

The Silk Code: Exhibition of Contemporary Art

Curated by Leeza Ahmady

In conjunction with International Business Conference
“Kazakhstan: Trade and Investment at the Crossroads of Eurasia”
Organized by Asia Society



Opening Reception
Thursday June 12, 2008 5-8pm
Radisson Hotel Astana, Kazakhstan
On View Through June 14, 2008

The Silk Code: An Exhibition of Contemporary Art

“The Silk Code” is a dynamic exhibition of contemporary art by internationally acclaimed artists and collaborative teams from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. Presented in conjunction with Asia Society’s International Business Conference entitled “Kazakhstan: Trade and Investment at the Crossroads of Eurasia”. The exhibition is curated by Afghan-born, US-based art curator Leeza Ahmady, a noted Central Asian art specialist.

While few of the artists included in the exhibition live abroad, the rest remain in Central Asia, and all engage in the cultural dialogue of place and identity. Much like artists of other regions around the world, Central Asian artists work in whichever media are able to clearly express their ideas while also being readily available and inexpensive. Much like other contemporary artists in the world, the media in which they work includes video, installation, and photography.

Today’s successful artists come from a generation that has had training in architecture, monumental painting, and sculpture at the best Soviet art institutions. They studied these disciplines alongside traditional local forms of art-making. The 1990s, which witnessed the fall of the Soviet system, represented incredible years of experimentation and growth, which continues today. Mastery of crafts like painting and architecture combined with embedded cultural traditions such as music, theater and epic poetry have resulted in the artists’ ability to break through and to express their own individual as well as their collective aesthetics with incredible conceptual vigor.

“The Silk Code” gathers artists of the region who are locally active, but also exhibiting internationally. The title of the exhibition is a playful take on the usual tagline ascribed to the region: “The Silk Road”. It is also a direct reference to the ironic attitudes found in many of the works - the tendency for artists to observe and to challenge fixed perceptions about the world and about Central Asia. They often choose conceptual modes to help them be more readily expressive. Many times this practice involves high dosages of self-revelation and collective-societal criticism, all of which make their works compelling.

When we talk about a code we refer to something significant, something privileged, or hidden, which one could access or breakthrough with special effort. Central Asia as a region has certainly experienced many breakthroughs in recent years. Some countries have been more successful than others in implementing change. Movements toward a free market economy and democratic government have enabled Central Asia to engage with other nations.

Global connectivity however requires prompt willingness to change. It demands adaptation to - and adoption of - new codes. These codes manifest themselves in different forms: new products, new prices, new rules, new ways of thinking, and perhaps even learning or using another language to communicate. In addition to the prevalence of Russian dating from the Soviet period and of English as the dominant second language for business and international communication, national languages are experiencing a resurgence across the region.

This call for re-coding has by no means been a one-way matter. The international community in turn has had to reawaken to the enormously, intriguing, complex, and diversified territories of the region. Everyone from human rights groups to investment bankers and cultural advocates are suddenly, fiercely trying to crack the code - that of rediscovering Central Asia. Indeed the recently discovered abundance of minerals and petroleum is comparable to the region's glorified past commodities of silks and spices.

Thus the "Silk Route" and its colorful predications are revived in all possible ways to re-open and to re-dream the dream of Central Asia. "The Silk Code" as an exhibition hopes to serve as a reference to the profound social, political and economic changes that are taking place as seen throughout the eyes of these selected artists. Transformation as a concept appears in almost all their works. In documenting, criticizing, appropriating as well as aesthetic-izing daily societal events and conditions in nature, these artists act as our intermediaries to reality. Often times they use ancient continental (Asian) and universal philosophies to call attention to psychological stagnation that exists in the world, which tends to delay and prevent change.

Their works, however, are not documentary in nature. Instead they address local as well as global issues through the exploration of concepts of paradise, constructions of identity, and senses of place. Many of the works embody paradoxes that challenge the viewer to reconsider easily found truths. In fact, the artists seem to question the very idea of truth. There is no attachment to the authenticity of the suggested narratives. Instead, the narratives serve as a tool for constructing new relationships that may last or may be immediately destroyed to create something else entirely.

At the same time, reality is never completely forsaken by the artists in this exhibit. Indeed it is emphasized through re-constructions of local, continental and global traditions, both old and new. The many religious practices of the region, including Islam and Shamanism, are also reflected in the works. Ritual in all its forms is therefore appropriated as a method for investigating reality. Many works incorporate gorgeous landscapes, as well as natural and man-made imagery, mixed with contemporary artistic practice that is performance based and action-oriented. These works gesture towards the hopes, disappointments, contradictions, and general disrepair present in all facets of life in Central Asia, but also in the world at large.

Leeza Ahmady

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Participating Artists

Vyacheslav Akhunov (Uzbekistan)
Said Atabekov (Kazakhstan)
Mariam Ghani (Afghanistan)
Gulnara Kasmalieva &
Muratbek Jumalieva (Kyrgyzstan)
Rustam Khalfin (Kazakhstan)
Jamshed Kholikov (Tajikistan)
Galim Madanov (Kazakhstan)
Almagul Menlibaeva (Kazakhstan)
Moldagul Narymbetov (Kazakhstan)
Saken Narynov (Kazakhstan)
Rahraw Omarzad (Afghanistan)
Alexander Ugay (Kazakhstan)
Elena and Viktor Vorobyov (Kazakhstan)

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Special thanks to Doris Bradbury, Executive Director, AmCham in Kazakhstan

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Note: Partial text in this statement are excerpts incorporated from former exhibition entitled: "A Parable of a Garden: New Media Art in Iran and Central Asia" Curated by Leeza Ahmady, Sarah Cunningham, & Deborah Hutton at the College of New Jersey Art Gallery, USA. (Feb-March 2008)