



KASMALIEVA AND DJUMALIEV

A NEW SILK ROAD: ALGORITHM OF SURVIVAL AND HOPE

GULNARA KASMALIEVA (BORN 1960) AND MURATBEK DJUMALIEV (BORN 1965) are a vital artistic force in Kyrgyzstan, a young nation with an ancient history. Their video, photographic, and performance projects aim to unpack multiple layers of Kyrgyz identity, including the country's traditional nomadic and shamanic roots, its Soviet past, and the new republic's tenuous position in the current global capitalist system. Kyrgyzstan, known officially today as the Kyrgyz Republic, is located on the plateaus of the Tien-Shan (Celestial) Mountains in Central Asia, bordered by China to the east, Kazakhstan and Russia to the north, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, to the southwest. Neighbors farther to the south include Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Centuries of invasion and resettlement at the hands of warring, expansionist groups, including Mongol, Arab, Turk, Chinese, and Russian, have led to the current mixture of cultural influences and a fairly healthy society-wide distrust of authority. The historic Silk Road(s) that stretch over 7,000 miles between China and the Mediterranean via Central Asia serve as a backdrop to the artists' critical investigations of the small-scale trade economies that have cropped up in the 16 years since the collapse of

the Soviet Union. Where once passed Marco Polo and caravans of camels and horses laden with precious luxury goods, today Kyrgyz and Chinese truck fleets move cargo back and forth over the border attracting entrepreneurial communities of rural villagers to makeshift towns along the road, offering food and other services to the comparatively wealthy drivers. Using documentary processes within a conceptual framework, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev map new terrain along the ancient paths. They reveal the experiences of these contemporary residents who, after nearly 75 years of compulsory settlement and collective farming, rely anew on trade, and still, over four centuries since the demise of the original routes, refer to the thoroughfare along which they make their living as the *tybek jol*, or the "Silk Road."

Having grown up during the Soviet era, both Kasmalieva and Djumaliev were trained in traditional art media. She studied in Moscow and Estonia, with an emphasis in graphic art and printmaking, while he focused on sculpture in Saint Petersburg. They each enjoyed a solid, supportive—albeit conservative—artistic education in which they were able to travel freely and inexpensively throughout the 15 nations comprising the Soviet Union (equal to roughly one-sixth of the globe) and to create

and exhibit their work—opportunities that are now out of reach to most Kyrgyz artists. Partners in life and in work, they have developed a successful international career over the last decade. Their collaborative projects have been featured in the Venice and Singapore biennials, as well as multiple group and solo exhibitions in New York, Denmark, Italy, Spain, and much of Central Asia.

In recent years the two have also been leaders in the cultivation of the artistic community in Kyrgyzstan, where institutional infrastructure for the education and support of artists has long since been abandoned by the government. Adopting the roles of cultural administrators, mentors, and facilitators, they joined with other artists in 2003 to incorporate their own nongovernmental organization called ArtEast, which aims to advance contemporary art in Kyrgyzstan, promote partnerships with international arts organizations, and encourage the use of new technologies in art by providing studio, workshop, and video-editing facilities. Kasmalieva and Djumaliev also implemented the 2nd and 3rd Bishkek International Exhibitions of Contemporary Art, *In the Shadow of "Heroes" and Zone of Risk—Transition* (October 2005 and 2006, respectively), which brought together works in a variety of media by artists

from Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Central Asia, China, India, Iran, Russia, Spain, and the United States. These exhibitions, replete with works of pointed political commentary, were aptly installed in the dusty underground complex of the former KGB headquarters situated directly beneath Bishkek's Ala-Too Central Square, previously Lenin Square. The square is also home to the State Historical Museum, previously Lenin Museum, outside of which a liberty statue supplanted an oversized likeness of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin—its coattails flying and arm outstretched beckoning the multitudes to follow—that used to tower over the square until 2003, when it was finally relegated to the small garden behind the museum.

Another massive bronze image of the Soviet leader looms over the grand lobby staircase of the museum. The plaque at the foot of the sculpture, which was optimistically erected only seven years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, reads, "My novy mir postroim," or "We are building a new world." That these monuments remain on view as the nascent republic makes its initial steps toward autonomous nationhood is indicative of the Kyrgyz people's complicated relationship with their own turbulent history. One of the largest and most devastating Kyrgyz displacements occurred in the wake

of the notorious Revolt of 1916. Prompted by the Central Asian colonial subjects' forced participation in World War I on behalf of the Russian Empire—not to fight, but to clear and build roads, produce food, and transport equipment, freeing the Russian troops for combat duties—the rebellion culminated in a devastating 120,000 Kyrgyz dead with an additional 120,000 migrating to The People's Republic of China.¹ Among these émigrés were Kasmalieva's grandparents who, because of their privileged positions as landowners, were forced to make the treacherous journey through the mountain passes, remaining over the border until spring when they could make the trek back home in time to witness the Russian Revolution and its promises of change for the better. The reality of the Soviet era was complex, however. Along with the implementation of agricultural and industrial advancements, and the building of schools, parks, and public institutions, it also entailed the oppressions attendant to life under a totalitarian regime. The Kyrgyz are just now piecing together and reclaiming the entirety of their history after decades of its suppression by the Soviet government.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan—left with fewer marketable resources than, for example, Kazakhstan to the north with its rich oil reserves or

