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**The Eye-Catcher**

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Yerbossyn Meldibekov *Sheepwolf* 2001 mixed media

One of the first works by Yerbossyn Meldibekov that I encountered was of a gawking mammalian figure that looked like it belonged in a biodiversity exhibit at a natural history museum, except that this figure was entirely non-evolutionary a sculpture of a ferociously grinning creature, half sheep and half wolf.

*Sheepwolf* (2001) is one of a stunning array of imagery produced by Meldibekov, affectionately known as Yerbol, a leader of the pack among Central Asian artists breaking onto the scene. Representing Kazakhstan in the inaugural Central Asian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2005, Yerbol's reputation is growing as a compelling conceptual artist. He uses a variety of mediums such as performance, installation, video and sculpture to convey his insights about the human condition.

Since the end of the Cold War, privatization has been a main force in Central Asia. Artists have also begun to co-opt state-controlled production of culture to create their own original artistic identities. Against this backdrop, Meldibekov's works can be interpreted as highly politicized commentaries on the processes of change and reform tainted by socio-psychological and cultural impotencies.

*Sheepwolf*, for example, represents a passive-aggressive mentality. It's about the incapacity to be defined in one's core self. The sheep symbolizes

submission, and the wolf: internal rage. It is about the contradiction of the follower boasting bogus leadership.

In the video installation *Pastan I am* (2002), Meldibekov allows himself to be slapped repeatedly, so hard that at one point his skullcap flies off his head. Simultaneously, he is cursed at in ancient Mongolian by the same man who is slapping him, while English subtitles fade in and out of the screen: “Stupid! Living dead! Beast...Brute... Don’t fuck with me!” The scene is violent but somehow feels light, even comical.

Meldibekov uses his body and the bodies of others to stage bizarre scenarios, consciously deciphering them to transcend significance. His willingness to self-criticize renders his work universally relevant while preserving its cultural specificity. This explains the uplifting quality in his works despite their sometimes gut-wrenching content.

The performance, installation *Pol Pot* (2001) for example, shows a number of men buried up to their neck in earth among heaps of stones. All around them, sharp-edged wooden columns stick out from beneath the earth. It’s imagery that demands knowledge of Central Asia, a region that has recently broken out from a 70-year-old Russian dominated-soviet state system. Meldibekov is referencing the regime of Pol Pot and its annihilation of millions of people in Cambodia, to call attention to the obscured sufferings of Central Asian people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; namely, psychological stresses such as the loss of individuality, and the pacification of the will.

Like all post-communist countries, the five Central Asian republics underwent painful and dramatic identity crises. One positive result is that artists were forced to overcome their feelings of isolationism and indifference and the region’s informational vacuum. They stepped onto the global stage using available materials, as well as conceptual and spiritual resources, to construct their own artistic languages. Poignantly, they utilize art to deal with their oppressive pasts that could, at any moment, reappear in new disguises.

*Pastan I am* and *Pol Pot* are parts of a series of ongoing works allowing Meldibekov to continue addressing issues of passivity. He diagnoses Central Asia as suffering from the phenomena of bearing: bearing despotism, bearing exploitation by others and bearing violence against one another. These mechanisms, in the artist’s mind, must be reckoned with. As his statement about *Pastan*, an imaginary state invented by the artist reads: “We exchange our raw material resources for products of informational spectacle. We are just theater actors for BBC and CNN. I get slapped in the face like Third World countries by First World countries... I create eye-catchers, just like General Motors and Toyota does for their products.”

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