitney Houston; his imaginary correspondence with Whitney—six letters in large frames—was also included. Many of his friends at the show thought he had really died and expressed their sorrow—after which a middle-aged woman bought his framed correspondence and newspaper photo for her collection.

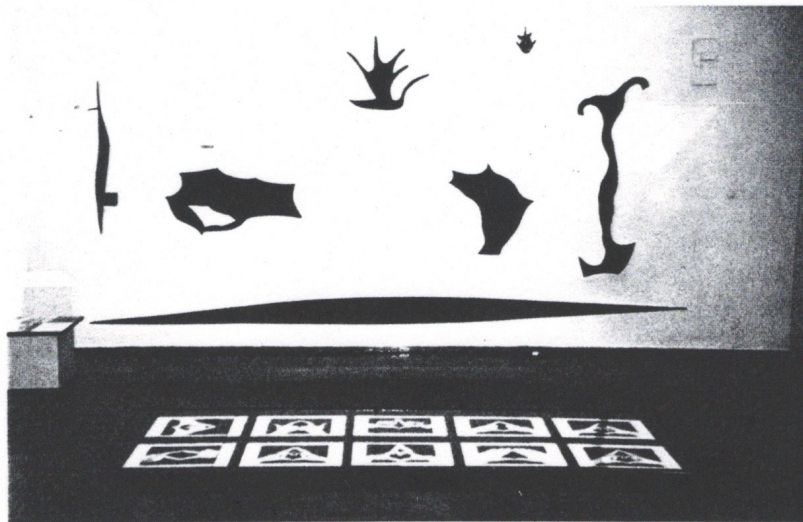
Later in life Sergey Maslov worked as a night watchman at Almaty's Voyager Gallery, designed a computer program about space aliens, and wrote an electronic novel about modern art in Kazakhstan. He died at the age of fifty in Almaty in 2002.

The closing years of the 20th century saw major changes in Kazakhstan. The privatization process became increasingly corrupt, benefiting only the newly affluent class, the country's parliament moved to Astana, Kazakhstan's new northern capital, and rivers of oil and money were skillfully di-

verted into the right channels by British Petroleum, Exxon/Mobil, Chevron, and Texaco. The excitement over pagers, faxes, and Mercedes 600s gave way to excitement over cellphones, computers, and Jeep Cherokees. The gulf between rich and poor widened. A political opposition emerged, power struggles broke out, Islam and Russian Orthodoxy became Kazakhstan's official religions, and holding companies absorbed media outlets, which lost their independence and took on a more official tone.

In 1995, the Soros Foundation—Kazakhstan, the British Council, and the Goethe Institute opened their doors in Almaty, and in 1998 the Soros Center of Contemporary Art, the only such center in Central Asia, also appeared on the scene. Information about international cultural trends and events gradually seeped into Kazakhstan's cultural life, sweeping away linguistic barriers, technological limitations, and parochialism.

The mid to late 1990s saw the emergence of an official aesthetic. The new state began to propagate a new version of history distinctly different from Soviet history. The most popular genres for the visual arts were now battle scenes, oil portraits, and monumental sculpture. As Soviet cultural ideology would have put it, the national content of Kazakhstan's new official art dictated its historical form. Typical of this were classical and baroque styles depicting countless battles, riders on horseback bearing falcons aloft,



Rustam Khalfin, *Body Emptiness*, 1995, plywood, deep black gouache, 24 x 492 cm; 154 x 60 cm; 122 x 19 cm; 74 x 71 cm; 60 x 67 cm.

and historical figures creating a state, issuing orders, and consulting their advisors. By the turn of the century Kazakhstan was inundated with bronze monuments, especially statues of stallions and Kazakh horsemen.

This genre spread throughout Central Asia until bronze horses and riders soon outnumbered the Lenin statues present in every town and city during the Soviet period. Classical compositions with Central Asian ethnic features came to represent the visual aspect of post-Soviet political power. After decades of repression it was perhaps natural that national identity showed itself first and foremost in national culture, but for some reason the Central Asian cultural landscape imposed the same old totalitarian pattern on this process: one ideological fetish was replaced by another as stilted and boring as its predecessor.



Said Atabekov, **Observatory of Homeless**, 1994, stone blocks, height 900 cm, diameter 600 cm.

And so this was the time when the generation born in the 1960s—the period of Khrushchev's "Thaw" and the emergence of a relative liberalism in the Soviet Union—burst onto the artistic scene in Kazakhstan. This generation's first breath had been a breath of freedom even though each of them knew from childhood that the state provided, indeed guaranteed them, the following path in life: institute-work-family-children-queues-pension. If they had successful careers (and this meant joining the Artists' Union and the Communist Party)

they could acquire official status, a medal, maybe even a car.

