

LOVE ME
LOVE MI NOT

LO9E MI
LOVE ME HOT

LOVE ME
LOVE ME NOT

LOBE ME
JOVE ME NOT

LAV MI
LAV MI NOT

LOVE ME
LOVE ME NOT

Produced by
YARAT

**CONTEMPORARY ART FROM
AZERBAIJAN AND ITS NEIGHBOURS**

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Curated by
DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

1ST JUNE — 24TH NOV ¹³
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Published in 2013 on the occasion of the exhibition
Love Me, Love Me Not
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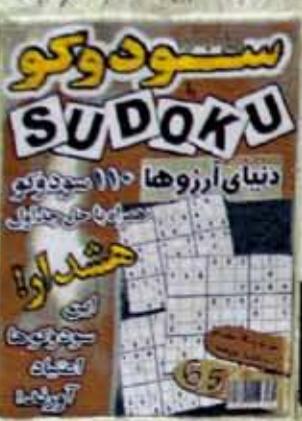
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Founder, YARAT

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AIDA MAHMUDOVA



FOREWORD



AIDA MAHMUDOVA

Founder, YARAT

The cultural heritage that intertwines Azerbaijan with its neighbours Iran, Russia, Turkey and Georgia draws from generations of literary, artistic and economic exchange.



From the great poet Nizami, to the Sufi cleric Molla Nasreddin, through to carpet-weaving traditions and the Silk Road routes of central Asia; spheres of cultural influence have persisted throughout the centuries, despite changing power structures and geographical borders.

Perhaps little understood in the wider world, the vibrant culture in this region produces compelling contemporary art. Our key concept was to produce an exhibition that not only brings to light aspects of the past but engages with contemporary ideas. The name *Love Me, Love Me Not* relates to the vacillating relationships of Azerbaijan and its neighbours over time, in a way that has informed artists today. It is their interaction with each other, within their borders and between the past and present that fuels much of the work you will see in this exhibition.

We at YARAT are delighted such respected artists from diverse cultures have come together to present *Love Me, Love Me Not*. As a not-for-profit organisation run by artists we work a great deal in our local community, and so for us, Venice will prove an exceptional opportunity for an international audience to see what YARAT and its wider team have to offer.

This exhibition could not have taken place without the generous support, hard work and immense creativity of those involved. I would like to thank the artists, our curator-par-excellence Dina Nasser-Khadivi, our team here at YARAT, the catalogue contributors, the invigilators, the press team; everyone's contribution is invaluable to the exhibition and your hard work has been incredible. Of course, all this is possible thanks our supporters, the Azerbaijani companies Gilan and Jala, who kindly sponsored our exhibition funding costs from home soil. As an artist-led organisation, YARAT lives by the creativity and energy artists bring to our projects. We are a dynamic organisation and we hope this life-force of YARAT's programme is reflected in this ambitious exhibition.





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ABOUT YARAT



Founded in 2011 by Aida Mahmudova, YARAT is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to nurturing an understanding of contemporary art in Azerbaijan and to creating a platform for Azerbaijani art, both nationally and internationally.

Based in Baku, YARAT realises its mission through an ongoing programme of exhibitions, education events, and festivals. YARAT facilitates dialogue and exchange between local and international artistic networks, including foundations, galleries and museums.

A series of residencies further fosters opportunities for global cultural dialogue and partnerships.

YARAT's educational initiatives include lectures, seminars, master classes, and the ARTIM Young Artist Project. ARTIM aims to encourage the next generation of Azerbaijani creative talent to seek a career in the arts and gives young practitioners the opportunity to exhibit their works in a professional context.

Founded as part of YARAT's ongoing commitment to growing local art infrastructure, YAY Gallery is a commercial exhibition space. In line with this, YAY shares all proceeds from sales between the artist and YARAT and supports a range of national and international artists.



INTRODUCTION
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DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

INTRODUCTION

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DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

IN TODAY'S FAST PACE SOCIETY, FACT CHECKING
WHAT WE SEE MAY NOT BE THE FIRST THING THAT CROSSES OUR MINDS,
ESPECIALLY WHEN SUBMERGED BY 24-HOUR NEWS CHANNELS,
THE INTERNET AND HIGH BUDGET MOVIES WHICH INSINUATE REALISTIC
PORTRAYALS OF COUNTRIES WE HAVE NEVER VISITED.

Ever present too, are the legal disclaimers stressing that what seen is often just *based* on a true story, which should – I suppose – help us differentiate facts from fiction... However, by then have we not already switched off our TVs or left the theatre with a presumption that is very much planted in our minds, like a seed waiting to grow over time, into a misconception of what we saw?

Given the current global media outreach, I guess we could consider that we are very much in touch with reality and safe from stereotypes. The aforementioned disclaimers should also provide, in theory, a safety net against the risk of falling into the trap of generalisations, as they clearly state that the facts we are fed are not always *entirely* accurate. Yet, the acclaim garnered by the blockbuster movie *ARGO* this year made me feel as though we may prefer learning about a country through a big Hollywood production that is *inspired* by a true story, rather than reading books relating to a history that is 7,000 years old.

Had I not visited or taken an interest in my native Iran, I could easily have taken Ben Affleck's version as a fair depiction of not just the 1979 Iranian Revolution – which already as it is has affected the country's image forever – but as a realistic portrayal of what Iran remains like today, thirty years post the chaos. In addition, not only has the foreign press perpetuated this image of the country for as long as I can remember, it has over time become one that can no longer be disassociated from it...

Along with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran came the misconception that Iranians spoke Arabic instead of Farsi, as Islam is generally associated to Arab nations... But more importantly the sole regional, or rather geographical, association the country has had since, has been to the Middle East. Whether in the media, in politics, contemporary literature, the art world, or even at times in our own diaspora, it seems as if our links with other neighbouring regions have become almost unaccounted for. People are still surprised when I tell them this show is meant to be a regional pavilion...

Would this not imply then, that the incidents of some thirty years ago have impacted our perception? And as these events have become so mediated since, that they have actually managed to wash away what was present for centuries, including the country's roots, its identity, its history and even, as this show attempts to demonstrate to a certain extent, the parameters of its geography as well...

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As an Iranian born around the 1979 revolution, and one who has been brought up in the very societies that condemned the present regime, I relied heavily on what the mass media portrayed of my country before deciding to get to know my origins for what they really are.

What I discovered following my involvement in the art world and my travels, is that not only had I been slightly misinformed on certain aspects relating to my origins, but that several ties whether diplomatic, cultural or historical seemed to have been completely discarded in recent years.

When I first visited Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and some of the countries near the Persian Gulf, and later discovered their art scenes – they initially felt like the nearest I could get to my roots... And in many ways they are and will always remain very close. The fact that the Iranian modern and contemporary art scene has blossomed greatly in Dubai in recent years is certainly thanks to these cross cultural ties, which have proven to lend mutual appreciation between Iran and its Middle Eastern neighbours when it comes to the world of art – with their politics remaining entirely separate.

Turkey and its artists have also always felt close but in a different way. Although we do indeed all share similarities in the context of the Middle East, we also have some clear distinctions with our Arab neighbours – such as our respective languages – which made me reflect that there had to be more than one way of looking at the art coming from our countries, besides the geographical setting we have categorised them into over recent years. To this effect, the Pan Arab pavilion held in Venice in 2011¹ was wonderful at making this distinction clear, as it obviously excluded Turkey and Iran, which was extremely inspiring and a breath of fresh air.

This concept later grew stronger when I visited Moscow and realised some of the dishes I have known since childhood as Persian cuisine, are in fact of Russian descent, showing how our cultures had once upon a time 'flirted' with one another, perhaps even mixed. A conference I later attended at Oxford² emphasised how Russia and Iran shared several cultural links ranging from *Russian Orientalism* to *Soviet Iranology*, making me wonder how interesting the combination of both cultures could be if they were to be set into the context of a contemporary art exhibition. The parallels present in Iran and Russia's respective historical evolutions became a subject I envisioned tackling a little further. After all, both had once been monarchies brought down by revolutions: one to be taken over by Islam while the other was to be driven by Communism... Making them so different and yet so similar.

Azerbaijan, and Baku in particular, was what finally brought all these ideas together and inspired me to do this exhibition. Following my first visit in 2008, I had come to realise that not only had the country been – like my own – the target of misconceptions, but it had also been ignored for many years: its beauty and significance almost forgotten over time, despite its cultural and historical importance... Most importantly, it represented a nexus of all the historical empires that had surrounded it (Ottoman, Persian, and Russian) and provided me an answer to the equation revolving around the evolution of dynamics to the north of my native Iran, as well as a door to another key region it was linked to: the Caucasus.

¹ *The Future of a Promise* curated by Lina Lazaar, Collateral Event at the 54th Venice Biennale 1 Jun–30 Nov 2011

² Reference to the conference held at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, 30 Nov–1 Dec 2012, *Russian Orientalism to Soviet Iranology: the Persian-speaking world and its history through Russian eyes*

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While Azerbaijan became pivotal to my train of thought as an explanation to certain geographical facts resulting from the past dynamics Iran had had with its Ottoman and Russian neighbours, it also enhanced the initial issues of categorisation and misconception which had been troubling me. Whether it was a phenomenon based on what seemed to be an impetus to focus on recent history only, or the mass media's portrayal of these countries, I realised it had also been accentuated within the art world.

Despite museums like The Metropolitan and The Louvre displaying artefacts from the region represented in our pavilion side by side³ – thus proving these links had been present for centuries – these cultural connections had for some reason not yet been properly explored within a contemporary setting, which in turn may have led to an emphasis of the current aspect of geographical categorisation (in the art world at least). Perhaps a classification resulting from current geopolitics, versus one based on historical cultural ties, either way – I hope the selection of artworks in *Love Me, Love Me Not* will give a different perspective on the cultural interconnections between these artists, as well as demonstrate more than just one view point when it comes to their regional groupings. There are in fact several combinations that could be made with the artists in this show – that seen in *Love Me, Love Me Not*, just happens to be one of them.

Now going beyond nationalities and cultural links that interconnect the artists in this exhibition, the dynamics covered in *Love Me, Love Me Not* are what remain essential to my critical approach. They are what explain the historical and geographical evolution of the area covered in this exhibition and in fact, reach far beyond these parameters as well⁴.

In the same way relationships can be complicated between individuals, whether lovers or family members, countries share similar dynamics. However, as opposed to only lasting a lifetime, these relationships continue for centuries, forging what have become our current borders. While the interaction between neighbouring countries have often historically involved wars, peace, love, hate and various invasions over territorial frictions – in the instance of Azerbaijan and its neighbours, the dynamics have also been characterised by a great deal of back and forth. This in turn has resulted in its unusual, at times confusing, yet original evolution outlined by its identity today: a hybrid of all the various influences that have surrounded it over time.

A part of the Persian Empire since the 6th Century BC, Azerbaijan later became independent governed khanates⁵ until it became a part of Russia following the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). It then gained a brief state of independence as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918, only to lose it shortly after, when incorporated into the USSR in 1920. This is a very simplified version of the long and complex historical evolution that has caused the Azerbaijani alphabet to change three times in the last seventy years, causing generations to read in three different scripts⁶. Eastern Georgia, and certain areas in Russia such as Dagestan, were also part of the territories that underwent significant changes as a result of dynamics between the Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires. Such evolvments caused many cities to change names over the years, some of which are part of the brilliant compilation made by the

³Anatolia and the Caucasus, 1800–1900 A.D., New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=11®ion=waa> (October 2004)

⁴Reference to Slavs and Tatars *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*, Onestar Press, 2010.

⁵150 Eurasian cities have changed names over the past century based on the complexity of the history of the dynamics in the region

⁶is a Turco-Mongol-originated word used to describe a political entity ruled by a Khan

⁶Reference to Slavs and Tatars' *Molla Nasreddin: The Magazine that would've, should've, could've*, Edition Christopher Keller, 2011, pp. 4–5

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collective Slavs and Tatars, included in the show.

Finally, the evolution of Azerbaijan and its neighbours as well as their dynamics, brought me to wonder about the effects of time and how, in addition to the media and the reading of recent history, it has affected our perception of the region. The more time goes by and the more we seem to forget our roots, while the lack of it in today's fast pace societies often pushes us to rely on quick facts. As potentially detrimental this can be in the media's case, this is ironically where I think art can do wonders: as opposed to being based on partial facts or a foreign perspective, the art inspired by and originating from this region offers a truthful narrative, based on personal stories and visions of the individuals' experiences. Whether the works are a translation of events actually lived through by the artists or witnessed by them, they each represent individual testimonies and as such – promise to give an accurate and recent portrayal of the nations they represent, with direct links to their roots, instead of representing an interpretation based on the region.

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Featuring recent work by 17 artists from Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, Russia, Georgia and the collective Slavs and Tatars, *Love me, Love me Not* will seek to remind us that there are multiple cultural links to be explored and that dynamics are key to a better understanding of the background of the countries included in this exhibition. Showcasing work by these artists in a single exhibition aims to also, ultimately, question how we each perceive history and geography.

This show does not take any political stands, nor is it aimed at making any statements, other than to show facts that seem to have been forgotten over time by the audience at large. It tackles however, the possibility of reasons that may or may not be linked to this situation, while opening a door to a new way of looking at our present, based on relationships that are centuries old.

Each piece selected or commissioned for this exhibition has a role of giving the viewer at least one new perspective on the nations represented in this pavilion, with the mere intent to offer a better understanding of the geographical area being covered. Art enables dialogue and the Venice Biennale has proven to be the best arena for cultural exchange. While I realise some may not be familiar with Azerbaijan yet, they usually know its neighbours, sometimes without even realising it. This is why I hope this exhibition could play some modest part in destabilising traditional ideas about a part of the world that is largely misunderstood... and in the end, starting a conversation...

Finally, this exhibition aims to provide a bit of a 'crash course' on the region, without having the pretence of being overly academic. The collective Slavs and Tatars often say that art needs to be more generous⁷ and I have to agree with this statement. We sometimes end up alienating a large portion of audiences by producing contemporary art shows that are only understood by a handful of people... This exhibition attempts to introduce a complex topic through a simplified format, with works of art and a catalogue that will help engage the viewers and the readers at large.

⁷What does art do: the production of knowledge in a globalized economy.

panel moderated by Dr Anthony Downey including Zeina Arida, Director, Arab Image Foundation; Michael Rakowitz, Artist and Associate Professor at Northwestern University in Chicago ; and Payam Sharifi, Co-Founder of Slavs and Tatars, Dubai March 2013

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In today's society where there is often a flux of information, coupled with a lack of time to dig through what the real facts are, a true portrayal of a country has almost become like a puzzle to assemble. The power of the press is significant and yet it can go both ways, depending on which side of the pond we are standing on, the same way the reading of history can be interpreted differently, depending on where we each come from.

As such the aim of this show is to be somewhat different: the viewer can decide whatever they want to take away from it; this is only an introduction to dynamics that have been present through time in one part of our world, and for those who come from the region – this just constitutes an additional way of looking back to our roots and exploring connections to our neighbours which in one way or another, have made us who we are today.

LOVE ME,
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DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE SENTENCE
‘LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT’ REMINDS US
OF A CONCEPT BASED ON ROMANCE,
THE FAMOUS GAME THAT ENTAILS PLUCKING
THE PETALS OF A FLOWER TO DETERMINE
IN A RATHER NAÏVE AND PLAYFUL FASHION,
WHETHER THE OBJECT OF OUR AFFECTION
LOVES US OR NOT...

Yet upon dissection, this expression so commonly used contains several levels of interpretation involving ideas of layers, duality, dynamics of recurrence and more importantly: aspects of complexity based on vacillating relationships.

Located at a crossroads between three major historical empires, the intricacy behind the evolution of the countries in this pavilion suddenly becomes a little more understandable. The Ottoman, Persian and Russian rulers were after all driven by the expansion of their respective territories and ideologies, and while the trifecta is now history, the areas that happened to be caught in the middle went through significant alterations resulting in the often interesting amalgams we see today, such as present day Azerbaijan.

While change has characterised the diversity and ‘originality’ of Azerbaijan’s culture, it is also what has sometimes led its people to a state of confusion. As conveyed in Rashad Alakbarov’s installation *Lost in translation... This too shall pass*, 2013, the Azerbaijani alphabet changed three times¹ in seventy years causing three consecutive generations to read in three different scripts² and evidently this created not only a disruption, but also a strong feeling of frustration for those who got affected by all these vicissitudes. What this exhibition will try demonstrate however is that ultimately, over the course of time, a greater picture comes together: one that relates to the notion of interconnectivity.

As each piece featured in this exhibition is later explained in detail, this essay aims to give an overview of the reasonings behind my selection. While the artists and works on display intend to give a new perspective on the geographical area covered, I realise they also revolve around an individual critical approach. For this reason, I purposely invited curators and writers with different backgrounds to contribute to this catalogue, in the hope of giving as many different viewpoints as possible.

A MODULAR CULTURE...

The history and the geography, as well as the parameters, of the region covered in this show present a tricky theme to tackle as they involve considerable back and forth and substantial changes over the years. Slavs and Tartars’ installation *Love Me, Love Me Not*, 2010 demonstrates to this effect the rather multifarious patterns some of the cities³ from the region have followed over time, while emphasising simultaneously how the influences surrounding them have impacted their names and in essence, their cultural heritage.

Despite its convoluted and unusual evolution, Azerbaijan has blossomed into one of today’s most interesting destinations, thanks to its cultural heritage and identity. A hybrid of all the cultures that preceded its independent state, its amalgamation also transpires through its artistic scene. While works such as Ali Hasanov’s *Masters*, 2012 may seem at first to have more of a Soviet identity, pieces such as Faig Ahmed’s *Untitled*, 2012 thread installation relate to a more Persianate influence, pointing to the modular culture that has taken shape in the country over time.

As the notion of change remains pivotal in Azerbaijan’s evolution, it continues to be a prevalent theme in the works of its artists today. Often with references to how quickly their nation is moving towards modernity

¹In 1922 the New Turkish Alphabet Committee in Baku created a Latin alphabet. In 1929, the uniform Turkic Alphabet was then introduced to replace the varieties of the Arabic script in use at the time. However in 1939, because Joseph Stalin wished to sever the ties between the Republic of Turkey and the Turkic peoples living within the Soviet Union, he decreed that only the Cyrillic script could be used. Finally when the Soviet Union collapsed and Azerbaijan gained its independence, one of the first laws passed in the new Parliament was the adoption of the new Latin alphabet.

²Slavs and Tatars, *Molla Nasreddin the magazine that would’ve, should’ve, could’ve* Edition Christopher Keller, 2011, pp. 4–5

³Slavs and Tatars *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed names* covers 150 cities, and includes in addition to Azerbaijan,

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– another facet of Ahmed’s work – elements of nostalgia resurface regularly through some of the pieces on display. Mahmudova’s *Recycled*, 2012–2013 refers to personal memories experienced by the artist in her beloved Baku and attempts to immortalise her nostalgia through the preservation of old window grates which once adorned the city, while Farid Rasulov’s sculptures from his *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013 underline the general transformation of the country, which has also become visible through its architecture. The contrast between the modern skylines rising in the Caspian’s capital and the walls of the old city, result in strong visual incongruences which is also characteristic of the beauty and originality of Baku. Rasulov’s sculptures convey this notion of change by combining the old with the new, the past and the future, just like his native city does.

Modernity however, often also opens the door to globalisation, which in turn can lead to changes that are not always necessarily positive. Rashad Babayev explores this concept in his installation *The Tree of Wishes*, 2013 by recreating a traditional Azerbaijani and Central Asian ritual⁴ into a contemporary setting. He uses a real fig tree from the peninsula of Absheron, which he covers with scarves and various pieces of cloth stamped with international designer logos, hinting at how consumerism is slowly replacing tradition in his native land.

THE PARADOXICAL POWER OF THE MEDIA...

Huseynov’s *Life of Bruce Lye*, 2008 on the other hand, points to the difficulties of being secluded as an ex-Soviet nation and underlines residues of bittersweet memories. Following the fall of Communism in 1991, mass media took a while to get re-established in the new state of Azerbaijan causing a great deal of misinformation in the interim, for those growing up and living there. The artist refers to his childhood experience in the post-Soviet era

by interviewing fellow artist friends on the pop culture icon Bruce Lee, who was for years thought of as being the actor who went by the name of ‘Bruce Li’ (the latter being an imitator of the former, in knock-off film versions available then). While this video montage conveys its message with a great touch of humour, it also tackles the paradox associated to the power of the media and globalisation: depending on where you are located in the world, perception can be completely monitored, sometimes without our knowledge, resulting in misrepresentation and ultimately...deceit.

Slavs and Tatars’ *Molla Nasreddin*:

The Antimodernist, 2012 is for this reason a focal work in this exhibition, as it reflects on the one hand a metaphor of the Sufi philosopher headed towards the future while facing his past, and on the other the famous Azerbaijani satirical periodical dating from the early twentieth century⁵. As the collective’s research demonstrates⁶ the magazine *Molla Nasreddin*, which was published between Baku, Tabriz and Tbilisi, had an outreach that went beyond the linguistic challenges that were present back then and managed to even include the illiterate population, thanks to its use of caricatures. As such this playful installation combining history, philosophy and the power of the press, remains very symbolic for the pan Caucasian region as a whole. It makes the viewer reflect on both the past and the present of Azerbaijan and its neighbours, as well as the timeless impact of the publication, from which its title derives from.

