

# CENTRAL ASIA REPORT

## A 'STANS DIARY

Emerging from 70 years of Soviet rule, Central Asian artists display remarkable creative élan, despite censorship and lack of support.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO to Central Asia?" The intriguing offer came from Susan Katz, program director of CEC ArtsLink, a nonprofit group that facilitates cultural exchanges between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Though I have traveled abroad quite a bit, the proposed destination was completely new to me. I was being invited to give some lectures and to accompany Katz as she met with artists, curators and art managers in connection with the CEC-sponsored Global Art Lab, an ongoing project promoting socially engaged art initiatives. For about two and a half weeks last October, we traveled to Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, and to three cities in Uzbekistan: Tashkent (the capital), Samarkand and Bukhara. The last two cities, both venerable trading centers, are known for their historical melding of Islamic, East Asian and Western cultures. But in the present day, despite the very positive reception afforded the first Central Asian pavilion in the 2005 Venice Biennale and an active presence in every installment thereafter, none of the "'Stans" has had much impact on the international art world [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '05]. So one of my goals would be to ferret out any compelling cultural tendencies, artists or art-related activities.

Locked between China, Afghanistan and Russia, this arid region was long dominated by nomadic tribes and waves of foreign invaders, among them the Huns, the Mongols and the Russians. Geopolitical importance grew from its intermediary position on the legendary Silk Road, a network of ancient trade routes that stretched from China to Europe. Central Asia's more recent history has been defined by seven decades of Soviet occupation, which ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by a resurgent nationalism based largely on a mythologized past. In many Central Asian republics, former Communist officials have retained considerable power. Guidebooks make little reference to con-



temporary art or culture, for reasons that would soon become clear to me.

In Moscow, I met up with Katz, who is based in St. Petersburg, and her husband, artist Pyotr Shvetsov, for the final five-hour flight to Bishkek. At 4 A.M., we arrived at the Silk Road Hotel, a comfortable lodging with a lovely garden and a business center offering Internet access, a feature

Zhon Jele Jemes /  
Ne Prosto Tak: *The Choice  
of 2010*, election box  
replica and mud, 35½ by  
17¾ by 17¾ inches; in  
"Kyrgyzstan 2010" at the  
Koldo Gallery, Bishkek.



Left, Evgeny Boikov and Furkat Tursunov: From the photo series "Identification 2010," 25 1/2 by 47 1/4 inches; in "Kyrgyzstan 2010" at the Koldo Gallery, Bishkek.

Below, view of the play *Seven Moons*, 2010, at the Ilkhom Theater, Tashkent. Photo Pavel Akimkin.

Opposite, left to right, Vyacheslav Akhunov's *Gate*, *Street Spraying Truck* and *Wall Ideology*, all 2010, color photographs, from the series "Green Mile."

that would prove elusive as we continued our trip. Bishkek, with a population of 900,000, is surrounded by rugged mountains that soar nearly as high as the Himalayas. The city is an odd mix of drab Soviet-era apartment buildings and more recent boulevards and parks. The whole place feels a bit ragged and, like all the cities I was to visit, persistently haunted by its USSR-dominated past.

ONLY SIX MONTHS BEFORE our arrival in Kyrgyzstan, the nation had been roiled by revolution. A series of riots across the country, sparked by economic difficulties and media censorship, resulted in over 100 deaths, 1,000 injuries and the ouster of the president. Elections took place the week after our departure, resulting in a new coalition government that promises a more parliamentary approach. Excitement about the prospects for democracy ran high among the artists and administrators we encountered. (Both Shvetsov and Katz are fluent in Russian.) One manifestation of this euphoria was "Kyrgyzstan 2010" (Sept. 3-17, 2010), an exhibition of work by artists from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Germany, organized by independent Kyrgyz curators Nazira Alymbaeva and Gamal Bokonbaev, with support from Germany's Goethe-Institut. The Koldo Gallery, a rudimentary space with three rooms, was filled with installation and video works relating to the recent revolution. Most raw was a cluster of drawings by schoolchildren, assembled by Kyrgyz artist Natalya Andrianova. The contrast