Uzbekistan to the west with its significant natural gas deposits—continues the struggle to gain a foothold in the global economy. Passionate about their country, but frustrated with the corrupt political landscape and economic hardships of the last 16 years, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev confront this adversity head-on, using the skills they have developed as artists to affect change in their community. At its essence, theirs is a practice that redefines the terms of art in the face of what Djumaliev refers to as "the collective phobia, skepticism and disappointment" that pervades the milieu they inhabit.² Melding the poetic with the political, they employ evocative imagery with minimal narrative structure in order to tell poignant stories of human struggle, perseverance, and hope for the future. Their single-channel video *Revolution* (2005) portrays the March 2005 Tulip Revolution, which resulted in the ouster of former President Askar Akayev and his government after 15 years of rule. Clever editing mirrors the relatively peaceful protests that began in Ala-Too Central Square but quickly escalated to violence in the streets, culminating in the looting of stores and government buildings, as well as vehicles set ablaze. Combined with the cartoonish soundtrack of composer Edvard Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, the spectacle is pushed to the brink of absurdity, becoming a

visual expression of the artists' distrust of the political process, whether revolutionary or administrative. The two projects featured in this focus exhibition, *Trans-Siberian Amazons* (2004) and *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope* (2006), similarly bear witness to socioeconomic and political realities without relying on a narrative documentary structure.

The middle screen in the three-channel video *Trans-Siberian Amazons* portrays two older women in a dimly lit train car. On each of the two adjacent screens, gray skies and vast, vacant landscapes sweep past in opposing directions. Each one is an echo of the rest, frustrating any desire to mark the distance traveled. Visibly nostalgic, the central figure delivers a wistful rendition of "Without Me," a popular ballad from the mid-1980s by Russian diva Alla Pugacheva, in which a lover cautions her departed mate that without her, he will "have but one wing." Easily recognizable by anyone of a certain age from the former USSR, but intentionally untranslated for English-speaking viewers, the song of thwarted love, in this context, serves as a metaphor for the loss of an entire way of life. Relying on two signal motifs—the protagonists in the train car and the landscape outside the window—the video implicitly tells a story of Post-Soviet economic

devastation. What we are left to intuit is that these women are making an arduous journey hauling domestic goods across Central Asia. They, and countless others like them who were previously employed in the professional sector, are now forced into small-scale trade and transport in order to support their families. They are "amazons" in the sense that they are women who, against the odds, have taken charge of their own destinies, which is remarkable considering the large percentage of men in their communities who remain unemployed, seemingly unable to make the same sacrifices. The video is at once a tribute to those who have been deserted in the name of political "progress," as well as an intimate portrait of two individuals struggling to survive and provide for their families. The pared down simplicity of the installation exemplifies the artists' strength in relaying rather complex narratives with the sparest of means and their capacity to weave the political into the visually poetic.

Created especially for this focus exhibition, the five-channel video installation accompanied by 27 still photographs *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope* (2006) provides an abstract set of instructions for resilience in face of hardship. Over the course of a several-day-long journey, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev recorded the process of sorting and

packing scrap metal for transport by truck between Kyrgyzstan and western China. As they trailed the caravan they captured the sculptural beauty of the vehicles, and in the installation, juxtapose such images with those of the long-established rural communities that populate the plateaus and the provisional villages now springing up near the road in a reflection of the scrap economy's viability. Through deft video and sound editing, the artists hone in on the patterns and cadences formed amidst the chaotic activity, exposing the humanity in an account that is at its essence about global economics. All five screens open with humming trucks crisscrossing through the mountains, followed by the clinging sounds of the collecting, sorting, and loading of the metal. The rhythmic packing and taping of giant parcels in the marketplace is then depicted, before the camera cuts back to mountains, where truckers and villagers come together and the central screen highlights one young rural man as he sings a traditional Kyrgyz tune. Closing the cycle, we return to the trucks, the basis of a new economy. Devoid of nostalgia for the ancient Silk Road, with all of its romantic connotations, the project foregrounds instead the contradictory currents in the existence faced by the living, breathing populations along these well-worn trade routes. The artists' clear focus is the entrepreneurial

ingenuity and perseverance that have taken hold in recent years, and an intimation of what may lie ahead.