Farhad Moshiri’s *Kiosk de Curiosité*, 2011 then questions the flux of information in today’s society, which ironically can result in opacity as it requires one to filter through the mass of information that has become available. His installation also hints at the presence of censorship, ultimately conveying that no matter where you are it is always present in a way – albeit in different shapes. Being flooded with too much information results in the need to dig for the truth while controlling it and suppressing it, takes it away all together.

Iran, Russia, Georgia, cities from present day Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, Tajikistan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Romania, Kyrgyzstan, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovakia, Belarus, Albania, Moldova, The Czech Republic, Slovenia, Afghanistan

⁴This ritual also exists in several other countries in Central Asia and beyond

⁵as well as the notion of generosity present in the region due to the installation’s interactive nature

⁶refer to excerpts from Slavs and Tatars’ *Molla Nasreddin* p.58–63 of this catalogue

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SHARED HISTORY, COEXISTENCE AND BORDERS...

In addition to the concept of duality, *Love Me, Love Me Not* also implies dynamics with another entity. While Azerbaijan was caught in the middle of its neighbours until it gained independence, it is also its history that has moulded its current identity and borders. Its relationship with countries such as Iran could therefore be viewed as a little ambiguous perhaps, however set in a contemporary context such as this exhibition, what the works commissioned often convey are notions of shared history and coexistence, proving that what remains is a feeling of respect and interconnection often stemming from common roots.

Shoja Azari's *King of Black*, 2013 re-examines the epic poem of *Haft Paykar* (Seven Beauties) by Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi, whose poetry is among the archetypes of classic Persian literature. Originally completed in 1197, it retraces an allegorical romance of great beauty and depth. Azari conveys its central theme of self-knowledge as the path to human perfection in rich and vivid imagery and complex symbolism, through a combination of video and miniature painting. Through this modern day interpretation, the artist continues to emphasise the virtues of patience and endurance just as the original tale intended and brings us back to a universal concept.

Ali Banisadr's historical triptych *Fravashi*, 2013 then refers to the guardian spirit mentioned in the Avesta, the primary collection of sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. By choosing a theme that recalls elements of ancient history and incorporating his own memories, Banisadr creates a personal narrative as well as a contemporary homage to his native Iran and the countries it shares borders with, such as Azerbaijan⁷. While Islam remains predominant in both countries⁸, Zoroastrianism is still recognised as an important part of their cultural heritage and to this end, they each celebrate these roots every spring with 'Nowruz' (which stands for the new year)⁹ as well as the preceding ritual 'Chaharshanbe Suri'.

Mahmoud Bakhshi's *Mother of Nation*, 2009–2013 on the other hand conveys, in addition to the notion of shared history, a cause that has been linked to some of the dynamics in the region: oil. While it may represent the answer to a country's wealth and power – and viewed as a 'nurturer' – it is also a factor that has created over the past century many invasions and controversies. By recreating something akin to an Aztec pyramid, the artist refers to the 'sacred status' the commodity holds in today's society, but also to the many sacrifices it has entailed over the years. Baku was invaded for its oil in 1920, while Iran's nationalisation by Mossadegh in 1951 created much debate in the nation's history.

Afroz Amighi's *Untitled*, 2013 also tackles the idea of common roots, but from a completely different angle. She chooses to focus on the concept of reflection and a parable by Rumi describing a competition between the Greeks and the Chinese, as well as *La Convivencia* (the coexistence) – the period in Spanish history when Muslims, Christians and Jews in Moorish Iberia lived in relative peace together within the different kingdoms. When I initially discussed the piece with the artist she mentioned: '*The geography of Azerbaijan is deeply integral to its cultural history. Straddling Europe and Asia it contains elements of both and therefore cannot be easily defined, as was Moorish Spain. Like the contested authorship of the epic love story Ali and Nino, the culture of Azerbaijan cannot be claimed by any ethnic or religious group in particular*'¹⁰. To this end, she has created a design incorporating both traditional Azerbaijani and Venetian motifs and introduced for the first time an element of water, to commemorate this exhibition's venue: Venice. By combining these ideas in one, Amighi's installation becomes essential for its notion of coexistence and brings us back to a very central thought and theme of this exhibition, which is to remind us that we are ultimately all interconnected.

Sitara Ibrahimova's video and photography installation *The Edge*, 2012 alludes to the difficulties

LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

and challenges of reaching this state of coexistence by covering the intricacies surrounding the disputed territory of Karabakh. She blends collective memory and narrative by basing her project on a region that has caused recent conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia and by featuring photographs of Ağdam, a town now deserted due to the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Through this project she conveys the emotional paradoxes that occur with the phenomenon of displacement, as well as the notion of borders at large.

Kutluğ Ataman's *Column*, 2009 from his *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* is, to this end, an extremely significant piece in the context of this exhibition, as it tackles all the aforementioned notions, and more. While it remains inspired by Trajan's Column in Rome, this work does not speak of victors but of the vanquished. The villagers portrayed in this work are all from a village near Ataman's native Erzincan in Eastern Turkey (which corresponds to the Anatolian peninsula). A region that was once one of the cradles of civilisation, it has transformed over time to become amongst the most underdeveloped zones in Turkey. Untouched by the modernisation that has taken over the rest of the country, it has become a place that underlines the difficulties of reconciling tradition and globalisation¹¹. Each of the individuals shown on the screens stare silently at the camera, unable to speak, prevented from telling their stories, because they no longer have a language with which to communicate with the rest of the world¹². It is an attempt by the artist to tell a story without any narration, as well as a tribute to the history of Anatolian people.

Russian artist Taus Makhacheva is another artist tackling the nature of identity in correlation with the effects of history and geography. In *Gamsutl*, 2012 she puts into perspective the cultural changes that preceded this abandoned city located in her native Dagestan, by making the protagonist in her video impersonate all the past influences that once touched this majestic settlement now falling into ruins. Due to its geographic location, the region of Dagestan was caught between significant back and forth

amidst the empires that once surrounded it and over time, it has become one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Russia. Makhacheva demonstrates the passage of time and the cultural heritage of her native land through the dance of this man, whose every movement translates into a narrative from the past of the now deserted Avarian Mountain settlement.

◇

And this finally brings me to the notion of time... An essential component in each of the works in this exhibition, it remains inextricably linked to the current messages expressed. While it gives the greatest perspective on history and geography, it is also what may explain a lot of the misconceptions resulting from today's fast pace world. Georgian artist Iliko Zauthashvili's installation *Time disappears in Time*, 2006–2013 focuses on the contemporary issues revolving around the notion of time and addresses the idea that by constantly thinking about the future, we end up forgetting about our past and present... Something I believe greatly to be associated with the lack of knowledge on the area that is covered in this show, in addition – of course – to the complexity of the dynamics at large.

Surveying evolutions that are centuries old is a difficult theme to approach in a single exhibition, as there is so much more out there to cover and discover. While my selection represents only a fragment, I hope the works in this pavilion will demonstrate that when set in a contemporary context, a greater perspective ultimately arises from their combination: whether the works on display question the nature of identity, the concept of borders, of time, of coexistence, or shared history... The most important in addition to new perspectives is, that they all convey the concept of universality and interconnectivity.

⁷ Azerbaijan's etymology is thought to derive from Zoroastrianism as it stands for 'Guardians of Fire'

⁸ The Constitution of Azerbaijan does not declare an official religion, and all major political forces in the country are secular nationalist, but the majority of people and some opposition movements adhere to Shia Islam. Cornell, Svante E. (2010). *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. M.E. Sharpe, pp. 165, 284

⁹ Nowruz is not only celebrated in Iran but also in the Caucasus, Central Asia and by Iranians worldwide

¹⁰ Afroz Amighi in conversation with Dina Nasser-Khadivi, November 2012

¹¹ P. Baldi, Introduction, Maxxi catalogue Kutluğ Ataman – Mesopotamian Dramaturgies, Rome, Electa, 2010, p.10

¹² C. Perella, *The Future is in the Sky*, Kutluğ Ataman – Mesopotamian Dramaturgies, Rome, Electa, 2010



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◇
NEGAR AZIMI

We are a tribe that speaks many languages,
but not a single one of them without an accent.

◇
For the first ten years of her life, my grandmother
– she was born in a small town not far from the
Iranian border with Azerbaijan – believed the
word for ‘Russian’ was the word for ‘foreigner’.

◇
The name ‘Georgia’ may or may not be
derived from the Persian word ‘gorgan’,
or land of the wolves.

◇
Women in Azerbaijan were given the right to
vote in 1918. This was twenty-seven years before
France, fifty-three years before Switzerland, and
twenty-two years before Canada.

◇
The world’s most skilled tightrope walkers
are said to be from Dagestan.

UNCOMMON TRIBE

In Iran, the people we refer to as the ‘Turks’
are not Turks at all, but rather, ethnic Azerbaijanis
who make up a quarter of the population of this
vast land. The current Supreme Leader,
Ali Khamenei, is a Turk. As is the former Empress
from the time of the monarchy, Farah Diba.

◇
Ludvig Immanuel Nobel, a member of the
illustrious family that endowed the prize of the
same name, was the scion of an oil fortune based
in Baku that, at one point, produced fifty percent
of the world’s oil.

◇
The musical band The Gypsy Kings –
who sing in Spanish – are inexplicably popular
among vast numbers of Iranians who do not
speak Spanish.

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THESE DAYS, PEOPLE REFER TO THE
'GLOBALISED' WORLD ALMOST BY ROTE,
IN THE SAME THOUGHTLESS WAY THEY
MIGHT REFER TO THE HOSPITABLE WEATHER
IN FLORIDA, OR THE WARS
OF THE MIDDLE EAST.

And yet, we forget that it has always been globalised, if one is to mean interconnected, long before telephones became mobile, before the internet colonised our lives and brains, and the glut of consumer monoculture – H&M for everyone – bound us together from Berlin to Beijing to Beirut, in one bland embrace. Being global didn't mean that we all wore the same sneakers, but it meant that through the force of trade, conquest, and even diplomacy, we borrowed, cut, pasted, and cross-pollinated in multiple realms – from politics to dress, to language and literature. In this version of the world, culture is always in flux. It is almost never self-contained, singular, or immune to the siren call of the worldly encounter.

◇

Azerbaijan. The word itself comes from the Persian for 'Guardians of Fire' – a remnant of the country's partially Zoroastrian past (for this ancient religion is largely built around fire worship). With Iran to the south, Russia to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia to the west, and the Caspian Sea to the east, the country is literally enveloped by a patchwork of multiple traditions. This land has been colonised, variously, by the Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Russians. One small story about language, to illustrate a very recent history of breathtaking diversity: in the twentieth century alone, the Azerbaijani national script has changed three times, from Arabic to Latin in 1929, Latin to Cyrillic in 1939, and Cyrillic back to Latin in 1991 when the Soviet Union fell apart at the seams. Straddling Asia and Europe at once, Azerbaijan is neither here nor there, a prime point of departure for thinking about the

syncretic histories of this part of the world. Patchwork as a condition. Culture in flux.

◇

New geographies. These days, there is abundant talk of new geographies. South East Asia, the Americas, the Far East, the Middle East, Eurasia. Nevermind that these parts of the world have been home to the oldest civilisations on earth and are hardly 'new' (new to whom? might be the operative question). In the arts, the inclusion of these new geographies in a larger conversation about culture tends to signal a readiness on the part of more hegemonic art scenes to break through the straitjacket of familiarity and acknowledge other traditions, other places, other markets. Most of the time, this internationalisation is considered a welcome and necessary good. After all, it brings with it the chance to see more things, meet more people, travel, exchange, collaborate. The staging grounds are various, and include conferences and symposia, art fairs, and of course, biennials like this one.

But what are the possible costs of internationalisation, or this enlargement of the conversation? Is it possible that it does not always represent a categorical *good*? Could it be that as we see each other more or see more of the very things we previously had no access to, we grow more ... the same? This may be well-tread territory for scholars of globalisation, but in the arts, does reading the same arts magazines and e-flux announcements, attending the same symposia, studying at the same curatorial studies schools, wielding the same Phaidon texts and so on, render us bland? Could it homogenise culture? In bringing these new geographies into the proverbial fold, could we be flattening the very difference we are ostensibly celebrating? What is the cultural version of wearing the same sneaker, anyway?

Instead, what if we take the 'new' in the rubric 'new geography' and run with it, rendering it a metaphor for a new way of seeing – a state of being, rather than a physical place. Rather than indulging in sameness, what

UNCOMMON TRIBE

if we took advantage of the benefits of flexible foreign travel, of institutional inclusionary impulses, even token gestures in the name of multiculturalism, and allowed things to rub up against one another, breathe, spar? What we might in fact learn from these so-called nether-regions of the world is not only that there are rich and robust cultural histories here, but that we've been overlapping all along – for centuries, in fact. The lines between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran, Georgia, or Russia are by no means invisible, but history has taught us that they are anything but fixed. When back in the fourth century BC, the Persian Empire sought out the Georgian Colchian Empire to serve as a buffer from the menacing tribes of the south Caucasus, the two empires exchanged rich and elaborate diplomatic gifts: gold Achaemenid bracelets, earrings, bridle ornaments and so on, so that they may ensure camaraderie, and by extension, mutual protection. *You scratch my back and...* Those exotic gifts, in turn – their style, texture, and specific iconography – found their way into the art of each country. Again, before H&M for everyone, we'd always been global.

◇

One last lesson is drawn from literary history. The classic tale *Ali and Nino* – sometimes referred to as the seminal text from the Eurasian part of the world – was published in Vienna in 1937, by an author with the exotic pseudonym of Kurban Said. The story, which charts the love between a young Russian-educated Azerbaijani and a Georgian princess, is Wagnerian in scope and breadth. Their star-crossed affair – he is Muslim and she is Christian – takes them from Baku to Dagestan, to Tbilisi to Persia, and back again. Along the way, the two lovers negotiate the brute force of centuries-long traditions, a kidnapping at the hands of a marauding Armenian, and in the final account, a revolution. And yet, in spite of all, their love persists (for cross-cultural couples did exist in Baku as early as 1900).

The story aside, it is the debate about the authorship

of *Ali and Nino* that serves as a window onto the patchwork (again) nature of this corner of the world. Over the years, at least three – and sometimes four – individuals have been identified as having been involved in the scripting of the story: the respected Azerbaijani writer and statesman Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, the Kiev-born society writer Lev Nussimbaum who, though born a Jew, took to wearing Muslim drag and wrote under the pseudonym Essad Bey, the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidze, and, finally, an eccentric adulteress Austrian Baroness named Elfriede Ehrenfels, who registered the book with German authorities and claimed, amazingly, to be its sole author.

Nearly eight decades later, the authorship debate continues. And yet, it seems mostly irrelevant. Above all, the confusion between the Jew who posed as a Muslim, the honourable Azeri, the eccentric baroness, and the Georgian is, you could say, a fitting paradigm for the peculiar scope of history in this neighbourhood. Always global.

◇

WE ARE A TRIBE THAT SPEAKS
MANY LANGUAGES.

◇

THIS IS A BOOK WITH MANY AUTHORS.

◇

IT SEEMS A FINE WAY TO THINK
ABOUT THE WORLD.



OFF-CENTRE
OFF-CENTRE
OFF-CENTRE
OFF-CENTRE
OFF-CENTRE

NADA RAZA

OFF-CENTRE: A VIEW FROM SLIGHTLY EAST

◇
NADA RAZA

“WHEN THE WORD ‘MODERN’, ‘MODERNISATION’ OR ‘MODERNITY’ APPEARS, WE ARE DEFINING, BY CONTRAST, AN ARCHAIC AND STABLE PAST. FURTHERMORE, THE WORD IS ALWAYS BEING THROWN INTO A FIGHT, IN A QUARREL WHERE THERE ARE WINNERS AND LOSERS, ANCIENTS AND MODERNS.

‘MODERN’ IS THUS DOUBLY ASYMMETRICAL: IT DESIGNATES A BREAK IN THE REGULAR PASSAGE OF TIME, AND IT DESIGNATES A COMBAT IN WHICH THERE ARE VICTORS AND VANQUISHED.”¹ BRUNO LATOUR

Asked recently if it might be possible for artists and thinkers to speak from a ‘non-Western centric’ position, I found myself getting into a long-winded circular conversation about postcoloniality, entanglement and the pointlessness of searching for authenticity. I only understood afterwards what the question was – can we, today, articulate ideas that are truly sited from an alternative experience of the world, truly of Baku or Tehran or in my case, Karachi? Not speak for, but speak from? I thought I would make an attempt to view the work in this exhibition through the lens of practices in Muslim South Asia, Pakistan in particular, where artistic practice has evolved under various influences; colonial art schools, the invention of a national identity, European and American influences, Islamisation and the global art market in turn.

Often, when in conversation with contemporary artists who work in Pakistan, the notion of the ‘traditional’ is still raised, often in binary opposition to European modernism. I have found myself wanting to resist the binary definition, and rather than seeing it as a tension between past and present, to instead think of our time as diachronic, where many positions can exist simultaneously. Every time an artist spoke to me of trying to express or reconcile tradition and modernity I would cringe slightly, until I

realised that their definitions of those terms were perhaps different from mine.

One development in recent years has been to relook at geometric and calligraphic abstraction from the 1950s onwards, especially as art historical interest in the modern period of the region has grown. State sponsored religion played a particular role in Pakistan, as the modern nation began to define itself in terms of Islam. Artists who had often trained abroad grappled with the invention of a new visual language – turning their hand to calligraphic form, Arabesque and geometric patterns, and then the region’s Indo-Persian traditions. At the National College of Arts in Lahore, the contemporary neo-miniature evolved in the 1990s, a hybrid form which allowed artists to represent contemporary concerns but in a seemingly ‘traditional’ form. Intriguingly, while this is now called ‘the Lahore School’, the craft has not evolved from an uninterrupted local tradition, but from a revival of the skills and capabilities of the ‘miniature’ within the institution. A cohort of artists led by Shahzia Sikander and followed by Imran Qureshi and Aisha Khalid, adapted the formal language of the craft. Emerging from the textual and narrative form of the book, contemporary miniature painting lends itself to storytelling, subverting the seductive ornamentation of its polished surface and decorative elements, to communicate more recent events and more particular concerns. Soon, work began to go ‘beyond the page’² into three-dimensional and installation-based work by artists such as Hamra Abbas. Rather than a purist return to the traditional, it became clear that it was indeed a strategic move, which opened up a space for innovation and subversion for artistic expression within an increasingly conservative social environment.

So, perhaps, ‘traditional’ then meant local, while modern was ‘Western influenced’. When looking at the selection of artists put forward by in the exhibition *Love Me, Love Me Not*, I was struck by the tendency towards craft forms and materials, and began to think about the modes in which contemporary artists might employ and adapt

OFF-CENTRE: A VIEW FROM SLIGHTLY EAST

‘traditional’ craft forms as a formal or conceptual tool, and whether any commonality might exist in their attitudes or approaches. Might it be, similarly, a strategy rather than a more simplistic ‘eastern’ or, authentic sensibility or even a self-orientalisation? Do we share anxieties and concerns?

In the volume *Identity Theft – The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art*, Lewis Johnson writes in relation to a Turkish work that it can ‘outbid and disturb dominant reterritorializations of East and West’ as reflected by the media and governments³. When approaching the works in this exhibition, this to me seemed like a fair provocation to keep in mind.

Faig Ahmed’s thread installation *Untitled*, 2012, uses the geometric pattern of the carpet as the central motif for a three-dimensional sculptural work; the work is arranged over two walls at right angles, connected by the threads of its deconstructed design. The work takes the decorative elements of a ubiquitous craft form in Central Asia, and transforms them into a complex artwork that plays with space and form. It operates by surprising the viewer, offering a new and unexpected version of a familiar format. Exploring the mathematical and spatial qualities of the geometric pattern, the work feels like a three-dimensional line drawing, expanding and pushing the boundaries of the flat surface of the carpet.

Afroz Amighi also uses the formal qualities of pattern in her *Untitled*, 2013 installation, but adapts them to contain specific narrative elements. She approaches traditional designs very deliberately and uses the prayer rug as a form, which has a floral and symmetrical design but also alludes to the idea of the celestial within Persian rug design, meant to be an earthly expression of the gardens in the heavenly world. Amighi uses paper filigree and light, and was the recipient of the Jameel Prize, 2009 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This work in particular references a poetic fable of a competition between Greek and Chinese artisans. Amighi credits Rumi but the fable recurs and has also been told by other poets, perhaps due to the

cultural resonance of two cultures that historically impacted and interacted with the Persian. In the fable, two groups of artisans are asked by a monarch to compete, given each a wall to embellish. While the Chinese produce an incredible painting, the Greeks polished their facing wall to a reflective sheen, so that when the curtains are lifted the combination of light and reflection is overpowering and the king is impressed by their cleverness. Similarly, Amighi seeks to double the effects of light and shadow within her work, producing an ambitious installation combining Azerbaijani and Venetian motifs. Venice of course shares a long history of engagement with Ottoman Turkey, in competition with Constantinople, another shared and overlapping conversation between the Orient and Occident.

While we are on the subject of carpets, Farhad Moshiri’s work uses the form to create his *Kiosk de Curiosité*, 2011. A magazine stand, such as that commonly found in an Iranian bazaar, is assembled, but each magazine cover is a small woven silk carpet, complete with the shapes of stickers regularly applied by Iranian censors to all print media entering the country. Here, the artist cuts through those shapes – a more striking and visible intervention when applied to the surface of a hand-woven carpet. Moshiri’s work is a more complex approach, transforming a medium, the woven carpet that is associated with floral or geometric non-representational or ‘Islamic’ modes, into contemporary photographic, figurative and popular magazine covers. He has in the past played with the forms of traditional calligraphy and pottery, but his overarching concerns that are evident in this project, are the steady creep of consumerist and capitalist culture, which in a globalised world often has no bounds. The magazines are from Russia, the Middle East and Europe. While Iran remains in the grip of sanctions and external impressions of the nation are coloured by the international press, it is interesting to see the most pedestrian visual culture, gossip and film magazines reproduced and reflected back at us, but in a medium closely associated with the traditional and Oriental.

¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 11

² *Beyond the Page* was the title of exhibitions curated by Hammad Nasar in the UK and US (2006 onwards) which explored ‘miniature as attitude’

³ Louis Johnson in *Identity Theft*, Jonathan Harris, ed., Liverpool University Press and Tate Liverpool, 2008

OFF-CENTRE: A VIEW FROM SLIGHTLY EAST

Also a comment on the relentless pace of commercial progress and development, Farid Rasulov's *Untitled* sculpture from the *Architectural Dichotomy*, 2013 series turns to architecture – Azerbaijan has enjoyed a construction boom and the artist has reclaimed a stained glass window pattern from an eighteenth-century palace. Sandwiched between blocks of concrete using the formal language of minimalist sculpture, the stained glass panel becomes both decorative and more fragile in relation to the brutal lines of the concrete. Aida Mahmudova's work, *Recycled*, 2012–2013, also uses a reclaimed windowpane, commenting on the pace of development. The recognisable metal-filigreed windows were removed during recent renovations, and the artist created a public sculpture from a fragment, capturing a more recent memory and transforming it into a commemorative work. In dialogue, these two works are contemporary responses to the loss of memory, both cultural and spatial, revealing a shared anxiety about discontinuity, or a break from the historic and recent past as the nation attempts to reinvent itself.

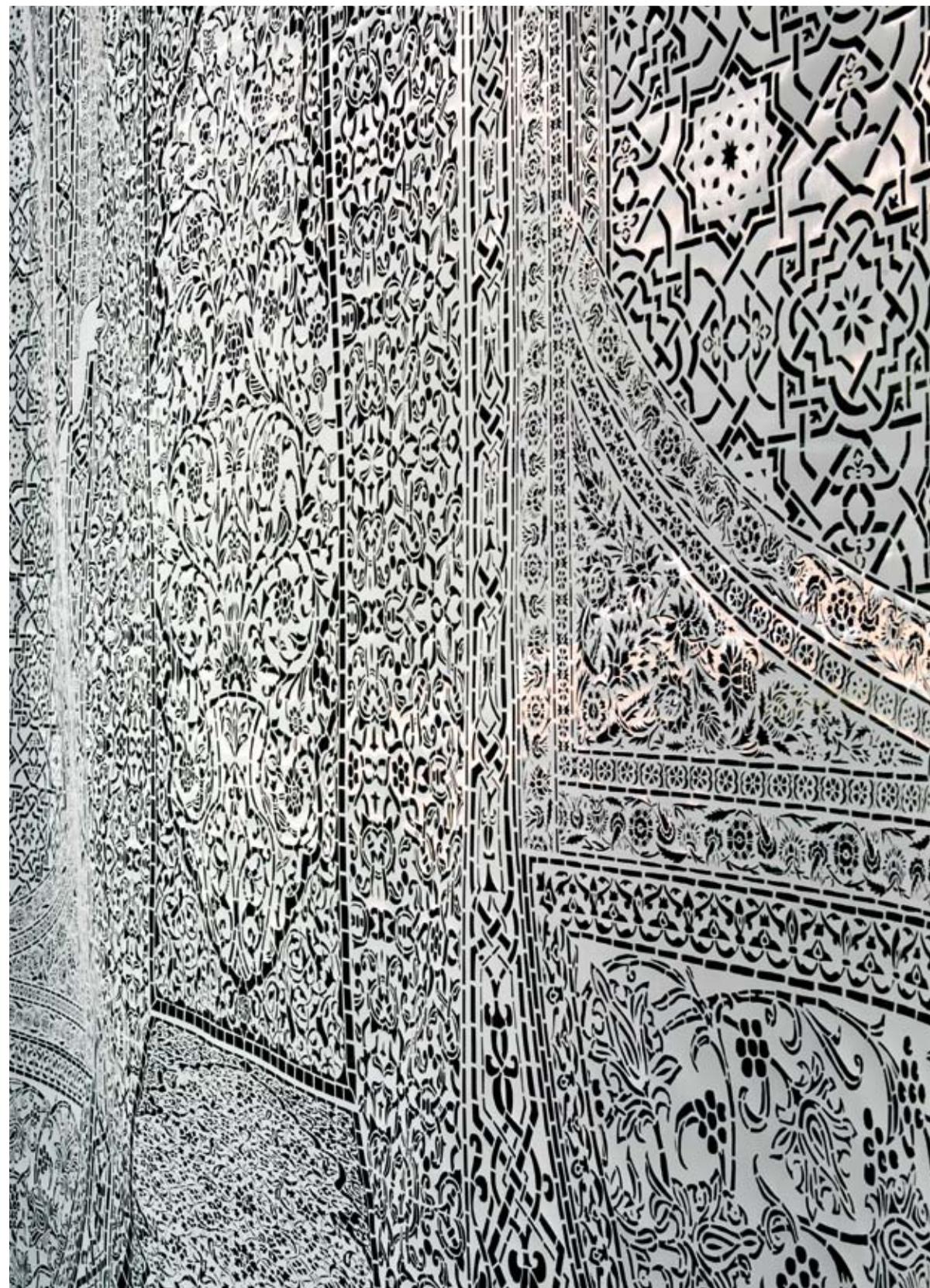
Ali Hasanov's *Masters*, 2012 is an assemblage of humble twig brooms, which are common in post-Soviet states (as well as in South Asia). The work interrogates power and its relationship to labour, the brooms arranged in a circular pile to form a large and imposing sculptural work. Perhaps one of the most poetic but also literal gestures in this selection of works is the *Tree of Wishes*, 2013 by Rashad Babayev, who recreates a tree commonly seen in parts of Central Asia, perhaps a pre-Islamic, even Buddhist tradition, as these are found in South Asia as far as Nepal – where people tie fragments of fabric to signify their prayers, often for offspring and good health. Babayev instead uses branded scarves, now seen all over the Middle East and in common use as veils.

Returning to the opening quote by Bruno Latour, his text continues to ask what it means to be modern, and whether it is possible to arrive at modernity without first journeying through the Enlightenment. 'If so many of our

contemporaries are reluctant to use this adjective today, if we qualify it with prepositions, it is because we feel less confident in our ability to maintain that double asymmetry: we can no longer point to times irreversible arrow, nor can we award a prize to the winners. In the countless quarrels between Ancients and Moderns, the former come out winners as often as the later now, and nothing allows us to say whether revolutions finish off the old regimes or bring them to fruition.'⁴

Slavs and Tatars offer a riposte in the figure of *Molla Nasreddin: The Antimodernist*, 2012. Seated backwards on his donkey, he straddles both past and future. Molla Nasreddin was a popular figure in Central Asia, especially in Azerbaijan where he appeared in satirical cartoons that were as favoured with intellectual circles as with the common people, and widely popular trans-nationally, according to the artists from 'Morocco to India'. The playful work invites members of the public to climb on alongside the bearded and turbaned figure, and offers us a provocation: to understand and speak from our particular histories, instead of accepting fictionalised or received versions of the past, or attempting to break from them entirely. 'Yet the anti-modernist is not against modernity; instead, he reminds us of the need to engage history and the past as an agent for the present.'⁵

Perhaps the turn to tradition or the vernacular in contemporary art practice from our regions needs to be placed not as a revivalist or identitarian response to globalisation (or more cynically, the geographically driven demands of the art market), but attempts to work out, in our own terms, what it is that makes us 'modern' or if indeed, that is the end that we must desire.



⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 11

⁵ Slavs and Tatars, from www.slavsandtatars.com



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SUAD GARAYEYA

NOVA HISTORIA: THE ROLE OF TIME-BASED MEDIA IN THE RE-EVALUATION OF MEMORY

◇
SUAD GARAYEVA

FROM THE MOMENT JOHN CAGE INTRODUCED 4'33" (1952) – HIS FOUR MINUTE, THIRTY-THREE SECOND LONG COMPOSITION OF SILENCE FOR VARIOUS INSTRUMENTS – HE IGNITED THE CONCEPT OF TIME AS OBJECT, INTO THE REALM OF ART.

Its influence has since led to varied creative undertakings and new ways of engaging with time not only as a concept, but also material. Complemented by an increasing use of moving-image technologies in fine art since the 1960s, time-based media has become an inseparable constituent of contemporary art today. As artists of diverse practices and pre-occupations turn to video as a predominant medium, the fluid engagement with art takes over the traditional static appreciation of 'art-as-object' and forces the viewer to consider time as an active element. This essay looks at how new media is being employed in the works of artists presented in the *Love Me, Love Me Not* exhibition and how time enters and affects the pre-existing sets of issues these artists set out to tackle.

In his segment for *Ten Minutes Older* (2002), conceived as a feature-length compilation of short films by leading directors, on the theme of time, Volker Schlöndorff shows a day of the life of a mosquito, overlaid with profound deliberations on the problematics of conceptualising and registering time. Based on the confessions of St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430) the conclusion suggests that time is an unattainable concept that cannot be defined, lest by the guidance of the Merciful. In a witty pun of attributing thoughts spanning the depths of human history, to a seemingly insignificant lifespan of an insect, Schlöndorff suggests the ubiquity of such inquiries and the significance of the instant flash of a moment, for all creation alike.

Georgian artist Iliko Zautashvili employs a more sober aesthetic to express a similar concern with a contemporary attempt to capture time. In his installation *Time Disappears in Time* (2006/2012), twelve pillows

printed with calendar months are stacked in a haphazard pile on the floor. Positioned between them are three monitors looping a video collage. A view of a man facing outward on a city bridge is superimposed with numerous digital timers, which count up and down at varying paces. This random ticking away of seconds questions the obsession with time in the contemporary rat-race. Doubting the authority of the ticking clock, Iliko juxtaposes it with the natural registers of passing time – the other frame shot of the video is of a river close-up. The artist questions the enforced pace of city life and the resulting oblivion to the actual passage of time, as referenced by indistinguishable months left behind. Jumping between sound and silence, the fleeting and the eternal, the video ends with the words that could have been a line out of Schlöndorff's mosquito's monologue: 'Don't worry about the future, it isn't here yet and now it's gone...'

The fast pace of contemporary society also finds its criticism in a multilayered video by Iranian-American filmmaker Shoja Azari. Sourcing its subject matter from *Seven Beauties* (1197), a famous poem by the twelfth-century Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi whose poetry is among the epitomes of classic Persian literature, the short film evokes the universality of human concerns across centuries. Azari hired professional actors to play out the story of the Black Beauty, who speaks a lesson of patience and endurance. As the protagonist, King Bahram finds himself in a land where everyone is dressed in black, and embarks on a journey to uncover the hidden secret of the mourning. The film is superimposed on a background of an intricate collage of Oriental miniatures, setting the scene to reference both the ancient iconography, and the idea of Heaven and Earth implied by it. Adding an Alice in Wonderland spin to his constructed fantasy, Azari leads the protagonist through a hole in the wall and into a garden filled with flowers, birds, and creatures of pure beauty. At the same time, the setting evokes the Gardens of Eden, as was Nizami's original intention. Yet Bahram's patience fails him, as he forsakes his

NOVA HISTORIA: THE ROLE OF TIME-BASED MEDIA IN THE RE-EVALUATION OF MEMORY

place in this dreamland and is banished to barren reality to join people in their common sin.

The film depicting human imperfection is layered with meaning in the best of Eastern Sufi traditions. The striving for an ideal is juxtaposed with the Western attraction to Exoticism, as the scenes reference both the Islamic conception of Heaven and the nineteenth-century French Orientalist paintings of harems. Thus, Azari reconstructs the persisting historical prejudices and raises awareness of those who tried to subvert those very preconceptions as early as eight hundred years ago. Feeling liberated from the boundaries imposed on the artist by the film industry in the medium of video art¹, Azari at the same time breaches the thresholds of painting and film, by treating his projection screens as stand-alone canvases.



Kutluğ Ataman, *Dome*, from the *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* series, 2009
Courtesy of the artist and Galerî Manâ, İstanbul Photo: Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2009

Another filmmaker-turned-artist, Kutluğ Ataman, uses a range of formal techniques to assimilate video into objecthood, from spreading his videos onto the ceiling² to building sculptural installations. Similar to the work of artists such as Pipilotti Rist, Bill Viola and Judith Barry, Ataman's video installations work on the phenomenological level by enveloping the viewer into their own domain, establishing a closer physical connection to create a stronger impact. His *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* (2009) is an extensive project that deals with the modern history of Turkey from the vantage point of Ataman's native Erzincan. The viewer is presented with a fictional story based on

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's early twentieth-century promises of modernity and progress in *Journeys to the Moon*, and with what seem to be genuinely intimate stories of local inhabitants in a set of deadpan interviews in *Küba*. Often misinterpreted as documentary, Ataman's work is more concerned with the construction of narratives, rather than the subjects themselves.³ By reconstructing realities he questions the validity of historical narratives, as well as their depictions on film, and proposes new perspectives for the viewer.

In this exhibition, *Column* (2009) is made up of used TV monitors in a formation inspired by Trajan's Column in Rome, which commemorates the Roman victories in Dacia. Unlike classical Roman columns, often depicting tales of deities and bravery, Ataman's *Column* refrains from telling any stories as such. As a face of a local Anatolian inhabitant gazes out from each monitor in complete silence, their collective memory reverberates on a subconscious level, through their silent protest and the muteness of their position in history. Living in one of the most underdeveloped areas in Turkey, their personal histories escaped grand narratives of modernity, as well as to a large extent the more recent economic boom and capitalist dreams played out in big cities like Istanbul. In line with Ataman's concern for subjective constructs and contradictions inherent in history and geography, their silent story proposes the only truthful alternative.

Moments of silence have direct associations with trauma, and a continuous loop of this uniform silence evokes an unspoken anguish that cannot easily be placed. Collective trauma re-emerges in *The Edge* (2012) – Sitara Ibrahimova's three-channel installation of footage from the border of Azerbaijani – occupied territories in Karabakh. Ibrahimova travelled to the once prosperous agricultural town of Ağdam, whose territory is now divided through Armenian occupation, with special permission to photograph the otherwise forbidden territories of aggression. Ibrahimova filmed and photographed its abandoned

¹ From interview with the artist. For a discussion on general concerns for filmmakers entering the gallery space see Federico Windhausen's essay 'Assimilating Video', in *October* 137, Summer 2011.

² In a part of the 'Mesopotamian Dramaturgies' installation entitled *Dome*, Ataman projected a video onto the ceiling and the viewers were invited to watch it by lying down on the floor.

³ From the artist's interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in Cristiana Perrella (ed.), *Kutluğ Ataman: Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, Rome, Electa, 2010

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980), trans. by Richard Howard, Cape, London, 1982

NOVA HISTORIA: THE ROLE OF TIME-BASED MEDIA IN THE RE-EVALUATION OF MEMORY

houses, broken gates, and empty streets. The snapshots of quotidian life that remains inaccessible to most Azerbaijanis, present a window into the unknown, yet familiar territory. Photographs of personal belongings left behind by refugees such as family photographs, old USSR passports, a collection of pins, a gun kept in an awkward cardboard box, are juxtaposed with depictions of monuments to war heroes and fallen soldiers. According to Roland Barthes, photographs have the power to pick out the unspeakable traumas⁴. In *The Edge*, photographs stitched together with video and an evoking soundtrack by Isfar Sarabsky, offer an immersive ‘temporal hallucination’ of collective memory transgressed by war, violence and displacement.



Figure 6.7 “Dance of the Collective Farm Brigade Leader.” The sequence of photos shows: preliminary steps; plowing; driving a tractor; looking corn; binding the sheaves; lifting the sheaves; loading the sheaves; and final steps. (From *Vsesoiuznyi tseñtralnyi sovet professionalnykh soizuzov, Soviet Folk Art* [Moscow, 1939], 14-15)

Dance of the Collective Farm Brigade Leader, from *Empire of the Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Culture and Society after Socialism) Francine Hirsch, Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 272 (Original source: From *Vsesoiuznyi tseñtralnyi sovet professionalnykh soizuzov, Soviet Folk Art*, Moscow, 1939, p. 14-15)

Historic memory also preoccupies Taus Makhacheva, whose practice combines video art with performance. Exploring the nature of identity as a social construct preconditioned by tradition and heritage, Makhacheva’s works question the persistence of this impact through time and across geographies. Living and working between London and Moscow, her work looks back at her native Dagestan, deconstructing its ancient folklore, as well as recent history and its effect on the current day vernacular.

For *Gamsutl* (2012), Makhacheva hired a

professional dancer to animate the space of a derelict village located 1,794 meters above sea level in the Caucasus Mountains. Abandoned since the 1960s, when its population was driven to various *kolkhoz*⁵ and for schooling in the capital city of Makhachkala, the village now stands as a picturesque relic of an old dwelling place and a direct witness of the ruinous effects of the passage of time. The male dancer, himself from the region, carries out a slow routine with steps inspired by a guide *The Dance of the Collective Farm (kolkhoz) Brigade Leader* from the 1930s, which was an attempt on behalf of the Soviet authorities to assimilate folklore into its propagandistic socialist ideals. By referencing a Soviet precedent in an ancient village set atop a magnificent landscape, whose grandeur remains inviolable through time, *Gamsutl* evokes a comprehensive view of the region’s past and the multiplicities inherent in its history.

In his book *Species of Space*, George Perec writes, ‘Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.’⁶ In a similar way, the masculine protagonist of *Gamsutl*, attempts to conquer the space of his ancestors. As the dance flows through the ruins, the dancer’s bespoke choreography animates the space, its walls and niches. Giving it a new lease of life, his own body gets assimilated into its idiosyncratic architecture, making him at once the sole owner of the place and an intrinsic part of it. This layering is complemented by the formal qualities of the work as Makhacheva adopts the latest technology of shooting in HD with an ethnographic video aesthetic. Alternating close-ups of the dancing figure with wide-angle views of the landscape, the artist contrasts the scale of the human to that of nature⁷. Elevating and erasing the subject further accentuates the nature of subjectivity, as a performative construction affected by temporal and spatial identifiers⁸.

Moving-image technology, through film and more recently digital media, played an integral role in the construction of subjectivities through innumerable characters that it lent to our contemporary imagination,

NOVA HISTORIA: THE ROLE OF TIME-BASED MEDIA IN THE RE-EVALUATION OF MEMORY

since its inception in the early twentieth century⁹. As cinematic characters offer a window into someone else’s fantasy, their imaginary nature gets erased and the memory they leave behind is often more persistent, and resilient to time, than those of real human subjects. In *Life of Bruce Lye* (2008), Azerbaijani artist Orkhan Huseynov in a joint project with Rashad Alakbarov, Farid Rasulov, Faig Ahmed, Javanshir Muradov and Jeyhun Ojadov, the work plays on the significance of an on-screen character in the collective memory of the youth of his generation. The work is filmed as a stylised documentary made up of interviews with questions on ‘Bruceploitation’ – the substitution of Bruce Lee films by their spin-offs, starring imitators such as Bruce Li.

Filmed against a backdrop of old monitors, film posters and ads for ‘foreign goods’, such as Snickers bars and Turbo chewing gum, *Bruce Lye* instantly awakens childhood associations for those from the artist’s generation. Huseynov interviews his artist and filmmaker friends on their recollections of first video tapes and the karate cult in Baku, before the take-over of Hollywood blockbusters in the early 1990s. It reveals how the characters embodied by Bruce Lee, were appropriated and manipulated to produce Americanised variations. Although there were some obvious distinctions in the more ascetic behaviour of the Chinese karate king, and his more viral ‘cool’ twin, Li, the two were pretty much inseparable in the psyche of the boys, who aspired to be like them in every possible way. Huseynov’s work attempts to untangle this web of double fantasy and deception that calls on other iconic characters such as King Kong and Mohammad Ali to bear witness. The authenticity of Ali and Lee is assimilated into childhood fantasy through the mediation of the screen, at the same time as the constructed characters of Bruce Li and King Kong assume a position in the reality of their cognition. As a result, human memory, the only carrier of continuous time, fails to distinguish between the factual and the perceived.

In a project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999), two artists

associated with Relational Aesthetics, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, acquired the rights to a Japanese manga character whom they called Annlee, and invited fellow artists such as Liam Gillick and Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, to use the character and animate it through their work. The final project offers a compilation of numerous forms and identities taken up by Annlee through digital manipulation. An innuendo to one’s own malleability within the framework of endless possibilities offered to individuals by the media today, Annlee, not unlike *Bruce Lye*, questions contemporary society’s ambition to become closer to the seeming perfection projected through the screens.

Childhood memories and present day musings over the future alike are filled with utopian visions. By making use of the latest technologies, artists appropriate these visions and memories to propose their own utopias. In the words of artist Matthew Buckingham, ‘it is important to look at utopia as not something that is intended to succeed, but rather a fiction that is a critique of the present moment’¹⁰. As demonstrated through the works in this exhibition, such critique is built up by incorporating and deconstructing historical narratives and playing with different levels of fiction and reality, in order to offer new experiences through visualisations of the past.

⁵ Agricultural collectives found across the former USSR that produced output to fulfill the plan as determined by the state.