between the drawings' stylistic naiveté and their disturbing content was sobering. Gleaned either firsthand or from television, the subjects included mobs in the street, burning buildings and people lying in pools of blood. Kyrgyz artists Chinara Choturova and Abdusamat Mirzaev presented artifacts from the rioting—charred plates, bowls and other domestic objects, some altered to serve as weapons—displayed on earthen blocks. Similarly commemorative was a rubble-filled ballot box by the Kyrgyz group Zhon Jele James / Ne Prosto Tak (Not So Simple), while in a slightly lighter vein Kyrgyz artists Evgeny Boikov and Furkat Tursunov, photographed wear-

ing distinctive Uzbek hats, presented their self-portraits as faux mug shots, evoking the longstanding harassment of minority groups in Kyrgyzstan.

Since this region has virtually no professionally run contemporary art galleries or au courant collectors, excitement about the future mingles with a sense of frustration among the more traveled artists. Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, an artist couple included in the first Central Asian pavilion in Venice, have shown their video and installation works in the U.S., Mexico and parts of Europe. Their pieces often deal with the contradictions of Central Asian identity. Kasmalieva is still celebrated for *Farewell Song*, a



performance she offered in Bishkek in 2001, and again in Geneva in 2002. To dramatize the need for a break from the past, Kasmalieva played a traditional bow instrument as an assistant wove the artist's long hair on a loom. The work ended when Kasmalieva snipped off her locks and walked away. She and Djumaliev are active in efforts to bridge the gap between the Kyrgyz art community and the international art world. Like a number of other people we met, they are starting a school. "Our art academies are still dominated by older Soviet-era professors who teach paint-

**YOUNGER PEOPLE IN THE REGION ARE INTERESTED IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL. ONE ASKED HOW GLOBALISM RELATES TO ORIENTALISM.**

Thomas Werner, director of photography at Parsons the New School for Design in New York, and artists Simon Lee and Eve Sussman. I offered a slide lecture on globalism, thinking that the issues of decentering and diversity would be of interest to an audience of artists eager to break onto a larger stage.

The post-lecture questions suggested that my talk had landed somewhat unevenly, perhaps in part because, as I learned later, the interpreter simply made things up when she didn't understand what I was saying. An older artist, evidently disgruntled by what he had seen, challenged me to explain why "art is dying today." Younger questioners were interested in the conflict between the local and the global. One, clearly conversant with contemporary theory, asked how globalism relates to orientalism.

Visits to various art institutions reinforced my sense of Bishkek's cultural underdevelopment. Throughout Central Asia one still finds artist unions, relics of the Soviet system that once wielded power through the ability to allocate studio

A huge white-robed female figure floats over happy people in traditional Central Asian garb. Brave Soviet revolutionaries are tortured, massacred by Tsarist forces and otherwise graphically martyred. In a section of the picture that deals with nuclear arms, figures wearing skull masks sit astride ominous missiles. This fascinating panorama serves as a time capsule for a lost ideology, made more poignant by the intrusion of the capitalistic sales pitch from below. One couldn't help but suspect that these remnants survive only because the museum has no money to replace them.

LATER THAT SAME AFTERNOON we took a two-hour flight to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where the political and cultural situation makes Kyrgyzstan seem positively utopian. Uzbekistan has been ruled since 1991 by Islam Karimov, whose autocratic government keeps a tight rein on the population, censoring everything from newspapers and television to the Internet. In fact, I had been warned not to identify myself as a writer on my visa application, as foreign journalists are unwelcome. (I instead designated myself a



ing and sculpture," the pair told me. "As a result, progressive young people are turning to photography and video art as a way to escape. But there is little training in video art." It was a refrain I would hear frequently: despite official neglect, new media—so congenial in its speed and vivacity to the rising generation—flourishes in Central Asia.

Although it suffers from an almost complete lack of infrastructure, the Kyrgyz art scene is marked by lots of energy and individual initiatives. Many of these efforts are funded by outside organizations. A case in point was my own lecture, which had been grafted onto a workshop on video art organized by the American University of Central Asia and sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek. The primary instructors were

space and exhibition opportunities. But Bishkek's union, headquartered in a run-down public building in the center of town, has lost its studios to privatization and rising real estate prices. All that remains is a gallery space, filled during our visit with mediocre landscape paintings.