The second breath of freedom was more of a wake-up call delivered in a cold wall of water as police turned hoses on demonstrators in Almaty on a freezing December day in 1986—the infamous student uprising on the Central Committee square, an event the Party press termed "a manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." The students, among whom were the second generation of artists, turned to the Writers' Union hoping to hear the clarion call for freedom and revolution, but heard only tepid appeals for a timid form of na-

tionism from their older colleagues.

For those who hadn't been thrown out of university and into prison, the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union took away the dream of a Moscow education and a preordained path in life. A generation of students discovered their university degrees provided little more than a passport to unemployment. Freedom was now more than a whiff of fresh air, it was a flood sweeping through people's lives.

The euphoria of national independence with its promises of oceans of oil and a Kuwaiti lifestyle passed quickly. Oil and money flowed abundantly—but into private accounts abroad, not into the national budget. The new generation of artists was only saved by the emerging market economy: in order to survive, they created their art on sidewalks, sold their paintings, opened galleries, and organized art associations. Artists of this generation possessed an independence of judgment, a critical view of life, and a burning need to debate social issues. They did not pretend to possess a higher truth because they considered art "a studio, not a cathedral."

Southern Kazakhstan, where Chymkent is located, is a very distinctive part of the country. Local legend has it that Noah's Ark came to rest on Kazygurt Mountain in southern Kazakhstan rather than on Mount Ararat. Ancient mausoleums in all their glory dot the landscape every five or ten kilometers. A journey to the grave of Hadji Akhmed Yassavi, a famous dervish and philosopher, in Turkestan (a southern city) is considered akin to a pilgrimage to Mecca. The south is alive with legends and travelers there may stumble on the glazed tiles of ancient cities, stretch out beneath a sacred tree, seek out shamans—the keepers of sacred stones and sacred springs, who claim with utter conviction that they believe only in Allah—or wander through a traditional Eastern bazaar. The south bears a deep Turkic and Islamic influence.

Said Atabekov (b.1965) and Askhat Akhmedyarov (b.1965) both graduated in 1992 from Chymkent Art College, Kazakhstan. Atabekov and Akhmedyarov were members of the Shymkent's Kyzyl Tractor Group, which Askhat left in 1995, and were unusual in their lifestyles. When they were still teenagers, Said Atabekov and Askhat Akhmedyarov bought a loaf of bread and went off into the mountains to



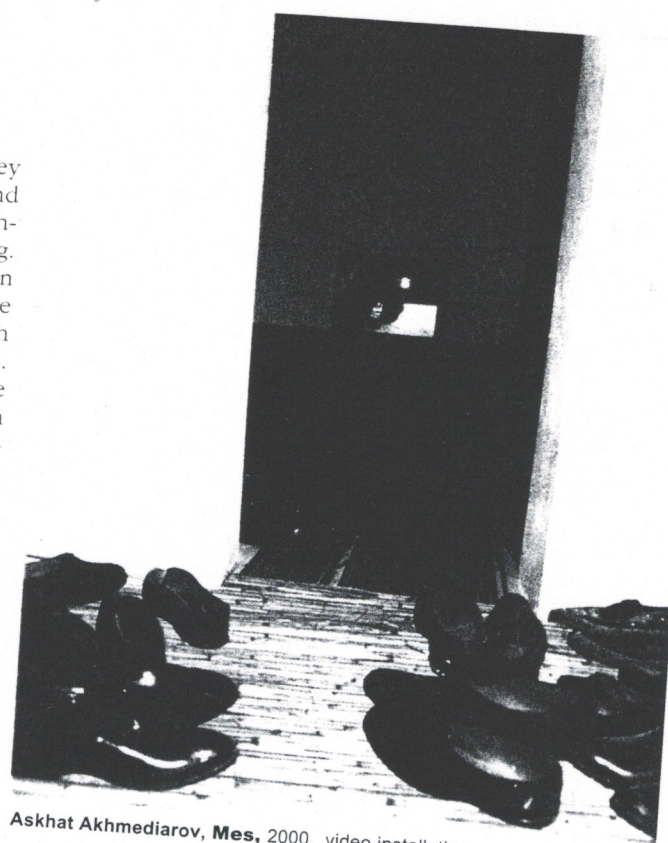
Said Atabekov, **Chingiskhan's Dream - III**, 2003, photograph.

search for Noah's Ark. They wandered for three days and three nights, but found nothing—at least for the time being. At the opening of his one-man show, Said Atabekov sat on the floor dressed in a red dervish costume, depicting a mullah. The other guests at the vernissage sat down with him and seemed to fall into a religious trance. Then everyone stood up and went over to the buffet as if nothing had happened.

