

Tarinankertojien aika

Kertova ja etäinen katse entisten neuvostotasavaltojen taiteessa

Time of the Storytellers

Narrative and Distant Gaze in Post-Soviet Art



KIASMA

Gulnara Kasmalieva

★ 1960 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan ▶ Bishkek

Muratbek Djumaliev

★ 1965 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan ▶ Bishkek

THE IRON SILK ROAD

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev's project "A New Silk Road: Algorithm for Survival and Hope" is a reconstruction of one of the economic realities of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Trucks carrying scrap metal through the mountain passes to sell in Western China. The spectator observes the process of sorting and loading the waste metal, the everyday lives of those taking part in the expedition, the stops on the road for rest and repairs, meetings with the inhabitants of the villages dotted along the roadside, the picturesque mountain landscapes, and, of course the steady and meditative movement of these heavy trucks loaded with rusty iron, giving them the expressive and slightly infernal appearance of "sarcophagi full of dead things". This video installation is accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of the metal load being transported.

The artists have entitled this dramatic action as "A New Silk Road". In other words, these modern commercial expeditions are being represented as the descendants of the ancient medieval caravans of the Great Silk Road – that legendary trading route that passes through Central Asia and has been connecting the East and the West of

Eurasia for seventeen centuries. The Great Silk Road – which came to a standstill in the 15th century due to increased political instability along its length and the development of alternative sea routes – is to this day still a very popular "brand name" in the countries of Central Asia. Its name is gladly invoked and used by firms, organisations and all sorts of social initiatives. The Great Silk Road is a symbol of prosperity and success (many cities in Central Asia existed as transit points along the Silk Road and since its decline have consequently fallen into decay). This is a symbol of the peaceful links between West and East and it was clearly the latter that dominated this relationship. For the whole of the Silk Road's working life, the East was more technologically advanced than the West with the East bringing its valuable goods (silk, cotton, wool, china, and spices) in return for Europe's gold.

Today once again, international trade, having served as the economic foundation of these medieval cities, has become a source of survival for the population of post-Soviet Asia. However, now it is no longer luxury items for Europe's ruling classes that are being transported. Along the smaller Asian

section of the Great Silk Road there now only travel trucks piled high with low quality clothing from China and rusty scrap metal going back in the opposite direction, and the services organised by the roadside villagers for these modern day caravans are much more basic and modest.

After the crash of the USSR this same “silk road” has become the sole means of survival for thousands of former Soviet citizens. An avalanche of “suitcase traders” (as these small traders independently plying their goods are called in the post-Soviet space), are swamping the railway stations with their huge multi-coloured checked and plastic weave bags and these have become a colourful sign of the post-perestroika times. Kasmalieva's and Djumaliev's other video installation “The Trans-Siberian Amazons” (2004) – is a wall made out of these huge checked bags, which press in around a video screen showing an old woman trader travelling on a train singing the lyrical ballads of the old Soviet times.

In the series of photographs from the “A New Silk Road: Algorithm for Survival and

Hope” fragments from the life of Bishkek's Dordoi Market are displayed. This is the biggest trading hub in Central Asia where cheap goods are brought from China and thence transported to the other regions of Central Asia. We see people shut in by narrow streets made up of containers and heavy and unwieldy bales of goods that have become lost amongst the mountains of clothes that are being sold for practically nothing.

Kasmalieva's and Djumaliev's narration about the lives of those toiling along the contemporary Silk Road sounds like an epic saga and the soft humour intrinsic to this work stops it from being turned into a tragedy or a political pamphlet darkly chronicling the horrors of the Third World. Although sympathising with their subjects the artists do not treat them as victims but as people who are putting up an obstinate resistance to their unfriendly environment. This lack of “life quality” has not turned life into one that is “sub-standard”. The pictures shown to us by the artists are pictures of a meaningful life, albeit with a slightly metallic after taste.

Oksana Shatalova



Gulnara Kasmalieva & Muratbek Djumaliev
Uusi Silkkitie: Selviytymisen ja toivon menetelmä
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