Immediately after my lecture, we went to the National Historical Museum, noted for its Socialist Realist displays. These did not disappoint. After filing past an Avon advertising kiosk on the steps of the museum, we went upstairs to the Soviet section. While loud pop music from the Avon promotion wafted up, we wandered through room after room lined with life-size bronze tableaux of Lenin in heroic poses. The ceilings present a vast mural depicting Central Asian history from a Soviet perspective.

curator, a profession that is evidently not as threatening.) Despite widespread poverty and a rocky economic situation, the government funnels money into massive restoration and beautification projects designed to enhance the image of Uzbekistan as a modern, prosperous country.

We were met by Maxim Tumenev, international projects director for the Ilkhom Theater. He proved to be a resolutely flamboyant figure with an amiably insouciant manner—well traveled, fluent in English, and sporting manicured nails and colorful scarves. Equally improbable, for this part of the world, is the institution he represents. The Ilkhom Theater was founded in 1976 by American-born stage director Mark Weil. Since then, the Ilkhom has evaded the political censorship that has stifled other cultural initiatives, and built

up an international reputation through its ambitious multimedia productions. Works have addressed issues like homosexuality, nationalism and Islam. In 2007, Weil was stabbed to death in Tashkent. Last year three radical Islamists were convicted of the murder, committed, they confessed, to avenge an "offensive" portrayal of Mohammed in a production of Pushkin's *Imitations*

national residency program, for instance, has become vastly more expensive because visitors must now stay in hotels rather than private apartments. Art and theater criticism is almost nonexistent, blogs and YouTube are censored, and official support of avant-garde culture is nil. Patronage of indigenous crafts, historic architecture and traditional music is divided between the two warring daugh-

artists. Our first visit was with Vyacheslav Akhunov, affectionately known as Slava. A great bear of a man, he is a protean character. Active as an artist, writer, performer and agitator, Akhunov was an initiator of Kaprow-style Happenings in Uzbekistan in the early '80s, and is now perhaps the most widely known contemporary Uzbek artist. His work was featured in the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, and he shows frequently in Europe, Australia, Russia and Central Asia. Despite, or perhaps because of, this visibility, he is persona non grata with the National Art Academy and the artist union. He is not allowed to show or teach in Uzbekistan, and is reduced to exhibiting his work in his apartment.

Akhunov ushered us into an overstuffed studio crowded with detritus from various installations and performances—including USSR-era busts and paintings of Lenin, facsimiles of classical statuary, fruit bowls and a small Buddhist shrine. As he brought out works to show us, his links to the 1970s Moscow Conceptualism of Ilya Kabakov and others grew more evident. We were invited to examine various pieces dating from the '70s to the present: absurd proposals, collages replete with mocking references to Socialist Realism and an archive of painting illustrations clipped from Soviet art magazines, along with documentation of



**WITH THE ACADEMIES STILL DOMINATED BY OLDER SOVIET-ERA PROFESSORS, VIDEO AND PHOTOGRAPHY ARE MORE LIKELY TO THRIVE TODAY THAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE.**

*of the Koran.* The murder suggests that, despite the generally looser practice of Islam in Central Asia, extremist elements are now creeping in.

At dinner that night we talked with Tumenev about the theater's travails and the difficulties of cultural life in Uzbekistan. While the fatal stabbing has not dampened the company's dedication, Ilkhom has found itself in increasingly precarious financial straits since 2001, when a crash of the American market greatly reduced its investment income, the main source of funding. Although the state lets the theater survive, heavy-handed regulations often impede operations. Ilkhom's inter-



ters of the president, who use it as a vehicle for self-promotion. Meanwhile, the impressive history of medieval Uzbek painting remains as neglected as the contemporary varieties of visual art.

