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ART REVIEW

## Surprising Sophistication

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

Much of the art in the College of New Jersey's latest exhibition, "Parable of the Garden: New Media Art from Iran and Central Asia," shows a level of sophistication that may come as a surprise to many viewers.

Most contemporary artists in these former Soviet states, among them Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, were initially trained in architecture, monumental socialist realist painting and sculpture at Soviet art schools, according to Leeza Ahmady, Sarah Cunningham and Deborah Hutton, the curators, writing in the exhibition catalog.

Today, however, the region has emerged as the site of a remarkably complex new-media art culture, with endearing local particularities of content and style.

The catalog tells us everything about this new-media culture in Central Asia, except the reason for it. But the curators imply — rightly, I think — that after decades of isolation, Central Asian artists want to reconnect with the world, joining the free market of ideas and images. And what better way to engage the world than through the Internet? Most of the artists in this exhibition maintain Web sites where they display their art.

The show includes the work of 10 contemporary artists who explore a sense of place, ideas of paradise lost and found, memory, tradition and the garden. Iran is included because of its cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic ties to the region; the Persian Empire once ruled over much of Central Asia, and people living in Iran today have much in common with their Central Asian neighbors.

Video, digital photography and graphic design are especially popular forms of expression. Almagul Menlibayeva, born in Kazakhstan in 1969 and the best-known artist in the exhibition, makes video artworks illustrating aspects of Kazakh culture, often with a fantasy quality.

"Steppen Baroque" (2004) offers up a dreamlike vision of the country in which women, nude or draped in traditional, hand-painted regional fabrics, re-enact regional tales and rituals to a soundtrack that evokes the eerie isolation of the landscape. The video imagery is also manipulated

using a computer.

Ms. Menlibayeva's video references Kazakhstan's nomadic tribal heritage; Genghis Khan and his mounted warriors came from the Kazakh steppes. At the same time, it alludes to Baroque art, in particular Italian art from the 17th century. The artist refers to this synthesis of Central Asian and European traditions as "romantic punk shamanism," a term that captures both the rebellious qualities of the work (the use of nudity in a Muslim nation) and the celebration of nature and imagination.

Irony, pastiche and metaphor abound in these works, which are rich with humor and pathos. Vyacheslav Akhunov, born in 1948 in Kyrgyzstan and now living in Uzbekistan, presents a video of an elderly man in traditional Uzbek clothing slowly climbing a minaret's narrow spiral staircase. He is clearly a follower of Sufism, in which strenuous physical activity is tied to religious devotion.

Were this all, Mr. Akhunov's video might have been an interesting reflection on tradition and religion in Central Asia. But when the old man reaches the top of the minaret, he sits down and opens up a laptop, proceeding to watch a replay of the video of himself climbing the tower. Instantly the work bridges past and present, linking ancient religious traditions to 21st-century digital technology.

Alexander Ugay, born in Kazakhstan in 1978, reflects on the way in which many Central Asia nations are busy getting 21st-century makeovers. Mr. Ugay's "Paradise Landscape" (2004), a digital print on canvas, presents a tongue-in-cheek vision of the transformation of Kazakhstan during the artist's lifetime from a poor developing nation to a Technicolor utopia filled with exotic animals.

Muratbek Djumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva, born in Kyrgyzstan in 1965 (Mr. Djumaliev) and 1960, also reflect on social and economic changes in Central Asia. Their joint work here consists of three videos surrounding a patch of grass; the videos depict stages in Kyrgyzstan's road from post-Soviet economic collapse to newfound prosperity.

Iranian artists have also experienced profound change and transformation over the past few decades. This is reflected in a video by Simin Keramati, born in Iran in 1970, in which we see the artist, a young woman, sitting against the wall of an enclosed space. Sand slowly fills the space, burying her. It is meant to be a metaphor for the powerlessness of Iranian women since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

It is easy to find the artwork in this exhibition exotic, for it originates in a part of the world that is unfamiliar to many of us. At the same time, much of the art transcends its specific social, cultural and political context, engaging with more universal themes, like hope, faith and a desire for love,

health and prosperity.

Central Asian contemporary art may be a revelation to audiences in the West, but the sentiments underpinning it are surprisingly familiar.

*“Parable of the Garden: New Media Art from Iran and Central Asia,” the College Art Gallery, College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Road, Ewing, through March 30. Information (609) 771-2633 or [www.tcnj.edu/~tcag](http://www.tcnj.edu/~tcag).*

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