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The New York Art World®.com

**The New York Art World Magazine September 2005**

**On the Official and the Unofficial**

**The 51st Venice Biennale**

**By Leeza Ahmady**

The 51st Venice Biennale has been expanded considerably, with more countries participating than ever before. For the first time in its 110 year history, Albania, Morocco, China, Belarus, Afghanistan and a cluster of Central Asian nations; Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan were represented.

Afghanistan inaugurated its pavilion with two artists. Lida Abdul, who was born in Kabul and lived in Germany and India as a refugee before coming to US; and Raheem Walizada, a rug designer who also owns a gallery in New York. Both artists live and work in between Afghanistan, US and Europe.

Abdul's short film, Clapping with Stones was shot on location in Bamiyan, in front of the famous defaced Buddha statues. The artist returned to Afghanistan to create three new works that were shot in 16mm film and transferred to video for the Biennale. In another work, White House, Abdul is seen painting the ruins of a building white, while in Landscape I, men dressed in black carry a large tree trunk across a barren landscape.

Most of these videos are silent performance-based works charged with visual potency. Experiences of loss, tragedy and fragmentation are explored through ritualized exercises that sanction expression to the artist's profound desire for understanding life's events.

In 1997, Sislej Xhafa wandered around pavilions at the Venice Biennale carrying a soccer ball, and listening to a match on a radio while asking people to play soccer with him. He had painted his torso red, and had a small Albanian flag stuck on to his backpack. "He was the roving Albanian pavilion". Like Afghanistan, Albania too finally got a proper pavilion this year. Xhafa, who is known for activities that often push the envelope, continued his onslaught against societal norms with a giant sculpture of a Ku Klux Klan mask, titled Ceremonial Crying System. The enormous mask, which really did cry, was prominently placed at the entrance of the Giardini, visible from miles away.

A year and half ago in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Kurama Art director Churek Djamgerchinova spoke of her dissatisfaction with the art world's ignorance in regards to Central Asia. Her decision to change this fact as well as the collective efforts of many artists and art practitioners in the region, and abroad, drove her to commission the Central Asian pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The pavilion was curated by Viktor Misiano, whose strategy for the exhibition was to archive more than a decade of works by 20 of the most dynamic artists in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

This year's Biennale was especially strong in the area of video. From Rebecca Belmore's Fountain (2005), to Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's Reading for Corpses (2002), to Kim Sooja's A Needle Woman series, (2000-2003) the best works incorporated an element of video. Central Asian artists too, have been making video, mostly performance-based works in an extraordinarily efficient and effective manner. Maybe it's their inheritance of centuries of myth & ritual that so fluidly and simply allows them to articulate realities of their collective, but also that of the world society at large.

One striking piece at the Central Asian Pavilion was the work of Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djournaliev, a husband and wife team who began their work at the end of the 1980's in Kyrgyzstan. Trans Siberian Amazons (2004) is a video-installation about the lives of women whose means for economic survival, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been to trade imported goods on trains to passengers who are as poor and as spiritually weary as they. Much like "bootleggers" during the prohibition era in the United States during the 1920s, "suitcase traders" has become a massive, social manifestation in post-Soviet space during the last fifteen years.

Almagul Menlibayeva is said to represent the modern image of a female nomad traveling in art as freely as in real life. For the Biennale she created a room installation that incorporated many of her video works Steppe Baroque (2002), Apa (2003), A Wild Sheep Chase (2002) and Vagon (2002). Trained in Kazakh painting and batik traditions, she is set on using symbolism & decoration to create the sense of the magical in her works. Almagul's alluring videos transport us to a world of beautiful women tasked with strange rituals in fantastic places, sometimes nude, sometimes half dressed, dancing in the snow, or tumbling through beautiful landscapes in colorful turbans, scarves and shawls. It seems that the old boy's network has finally given way to make room for the rest of the world at this year's Venice Biennale.