

LAURA BULIAN GALLERY

via Montevideo 11 – 20144 MILANO

tel. +39 02 48 00 89 83

info@laurabuliangallery.com

www.laurabuliangallery.com

Facebook : Laura BulianGallery

INTERVIEW TO VIKTOR MISIANO by Valentina Parisi

Opening exhibition

“Said Atabekov. Son of the East”, May 14th, 2009 – Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan

Viktor, can you please tell us something about the earliest steps of Said Atabekov’s art, that now we can see in Milan, at Laura Bulian Gallery, and which is his position in the landscape of contemporary art in Central Asia?

Well, Said Atabekov represents the whole experience of Kazakhstan and Central Asian art, in general, we can say even of Soviet art. He is exactly, in the Post Soviet Period , one of the key personality of that generation which appeared on the international art scene during the Nineties. In this exhibition he shows his earlier works, which are not individual: he worked in a collective, he played a role in the establishment of this collective, but formally he used to work refusing his individual “artistic signature”. The name of his group was “Red Tractor” and it was mostly a performing group. It was an art school realising theatrical and musical performances. The topic of its performances was mostly focused on the research of the national roots; so they were singing, they were dancing, they were producing fantastic costumes and all these activities of his group were the direct reaction to the problem of identity, the “necessity of inventing an identity”. Most of the Post Soviet countries, Russia included, have in common this experience of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and of the “ Red Tractor ” group, because all these countries got the independence in this period. For decades, a big part of these countries was marked not ethnically, not culturally not linguistically, but politically - because Soviet was a political identity, not a national identity. Soviet art was focused on a problematic: “who we are”, which kind of narrative we have in common as citizens of the same country. This activity of Red Tractor - inventing costumes, inventing national sources, inventing national histories, inventing dancing - , is a response to the challenge of that situation. In this way we can say “yes, our roots are here, our roots are in this oriental, mythical, still undiscovered culture world”, but at the same time it was very ironic, because Kazakhstan is in Central Asia, but also as a Soviet Republic they used to be a highly modernized country, so the reality is that the activities of the “ Red Tractor ” were constructing identity, but at the same time they were treating them very ironically, even in a kind of criticism of this pseudo- orientalization. The reality of the problem is that Central Asia countries became twice “ oriental ” after the collapse of Soviet Union – from a geographical point of view, because big part of the Soviet Union could be easily considered a European country as half of Russia is practically part of Europe, and at the same time culturally because, by living in this Soviet country of speedy modernization , they were considered from outside as an oriental world. This is what I mean: “double orientalization” of Central Asia after the collapse of Soviet Union. In this case, this ironic performance of orientalism was a critic to the situation of the

Nineties. Certain traces of these performing activities of the Nineties can be noticed for example in his video, "Neon paradise" where we see him during one of his first trips to – let's say – "Europe" or "The West", part of Europe such as Croatia, Istanbul, where he appears dressed in an oriental, very picturesque costume, designed by himself, in a very oriental pose, sitting on his legs. He put himself in front of the entrance of a supermarket, in an oriental ritual gesture, and he keeps the distance from the automatic doors of the supermarket; when he is just approaching his head close to the doors and they just open, you'll never know if this is the magic effect of his praying or if he is contemplating contemporary technology. This work is perfectly orchestrated, with irony and at the same time a necessity to mark himself, to identify himself. This is the problematic of the Nineties, it's the typical situation of this decade when art – or society – became "global" and in reality, by this time, globalization was most economical, so globalization in art was first of all in the art market, considered in economical terms. In fact, we have to give an answer about what is globalization in the Nineties. Art has acted as a global market of national brands, so national arts were proposing an ethnicity, a race, a national passport, and in fact all these strategies of Central Asian artists attract us by inventing all these – never existing – identities, because at the western eye they look very oriental, invented by the artists who seem as oriental, but they're not oriental, so this is the reason of their irony, against the West or against themselves, producing these national brands. All this activity is typical for the Nineties. I would say that the work of Said has definitely changed, as you asked me about different steps. So I would say that at the end of the Nineties his work radically changed and from my point of view he went from this activism, from performative activity into a practice that could be named "Myth making". In fact his work is focused on the reflection of building up a huge and very complex mythological narrative.

So it's not only a personal identity or national identity, but after the Nineties is more a construction of his own mythology?

Yes, it is a construction of his own mythology, but at the same time his mythology is very complex. His mythology is, of course, related to his previous activity, to the reflection of his original condition – the motifs of his steppes, of his parental ideals. Of course, his reflection on the particular condition of Central Asia is very much in the focus of his new mythology but at the same time all post soviet reflections are also coming up because we can see a lot of references to soviet past, a lot of post soviet presence. And also very deep reflection of the condition of the global world, to use a mythical term related to mythology as "leit-motif" (Richard Wagner was the first one who used this term applied to mythology), we see a lot of leit-motifs related to pagan civilization, to Islam, of course. But Islam is related to the history of Asia and has also political topics. A lot of leit-motifs are also related to Christian, to Christianity. For example in the case of "Son of the East", one of his earlier works realized in the Nineties, we see references to European civilization. This is a figure of Leonardo, and this national cap is a typical Kazakh cap, and there's also a reference to his personal mythology because the boy is his son.

The palette is the colour of Islam?

It's not turquoise blue. I think the colour in this case is different. Well, and of course there are also a lot of references to contemporary political conditions of the world and also of the Central Asia. One of the most important works by Said, "The Way to Rome" is very much focused on his activity: it is in fact, a work in progress, it's open,

he is continuing working on it , and this is a strange assemblage of different motifs, related to his wish of building up a mythology of contemporary time, so we see motifs related to higher political power of the U.S.A., to United Nations forces, to United Nation presence in that region, because we have not to forget that Kazakhstan is quite close to Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran.

So, I mean, all these motifs are in this work, because they are very close to his every day experience. We have a lot of reference to Soviet past, to Islam. For example this figure (" Way to Rome # 2 " ndr) , which is also present in this exhibition, is carrying the symbol of Islam, and is a paraphrase of "Via Dolorosa" of Jesus Christ, so it' s a very complex mixture of different symbols and different leit-motifs, related to what could be considered his post-soviet, Asian narrative.