

**The Paradox of Polarity: Contemporary Art from Central Asia**  
**Curated by Leeza Ahmady**  
**Bose Pacia, New York, Jan 12 thru Feb 17 2006**

**Curatorial Statement**

For many, the region of Central Asia represents a mishmash of exotic imagery from the past: The Silk Route, the Great Game, and the Cold War. Stories about its people, places, and cultures are repeated as if the concepts of time and progress are irrelevant. Despite its tremendous technological advances, Asia in its entirety has had to make great efforts to be viewed in the present.

Change is a basic element of reality. The past fifteen years have witnessed the Cold War era fade away, and the five Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan move toward developing free market economies and democratic cultures. Meanwhile, over the last few decades a contemporary art explosion has occurred because regional art communities all over the world have reached out through the Web and new media. Through contacts, collaboration, and shared exhibits, artists have established a variety of arenas that are at once local and global, rooted in existing cultures yet expanding to create new forms worldwide.

The art landscape, previously dominated by the West, is currently flooded with interpretations of art and modernity by artists from regions that were once considered remote—the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe—and most recently Central Asia. With the rise of China and India as both new economic powers and vibrant artistic metropolises, it seems that Asia's struggle for visibility is finally bearing fruit.

*The Paradox of Polarity* is part of an ongoing curatorial project entitled *The Taste of Others*, which is a series of lectures, screenings, and exhibitions at various local and international art venues, aimed at promoting the scattered and heretofore unidentified artists of Central Asia and connecting them to the broader international arts community.

For over seventy years, Central Asian artists were isolated from the international art discourse by the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The inaugural Central Asian pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale took many in the art world by surprise with its presentation of exceptional work; indeed, it was widely acclaimed as one of the highlights of the entire biennale. Certainly, the region has attracted considerable political attention as a result of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath. But the fact that Central Asia is strategic beyond its ample supply of resources to world leaders, investment bankers, army bases, and energy moguls is only of recent discovery. The celebrated Central Asian pavilion in Venice along with the inclusion of works by these artists in the 2005 Istanbul Biennial and the Singapore & Sydney Biennials of 2006 prove that the region has just as much to offer in the way of contemporary art practice. The genre serves

to redefine awareness of the Asian continent and offer a fresh perspective on the global art scene.

The most impressive works by these contemporary artists embody paradoxes that continue to perplex. This is a common denominator in the conceptual works of contemporary Central Asian artists. Some common aphorisms, which come to mind include: "Everything is and is not, at the same time," "Each truth is half-false," "There are two sides to every story," and "There is a reverse side to every shield." It may be that the multiplicity of philosophies nurtured in the collective mind of this region – Shamanism, Buddhism, Sophism, Marxism, Bolshevism, Sovietism – create a peculiar mix which compels the artists' exploration of paradoxes.

There appears to be a conscious utilization of extreme opposites in the works of many of the artists. This emphasis on opposing dualities is not intended as the subject, but rather a means of possible resolution of various paradoxes. For example, a work that appears comical or poetic may simultaneously contain graphic and disturbing imagery, such as men buried in heaps of stone or bodies wrapped in white silken clothes. Other works may feature desolate subjects such as broken down machinery or abandoned fragments of buildings – all remnants of a Soviet empire in disrepair – but these images manage to convey an undeniable sense of dignity and monumentality. Some critics have seen this tendency as an added feature or a method of survival by artists. Yet, what is most refreshing is the element of open-endedness in the works. Given the region's long period of authoritarian political history, this open-endedness and lack of constraints in art seems ironic, but in fact, it is not when viewed from a wider scope of history.

Like all post-communist countries, the five Central Asian republics underwent painful and dramatic identity crises. In some countries, development in the arts was halted by civil war or violent periods of political conflict. For example, many cultural institutions were destroyed in Tajikistan. Cultural facilities that are still in place have an obsolete materials base and lack new technology. On the other hand, the two countries that have shown a "bold experimentation" in the arts are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This is partially due to the fact that government repression and pressure for nationalism has been slightly more moderate there than in the other Central Asian Republics. It is perhaps these very elements that have helped to cultivate and distinguish the works of Central Asia's artistic communities. After years of restriction under bureaucratic state-run art programs, it is suddenly irrelevant for these artists to apply any kind of boundaries. Artists even take on multiple roles - acting as curators, critics and viewers in order to develop a nurturing environment in which to create and exhibit work.

Since the end of Cold War, there have been two concurrent forces active in the production of art in Central Asia. One mimics the Soviet system appearing new only in symbolic ornamentation, devised by the state as an instrument for control. The other involves an organic process of concepts and systems applied by artists

individually or in small groups, in an effort to co-opt state-controlled production of culture to create their own original artistic identities.

In the first scenario, artist unions remain in operation in spite of enjoying less prestige and minimal government fund allocations. Individuals who held positions during the Soviet period continue to teach and administer art, while contemporary art remains completely absent from university curriculums. Works continue to be commissioned by government agencies and are considered official. The government vigorously promotes “a return to national origins” and “a revival of historical memories” in the arts. Such propaganda is used to produce a mass-hypnosis effect, which is, ironically, similar to Soviet methods of maintaining control.

In the second system, artists are entirely active in deciding their individual creative and professional destinies. They utilize a global outlook, and explore problems of the post-Soviet space while nurturing a fluid non-definitive position as a catalyst for expression. *The Paradox of Polarity* presents works emerging from this second scenario: works which can be interpreted as commentaries on the processes of change and reform, tainted by socio-psychological and cultural stagnations.

Common to the works of many of the selected artists are regional-ethnic subjects, archetypes, nomadic and Sufi traditions, sacrifices, and pagan rites. However, there is no attachment to the authenticity of any narratives. They serve as tools for constructing new methods, meanings, and relationships that could endure or be destroyed. Clearly visible are the Russian *avant-garde* movements and, more recently, Eastern European conceptual and formal influences. However, the strength of many of the artists' works lies in their intense desire to integrate those references with new models and new standards that create an original discourse.

Identity continues to be a problem that artists focus on. Myth making, which is an old Central Asian practice, is actively used by artists of all generations to explore both regional and global issues. Glaring subjects such as national totalitarian rule, poverty, ruin, war, racial tension, ecological accidents, geopolitics, religion, gender role, and democracy are juxtaposed with beautiful and serene landscapes both natural and man made. Spiritual practices and modern urban and traditional nomadic ceremonies are also inserted into the mixture. Thus in a detached and humorous manner new myths and myths long believed or recently forgotten tend to reappear in forms of photography, installation, performance and video, deciphering paradoxes that offer no solution but like all good art pose for us more questions.

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