⁶ George Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974), ed. and trans. by John Sturrock, Penguin, London, 1999, p. 91

⁷ This contrasting of scale, as a discreet commentary on human significance, is also a running theme in Makhacheva’s other works. In *Walk* (2009), for example, the artist filmed herself walking along the edge of a cliff at a distance that made her figure almost indistinguishable.

⁸ See Judith Butler’s well-known text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1999

⁹ For a discussion on the film industry and its relation to video art see, for example, Stuart Comer (ed.), *Film and Video Art*, Tate, London, 2009, among others.

¹⁰ Malcolm Turvey et al., *Roundtable: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, October 104, Spring 2003, p.79

MAP OF THE CAUCASUS



NEW VERSUS
OLD GEOGRAPHIES

A conversation between
NICHOLAS CULLINAN *and* DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

NEW VERSUS OLD GEOGRAPHIES

A conversation between
NICHOLAS CULLINAN and DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

NICHOLAS CULLINAN: *The Venice Biennale is distinctive amongst Biennales, in part due to the presence of the Official National Pavilions. Your collateral exhibition relates to a geographical area stretching from Turkey in the West, to Georgia in the East, Russia in the North, Iran in the South and Azerbaijan at its centre. In contrast to the many national Pavilions, you cover an extensive area; were there challenges in combining artists from these diverse cultures?*

DINA NASSER-KHADIVI: The artists I selected for this exhibition may seem, at first, to come from diverse areas but what the show will demonstrate is that they are all – originally – interconnected. Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia and Georgia have been historically, culturally and geographically linked for centuries. And what binds all these cultures and countries together, is Azerbaijan. Firstly, because of its location and historical background, hence the reasons for its being the focal point of the show, and secondly, because it raises the issue I want to address in my critical approach: namely, how the passage of time and the sources of information we currently rely on, alter our perception of important fragments of history and geography (which is what inspired me to do this exhibition).

With respect to the challenges of gathering the artists for the show, I knew a few of them from my time living in New York and discovered a large majority of the others during my trips to Tehran, Baku, Moscow and Istanbul. As such, my selection came together fairly organically and many of the artists really appreciated and liked the idea of this geographical approach.

NC: *Now, removing this frame of nationality and country; in today's increasingly globalised world, where individual artists draw upon a wide range of influences, can an artist be said to represent a national identity? How has this affected your artist selection? The collective Slavs and Tatars for example evade a national category, describing themselves as 'Eurasian' working with an area 'from the former East-Berlin Wall to the Great Wall of China.'*¹

DN-K: As you rightly say – a wide range of artists today, including the ones featured here, travel the world widely and have been exposed to various influences. They therefore tend

¹ Slavs and Tatars website www.slavsandtatars.com/bio.php

NEW VERSUS OLD GEOGRAPHIES

to consider themselves international rather than from a specific nationality. This is the case for most of the Iranian-American artists in this show for example, who have been living abroad since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. I find however that a great deal of artists, especially those of a diaspora, are often inspired by personal experiences that demonstrate strong relations to their country of origin. Whether this is expressed through their work by personal elements of nostalgia or a narrative reflecting facets of their identity, it usually remains somehow in the background.

In context, half of the works are special commissions and were meant to factor elements of 'national' identity into the exhibition. I wanted each artist to create a work that brought forth forgotten connections to their roots: whether with respect to their own identity, or to their neighbours. In other words I wanted them to dig for inspiration from their past, and in their present. Ali Banisadr's piece is based on Zoroastrianism for instance, while Afruz Amighi focuses on the aspects of coexistence. And the existing works I specifically chose by artists Kutluğ Ataman, Orkhan Huseynov and Taus Makhacheva, already gave prominence to these themes. The two works I selected by Slavs and Tatars are a bit of an exception in this specific instance, as they reflect the collective's research about the region versus their nationalities. They are more knowledgeable on the region I've chosen to cover, than anyone else I know. The fact that they do not belong to a country but rather a region, makes their work even more relevant.

NC: *When reading about art, one sees terminologies such as 'Middle Eastern' or 'Ex-Soviet' used to describe groups of artists and by implication, their styles. For this exhibition it seems that no such terminology fits; Caucasian or Central Asian, for example, would be inaccurate. Through working outside of such categories, do you hope this exhibition will challenge common modes of classification that lead to generalisation?*

DN-K: Absolutely. In fact one of the main goals of this show is to put such terminologies and geographical 'labels' into perspective. For instance while the countries represented in our show are part of the region referred to as Transcaucasia, we could not say our exhibition was an introduction to 'Contemporary Art from Transcaucasia' as on the one hand some countries

would be missing and on the other Iran, Turkey and Russia are only partly linked by their geographies to the Caucasus. They however all share borders with Azerbaijan and what I wanted to demonstrate is that through this small segment I am covering, a larger picture emerges, putting many things into perspective including how we see history and geography today.

Also Azerbaijan is not just an *Ex-Soviet* country. Rather, a hybrid of the many cultures that have influenced it over the years – those of its neighbours – and this becomes evident when you see the art emerging from the country. Defining it as 'Ex-Soviet' is rather restrictive and erroneous if you look at its overall historical background. This connotation would be relying on its history with the USSR only, and not letting it have its own identity, despite it being independent for over twenty years and having a history with its other neighbours that is centuries old. In the same way, Iran is part of the Middle East of course, but it is not only linked to its Arab neighbours, it also has ties and history with its neighbours to the north (and to the east! Which is a different theme all together). Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, it is almost as if no other geographical and historical ties existed other than the ones linking it to the Middle East. In recent years the art world has made this categorisation even stronger by linking Iranian artists to only this one group. The same stands for Turkish artists when Turkey is literally divided between Europe and Asia. As such how can it be labelled? Georgia and Russia suffer perhaps a little less from this issue of generalisation, however I find that from an international perspective some of ties they have to Transcaucasia have been a little overlooked in recent years. I was glad to find out through a conference in Oxford last year that terms such as *Russian Orientalism* and *Soviet Iranology*² are now more in use and that there are scholars dedicated to researching these links further and publishing them, which is fantastic as its again just a reminder of our roots and how we are all interconnected historically.

Of course, Kurban Said's romantic novel *Ali and Nino* is also always a lovely reference on the region covered in the show as it so relevantly describes the cross cultural relationships in the area, in addition to focusing on Baku being at the crossroads³, proving how Azerbaijan has been for long before this exhibition a centre of inspiration in order to demonstrate these dynamics.

² Reference to the conference held at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, 30 Nov–1 Dec 2012, *Russian Orientalism to Soviet Iranology: the Persian-speaking world and its history through Russian eyes*

³ Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino: A Love Story* (Vienna: Tal Verlag, 1937)

NC: YARAT, the not-for-profit contemporary art organisation based in Baku who are behind this exhibition, are quite a young organisation (founded in 2011). Can you tell me more about your experience working with them, their artists and the emerging art scene in Baku, Azerbaijan?

DN-K: YARAT is the heart of the art scene in Azerbaijan. They are dedicated to nurturing an understanding of contemporary art locally as well as to promoting the work of Azerbaijani artists internationally. In pursuit of their mission they have been instrumental in creating institutional relationships around the world. They may be young, but they have accomplished a considerable amount of projects since their inception, and their dynamism and hard work is admirable. My partnership with them grew organically as I have been fascinated by Baku since my first visit there in 2008. Its history is simply amazing, its beauty and significance timeless. I believe it will become a major centre for the Arts in the very near future, the same way it use to be for centuries, at the crossroads of the historical Silk Road. The contemporary art scene in Baku has become quite vibrant thanks to Aida and her team. Discovering the scope of YARAT's projects has been really interesting. Combined with my background, it is what really gave me a whole new perspective on our roots, on how our region has evolved, in short: what led us to put this show together.

NC: The title *Love Me, Love Me Not* relates to the theme of the show, described as the 'vacillating relationships' between the countries involved, as well as an installation that you have included by the collective *Slavs and Tatars*⁴. I know they also did the book *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*⁵ which corresponds to this installation showing how names of cities have changed over time due to different power-structures. Rashad Alakbarov's work similarly relates to how the official language of Azerbaijan has changed three times in the last seventy years. Are shifting power structures a catalyst for contemporary art of the region?

DN-K: The shifting power structure is definitely a catalyst in Azerbaijan's art scene, as the country had a rather unusual evolution before it finally (re)gained independence in 1991.

⁴ Love Me, Love Me Not website www.loveme-lovemenot.com

⁵ Slavs and Tatars, *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*, Onestar Press, 2010

A part of the Persian Empire since the 6th Century BC, Azerbaijan later became independent governed khanates⁶ until it became a part of Russia following the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). It then gained a brief state of independence as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918, only to lose it shortly after, when incorporated into the USSR in 1920. This is the very simplified version of a very long and complex historical evolution that has caused the Azerbaijani alphabet to change three times in the last seventy years, causing generations to read in in three different scripts...

Georgia, and certain areas in Russia such as Dagestan, were also part of territories that went through considerable back and forth. The Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires were constantly involved in territorial wars, making these areas as Slavs and Tatars cleverly put it 'caught like children in the spiteful back and forth of a custody battle'.⁷ This is why the dynamics of the region are so interesting to highlight. The title *Love Me, Love Me Not* was the first thing that came to mind when I thought of the evolution of Azerbaijan and its neighbours, and when I discovered Slavs and Tatars' project *Love Me, Love Me Not Changed names*, the title of our show became a no-brainer, as I believe them to be pioneers in showing different perspectives on the region. It is really great of them to let us use the same title as their book and installation (which is of course, also one of the key works in the show).

NC: *It is interesting how contemporary art can be informed by historical ideas and / or artefacts. To name just two examples from the exhibition; Faig Ahmed's installation deconstructs traditional carpet weaving and Shoja Azari's film recreates the twelfth-century epic poem the Haft Paykar. I am wondering how you view 'tradition' in your exhibition. In an interview with the New York MoMA curator Gretchen Wagner, Slavs and Tatars mention the book Les Antimodernes (2005) by Antoine Compagnon as inspiring their sculpture Molla Nasreddin The Antimodernist, 2012, which is also included in the show. Compagnon and Slavs and Tatars praise 'antimodernists', those who are not utopian in their outlook, but are 'conflicted visionaries, concerned by the passing of the pre-modern age'.⁸ Do you see your exhibition as 'antimodern', '...going forward, but with an eye in the rear view mirror', or as something fundamentally different?⁹*

⁶ Khanate is a Turco-Mongol-originated word used to describe a political entity ruled by a Khan

⁷ Slavs and Tatars, *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*, Onestar Press, 2010

⁸ Interview between curator Gretchen Wagner and artists Slavs and Tatars (August 8, 2012)

⁹ Ibid

DN-K: I think tradition is a huge driving force behind contemporary art from the region as it relates to our sense of identity, roots and history. *Love Me, Love Me Not* is meant to bring different perspectives on existing facts, without necessarily taking a position or stand, other than questioning our current perception of history and geography in the region. So I do not necessarily view it as 'antimodern' but the show certainly includes works that support this notion.

NC: *You have chosen to showcase the exhibition in Venice, and at the Biennale, when its theme would be of interest almost anywhere. How have the works you have commissioned been impacted by the location of the Venice Biennale, and has Venice always been key to your curatorial vision of Love Me, Love Me Not?*

DN-K: I believe the Venice Biennale to be the best platform for cultural exchange as it has provided, for over a century now, a global arena for new perspectives on contemporary art. More importantly it allows a great number of artists, curators and organisations to represent their respective countries, while defying stereotypes that may or may not exist according to where the visitors come from. But one of the greatest aspects of the Biennale is that all this dialogue takes place through art.

I also always enjoy the contrast between the contemporary contexts of the biennale played out against the city's historical architecture, which is also a theme recurrent in our show (history viewed through contemporary art, and bringing new and different perspectives together). Venice made perfect sense for our exhibition.

The Arsenale allows large scale installations and so I seized the opportunity to commission works to commemorate the Biennale's importance and spirit. This also provided the artists the freedom and opportunity to create pieces that they may not necessarily have had elsewhere, due to size and spatial constraints. The other works I selected were in line with my theme and critical approach; the combination of the two is what made my selection complete.

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Slavs and Tatars

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that *would've***

***could've*
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Selected excerpts of writings by
SLAVS AND TATARS

MOLLA NASREDDIN

MOLLA NASREDDIN: THE MAGAZINE THAT WOULD'VE, COULD'VE, SHOULD'VE

Selected excerpts of writings by
SLAVS AND TATARS

WE FIRST CAME ACROSS MOLLA NASREDDIN SEVERAL YEARS AGO ON A COLD WINTER DAY IN A SECOND-HAND BOOKSTORE NEAR MAIDEN TOWER IN BAKU.

It was bibliophilia at first sight. Its size and weight, not to mention print quality and bright colour, stood out suspiciously amongst the more meek and dusty variations of Soviet brown in old man Elman's place. We stared at *Molla Nasreddin* and it, like an improbable beauty, winked back at us.

Published between 1906 and 1930, *Molla Nasreddin* was a satirical Azeri periodical edited by Jalil Mammadguluzadeh (1866–1932), and named after the legendary Sufi wise man-cum-fool of the Middle Ages. With an acerbic sense of humour and compelling, realist illustrations reminiscent of a Caucasian Honoré Daumier, Jules Grandjouan, or Frantisek Kupka, *Molla Nasreddin* attacked the hypocrisy of the Muslim clergy, the colonial policies of the European nations towards the rest of the world and the venal corruption of the local elite while arguing repeatedly and convincingly for Westernization, educational reform and equal rights for women. The magazine was an instant success – selling half its initial print run on its first day – and within months would reach a record-breaking circulation of approximately 5000 on its way to becoming the most influential and perhaps first publication of its kind, be read across the Muslim world, from Morocco to India.

Recently reissued in its entirety by the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, each volume of *Molla Nasreddin* runs roughly 700 pages, with a total of 8 imposing tomes in all. Since that blistering day several years ago, carrying and caring for these volumes between Brussels, Moscow, Paris, New York, Berlin, and Warsaw has toned our muscles if not our thoughts. We have wrestled with *Molla Nasreddin*: like any object of intense interest, it both repels and attracts us. But it is rare to embrace one's antithesis, as we have with MN: spending years translating, funding, and publishing a historical media platform with which we often disagree. Standing squarely as a champion of secular, Western values, the weekly is in some sense a mascot, in reverse, of our practice. Where MN is secular and pro-Western, Slavs and Tatars tend to err on the side of the mystical and are suspicious of the wholesale import of Western modernity.

Often depicted sitting backwards on his donkey, Molla Nasreddin the character is a perfect precursor to what Antoine Compagnon calls "les antimodernes" in his 2005 book of the same title. In it, he argues that the true modernists are not Vladimir Mayakovsky or F.T. Marinetti, utopianists who look to the future, but those somewhat conflicted visionaries who were deeply affected by the passing of the pre-modern age. As Sartre said about Baudelaire, those who go forward, but with an eye in the rear view mirror.

Like the best cultural productions, *Molla Nasreddin* is polyphonic, joyfully self-contradicting and squarely on the side of the creolization that results from multiple languages, ideas, and identities. The magazine's pan-Caucasian identity (itinerant offices between Tbilisi, Baku and Tabriz), linguistic complexity (across three alphabets) and use of humor as a disarming critique offer a rare trifecta which, despite any partisan polemics, we celebrate unequivocally.

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ISLAM



Doctor: "If you drink this medicine once every 100 years, then when the bottle is empty, you will be cured."

MOLLA NASREDDIN

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THE CAUCASUS

Clockwise, from far left: socialist, intellectual, pilgrim, nationalist, spy, mollah.



One man portrays all seven convictions

Yeddli məslək

MOLLA NASREDDIN

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MOLLA NASREDDIN

Though it is not made explicit, the language the students are forced to learn is Russian. From the early 19th century to the fall of the USSR in the late 20th century, the Russian language was used not only as a means of colonisation but also as a tool of education across the Caucasus.



Students: "Mirza, we also have our own tongue. Let us study it a bit also." Teacher: "No. Azeri Turk is forbidden. I need to stuff this language into your mouth."

Sığirdilər: "Ay mirza, bax bizim də dilimiz var, san Allah, qoy ona da bir az öyrənsək." Müəllim: "Yox, olmaz! Türk dili olmaz! Görək bunu soxam boğazınıza."

FAIG AHMED
RASHAD ALAKBAROV
AFRUZ AMIGHI
KUTLUĞ ATAMAN
SHOJA AZARI
RASHAD BABAYEV
MAHMOUD BAKHSI
ALI BANISADR
ALI HASANOV
ORKHAN HUSEYNOV
SITARA IBRAHIMOVA
AIDA MAHMUDOVA
TAUS MAKHACHEVA
FARHAD MOSHIRI
FARID RASULOV
SLAVS AND TATARS
ILIKO ZAUTASHVILI

ARTIST
PLATES

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FAIG AHMED

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1982

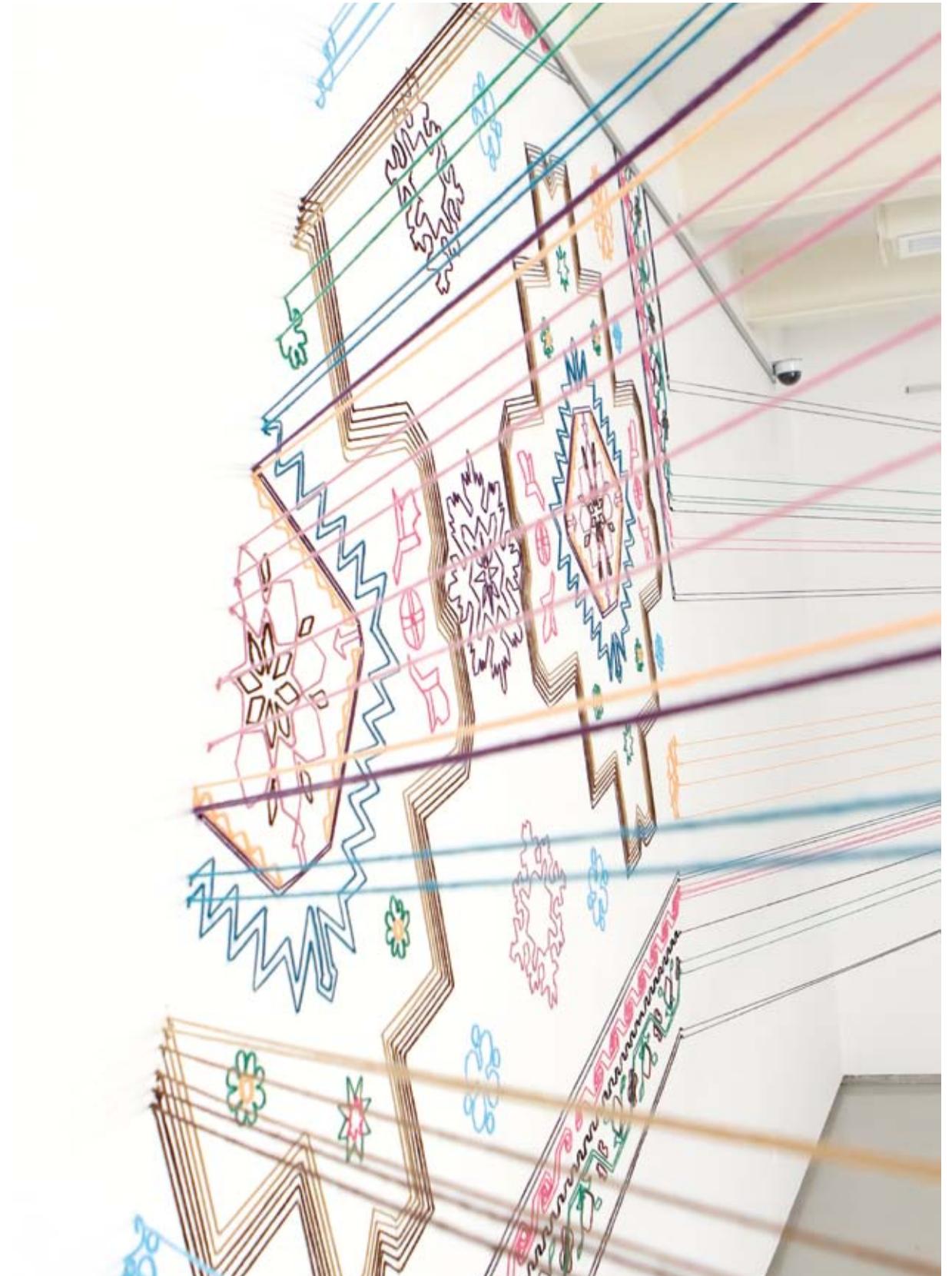
Faig Ahmed's compositions conceptually and formally engage in a conversation with the many faces of Azerbaijan. Combining carpet weaving with contemporary artistic practice, Ahmed's work both dissects and re-invents the complex layers of craft that inform the modern state. This approach investigates the intersections of the ever-transforming notion of 'tradition' in a multinational context to address contemporary issues of identity that inform present-day Azerbaijan.