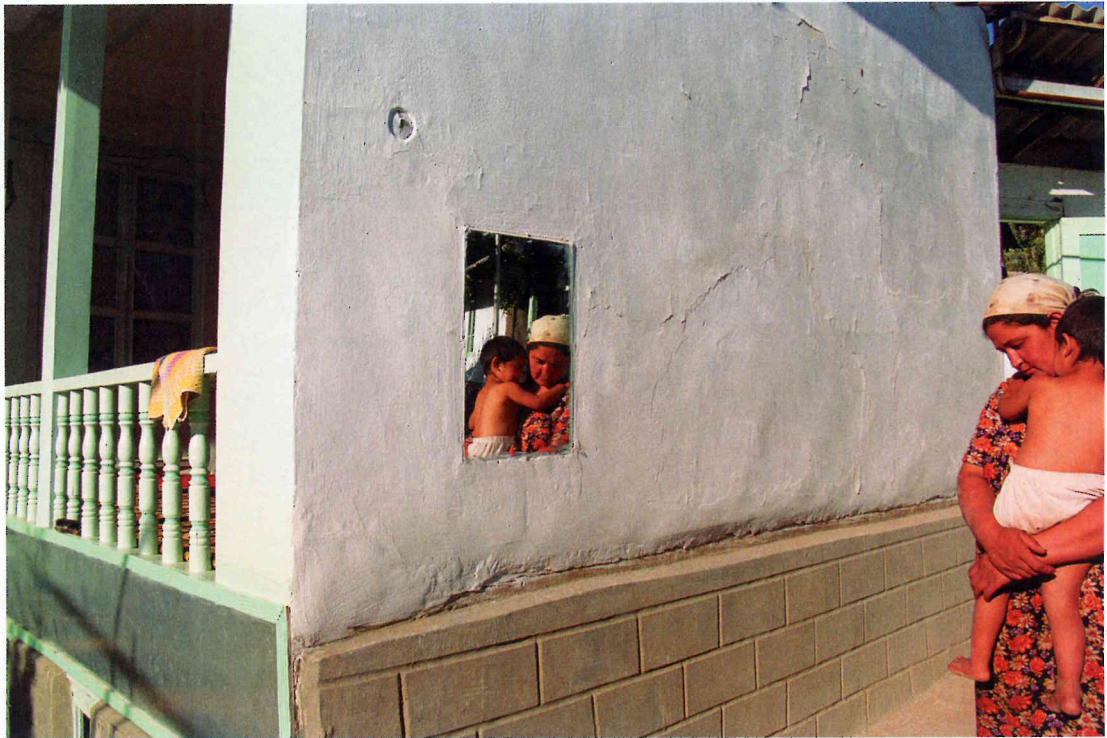
Problems became even clearer the next day when we met with two local

Akhunov's 2007 touring show composed of 1,000 works installed in matchboxes. He also presented his current project—a series of photographs depicting Tashkent fences, walls and streetlights that officials have painted a nationalist green. These are evidence, he maintains, of a desire to transform

Right, Umida Ahmedova: *Portrait of Sister*, 2003, color photograph.

Opposite top, Shavkat Boltaev: *The Stuntman*, 2002, color photograph.

Opposite bottom, Zilola Saidova: *Jewish Bride Preparing for a Wedding*, 2000, black-and-white photograph.



the whole urban environment into a monument to Karimov's rule.

Like Tumenev, Akhunov ticked off the obstacles hindering Uzbek artists. While in Soviet times culture workers were provided with a studio and a stipend, many are now independent. There is no support for nonaffiliated artists like himself. Young colleagues are particularly isolated, with little access to information about the international art world. As in Kyrgyzstan, they are turning to video but lack a familiarity with basic art history, or even much knowledge of current video art elsewhere. As a result, their work tends to be documentary or ethnographic. "I showed a young artist the work of Bill Viola and said, 'This is video art.' He was amazed," Akhunov told us.

That afternoon we met with Alexandra Batina, a young video artist whose conversation confirmed much of what we had been told. Batina has little in the way of formal training. She started to paint on her own, then turned to video along with several friends, who remain her primary audience and critics. She has attended various workshops, including one in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, where she was the only Uzbek student enrolled. There she received a heavy dose of art theory. At the time of my visit, Batina was attending another workshop in Tashkent, though she found it disappointingly lax. She would like to show locally, but because

she did not come up through official channels, she has a hard time gaining acceptance in the institutional world.

