



Korpeshe Flags #11 - 2009 – 2011

SAID ATABEKOV

The Dream of Genghis Khan

curated by *Marco Scotini*

Opening on December 15th 2011, at 18.30
The exhibition will run until February 18th 2012

the artist will be present

Opening times:

Tuesday - Saturday, 15.00 - 19.00

Mornings by appointment

Two years after his first solo exhibition in Italy, Said Atabekov returns to Milan's Laura Bulian Gallery with a new project. After the Venice Biennale and the group exhibition *Ostalgia* at the New Museum in New York, in Milan Atabekov will present three of the most important projects of his career. The solo show, which opens on 15 December, will bring together works dating between 2004 and today under one title: *The Dream of Genghis Khan* – one of the Kazakh artist's most recurrent themes. But what is the “dream” to which Atabekov refers? A dream about what?

For years now his linguistic mix of ethnographic signs, recollections of the Russian avant-garde and post-Soviet global interferences has been acknowledged internationally, yet rather than the material from which it is created, Said Atabekov's work stands out by virtue of the “historicity” that it shapes. Or better still, time in Atabekov's work coincides as much with the material as with the very device that moulds it: it is the appearance of something and at the same time the device that makes it appear. There is always a *state of time* in his works that makes the difference. The distinction between reality and fiction is no longer important, instead there is a line that separates the actual from the virtual, movement from immobility, interruption from continuity, a sense of direction from its absence, photo from video, the object from performative ritual. Such dualities – in time and of time – coexist within the same image.

Let us examine two of Atabekov's most recent projects which are part of this exhibition. *Farewell of Slavianka* (2011) consists of a hand-made felt carpet and the documentation of the ritual that was enacted to produce it. The performers of the ritual are the artist's own relatives and blood ties are behind the origin of the act. It does, however, in its archaic religious character, refer to a rather recent past. By bring up an incident from the Second World War, it attempts to reclaim the possibility of something that has been. The action is simple: a dozen or so village elders are busy laying out and wetting wool to make a felt carpet which five youths will press, roll up and carry to a village in the Steppes, following in the footsteps of a great uncle who disappeared during the campaign of 1943. The photographs instead are powerful: black and white, taken from an inclined angle, oblique vanishing

points, zenithal shots, *close ups* from below and continuous references to Max Penson's Uzbek photo reportage and Rodčenko's time-space discontinuity.

These images become the material of the photo-film *Farewell of Slavianka*, where the flow is defined through the freeze of the photographic instant. In other videos Atabekov has used slow motion as it was used in silent movies (*Walkman*, 2005) or else photographic cycles such as *Way to Rome* (2007) simulating phases of movement. The undertaking in this project is to split the pace of video narration in fragmented, halted images that relate to another time: a past that has been captured in documents or else present today, but only as a virtuality. A well-known patriotic Russian march is the soundtrack and it cannot but transform this footage into memory. The disappearance of an ancestor therefore, is the sign of a more general loss, indeed loss as such.

The other project in the exhibition, *Korpeshe-Flags*, includes a photo cycle in which the traditional cushion used in central Asian yurts – which functions both as a bedspread and a mattress – is transformed into a western national flag. The topographical and symbolic location is once again the Kazakh steppe: its flat, low desert horizon, the absence of traces, the empty, open sky. In each photograph a woman with a handkerchief on her head – facing the objective – lifts the *korpeshe* up to the sky, while the plain of the steppe below is covered in red poppies. In turn, each fabric bears the signs of the flag of a different nation: Canada, the USA, Norway, Italy, Turkey Switzerland and so on, in a sequence that superimposes the original imaginary “smooth space” with a new “striated” one – as Deleuze and Guattari would have defined it in their *Nomadology*.

Fabric as the sign of State apparatus contrasts with the infinite space, limitless in every direction that is a feature of the steppe. The flag's closed rectangle forces itself on a space which is open and decentred in its very constitution. Here we do not only find the times of 'before' and 'after' (monochrome red is also a symbolic sign of the past), we also find an idea of mobility that is typical in nomad culture, a space in continuous variation, in contrast with the concept of sedentary space which assigns fixed roles so as to be governed. The originary plain space appears as though captured between the weaving and texture of a streaked space.

In Said Atabekov the masks of the past never cease to return. But with no intention of returning or reassuring an identity to the various individualities of that which has been. A cot for newborn babies (*Besik*), a shaman's equipment, ancient stone idols, felt, a pile of *korpeshe* on top of a trunk, *kokpar* - a popular game on horseback, *Kyzyl Traktor*, the Kalashnikov, the 'Black square on a White background', the remains of the days of Soviet collective farming, the red star, the American flag, the United Nations logo, a Toyota, a boat that has run aground on Lake Aral etc, etc. There is a sort of carnival of time on every occasion that Atabekov goes on show.

On the one hand, everything returns as though it had been lost, emptied: such are the traditional Kazakh jackets lined inside with military camouflage. But on the other hand, uncovered rituals, unqualified skills, local knowledge that has just resurfaced never cease to erode or tarnish any claim to uniqueness in an absolute, definitive, dominant discourse. In a very beautiful video entitled *Noah's Ark* (2004) –

strictly in black and white and in slow motion – a bare-chested child sits on the edge of the steppe and has some visions.

In the first, he sees himself passing through the ruins of an Islamic past; in the second he uses a rope to drag away a dervish with a conical hat and a stick, while a boy and a woman beat him as though he were an impostor. In the final vision the boy tries to use the rope to remove a large Russian military helicopter that has been abandoned in the landscape, now a useless and forgotten object. Is this not perhaps *the Dream of Genghis Khan* this childish and inconceivable task of regaining a nomadic way of being far from history? the succession of powers and States? A time when signs of hegemony and of subjection are abolished?

Marco Scotini

Said Atabekov was born in 1965 in Bes Terek, Uzbekistan. He lives in Shymkent, Kazakhstan.

Selected exhibitions since 2005:

2011 : 54th Venice Biennale, Central Asia Pavilion, Venice, Italy
Ostalgia, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, New Museum, New York, U.S.A.
4. *Fotofestival The Eye is a Lonely hunter : images of humankind*, Mannheim – Ludwigshafen- Heidelberg, Germany
Winner of the Prince Claus Fund , Amsterdam, Netherland
2010 : *Rites without myths* , curated by Ilari Valbonesi, Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan, Italy
2009 : *Lonely at the Top*, curated by Viktor Misiano , Muhka Museum , Antwerp , Belgium
Son of the East, Laura Bulian Gallery, Milano, Italy – solo show
Photoquai 2009 , Biennale des Images du monde, Paris , France
Changing Climate , Kunsthalle Wien, Austria
Scènes Centrales , LILLE-3000 , Lille, France
2008 Destination Asia – Flying over stereotypes , Gallery ELEMENTA, Dubai, UAE
Old/New Routes- A Selection of video Art from Central Asia, BizArt , Shanghai, China
2007 : 52st Venice Biennale , Central Asia Pavilion, Venice, Italy
Time of Storytellers , curated by Viktor Misiano , Kiasma Museum, Helsinki, Finland
Live Cinema , *The return of the Image*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia , USA
La Biennale de Montreal 2007, Montreal, Canada
Way to Rome , SCCA , Almaty, Kazakhstan
2006 : 10th Media Art Biennale Free waves, Los Angeles, USA
Contemporary Art from Central Asia, Ujasdovskii Castle, Warsaw, Poland
2005: 51st Venice Biennale , Central Asian Pavilion, Venice, Italy
9th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey
In the shadows of heroes, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
X Prague Quadrennial, Prague, Czech Republic .