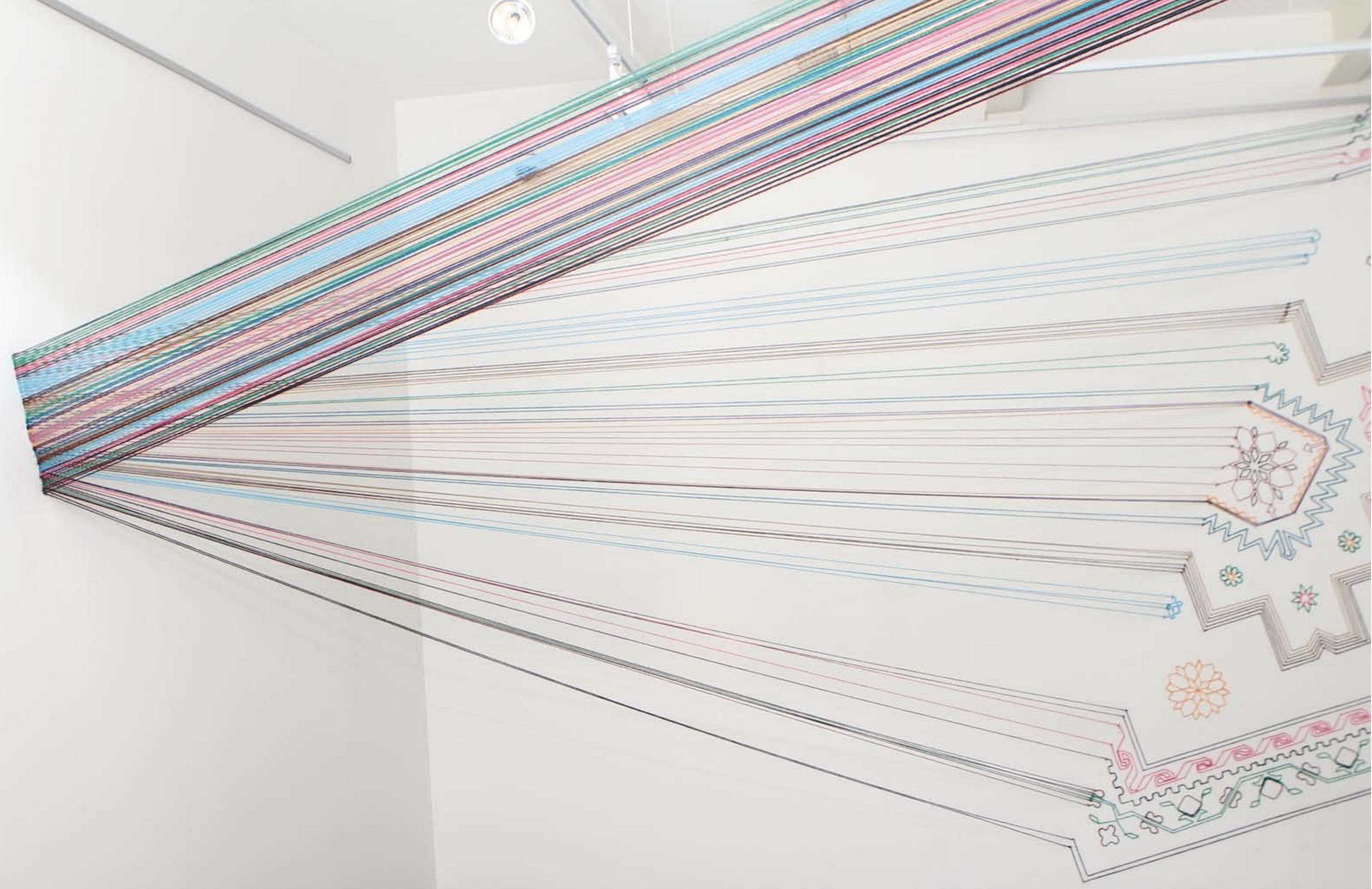
Ahmed's *Untitled*, 2012, thread installation positions the carpet as the starting point for his investigation. Carpet manufacturing has long served as a signifier of Azerbaijani identity and a repository for cultural memory. The installation deconstructs the elements of the carpet: the fabric, the patterns, and the weaving process. These components are re-organised in a form of spatial graffiti. Within the architectural space, the functional carpet is reformulated into a network of colours, threads, and angles. This creates a temporal and highly-sensory experience. Viewers weave through the spaces unoccupied by thread. The audience becomes physically tied to, and intertwined in the woven space, transforming the process of viewing into the process of participating. Consequently, participants are able to physically experience an object that holds an immense amount of cultural weight. As people traverse the material maze of string, they simultaneously navigate a complex network of ideological angles. Thus, participants become part of an intricate and complex system of history and philosophy that form the fabric of an ever-shifting cultural identity.

Azerbaijan is a resoundingly diverse geo-political entity. Ahmed's installation, and his work in general, place the Azerbaijani experience in visual terms both austere and playfully. The pieces he constructs impress themselves on a viewer's consciousness with a particularly self-effecting ingenuity. In an age of migration, diaspora, and identity issues, Ahmed's artworks exist as evidence of an era marked by major changes in the everyday. They carry a sense of the past with them while simultaneously repatriating tradition in favour of contemporary developments. His work offers neither conclusion nor counsel; rather, it visually displays a conscious effort to construct an experience that is simultaneously ordinary and unique, and irreducibly both 'other' and the 'same'.

UNTITLED

2012, Thread installation, Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





RASHAD ALAKBAROV

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1979

"The changes in the alphabet essentially made Azeris immigrants in their own country, both across generations ...as well as vis-à-vis their own cultural legacy."

Slavs and Tatars, Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've, 2011.

Rashad Alakbarov manipulates light and shadow to construct installations that play with visual, conceptual, and cultural incongruencies. The non-space that comprises his work is a minefield that explores the complex and complicated layers that inform contemporary Azerbaijani identity – aspects often obscured in the push to simplify and solidify the image of the newly established state.

Lost in Translation... This too shall Pass, 2013, is an installation that examines the complex character of linguistic heritage and generational identity present in Azerbaijan. The piece consists of light passing through mobile scripts made of Plexiglas. On the opposite wall, the four word English phrase, 'This too shall pass', emerges as a clear and well-defined axiom out of the visual cacophony of written languages. Apparent amidst the pairing of clarity and cacophony is the carnivalesque complexity of semantics that comprises the recent linguistic heritage of the political state.

While the modern, Azerbaijani alphabet is a Latinised system, three distinct written scripts have preceded it over the last century: Arabic, Latinised Turkish, and Cyrillic. At the turn of the twentieth century, a variety of Arabic scripts were in use across the region. In 1928/29, these scripts were officially replaced by the Latinised, Uniform Turkic Alphabet – a move that both linguistically and ideologically shifted focus westward. In 1939, however, the strict use of Cyrillic script was enforced and ties to the USSR were strengthened. Finally in 1991, upon the occasion of Azerbaijan's independence, the Latinised Azeri alphabet became the standard form of written communication. Thus, the linguistic heritage of the modern Azerbaijani alphabet is one of temporality, multiples, constant change, and generational rupture.

This linguistic schizophrenia has led to generational rupture, fragmented legacy, and a modern 'time immemorial'. Yet, the Azerbaijani language is a linguistic and cultural signifier of a complex and colourful national identity drafted in reference to its surroundings: Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Alakbarov's installation visualises the temporality and contested nature of language, power, and political arrangement. This depiction of a vacillating linguistic heritage – either a polyglot's daydream or worst nightmare – is a portrait of a nation as a living organism, characterised by constant change and ever-shifting multiples.

LOST IN TRANSLATION... THIS TOO SHALL PASS
2013, Installation with Plexiglas and light projection, Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku



AFRUZ AMIGHI

◇
Iranian, b. 1974

Afruz Amighi's work combines a variety of media as a means of addressing aspects of historicism and hybridity. Her installations incorporate intricately hand-cut stencil patterns, industrial metal wiring, and a complex interplay of reflection and transparency that is both visually stunning and historically relevant.

Conceived specifically for the Venice Biennale, *Untitled*, 2013, employs imagery steeped in historical signifiers and shrouded in visual sumptuousness. Venetian and Islamic geometric and vegetal motifs are scored into a woven polyethylene sheet (the material used for refugee tents). The cloth is flanked by two chain sculptures recalling the forms of both Murano glass chandeliers and Islamic brass lanterns. This material presence, however, is overwhelmed by the qualities of reflection and transparency that characterise the installation. A reflective pool of water extends from the front of the arrangement and the carefully designed lighting system creates an incandescent and opulent atmosphere, transforming the experience into an immersive environment.

This play of reflection and transparency is related to a narrative composed by the thirteenth-century poet Rumi. His parable tells of a powerful Sultan who hosted a painting competition between the Chinese and the Greeks. The nations were presented with opposing walls on which they were to compose a mural; and, as the contest drew to a close, it became clear that the Chinese mural was quite glorious. However, the Greeks, who had worked in secret behind a shroud of burlap, had burnished their wall to such a degree that it reflected the Chinese mural opposite it. Infused with light and mystery, the reflection far surpassed the actual painting. Although the Sultan declared the Greeks victorious, the prize was shared between the competitors. Beyond an engaging narrative, the parable ultimately illustrates the co-dependence and hybrid nature of expression.

In its entirety, Amighi's installation offers a meditation on the notion of tradition – a false static – by constructing an environment of competing, yet codependent codes. *Untitled* is a visualisation of hybridity and shifting historical signifiers. The piece incorporates imagery of difference and multiplicity, reflecting signs of difference in order to visualise a play with difference.



UNTITLED

2013, Woven polyethylene, Plexiglas, base metal chain, aluminium, Dimensions variable
Middle textile component 365 x 304 cm. (143¾ x 119½ in.); Right and left chain components 396 x 30 cm. (156 x 11¾ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York



KUTLUĞ ATAMAN

◇
Turkish, b. 1961

Kutluğ Ataman's sculptural installation *Column*, 2009, consists of forty-two used television sets of varying sizes assembled into an ascending cylindrical form. The stacked screens face outward and display, on repeat and in silence, shots of villagers from Eastern Turkey. The people framed by the monitors are of varying age and gender, each of whom stand, or sit, in front of an old stone wall. By focusing on a series of individuals, Ataman's work re-oriens history. It gives a face to those overlooked by the grand narrative; it calls attention to a region in a state of flux; and it encourages viewers to lend a voice to those who have been silenced.

The installation is part of Ataman's series, *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, 2009, which focuses on people who have continuously fallen into the fault lines of history. *Column* specifically re-oriens Trajan's Column in Rome. While the historic monument honoured the victory of a Roman Emperor, *Column* is a monument that honours the ordinary people affected by historic events. The stone blocks of the ancient column are replaced with television monitors, the faceless individuals forgotten by time are emblazoned on the intervening screens, and those who have been muted are given a voice by the mediating public.

While the piece is geographically situated in Anatolia, Ataman's work addresses the situation of Mesopotamia as a whole – a meeting place of cultures from Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, and Europe. What was once the centre of the ancient world is now an ideological zone, located between what is perceived as East and West, both geographically and culturally. The decision to tie oneself (country or individual) to Mesopotamia is the decision to embrace an identity that is multiple, layered, and in constant flux. It is a connection decidedly at odds with the contemporary push to construct an identity directed toward Europe and, simultaneously, enclosed within nationalistic borders. Amidst the historic events of both ancient and recent history are the quiet lives of those who live within the region. Ataman's work calls attention to the deafening silence of an overlooked people, and encourages the audience to lend their voice to those who have been muted on the regions' political stage.

COLUMN

From the *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* series, 2009. Video installation made with forty-two used TV monitors
Stills: © Kutluğ Ataman. Courtesy of the artist and Galeri Manâ, Istanbul





SHOJA AZARI

Iranian, b. 1958

Shoja Azari's short film, *The King of Black*, 2013, merges live action filmmaking and miniature painting to expand on the power of storytelling. The narrative, based on a twelfth-century poem, is a powerful morality tale veiled within a salacious allegory. Azari's film establishes an interesting dialectic between the opulent filmic setting and the lessons of patience and endurance that are emphasised within the story; and the combination of message and medium ultimately ties an ancient poem with a contemporary situation.

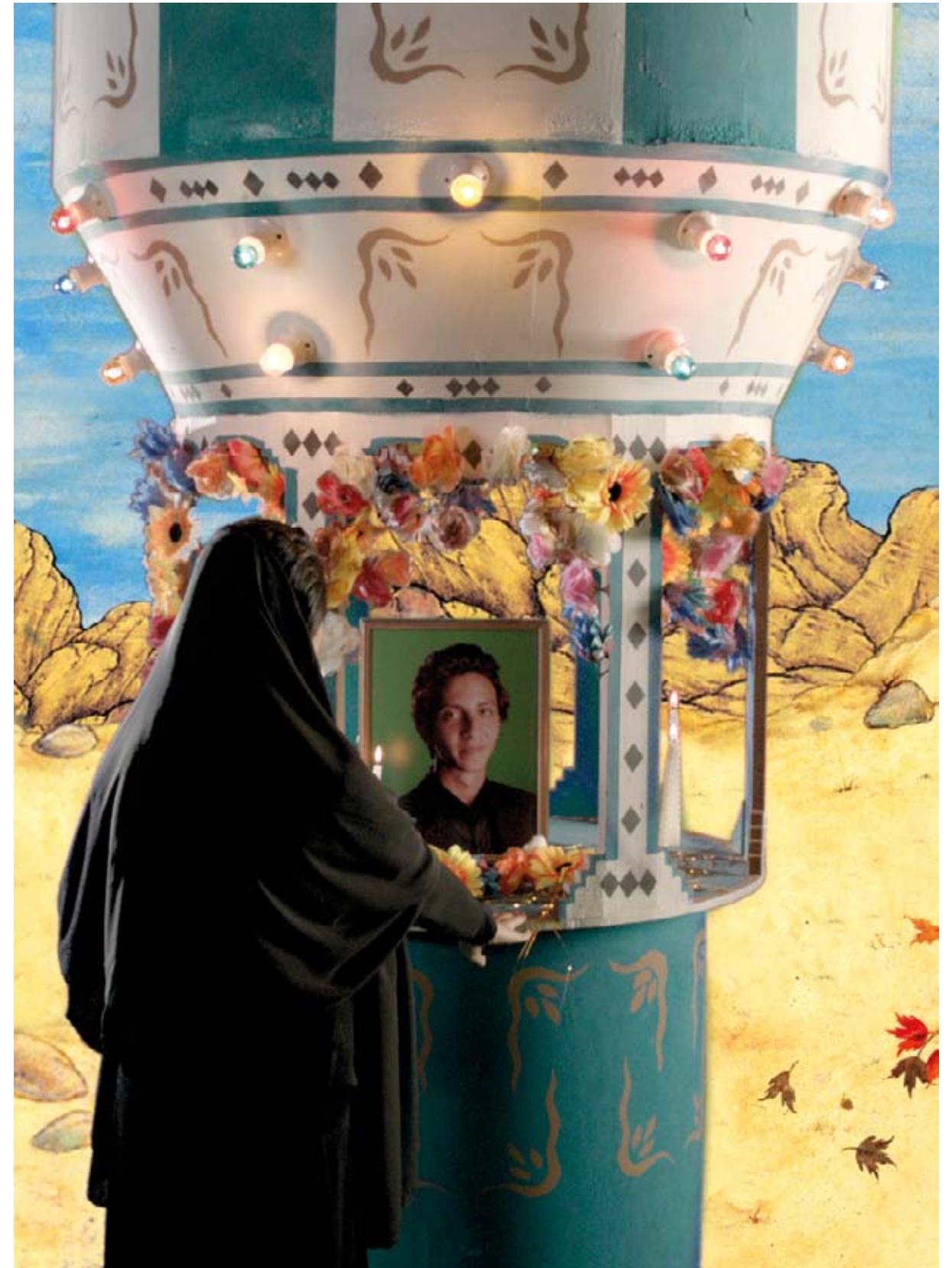
The narrative of the film is based on the illustrated poem *Haft Paykar* (Seven Beauties) completed by the Azerbaijani poet, Nizami, in 1197. In the tale, a king visits one of his seven brides residing in a differently coloured dome on successive days of the week. Each bride, in turn, weaves an elaborate tale of intrigue and morality, ultimately transforming the king into a just ruler. Azari's film explores the allegory told by the Princess in the Black Dome – an allegory emphasising the value of patience. The film follows the story of a legendary king who endlessly searched for the secret meaning behind a city's perpetual mourning and black dress. After a year of searching, the king was directed to a garden of paradise where he indulged in earthly pleasures for 30 days and 30 nights, yet was consistently denied the affections of the queen of the heavenly realm. Despite her council of endurance, the king was impatient. Unable to endure any longer, he was returned to earth to forever lament the loss of utopia. Azari's film, as well as Nizami's poem, meditates on the notion of paradise and the patience required to achieve the promise of heaven.

To realise the complex relationship between paradise and patience, the film establishes a visual and an ideological dialectic. The luscious setting of the manipulated miniature paintings is realised in the presence of the austere characters. Additionally, the opulence of the visual narrative provides a counterpart to the tale of patience and endurance. Yet, within the film's theatrical tension is also a tale that is as relevant today as it was nearly a millennium ago. At the heart of the narrative is the treatise that neither perfection nor paradise can be achieved so long as an individual is tied to their earthly desires of greed and lust. For the artist and the film, promises of earthly pleasures in heaven – promises that can delude or manipulate – undermine the philosophical depth of one's triumph over desire and the patience and endurance required to reach such a point.

THE KING OF BLACK

2013, HD colour video with sound, Length: 24 mins
Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

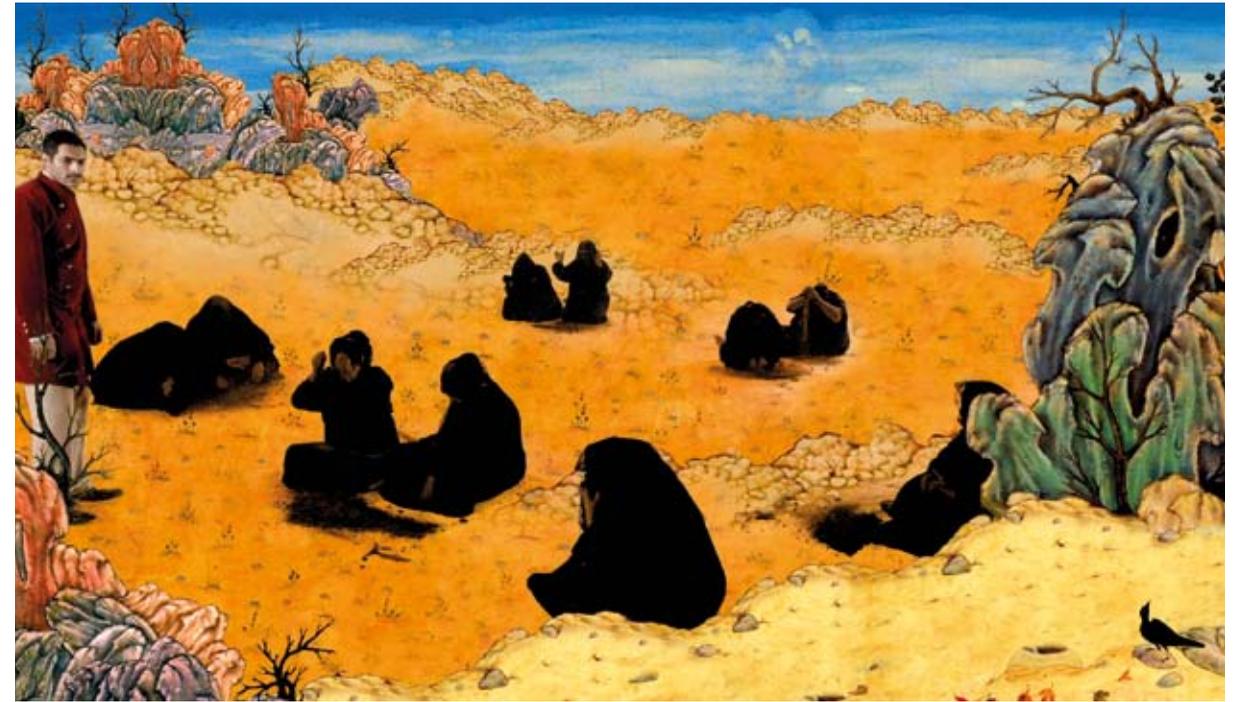
Hedjleh 1, still from *The King of Black*, 2013, detail
Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York





The banquet of Houries, still from *The King of Black*, 2013, HD colour video with sound, Length: 24 mins
 Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

Hedjleh 2, still from *The King of Black*, 2013, HD colour video with sound, Length: 24 mins
 Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York



Untitled, still from *The King of Black*, 2013, HD colour video with sound, Length: 24 mins
 Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

Toil, still from *The King of Black*, 2013, HD colour video with sound, Length: 24 mins
 Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

RASHAD BABAYEV

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1979

Rashad Babayev's work consistently balances a formal investigation of colour and form with a conceptual examination of practice and meaning. In his paintings, multimedia assemblages, and installations, these individual elements are steeped in localised meaning. This results in a consistent play between the formal and conceptual mechanisms; and it brokers a conversation between the local and the global.

Babayev's piece, *The Tree of Wishes*, 2013, was conceived specifically in reference to the international scope of the Venice Biennale. The installation investigates the changing nature of hope in both Azerbaijan and the region of Central Asia. The artwork incorporates a real fig tree as the anchor for the composition. Tied to the branches of the living tree are countless colourful scarves and labels. Each of these man-made adornments bears an individual's hopes and dreams. The process of tying one's hopes to a sacred tree through offerings of ribbons, scarves, papers, and on occasion, coins, is a practice that can be found with some frequency both in and outside of Azerbaijan. The sustained and international nature of this ritualistic exercise is a testament to human nature's desire to give material form to intangible thoughts. Yet, as Babayev is eager to point out, while the practice has endured over the centuries, the wishes – or the hopes – have significantly changed.