As I prepared for my lecture the next day, I suddenly realized that "globalism" might have very little to do with life and art in this hugely isolated country. It was a point Tumenev would reiterate. Acting as my interpreter, he spontaneously responded to a question about the oppressive nature of one-worldism with the remark, "Just because you don't see it here doesn't mean it doesn't exist." There were many questions afterward, ranging from the apparently inescapable "is this art?"—a bewildered response to my presentation of conceptually based work by artists like Walid Raad, Yinka Shonibare and Alfredo Jaar—to queries about globalism and technology, localism and the place of tradition-based work in the international art world.

That night we attended the premiere of the Ilkhom Theater's *Seven Moons*, whose opening date had been shifted for our benefit. This proved to be a highly polished production that would not have been out of place at the Brooklyn Academy of Music or the La MaMa theater in New York. The piece is based on an old Uzbek poem and uses the now archaic language, translated into English on a screen to one side of the stage. Adapted from a story by 15th-century Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi,

the play tells a tragic love story involving an ancient Uzbek king and the princess he falls in love with after seeing her portrait. *Seven Moons* is presented by an ensemble, with characters who slip in and out of modern and traditional dress, and actors who switch between various roles. The king's love object is played by eight different women, sometimes swathed in flowing robes and sometimes wearing chic flapper dresses. The music is equally hybrid, a mix of modern jazz and traditional music. There is even a bit of partial nudity in a scene when the heroine disrobes with her back to the audience.

At dinner, we asked Tumenev how Ilkhom gets away with themes and stagecraft that would close down another theater. He replied that, because of its long history and international standing, Ilkhom has a special dispensation. "It suggests," he said satirically, "that the government isn't really so oppressive after all." Dinner was followed by a tour of the city, during which Tumenev showed us various monuments to government folly, including a replica of a 19th-century clock tower that mysteriously appeared one day a few hundred feet from the still extant original, a series of "Potemkin buildings" whose facades are wrapped around unfinished interiors along the main boulevards, and various grand new parks built over once thriving neighborhoods.

On our last day in Tashkent, we went sightseeing with photographer Umida

Akhmedova, who has gained notoriety for her conviction in 2009 for "slander of the Uzbek nation." This judgment, for which she was given amnesty, resulted from a documentary she created under the auspices of the Swiss Embassy Gender Program, which documents the life of women in rural Uzbekistan, and from a photography book she produced that portrays rural Uzbekistan and its traditions. From a Western perspective, these works seem more ethnographic than political, but their representations of the casual poverty of everyday life run counter to the official portrait of modern Uzbekistan. Akhmedova is a genial,

sity. Now these largely reconstructed monuments are stuffed with curio shops and craft stalls for tourists.

As in Kyrgyzstan, the local artists union seems to have devolved into little more than a club, offering artists a place to meet. Members proved to be an eager, friendly and mostly middle-aged group, and we spent some time discussing their now familiar problems—no place to show their work, no government support, no audience for contemporary art. They took us to a computer to show us their work, a disheartening amalgam of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist stylistics,