Said Atabekov and a group of artists once lived in the desert for a month, erecting a pyramid of stones entitled *An Observatory for Those Whom Life Has Forgotten*. Soon afterwards, Kazakhstan's President

Nazarbayev ordered a monument built nearby in honor of the three Kazakh "hordes" (the three territorial clans into which the Kazakh people are traditionally divided.) The result was a striking spatial composition, a study in contrasts, a rough unfinished pyramid counterposed with a sleek marble obelisk. One day in the center of Shymkent, Askhat smeared his body with glue, then sprinkled himself with sunflower seeds and declared he was engaged in a "Trans-Dialogue with van Gogh." His performance unfortunately ended with three days in a local police station cell.

Atabekov once burned a hole in the Koran into which he placed a green-painted stone. In his defense art critics argued that because Islam was relatively undeveloped in Kazakhstan due to the



Askhat Akhmediarov, *Mes*, 2000, video installation.

country's nomadic history, because nomadic life made it impossible to build mosques, because traces of pantheism and its rituals are still found in Kazakh folk life, and because figurative art forbidden in Islam can be seen everywhere in Kazakhstan's life and museums, therefore Said Atabekov's Koran should be regarded as a visualization of the nomadic version of Islam—an artistic object, not a religious one. But the public was outraged by his work, even though this same public had been communist (i.e. atheist) until very recently. In fact, Atabekov is a religious man, but it annoys him when former Communist Party officials try to turn themselves into Islam's thirteen prophets.

When Atabekov was invited to Vienna for a performance art festival, he



Erbosyn Meldebekov, *Oriental Hospitality*, 2002, part of installation at the *Trans Forma* exhibition in Geneva's Center for Contemporary Art.

knelt on a stone 'prayer rug' wearing his own homemade dervish costume and began to pray. Then he prostrated himself on the floor and his friends poured green paint over him. This performance, *Genghis Khan's Dream*, was meant to show that the only remaining sign of the legendary conqueror was his outline on the pavement—like that of a corpse at a police crime scene.

Uzbekistan is a country where people still labor in its cotton fields and, in order to provide access to the internet, the Uzbek parliament replaced the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin alphabet. The Soviet system had blocked access to knowledge in Central Asia in exactly the same way—first replacing Arabic script with Latin script, then replacing the Latin

alphabet with the Cyrillic alphabet. Uzbekistan also has neither freedom of conscience nor functioning mosques, and its president, Islam Karimov, clearly believes, "Islam—c'est moi."

Erbosyn Meldebekov was born in southern Kazakhstan in 1964 and graduated in 1992 from Almaty Theater and Fine Arts Institute, Kazakhstan.

Meldebekov was one of the founders of the Kokserek Group and he has taken part in many seminars, symposia, and exhibitions abroad. In 1997, he was invited to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, for the *Asia Art Biennale*. Meldebekov's art is social and political, an acute response to the undercurrents of our time. His current preoccupation is religious fanaticism, a new element added to his earlier reflections on the nature of violence.

In a Tashkent exhibition hall Erbosyn Meldebekov displayed two skulls (from archaeological digs) on a stone podium, inserted arrows through the skulls, and called the work *Requiem for Human Rights*. When he was hauled off by the Uzbek KGB and asked for a written explanation of its meaning, he "naively" described his concept, composition, and color scheme in the simplest possible language.

Characteristically Asian facial types, long, leisurely examinations of torture showing people buried alive or shut up in wells, a detailed depiction of Asia's desert landscape, an infinite variety of tortures—this is Meldebekov's video-project, *Pol Pot*. His reflections on the nature of violence include the Latin American communists, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, along with Lenin who created a system of total terror. The Asian version is Pol Pot, the leader

of the Khmer Rouge, who orchestrated horrendous mass murders and, in Erbosyn's vision, is the Oriental despot closest to the Central Asian mentality.

For Meldebekov, the leaders of Central Asia's post-Communist regimes who profess their support for democratic values are chameleons who can adapt to any political system, whether Russian-style communism or American-style democracy, to maintain their own authoritarianism. Once the Asian dictator has taken power—whether bestowed by [Leonid Ilyich] Brezhnev (1906–1982), George Bush, or God—he feels he has the right to do whatever he wants with his country and his people.

Ablikim Akmullaev was born into a poor working-class family in 1965 and received no special education. In 1985, he joined a group of young hippies, The Green Triangle. The group put on art shows in basements, listened to Pink Floyd, and read and translated poetry. The Green Triangle gave birth to three more of Kazakhstan's most successful young artists: Almagul Menlibaeva, Saule Suleimenova, and the radical artist Kanat Ibragimov.