Instead of incorporating the simple, colourful fabric that commonly garnishes wishing trees, Babayev's tree is adorned with designer labels, expensive fabrics, silks, and sprays. The formally engaging and colourful installation is not simply a tree of wishes, but a tree of expensive tastes. The installation elicits notions regarding the fetishisation of goods and increasing commercialism. Azerbaijan's recent, and meteoric rise in the global community has distinctly affected the character of hope within the country. This has consequently altered the nature of wishing trees scattered throughout the landscape of Azerbaijan, and specifically, the Absheron Peninsula. Without judgment or pretense, Babayev's *The Tree of Wishes* incorporates an internationally recognisable icon, to present a snapshot of the rapidly changing nature of desire in Azerbaijan.

THE TREE OF WISHES

2013. Fig tree, textile, spray paint, acrylic 260 x 331 x 154 cm. (102¼ x 130¼ x 60½ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





MAHMOUD BAKHSI

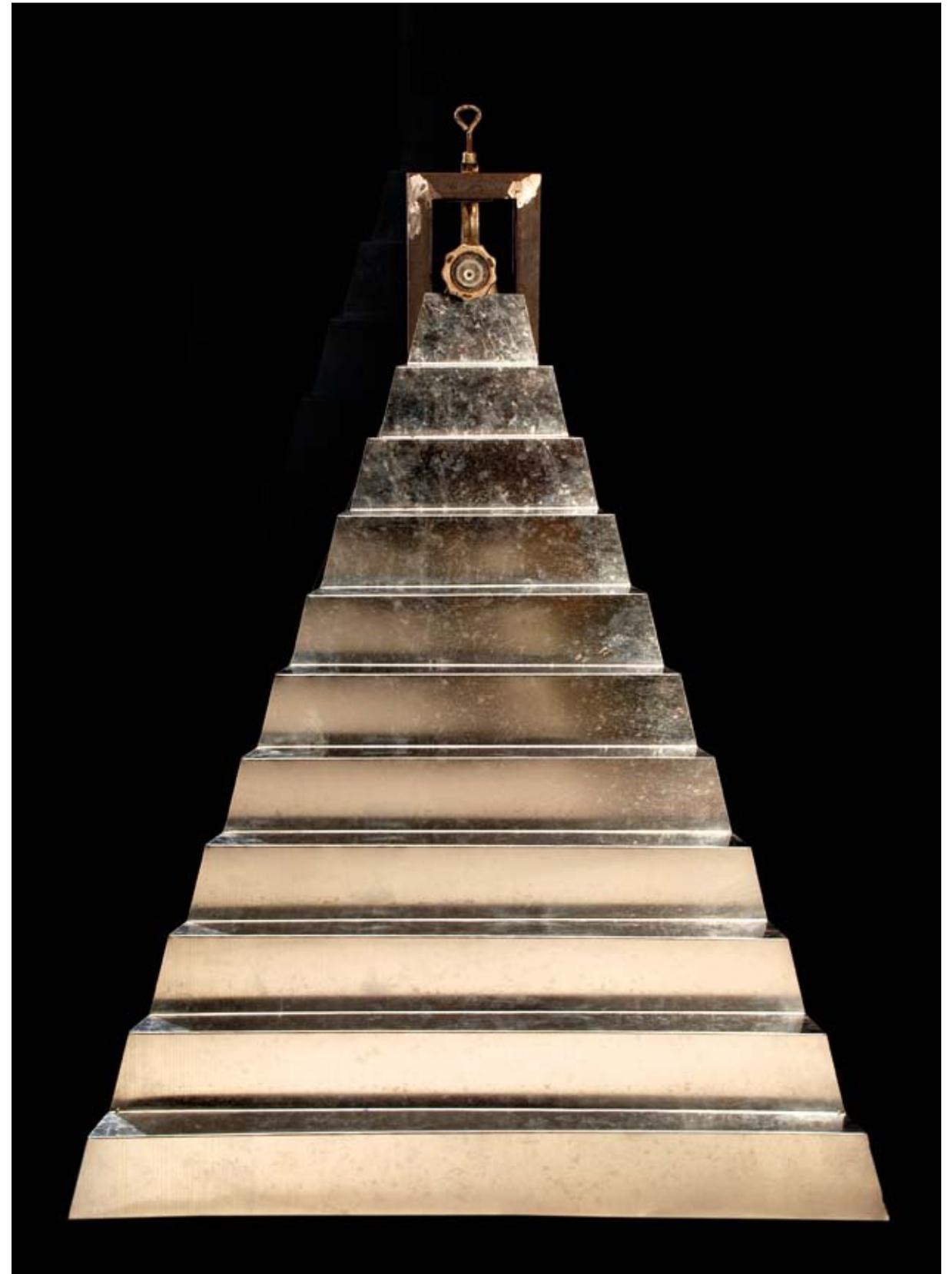
◇
Iranian, b. 1977

Mahmoud Bakhshi's work often takes the politics and aesthetics of his vexed homeland, Iran, as its point of departure. What form does the power of the state assume? How does it manifest itself in everything from popular iconography, to consumer culture, to the arts? Over the last decade, The artist has installed a series of thirty sculptural arms – flexed in a revolutionary pose – in the mosque of the grand bazaar of Tehran, erected sculptures painstakingly produced with individual Bahman cigarettes – Iran's smoke of choice, and has suspended Iranian flags that each bear the telltale dust and grime of the country's pollution. Each of these pieces, assuming the form of both familiar vernacular object and enigmatic sculpture at once, speaks of the multiple faces of the Islamic Republic today.

At first glance, the work in this exhibition *Mother of Nation*, 2008–2013, appears as a shiny pyramid. A glorious pile of gold blocks that speaks to our contemporary consumer culture – obsessed by the pursuit of shinier cars, taller skyscrapers, the better sneaker. On closer inspection, the totemic tower fashioned from metal, is a Tower of Babel: intermittently spitting, ejecting, spouting out a gushy, dark oozy oil. Erected on the back of the oil in the ground, the gold pyramid seems to be ever-growing. At the same time, it represents a double-edged sword; oil, father, mother, nourisher, and life source at once, it is also what spills, what spoils, what obfuscates. As in much of Bakhshi's works, there are more complexities here than is immediately apparent.

MOTHER OF NATION

From the *Industrial Revolution* series, 2009–2013. Tin plate, pacifier, cast-iron meat grinder and oil, 234 x 311 x 196 cm. (92 x 122¼ x 77 in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg





ALI BANISADR

Iranian, b. 1977

Ali Banisadr's triptych, *Fravashi*, 2013, is a complex network of brushstrokes, details, and vibrant hues. These formal elements combine into a viscerally loaded re-presentation of history painting that draws on both esoteric philosophies and past encounters. Yet the uncertain nature of the subject matter ultimately encourages viewers to read their own narrative into the layered web of signs and patterns that comprise the final composition.

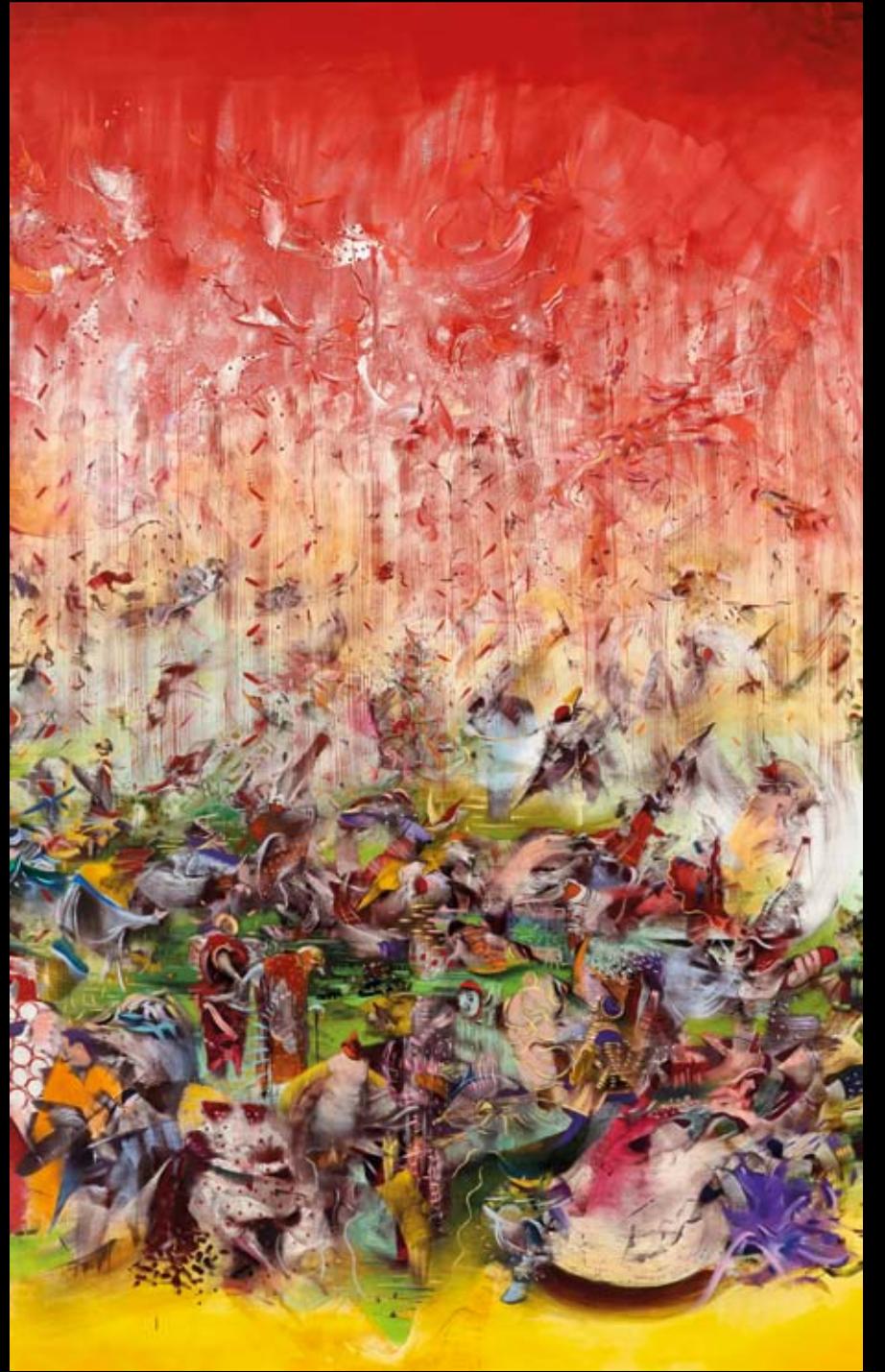
The painting's immediate force is conveyed through a powerful use of colour and derived from the painting process itself. A garish red palette dominates the visual field, accentuated by a variety of equally bright yellows, blues, and greens. These colours are shaped by texturised brushstrokes that vacillate between thin washes and thick impasto. Simultaneously, the surface fluctuates between depictions of shallow and infinite space. The effect creates a composition caught between both expanding and contracting space. This is achieved through the painting process. The artist has approached the canvas from many different points concurrently, allowing the piece to develop from multiple nodes and directions. The result is a composition that balances vast fields of colour with equally powerful minute details.

As a re-presentation of history painting, the triptych visualises dramatic events of recent history through a variety of unique, yet intertwining sources. Principal among these inspirations is the esoteric notion of *Fravashi* – a Zoroastrian concept for the heroic and guiding force of an individual. Amidst the vibrant explosions of colour, the painting alludes to both the personal experiences of the artist, who moved to the United States from Tehran at the age of twelve during the Iran-Iraq War, and the hardships faced by those who experience conflict. The composition reflects on the triumph of human character in the face of difficulty. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the diasporic experience of an artist balancing the diverse formal influences of Willem de Kooning, Hieronymus Bosch, and Persian miniature painting. Rather than depicting an actual event or a political system, this painting expresses an experiential situation that defies categorisation or subject matter. *Fravashi* captures an experience that, in turn, invites viewers to construct their own unique narratives out of the layers of colour and abstract shapes that make-up the painted arrangement.

FRAVASHI

2013. Oil on linen. Triptych. 243 x 152 cm. (95¼ x 60 in.) each; 243 x 457 cm. (95¼ x 180 in.) overall
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg. © Ali Banisadr. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges





ALI HASANOV

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1976

Ali Hasanov's work exhibits the hallmarks of a polymathic practice. He is simultaneously comfortable working with music, video, installation, photography, and performance. Hasanov's creations concretise ideas by constructing interesting and dynamic relationships between individual objects and the overall installation and/or exhibition in which they exist. Often site-responsive, his ventures are architecturally bound and exist as theatrical sculptural projects.

Hasanov's sculpture, *Masters*, 2012, is composed of hundreds of discarded *veniki* – brooms made of bundled twigs that are specific to the continental region and especially prevalent in post-Soviet states. These unwanted and forgotten *veniki* are amassed and lashed together to form an otherworldly object. The accumulation is composed of items that exist as both debris (discarded objects) and the mechanism for cleaning debris (*veniki*). The *veniki* immediately connote street and household work, manual labour, and the process of returning chaos to order, or messiness to cleanliness. However, Hasanov's accumulation exists in a world in which people have abandoned their *veniki* and consequently their work, in favour of lending their voice and opinions to ongoing global debates. In a world in which everyone postures as a *Master*, very little work can be accomplished.

The accumulation of *veniki* visualises and parodies forms of control and the pitfalls of political posturing. It was created as a means of realising the unique and rapidly increasing nature of multiculturalism within the Caucasus region. Multiculturalism is often understood as a means of managing diversity and multiplicity within a given society. It identifies masters and minions – essentially, determining who has the authority to conduct (control) the conduct (behaviour) of others. Hasanov's work visualises the absurd state created when populations play political games at the expense of maintaining local standards. The aggregated object Hasanov has realised is not a vague aphorism; rather it offers a concrete statement regarding the necessity of human labour and diligence to constitute a functioning society.

MASTERS

2012, Installation with sweeping brooms and ropes. Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





ORKHAN HUSEYNOV

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1978

A pervasive theme within Orkhan Huseynov's practice is the mapping of specific aspects of the Azerbaijani experience and culture. This cultural charting is consistently infused with a strong degree of wit and humour which affectionately colour the unique paradoxes that characterise the experience.

The video work in this exhibition, *Life of Bruce Lye*, 2008, consists of a series of conversations between, and interviews with, Azerbaijani artists. The dialogues are composed of spliced memories regarding the complicated and questionable identity of the actor, Bruce Lye (a reference to the Hong Kong-based Bruce Lee imitator: Bruce Li).

According to Huseynov, some of the first feature length films to enter into the newly established political state of Azerbaijan, following the fall of Communism, were Bruce Lee films. However, the authentic Hong Kong cinematic experience was in fact, a lie. The films were actually knock-offs starring the infamous Bruce Lee imitator, Bruce Li. The interviewees, unaware of the deception and the phenomena of 'Bruceploitation', genuinely believed they were watching Bruce Lee films. By embracing the absurd, the digital short addresses the complex and complicated notions of the authentic and the counterfeit, reality and myth, and the constructed nature of heroes and villains. Without judgment or pretence, the film documents a unique and humorous instance of an innocent deception. It is a case in which the forgery – Bruce Lye (Bruce Li) – functioned as the authentic; and the authentic was a lie.

This is a situation summarised quite eloquently by Huseynov's discussion of Bruce Lye within the short film: "I was fooled all my childhood". Although it is tempting to situate the work in reference to a region that only recently brushed off the vestiges of Communism, the film is carefully non-descript in its political agenda. Rather, it focuses on a culturally specific instance of humour and a significant moment in the development of an independent, Azerbaijani identity. The piece draws on the process of maturation – the realisation that things are not always as they seem. *The Life of Bruce Lye* is a moment in the life of a country whose identity is one of multiples, contradictory qualifiers, and remains in constant flux.

LIFE OF BRUCE LYE

2008. Authors: Orkhan Huseynov (Shooting/Editing).
Faig Ahmed, Rashad Alakbarov, Jeyhun Ojadov, Javanshir Muradov, Farid Rasulov, Parviz Jafarov. DVC – PAL. Length: 21 mins
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku



but I thought that was one person
and that the guys were mistaken.



Bruce Lye's character was forming slowly from the way the guys spoke.



I don't believe any other versions.



But then King Kong will beat.
Or just a draw...



and another cult,
the blockbuster cult came to replace it...

SITARA IBRAHIMOVA

◇
Azerbaijani b. 1984

Sitara Ibrahimova's photographs capture the human experience beyond political or geographical borders, and the compositions often allude to forms of historical and collective memory. Her images focus on emotive instances conveyed through an individual's facial expression or pose, or shown by a fragment or an absence. The photographs freeze poignant moments that characterise the everyday, and they encourage viewers to construct a narrative around each dramatic composition.

The Edge, 2012, similarly seeks to both capture and convey the challenges and complications associated with historical and collective memory in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The project consists of scenes of Ağdam, a now abandoned town that exists on the border of multiple political, cultural, and social groups. Through notable absences, the images convey the hope, tension, loss, and uncertainty that occur at the point where multiple socio-cultural identities meet. The photographs present glimpses of life slipping away from both law and order. A street or a building, cropped from the urban surroundings, renders the space depicted as nondescript. However, the metaphorical play between the pavement and the wall transform the images from scenes of passage into those of blocked escape. The compositions visualise a geopolitical conflict that is ironic, touching, playful, oppressing, and domineering. The border here functions as a zone of both withered dreams and human potential. It exists in stasis and silence, waiting to return to a state of vitality and habitation.

Presented in both printed and rotating-digital format, the arrangement recreates the experience of the original encounter. However, the photographs simultaneously allude to the uncertain position of both actual and remembered events. Memory is porous and malleable; and collective memory often operates as a steadying force – seeking to locate and reify a group or a national identity. During periods of crisis and instability, appeals are often made to collective memory, which, while negotiated by individuals, cannot be manipulated, changed, or regulated. The images of conflict-ridden Karabakh captured by Ibrahimova draw on individual memory, and display the divergent and unique perspectives that characterise perceptions of a region that exists on the border of multiple cultural and political identities.

THE EDGE

Part 1: Ağdam occupied territories of Azerbaijan/Lost In Karabakh, 2012. Video and photography installation with sound
Photography: Sitara Ibrahimova. Music: Isfar Sarabski. Length variable
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





AIDA MAHMUDOVA

◇
Azerbaijani b. 1982

Aida Mahmudova's work consistently encompasses aspects of memory and nostalgia. Her work considers how memory is tied to the debris and the material of a past life, rather than simply the locale or context.

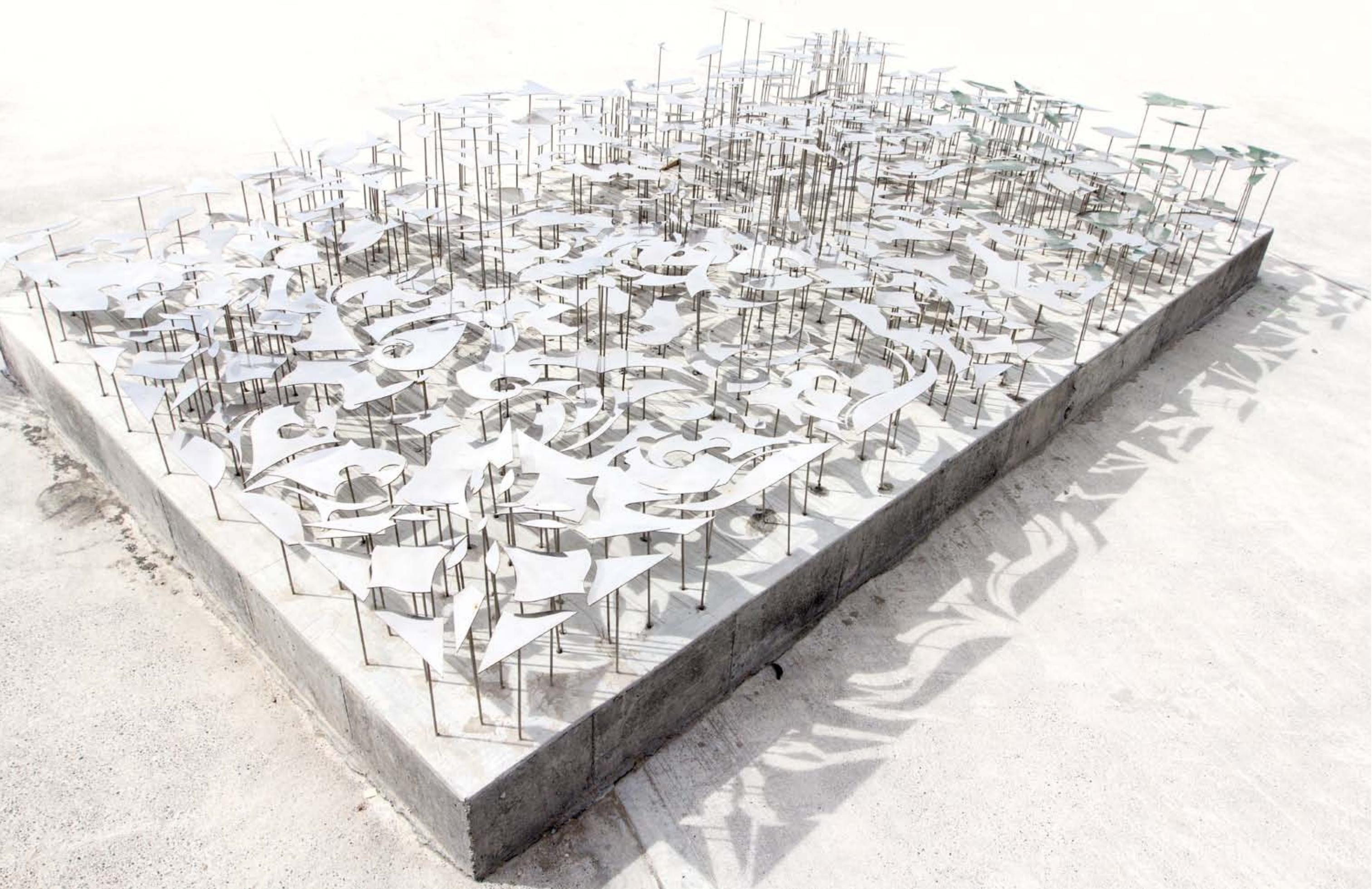
Recycled, 2012–2013, alludes to the complicated play between memory and modernisation that has come to characterise Baku and the surrounding regions. The sculpture re-purposes the discarded metal window grates that once adorned some of the city's old buildings prior to their renovation. Stainless steel silhouettes rise on thin metal rods from the latticework of the grates. These highly polished and reflective forms mirror the surrounding environment while simultaneously casting abstracted, decorative shadows within the immediate area. The effect of the nearly transparent rods, reflective surfaces, and cast shadows is both visual delight and optical confusion. Much like nostalgia itself, the assemblage is derived from actual, historic elements of Baku, yet it is infused with a sense of uncertainty and visual disorientation. The actual nature of the historic, decorative screen is only perceptible when seen through the precariously placed contemporary reflections.