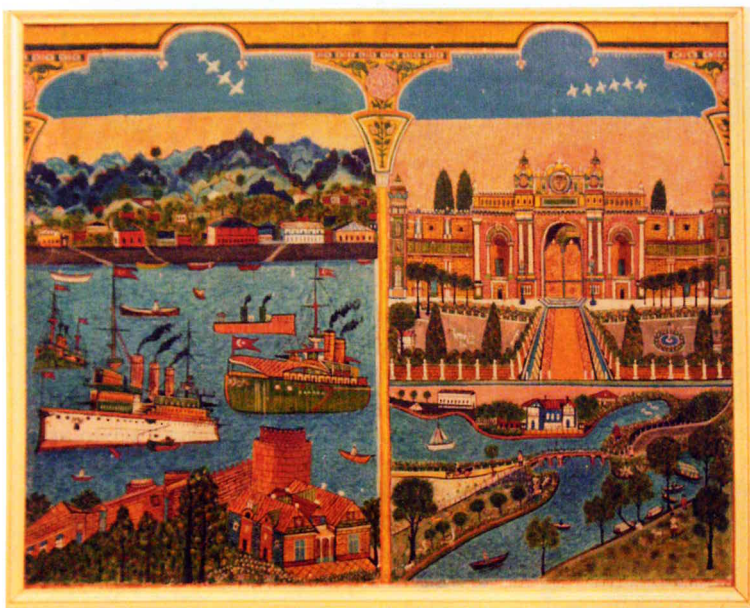
of other Uzbek colleagues, hung in the crowded gallery. The pictures comprised technically and esthetically accomplished views of traditional Central Asian peoples and landscapes, further confirming our impression that contemporary photography and video are more likely to thrive than painting and sculpture in Uzbekistan.

Boltaev and Saidova informed us that things were currently quiet in Bukhara because most of the residents, students included, had gone to the fields for the cotton harvest. We discussed the direction of Uzbek photography, in particular the consuming interest in documenting vanishing lifestyles and urban environments. Shavkat remarked that a few years ago there were 600 ancient monuments in the area, but that now there are only 150, the others having been razed to make way for new construction. "I hope to photograph all those before they disappear," he proclaimed.

Housed right around the corner in an old Bukharan merchant's house, the local art museum presented several exhibitions, including a show of 20th-century Uzbek art. Most works were in the Socialist Realist mode, but one body of paintings was truly charming. Naive in a manner that brought to mind Grandma Moses, these perspectively distorted, highly patterned scenes of mosques, madrassas and Central Asian city squares were the work of Sadriddin Pochaev (1870-1948), a Tajik jeweler who worked for the last emir. When asked for more information, the museum director replied sadly that there were no postcards or reproductions available, and that he would like to organize a traveling show of this work but had no funding for that sort of undertaking. Instead, as was clear from the next gallery, which held a splashy exhibition of Uzbek fabric and fashion put together by President Karimov's daughter Gulnara, the money goes for design. The third exhibition was a sales gallery for the local artists union. The director had invited some of the members to meet us, another awkward encounter with a group of aching sincere artists who had been left behind by contemporary art.

Clearly Uzbek artists, and to a somewhat lesser degree those in Kyrgyzstan, are challenged to reinvent their culture in a post-Soviet world. They face a discomfiting choice: either return to traditions eroded or entirely erased by the Soviets, or come to terms with a global world from which the 'Stans were cut off for 70 years. Given

this dilemma, the committed and energetic artists I met in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan seem deeply admirable. ○



Sadriddin Pochaev:  
*A View of Architectural Monuments*, 1938, oil on cardboard, 19 5/8 by 25 1/2 inches.

loquacious woman who hardly fits the profile of an enemy of the state. She told us that her amnesty was granted after her case received international attention, and that she intends to fight on until her conviction is reversed.

NEXT ON OUR JOURNEY was Samarkand, a city whose name is synonymous with exoticism, conjuring images of merchants on camels, gold and turquoise domes, minarets and bustling open-air markets selling silks, spices and crafts from far and wide. We arrived following an excruciating train ride, during which we discovered that the non-air-conditioned cars are rendered even hotter because Uzbek travelers have an aversion to fresh air. We were staying just off Registan Square, the traditional center of the city, which is surrounded by the buildings of the medieval univer-

romantic visions of old Uzbekistan, and "timeless" Central Asian scenes bereft of social commentary or reference to contemporary situations.

Things were more promising in Bukhara, our final stop. We traveled there in a private car, having learned our lesson about the trains. Bukhara is similarly legendary, and replete with medieval Islamic monuments, but seems less Disneyesque and more lived in than Samarkand. Here, our first stop was the Center for the Development of Creative Photography, a gallery/school/meeting place for photographers located just outside one of the main tourist centers. We were met by the CDCP's director, Shavkat Boltaev, and a young photographer named Zilola Saidova. Examples of their work, along with that

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