Ablikim Akmullaev wanted to try everything in life. He traveled to the Altay region, to Tadzhikistan, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, lived in artists' communes, played the *bubna* (a Central Asian drum,) and served in the army before finally coming to the conclusion that everything around him was a lie. He read the work of Chinghiz Aitmatov, traveled to the Chuiskaya Valley marijuana paradise, was arrested and spent three years in prison.

Once out of prison, he joined forces with Zitta Sultanbaeva and they began to create video-art. Their most re-

cent work is *Mediatis*, in which Ablikim and Zitta sing and show Almaty's downtown streets, as well as its upscale residential neighborhoods nestled in the foothills of Almaty's mountainous surroundings (Almaty's uptown and downtown are geographic as well as socio-economic concepts.) This video also featured the singer Timur Isaliev as a well-heeled customer in Almaty's supermarkets and banks, with Ablikim playing a manual laborer at the city's dirty, chaotic wholesale market.

The clean, shady, European-style streets shimmer with the reflections of the sparkling shop-windows lining them as if to announce: "At last civilization has come to Almaty!" while the smoky, smoggy working-class neighborhoods could be seen as either the dark, hidden side of capitalism or the tattered remnants of socialism. On the other hand, maybe Almaty's extremes are neither—just a social experiment in progress for the past ten years or so. Uptown and downtown Almaty are more than geographic concepts, they have geopolitical significance.

The changes sweeping Kazakhstan's vast expanses are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is a clear movement towards liberalization, declarations of democratic principles, and a relative security enjoyed by the intellectual elite and the political opposition. Fifteen years ago not a single Soviet citizen could have imagined that the new generation of artists would one day be tolerated and allowed to live and work in peace. On the other hand, authoritarianism is on the rise, freedom of speech and conscience is declining, and even cyberspace is subject to censorship. Contemporary art is once again being forced underground while the authorities pretend it simply doesn't exist.

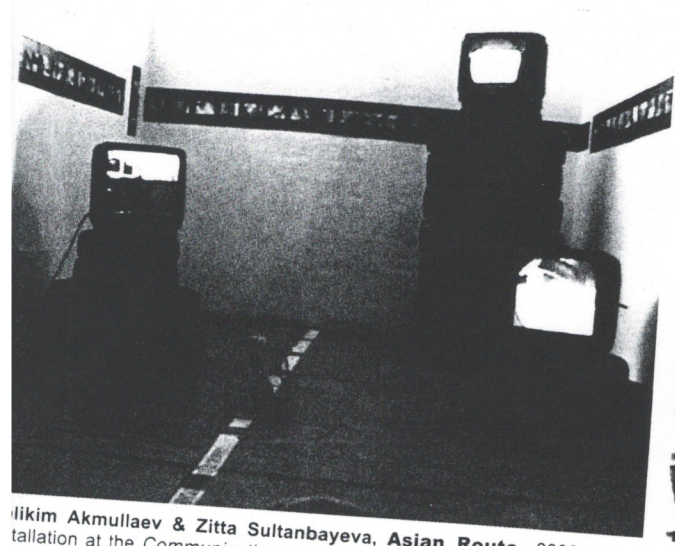
The enormous international exhibi-

tion of contemporary art held at Almaty's Atakent Center, a comprehensive show in which artists from 13 countries participated, was totally ignored by the media in favor of coverage of Astana's official culture. Three artists in Kazakhstan's new "northern capital" were regarded as more indicative of the country's cultural status than the 52 innovative projects in the Atakent exhibition, *Communication: An Interactive Experience*. Thus Kazakhstan's 'freedom-loving press' kowtows to officialdom and official tastes by acting as a "selection committee" to determine whether or not a work of art is important for our country. It should be noted that Kazakhstan's contribution to this exhibition was invited almost in its entirety to Berlin's large Central Asian contemporary art show, *No Mad's Land*, in March 2002.

Today Kazakhstan is covered with State-sponsored bronze monuments intended to pass as works of art without public discussion or artistic evaluation. Only the State, it would seem, is allowed to visualize Kazakhstan's sovereignty and historical-cultural traditions.

Still, if we contrast Kazakhstan with Turkmenistan, where even the opera house and the circus have been closed down while a massive, gilded monument to Turkmenbashi, the country's President, rotates on its axis to follow the sun, our country has a vibrant, independent arts community with artists able to generate new, alternative ideas, presenting real hope for the further democratization and enrichment of Kazakhstan's artistic space and society in years to come. Δ

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Ablikim Akmullaev & Zitta Sultanbayeva, *Asian Route*, 2000. Installation at the Communication Center, Almaty.