The assemblage attempts to capture that which cannot be completely recalled or made tangible. It conveys the diaspora of memory that characterises aspects of nostalgia. By re-using, re-contextualising, and re-cycling an historic object, the sculpture makes apparent that recollection depends on materiality: sensual perceptions, sights, sounds, and smells. In an era of rampant technological and urban development, mass globalisation, and migration, Mahmudova's work makes clear that the longing for a place is more than a specific locale, and more than merely a desire for a specific context. It is the remembered sensations of the debris of the past. The sculpture materialises what we long for when we are nostalgic and in that sense, limns the outline of a material history of memory.

RECYCLED

2012–2013, Metal window grates, stainless steel, 310 x 270 cm. (122 x 106¼ in.) each; 620 x 270 cm. (244 x 106¼ in.) overall
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





TAUS MAKHACHEVA

◇
Russian, b. 1983

Taus Makhacheva's work is based on Gamsutl – an abandoned, hard-to-reach ancient Avarian mountain settlement that was carved from the rocks to make it self-sufficient and inaccessible to invaders. Situated in Dagestan, along an offshoot of the Great Silk Road and famed for its skillful jewellers and armourers, its current condition is deplorable. Yet, its picturesque ruins blend harmoniously with the wild landscape making it seem almost timeless.

The protagonist in Makhacheva's video takes part in a peculiar ritual of remembering and re-enactment, striving to extract and carefully recreate the spatial memory of the forgotten past in this dying settlement. By 'merging' with this space – a palimpsest of many cultural strata and dramatic historical events (the Caucasian War of the nineteenth century, Soviet modernity, the post-Soviet abandonment and return to nature) – the 'dancer' attempts to recall and corporeally relive the place in his ironic mimicry of natural and architectural objects.

Some of the young man's moves recreate characters from the grandiose panoramic battle paintings of Russian artist Franz Roubaud (1856–1928), renowned for his series of Caucasian War paintings, depicting the area around Gamsutl and soldiers from both warring parties. The dancer takes on various identities, deciphering them by touching the settlement's surfaces and breathing in its winds. He alternately imagines himself as a defender, an invader, a warrior, a citizen of Gamsutl, and a collective farm brigade leader, incorporating symbols of Soviet modernity into his traditional dance. Yet his frozen poses are hardly capable of being assembled into a coherent dance or convincing movement. They are like the debris of a forgotten past, hard to put together to create a holistic picture. It is no longer possible to tell one layer from another and say who belongs and who is an alien, what is today's reality and what is an impression of the same place from an old photograph.



GAMSUTL

2012, HD colour video with sound, Length: 16 mins, 1 sec
Courtesy of the artist



FARHAD MOSHIRI

Iranian, b. 1963

“When I wander into a magazine store, I suddenly start to feel like a kid in a toy store. It seems as if the world has been squeezed into a small room; a room which is very colourful and very busy. How much of it is real or make-believe almost seems beside the point.

What is important is that I desperately hope, with no prejudice, to stumble upon some variation of truth which fulfills me on a personal level. On the other hand, the notion of leaving this place empty-handed frightens me for it would suggest that I, depressingly, have absolutely nothing in common with the world around me. So I buy anything to prove to myself that I belong.

In our globalised consumerist world, the Magazine Store or Kiosk de Press is where the opinions and concoctions of the collective are commodified and force-fed. It is the auto portrait of our society; the Cabinet de Curiosité of our culture.”

Farhad Moshiri

They can be found on just about every street corner in this city of twelve million. The kiosk. Where one not only buys news dailies and magazines, but also cigarettes, phone and internet cards, candies. In *Kiosk de Curiosité*, 2011, we encounter the faces of five hundred and fifty diverse publications. Kung Fu, ladies fashion, cinema, gossip... Oh, and that generic catchall: lifestyle. Inhabiting the vernacular form of the silk carpet, Moshiri has literally transplanted the texture of everyday print culture onto the face of one of the most original of Persian folk arts, the carpet. Half of them are characterised by the telltale touch of the censor. Others are left untouched, with their siren-like, gleaming garish allure. Hanging salon style, as in so many carpet salesrooms in Iran today, this Kiosk is a meeting of incongruous worlds.

KIOSK DE CURIOSITÉ

2011, Installation of approximately 550 carpets. Each carpet: 75 x 45 cm. (29¼ x 17¾ in.),
Overall installation: 350 x 550 x 200 cm. (137¾ x 216½ x 78¾ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg





FARID RASULOV

◇
Azerbaijani, b. 1985

Farid Rasulov's *Untitled* sculptures from the *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013, are a sequence of artistic variations based on the rapidly changing architectural skyline of Azerbaijan. Each sculpture comprises concrete slabs and panes of stained glass. The physical components and angled nature of each composition elicit a visceral reaction. The conflicting material qualities of the concrete and glass are readily apparent: durable and delicate, thick and thin, opaque and transparent. Simultaneously, the position of each arrangement is precarious: the sharply angled nature of the concrete slabs both threatens and is contingent with the placement of the stained glass. The uncertain and tense nature of the sculptural variations prompts a measurable degree of viewer anxiety. Each piece is modelled like a house of cards, unstable factors beyond artistic or audience control live on the precipice between standing and collapsing.

These sculptural impressions are derived from the recent and rapid evolution of Baku and the surrounding areas. In the last twenty years, the capital has transformed into a global city pairing hybrid and post-modern architectural forms with centuries-old monuments. Modern steel and concrete structures rise in clear view of ancient, earth-bound brick buildings. Glittering, sleek, pale glass has supplanted the centuries-old use of *shebeke* – wooden latticework held together with dowels and ornamented with pieces of varicoloured glass. The condition that places the ancient next to the contemporary is not unique to Baku. Similar situations can be found in urban environments around the world, specifically the Venetian setting of this exhibition.

The sculptures not only reference the locale of their conception, but also capture the state of the modern city in general. They make tangible the delicate balance between architectural systems – practices that develop from both external conditions and internal functional requirements. Consequently, Rasulov's sculptural arrangements build on the idea of an urban site as a living entity, always in process, always in flux, and always in a precarious position amidst a variety of architectural modalities and syntactic relationships.

UNTITLED #1

From the *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013. Simulated concrete, fibreglass, plywood, wood and glass, 60 x 181 x 80 cm. (23¼ x 71¼ x 31½ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku

UNTITLED #2

From the *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013. Simulated concrete, fibreglass, plywood, wood and glass, 60 x 161 x 80 cm. (23¼ x 63¼ x 31½ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku





UNTITLED #3

From the *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013, Simulated concrete, fibreglass, plywood, wood and glass, 107 x 106 x 80 cm. (42 x 41¾ x 31½ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku



UNTITLED #4

From the *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013, Simulated concrete, fibreglass, plywood, wood and glass, 100 x 140 x 132 cm. (39¼ x 55 x 52 in.)
Courtesy of the artist and YAY Gallery, Baku

SLAVS AND TATARS

◇
Eurasian Collective est. 2006

Children's toys inevitably reveal vast amounts about a culture. Their patriarchs, superheroes and heroines, mascots, and historical giants are psychic and spiritual totems for all times. In early 20th century Azerbaijan, Molla Nasreddin made for an unlikely hero. A mythical blundering wise man, Nasreddin served as the referent for a pioneering satirical paper that was published in three languages and across three cities, over a span of nearly three decades. The syncretic superhero. He's seated on his donkey backwards, looking towards the past – ostensibly moving into the future, slowly, but surely. As children climb, hang, straddle, and sit atop him, he – not unlike the epic periodical that bears his name – becomes a parable for hope, generosity, and a radically alternative, even inspired, way of being and seeing.

As a sculpture, *Molla Nasreddin The Antimodernist*, 2012 is a piece that is to be installed in a public space, like any playground ride, and is meant to be used as such. From *PrayWay*, a sofa-like prayer rug installed at the New Museum, to *Friendship of Nations*, a tent-like seating area installed at the Sharjah Biennial (2011) that brings alive Iran's unlikely relationship to Poland, the notions of generosity, and its cousin, hospitality, continue to be central to Slavs and Tatars' practice.

MOLLA NASREDDIN THE ANTIMODERNIST

2012, Fibreglass, steel, rubber, paint, 157 x 165 x 88 cm. (68 x 65 x 34½ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai



SLAVS AND TATARS

What's in a name? *Love Me, Love Me Not* vividly replies: so, so much. Channelling the spirit and meme of the exhibition in our midst, this sprawling, peripatetic, deliriously choreographed installation of names of Eurasian cities that have come and gone – not unlike spurned lovers in the night – reveals a riotous geographic tableau made up of a complex collision of peoples, languages, wars, peace...

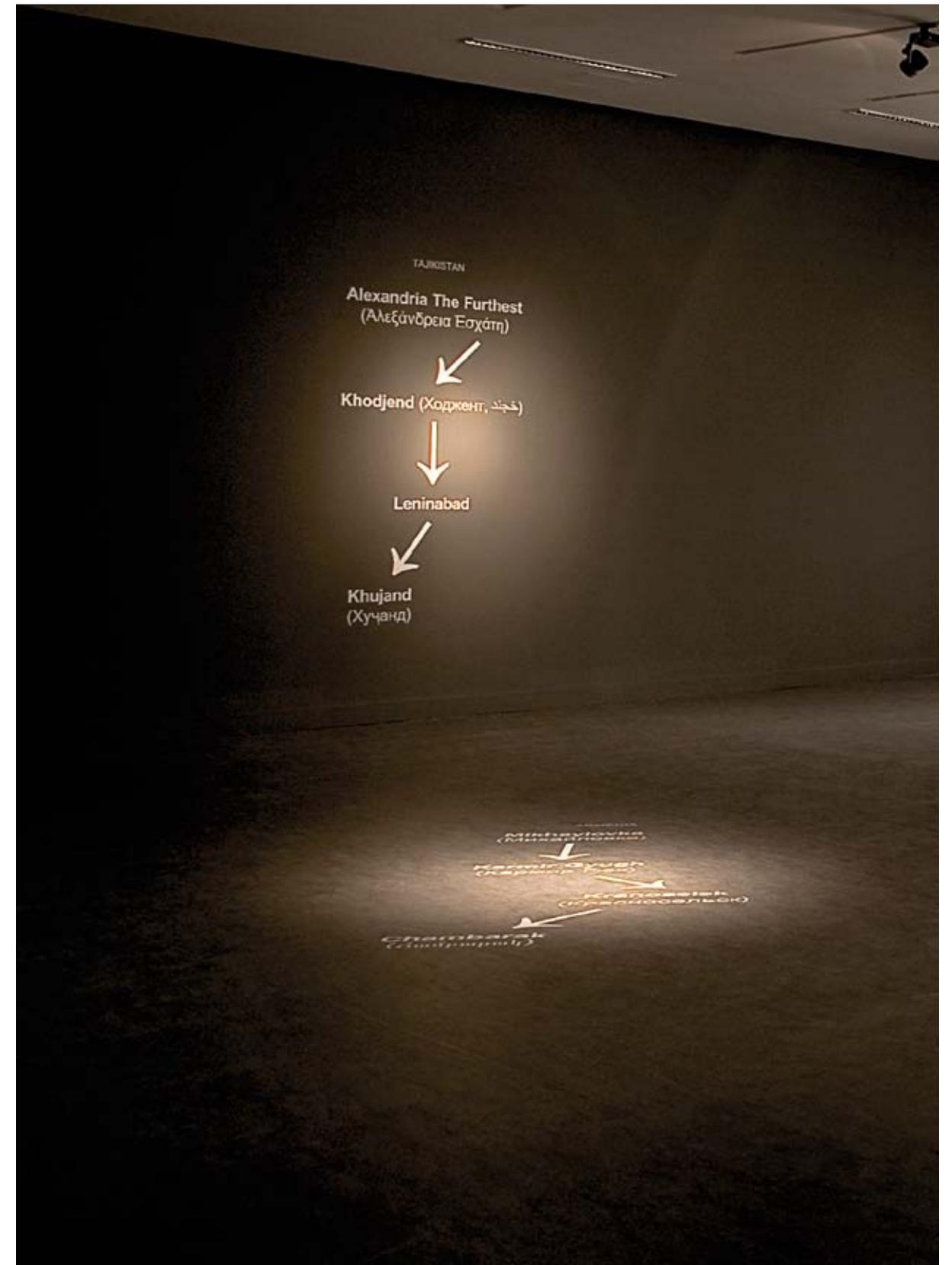
'Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names' plucks the petals off the past to reveal an impossibly thorny stem: a lineage of names changed by the course of the region's gruelling history. Some cities divulge a resolutely Asian heritage, so often forgotten in today's quest, at all costs, for European integration. Some vacillate almost painfully, and others with numbing repetition, entire metropolises caught like children in the spiteful back and forth of a custody battle.

Love Me, Love Me Not celebrates the multilingual, carnivalesque complexity readily eclipsed today by nationalist struggles for simplicity and permanence. If, from the foggy perch of the early 21st century, we tend to see cities like living organisms that are born, grow, and even die, why should their names be any different?

Slavs and Tatars, *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*, 2010

LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

2010. Wall and floor application, Dimensions variable. (Installation view from *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Centre of Contemporary Art 'Znaki Czasu', Torun)
Courtesy of the artist and the Centre of Contemporary Art 'Znaki Czasu', Torun



ILIKO ZAUTASHVILI

Georgian, b. 1952

Iliko Zautashvili's artistic practice spans an interesting historical time in the context of his native country. He belongs to a generation of artists who sought new forms of expression in light of the socio-political turbulence and economic uncertainty during the period associated with the Perestroika. Adapting to demands of Capitalism, his recent art reflects the issues and concerns characteristic of this 'Brave New World' that has fast become universalised with the aid of globalisation and communication technologies.

Time disappears in Time, 2006 is from a series of installation projects, in which Zautashvili uses mixed media to question human existence in an accelerated format characteristic of big cities, instant connections and avid consumerism. Referencing superficialities inherent in individual desires, he exposes the endless ambitions within contemporary society.

This work explores the fleeting nature of time and the significance of a moment that cannot be registered and yet may define a lifetime. The video loop playing on three screens in different sequences jumps between the footage of a man facing the city, his back to the camera, and a close-up of a flowing river. The city is bustling with sounds typical of construction sites and road traffic and is superimposed with digital clocks madly ticking away at different speeds. This is not a world of the Madhatter and his dysfunctional clocks, where time stands stills and everything is possible. It is a world where time flies at a rapid pace, leaving no room for the appreciation of the moment. The river acts as an eternal signifier of passing time and evokes an old saying of human inability to relive what is lost. Interspersing city sounds with silent spells, the work urges the viewer to step out of the rat race and contemplate time in silence.

The video screens are set between twelve white pillows dressed in calendar months, stacked haphazardly on the floor. Their random positioning evokes the cumulative individual histories falling in chaotic disarray and alludes to man's attachment to the future, that dismisses the present and immediately forgets the past. By placing the large pillows uncomfortably on the floor, Zautashvili challenges the viewer to physically engage with the work. One must walk around it, bend down to see it and strain to watch the embedded videos. And if theories of bodily activation positively affecting mental concentration is anything to go by, perhaps the artist's message will be that much more effective – *Don't worry about the future. It isn't here yet... And now it's gone.*

TIME DISAPPEARS IN TIME

2006–2013, Twelve pillows with black and white screen-prints, three flat screens, Video with sound, Length: 3 mins, 50 secs/loop
Courtesy of the artist



don't worry about the future

it isn't here yet

and now it's gone

FAIG AHMED
RASHAD ALAKBAROV
AFRUZ AMIGHI
KUTLUĞ ATAMAN
SHOJA AZARI
RASHAD BABAYEV
MAHMOUD BAKHSI
ALI BANISADR
ALI HASANOV
ORKHAN HUSEYNOV
SITARA IBRAHIMOVA
AIDA MAHMUDOVA
TAUS MAKHACHEVA
FARHAD MOSHIRI
FARID RASULOV
SLAVS AND TATARS
ILIKO ZAUTASHVILI

ARTIST
BIOGRAPHIES

ARTIST
BIOGRAPHIES

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TAUS MAKHACHEVA
FARHAD MOSHIRI
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FAIG AHMED

◇
b. 1982

Faig Ahmed deconstructs motifs and formulae of Azerbaijani carpets, a popular art form seen on the walls and floors across Azerbaijan and its neighbours. Creating two-dimensional arrangements into sculptural and spatial objects, and mixing hand-woven carpet elements with fibreglass forms, he offers a contemporary vision of a cultural icon. After graduating from the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Art (2004), Ahmed represented Azerbaijan in their first appearance at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007.

Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Actual Tradition*, Sharjah Islamic Art Festival, Sharjah, UAE (2012); *Merging Bridges*, Museum of Modern Art Baku, Azerbaijan (2012), *012 Baku Public Art Festival* (2012), *Steps of Time*, Kunsthalleim Lipsiusbau, Dresden, Germany (2008), *Azerbaijan Pavilion*, 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) and *Caucasus*, National Center for Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia (2006). Faig Ahmed lives and works in Azerbaijan.

RASHAD ALAKBAROV

◇
b. 1979

Rashad Alakbarov uses installations involving incongruous objects and coloured shadows, which play upon expectations and allude to cultural issues. For the 55th Venice Biennale, he has produced an installation focusing on the development of the Azerbaijani alphabet which was changed over three times in the past seventy years, reflecting the nation's history, identity and evolution. After graduating from the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Art (2001), Alakbarov was chosen to represent Azerbaijan at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013),

Actual Tradition, Sharjah Islamic Art Festival, Sharjah, UAE (2012), *Communist*, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan (2012), *012 Baku Public Art Festival* (2012), *Ground Floor America*, Den Frie Centre for Contemporary Art, Copenhagen (2010), *Azerbaijan Pavilion*, 52nd Venice Biennale, (2007). Rashad Alakbarov lives and works in Azerbaijan.

AFRUZ AMIGHI

◇
b. 1974

Afruz Amighi reflects upon history to create her multimedia installations. She has an in-depth and critical understanding of Iran's visual culture, from both an insider and outsider's point of view. Her largest work to date, specially commissioned for the 55th Venice Biennale, focuses on the crossroads of culture at the Biennale itself, as well as the history of Eurasian exchange. Developed from a parable about a contest between Chinese and Greek artists by Jalal al din Rumi, it fuses patterns of Venetian lace with water, shadow and architectural design. Select group exhibitions include *Doris Duke's Shangri-La: Landscape, Architecture,*

and Art, Museum of Art and Design, New York (2012), *Contemporary Iranian Art in the Permanent Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2012); *Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam*, Museum of Fine Art, Houston, Texas (2010) and the *Jameel Prize Exhibition*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2009). Select solo exhibitions include *Suspended City*, Bloom Projects, Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, California (2012), *The Hidden State*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York (2011) and *Angels in Combat*, Isabelle Van Den Eynde Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates (2010). Afruz Amighi lives and works in New York.

KUTLUĞ ATAMAN

◇
b. 1961

Kutluğ Ataman is considered a forerunner of new languages created within film and video art, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Ataman's work focuses on individual and collective identities, as well as historical and geographical narratives as constructs, in his attempts to reveal the ways in which identities are constantly re-written and negotiated. Ataman was nominated for the Turner Prize (2004), the same year he won the Carnegie International Prize. He was a recipient of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (Dubai, 2009) and the European Cultural Foundation's Princess Margriet Award (2011). Exhibited internationally, Ataman's works have shown at

the following Biennales: Istanbul (1997, 2003, 2007), Venice (1999), Sao Paulo (2002, 2010) and Berlin (2001), as well as in *Documenta* (2002). Recent solo exhibitions include *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, ARTER, Istanbul (2011); *The Enemy Inside Me*, Istanbul Modern, Istanbul (2010); *MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Arts*, Rome (2010); *Kutlug Ataman: Küba/Paradise*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2009) and *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, Lentos Kunstmuseum, Linz (2009). Forthcoming exhibitions include Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada (2013) and Galeri Mana, Istanbul (2013). Kutluğ Ataman lives and works in Istanbul, Islamabad and London.

SHOJA AZARI

◇
b. 1958

Shoja Azari is a visual artist/filmmaker whose use of film, painting and photography has created striking and culturally referenced works. Since 1998, Azari and renowned artist Shirin Neshat have developed a unique and successful collaboration, producing over fifteen film/art installations together which have received international acclaim, including their famous project *Turbulent* (1998), which won the Golden Lion in Venice that year. *Women Without Men*, a feature film written and directed with Neshat won the Silver Lion in Venice in 2010. Based on the controversial novel by Shahrnosh Parsipour, the film

interweaved the lives of four Iranian women in the summer of 1953 – a pivotal moment in Iranian history during an American-led coup d'état. Select exhibitions include *Solo Exhibition*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York (forthcoming 2013), *The Elephant in the Dark*, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, India (2012), *Live Art/Expanded*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2010), *Special Project*, Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Basel Art Fair, Switzerland (2007) and *Project Rooms*, ARCO, Madrid, Spain (2006). Shoja Azari lives and works in New York City.

RASHAD BABAYEV

◇
b. 1979

Rashad Babayev is a painter and installation artist whose varied artistic practice calls upon beliefs and symbols to create works, or by exploring colour in his abstract compositions. For the 55th Venice Biennale, Babayev brings a real fig tree to recreate the symbolic attachment many have to the 'Tree of Wishes' – such trees are found in Ashperon, Azerbaijan, to which many hundreds of scarves representing individual wishes, are secured to each year. In this exhibition, Babayev's installation critiques this ritual through attaching designer-branded scarves, to imply the materialist wishes increasingly prevalent in the country.

Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Commonist*, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan and *Merging Bridges*, Museum of Modern Art, Baku, Azerbaijan (2012). Rashad Babayev lives and works in Baku, Azerbaijan.

MAHMOUD BAKHSHI

◇
b. 1977

Mahmoud Bakhshi creates remarkably subversive work, commenting on the hypocrisy he sees around him. In *Verdicts of Looking* (2008), mannequins wearing the hijab have hollowed-out plastic eyes with explicit videos showing inside them, aimed at confronting the hypocritical modesty imposed on the public sphere. For *Air Pollution of Iran* (2004–2006), he framed Iranian flags stained by the capital city's pollution of the atmosphere. For this year's Venice Biennale he will parody the oil wealth of the region by creating a fountain of oil that flows down a stepped, tin-plate pyramid. Mahmoud's work has been acquired by Tate

Modern. Select exhibitions include *Hard Copy*, Art Gwangju, South Korea (2012), *Bah Man*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris (2011) and *Iran: New Voices*, Barbican Centre, London (2008). Awards and residencies include the Delfina Foundation (2010) and the Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize, which enabled him to have a solo show at the Saatchi Gallery in London in September 2010. Mahmoud Bakhshi lives and works in Tehran.

ALI BANISADR

◇
b. 1976

Ali Banisadr's works have been acquired by prestigious public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Saatchi Gallery, London, the British Museum, London and the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria. Through effective use of colour and painterly control, Banisadr translates the imagery of his childhood, his extensive understanding of art history, and his sharp observations of everyday life onto canvas. Select exhibitions include *A Selection of Recent Acquisitions from the Permanent Collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

(2013), *We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (2012), *Contemporary Iranian Art in the Permanent Collection*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2012), *Referencing History*, Green Art Gallery, Dubai (2012), *It Happened and It Never Did*, Leslie Tonkonow Artworks, New York (2011), *XXSmall*, Gemeente Museum, The Hague (2011) and *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, The Saatchi Gallery, London (2009). Ali Banisadr was born in Tehran, Iran and currently lives and works in New York.

ALI HASANOV

◇
b. 1976

Ali Hasanov is an artist, musician and filmmaker. His works have explored media in all three areas, with his notable project *Arsenium* (performed in 2012) inspired by the landmark performance of Symphony of Sirens by the Soviet Avant Garde composer Arseni Avraamov, in Azerbaijan in 1923. Creating an animation and musical score to commemorate this, a performance took place on the docks, with a full choir and brass band to accompany it. Hasanov graduated from the Azerbaijani State University of Culture and the Arts and received a degree in Filmmaking from Baku International Film School. He represented

Azerbaijan at the 52nd Venice Biennale. Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Takeaway/Prisoner and The Great Caucasus performance installations*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Perm, Russia (2011), *Think of the Radio and Appointment*, DEPO, Istanbul (2009), *Sentencia performance*, Mars Gallery, Moscow (2009) and *Art Caucasus*, National Centre for Contemporary Art, Moscow (2006). Ali is also the founder and leader of a musical collective called PG Large Used Project. Hasanov lives and works in Baku and Moscow.

ORKHAN HUSEYNOV

◇
b. 1978

Orkhan Huseynov creates work that is both playful and peculiar in a variety of media, including video, computer prints and plastic sculptures. With plexiglass and computer imaging he creates child-like images that at first seem innocuous but may refer to oil wealth, political power, religion or space travel. His works are united by their celebration of Azeri customs and history. Orkhan Huseynov graduated from the Azimzadeh State Art College (1995) and the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Art (1999), before going on to complete his Master's degree at the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Art in Baku.

He represented Azerbaijan at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Commonist YARAT* Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan and *Merging Bridges*, Museum of Modern Art, Baku, Azerbaijan (2012). Huseynov lives and works in Baku, Azerbaijan.

SITARA IBRAHIMOVA

◇
b. 1984

Sitara Ibrahimova creates work that is largely photographic, with some recorded performance work. Her images focus on emotive instances conveyed through an individual's facial expression or pose, or expressed by a fragment or an absence – capturing poignant moments that characterise the everyday. Varying from emotive portraits to images of deserted areas and abandoned objects, each project presents new questions for the viewer. In *The Edge* (2012), Ibrahimova's photographs seek to relay the challenges and complications associated with historical and collective memory in the Karabakh region. The project consists of scenes

of a now abandoned town that exists on the border of multiple political, cultural, and social groups. Sitara Ibrahimova completed her first degree in Psychology at Baku State University (2004), before graduating in Still Photography from the Famu University in Prague (2010). Select exhibitions include *Commonist*, YARAT Contemporary Art Space Baku, Azerbaijan (2012), *USSR Remix*, Prague, Czech Republic (2011) and *7, Photo Festival*, Tbilisi, Georgia (2010). Ibrahimova lives and works in Baku, Azerbaijan.

AIDA MAHMUDOVA

◇
b. 1982

Aida Mahmudova is an artist and the founder and director of YARAT. She creates multimedia sculpture, paintings and installations; many of which recall memories of specific places or a sense of place. One of Mahmudova's concerns is the rapid modernisation of Azerbaijan since the republic gained independence from the Soviet Union; this fuels her paintings of what she calls 'untouched places' that are often barren or featureless locations outside of the city. Her public art work *Recycled*, which now stands by the site of an old puppet theatre in Baku, uses windows from a beautiful building that once stood opposite her home.

Aida Mahmudova graduated with a degree in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins, London. She has upcoming solo exhibitions in Zurich and Baku. In 2011, Mahmudova founded YARAT to promote Azeri contemporary art. Select exhibitions include *Fly To Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Commonist*, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan and *Merging Bridges*, Museum of Modern Art, Baku, Azerbaijan (2012). Mahmudova lives and works in Baku and London.

TAUS MAKHACHEVA

◇
b. 1983

Taus Makhacheva is an artist whose work explores her nascent regions (Dagestan, the Russian Caucasus Mountains) and the people, places and behaviours that are significant in it. Makhacheva's work is often imbued with nostalgia and loneliness, with critical themes such as masculinity, or ideas of luxury in the USSR. Previous works have included a set of films exposing games of masculinity in her local region, such as dog fighting and car racing. For the 55th Venice Biennale she reproduces a film about an abandoned silk-road city *Gamsutl* through a young male protagonist who 'dances' to re-enact the fragmented and

largely forgotten history of the settlement. Makhacheva was educated at Goldsmiths College in London and later studied at the RCA. Select exhibitions include the Liverpool Biennial (2012), *Affirmative Action (mimesis)*, Impronte Contemporary Art, Milan, (2011), *Expanded Cinema*, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Moscow (2010) and *Aluminium*, IV International Biennale, Baku (2009). Taus Makhacheva lives and works between Moscow and Makhachkala.

FARHAD MOSHIRI

◇
b. 1963

Farhad Moshiri is known for his satirical depictions of consumerist culture in Iran and abroad. He uses unusual materials and plays with iconic images of both popular and/or traditional figures. Using objects from knives and icing dispensers to Swarovski crystals, he offers a novel and boundary-pushing interpretation of culture in Iran. Whether fusing religious imagery with childish cartoons, using weapons to spell out statements, or imitation cupcakes to mark out a chalk silhouette, he employs the playful to spell out the sinister and satirise the iconic.

Select solo exhibitions include *The Fire of Joy*, Galerie Perrotin, Paris (2012), *Shukran*, The Third Line Gallery, Dubai (2011), *Love is not Everything*, Farjam Collection, Dubai (2011). Select group exhibitions include *ARTandPRESS*, Martin Gropius-Bau Museum, Berlin (2012), *The World Belongs to You*, François Pinault Collection, Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2011), *Raad O Bargh*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris (2009) and *Iran Inside Out*, Chelsea Art Museum, New York (2009). Moshiri lives and works between Tehran and Paris.

FARID RASULOV

◇
b. 1985

Farid Rasulov produces installations, sculptures, photographs and paintings that play upon modernity and its relation to visual elements of the past. He denies symbolic meanings in his work, which are piqued with humour and often relate to the rapid modernisation of Azerbaijan by calling upon familiar Azerbaijani visual elements. By combining simple cement with this ornamented stained glass for sculptures from his *Architectural Dichotomy* series, 2013, Rasulov shows the contrast between the old and the new, past and present, and the evolution of a nation from tradition, to modernisation

and globalisation. Farid Rasulov originally trained as a Doctor at the Azerbaijan State Medical University. Since becoming an artist, he has represented Azerbaijan at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009). Select exhibitions include *Fly to Baku*, London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Rome (2012–2013), *Actual Tradition*, Sharjah Islamic Art Festival, Sharjah, UAE (2012), *Commonist*, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan (2012), *012 Baku Public Art Festival* (2012) and the 53rd Venice Biennale, Azerbaijan Pavilion (2009). Rasulov lives and works in Azerbaijan.

SLAVS AND TATARS

◇
est. 2006

Slavs and Tatars is a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia. The collective's work spans several media, disciplines, and a broad spectrum of cultural registers (high and low) focusing on an oft-forgotten sphere of influence between Slavs, Caucasians and Central Asians. Select solo exhibitions include the Dallas Museum of Art, USA, (2014), *GfZK*, Leipzig and Arsenal Gallery, Bialystok (2014), *Friendship of Nations: Polish Sh'ite Showbiz*, REDCAT, Los Angeles (2013) and *Kunstlerhaus*, Stuttgart (2013), *Beyonsense*,

Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), *Not Moscow Not Mecca*, Secession, Vienna (2012) and *Friendship of Nations: Polish Sh'ite Showbiz*, Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Gent (2011). Select group exhibitions include *Roundtable*, 9th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2012), *The Ungovernables*, New Museum Triennial, New York (2012), *I decided not to change the world*, Tate Modern, London (2011), the 10th Sharjah Biennale and *A Rock and a Hard Place*, 3rd Thessaloniki Biennial, Greece (2011). The collective live and work in 'Eurasia'.

ILIKO ZAUTASHVILI

◇
b. 1952

Iliko Zautashvili is an artist and professor of Art History at the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts. A regular speaker at conferences, he has participated in many exhibitions as a visual artist but also as a director of video and cinema. He has founded several important centres and initiatives in Tbilisi such as the National Art Center and the 'Artactive Evolution'. Select exhibitions include *Atlantis 11*, Palazzo Zenobio, 54th Venice Biennale (2011); *Words*, Museum of Georgian Literature (2010), *Born in Georgia*, Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Netherlands (2009), Emergency Biennale in Chechnya, Artisterium, Georgia

(2009), *Structural Changes*, Art Center Zamok Uyezdovski, Warsaw (2009), *Voyage a Tbilisi*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, France (2008), *Given Difference*, 2nd Asian Contemporary Art Fair, New York (2008), *Beyond Stereotypes*, Art Caucasus, Tbilisi, Georgia (2005) and *Aspect de la Photographie Contemporaine du Caucase du Sud*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brussels, Belgium (2004). Iliko Zautashvili lives and works in Tbilisi, Georgia.

NEGAR AZIMI

NICHOLAS CULLINAN

SUAD GARAYEVA

DINA NASSER-KHADIVI

FARAH RAHIM ISMAIL

NADA RAZA

MONICA STEINBERG

SLAVS AND TATARS

MADINA TLOSTANOVA

CONTRIBUTORS
& WRITERS

CONTRIBUTORS & WRITERS

DINA NASSER-KHADIVI is an independent curator and consultant, specialising in Contemporary art from the Middle East, Iran and selected areas of the Caucasus. Originally a 19/20th century Orientalist art specialist at Christie's, Dina began to work with Middle Eastern and Iranian Contemporary art in 2006, developing an international platform for the artists by organising numerous awareness-raising initiatives, such as the landmark symposium *An Introduction to the World of Iranian Modern and Contemporary Art* held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles in the fall of 2010. With projects that have included curating private collections and advising major institutions, Dina divides her practice between New York, London, Geneva, and Dubai.

NEGAR AZIMI is a writer and Senior Editor of *Bidoun*, an award-winning publishing, curatorial, and educational initiative. She has written for *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *Parkett*, and *The New York Times Magazine* among others. She is currently working on a book and exhibition project about the late photographer WVan Leo in her capacity as a member of the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation. She is also a board member of Artists Space in New York.

NICHOLAS CULLINAN is a Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Prior to that, he was Curator of International Modern Art at Tate Modern in London where he worked on major exhibitions including: *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* (2008); *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons* (2008); *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* (2009); *Tacita Dean: FILM*, the twelfth Unilever commission for the Turbine Hall (2011) and *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye* (2012). He also spearheaded founding an acquisition committee to collect modern and contemporary art from Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. He has taught at institutions including the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and is the author of many essays in publications such as *Artforum* and *Frieze*.

SUAD GARAYEVA is a Specialist in Contemporary Art from Russia and the CIS at Sotheby's London and recently curated *At the Crossroads*, their first-ever selling exhibition of contemporary art from the Caucasus and Central Asia, in March 2013. Suad has been a long time collaborator with YARAT and has curated *Nardaran Wedding* for their pavilion at the GRID International Photography Biennale in 2012 and an exhibition of video art entitled *Introspection*, in Yay Gallery in April 2013. She has also worked on numerous international exhibitions, such as the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 53rd and 54th Venice Biennales.

CONTRIBUTORS & WRITERS

FARAH RAHIM ISMAIL is an independent consultant and editor specialising in Contemporary Art. Previous positions include Gallery Director at Aicon Gallery, London, and Exhibitions Manager at Hauser & Wirth, London. She is now based in Doha, Qatar, and works with collections across North America, Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. Recent editorial projects for exhibitions in Doha include *Yan Pei-Ming: Painting The History* (2012; QMA Gallery, Katara), *Tea with Nefertiti: The Making of the Artwork by the Artist, the Museum and the Public* (2012; Mathaf) and *Ferozkoh: Tradition and Continuity in Afghan Art* (2013, Museum of Islamic Art), all published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing.

NADA RAZA is currently Assistant Curator at Tate Modern, working on art from South Asia. She has worked with the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) and with Green Cardamom. Recent exhibitions include *Lines of Control* 2012 at the Herbert F Johnson Museum, Cornell University, and *Social Fabric* at Iniva 2012. Nada Raza holds a Masters in Critical Writing and Curatorial Practice from the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London.

MONICA STEINBERG is a PhD Candidate in Art History at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has served as an Adjunct Professor at Hunter College for four years, contributed to exhibition catalogues including *The Abstract Impulse* and *The Communist*, and is currently a Pre-Doctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

SLAVS AND TATARS have exhibited widely throughout the Middle East, North America and Europe, including Tate Modern, Vienna's Secession, MoMA, and the Sharjah Biennial. Their publications include *Kidnapping Mountains* (Book Works, 2009), *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names* (Onestar Press, 2010), *Not Moscow Not Mecca* (Revolver/Secession, 2012), *Khhhhhhh* (Mousse/Moravia Gallery, 2012), *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (Book Works, 2013) as well as a translation of the legendary Azeri satire *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've* (JRP-Ringier, 2011).

MADINA TLOSTANOVA is a professor of Philosophy at Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Moscow). She has authored eight scholarly books and over 180 articles on contemporary culture and art, social theory, alter-globalism, postcolonial and decolonial discourses. Recent publications include *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflection from Eurasia and the Americas* (co-authored with Walter Mignolo, Ohio State University Press, 2012). Currently she is working on a book on decolonial aesthetics and contemporary art.



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WE WISH TO THANK EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM

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THE ARTISTS

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Farah Rahim Ismail, Suad Garayeva, Negar Azimi, Nicholas Cullinan, Monica Steinberg, Nada Raza, Madina Tlostanova and Slavs and Tatars

We have learned about each other's alphabets, respective history and geographies, and more importantly we have realised how we all remain interconnected... We very much hope that *Love Me, Love Me Not* will send the same message to its audience.



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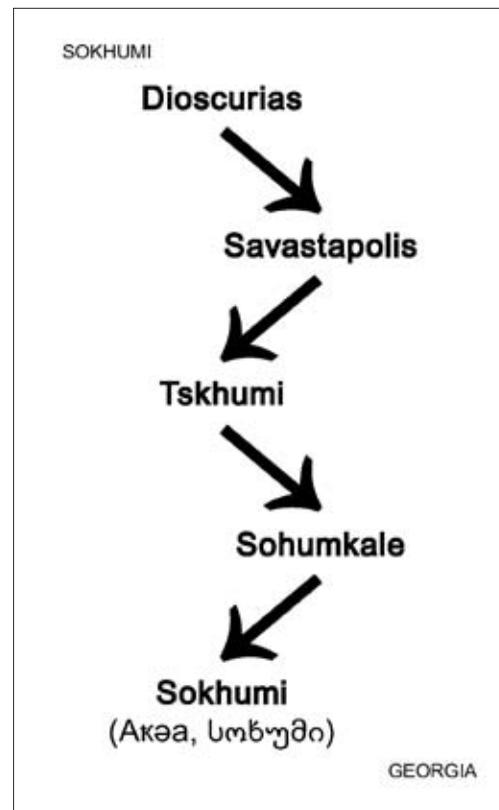
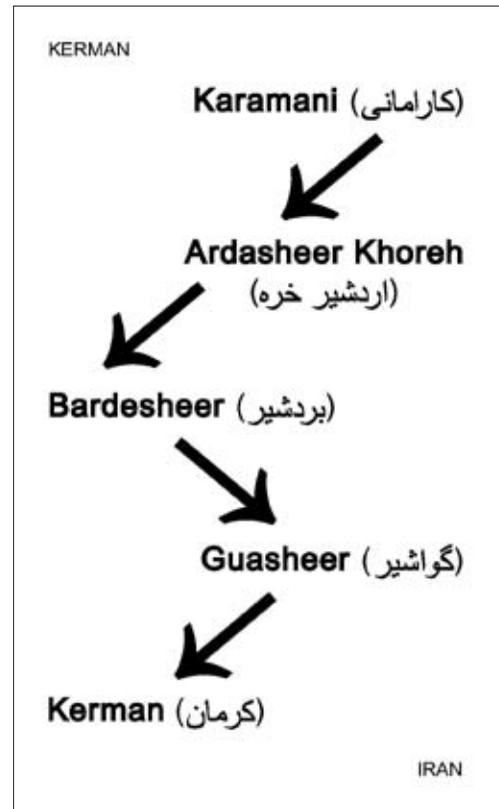
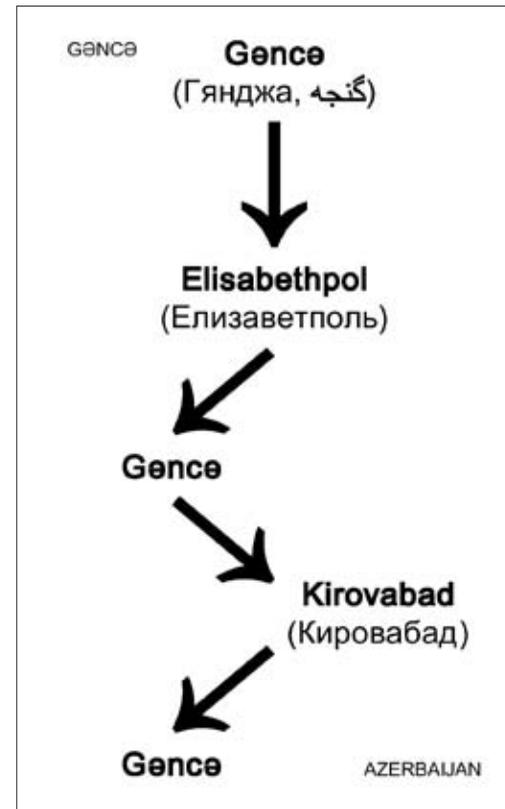
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LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

Pages from *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names*, Slavs and Tatars, Onestar Press, 2010. Offset print, 22.5 x 14 cm. (9 x 5½ in.), edition of 250 numbered copies.



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