Kasmalieva and Djumaliev's practice argues for the redefinition of identities within a paradigm of cultural and political upheaval. Much like the "amazons" in Siberia and the villagers along the great old Silk Way, their individual projects exemplify artistic perseverance and cultural leadership in the face of plight. Their production and the international acclaim it has received are evidence of the potential for cross-cultural exchange as one antidote to political subjection; the more visibility they garner through their work, the more opportunities they are able to create for other artists who can use this as a vehicle for further cultural engagement and even financial solvency; ultimately leading to increased political power. Through the lens of the Kyrgyz experience, one that may at first seem remotely obscure, the works of Kasmalieva and Djumaliev ultimately guide us to recognize the interconnectivity of contemporary experience—cultural, political, and economic.

LISA BORIN
ASSOCIATE CURATOR
DEPARTMENT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

1. The unfortunate wording of the czar's decree was "requisition" rather than "conscription," indicating that the Central Asian subjects were considered property rather than people. The numbers of dead and migrated are approximate due to the suppression of the history by the Soviet regime.
2. Muratbek Djumaliev, "In the Shadow of 'Heroes,'" in *In the Shadow of "Heroes," 2nd Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art* (Bishkek: ArtEast), p. 5.



GULNARA KASMALIEVA

Born Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 1960

Studied Kyrgyz State Art College, 1975–79; Moscow Academy of Fine Arts, 1980–86; Tallinn Academy of Fine Arts, Estonia, 1988–90

Lives and works in Bishkek

MURATBEK DJUMALIEV

Born Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 1965

Studied Kyrgyz State Art College, 1980–84; Mukhina Academy of Art and Design, Saint Petersburg, 1984–91

Lives and works in Bishkek

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev: Into the Future, Plus Ultra Gallery, New York

2002

LeVall Art Gallery, Novosibirsk, Russia

1999

Drawing's Return, The Gagarin Museum, Bishkek

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007

The Paradox of Polarity: Contemporary Art from Central Asia, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York

2002

Naked Life, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, Taiwan

2006

La sindrome di Tamerlano: Arte e conflitti in Asia centrale/ The Tamerlane Syndrome: Art and Conflicts in Central Asia, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee; Palazzo dei Sette, Orvieto, Italy (cat.)

2006

Razamina, Spiridonoff Palace, Moscow (cat.)

2006

Singapore Biennale: Believe (cat.)

2006

Zone of Risk—Transition, 3rd Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, underground complex of Ala-Too Central Square, (cat.)

2002

Adventure in Glisbohm, Hollufgård Museum and Art Center, Odense, Denmark (cat.)

2001

Contested Spaces in Post-Soviet Art: Russian Redux 2, Sydney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, New York

Art of Central Asia, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland (cat.)

Biennale Cavée: World Selection of Contemporary Art, O.K. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz, Austria

2005
51st Venice Biennale, Central Asian Pavilion: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (cat.)

Videoidentity: Sacred Places of Central Asia, Soros Center for Contemporary Art/German Theatre, Almaty, Kazakhstan

In the Shadow of "Heroes", 2nd Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, underground complex of Ala-Too Central Square (cat.)

Thrust: 26th Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia (cat.)

Adventure in Glisbohm, Hollufgård Museum and Art Center, Odense, Denmark (cat.)

The Taste of Others, Apex Art Gallery, New York

2004

The Way the World Is, Vector Museum of Fine Arts, Turkish Association of Iasi, Turkish Bath, Iasi, Romania (cat.)

... And Others, 1st Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (cat.)

Pueblor y sombras (Peoples and shadows): Contemporary Art from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Cámara Nacional de la Industria Artística, Mexico City

Contemporaneity: International Video Art in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts

2003
3rd International Biennial of Contemporary Graphic Art, Novosibirsk State Art Museum, Russia (cat.)

2002
Trans-Forma, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

No Mad's Land Contemporary Art from Central Asia, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin

2001
2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Graphic Art, Novosibirsk State Art Museum (cat.)

Inner Asia, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts; Tribune Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan; XXX, Saint Petersburg; Novosibirsk State Art Museum; Fine Arts Museum of Uzbekistan (cat.)

2000
Communication: Experience of Interaction, Kazakh Business Center, Almaty, Kazakhstan

1999
1st International Biennial of Contemporary Graphic Art, Novosibirsk State Art Museum (cat.)

Plus-Minus: International Exhibition of Contemporary Arts, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts (cat.)

1998
Biennial of Contemporary Art, Central Exhibition Hall, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Labyrinth: International Exhibition of Contemporary Arts, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts

1997
Parallel City: International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Arts

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
Akinsha, Konstantin. "Central Asian Pavilion." *Arneus* 104, no. 7 (Summer 2005), p. 184.

Dupuis, Isabelle. "Contested Spaces in Post-Soviet Art." *NY Arts* 11, no. 7/8 (July/Aug. 2006), p. 54.

McEvilley, Thomas. "Report from Central Asia: Video Comes to the 'Stans.'" *Art in America* 93, no. 11 (Dec. 2005), p. 86.

Moulton, Aaron. "The Tamerlane Syndrome: Art and Conflicts in Central Asia, Palazzo dei Sette, Orvieto, Italy." *Flash Art* 38, no. 245 (Nov./Dec. 2005), p. 53.

Iles, Chrissie, Tirdad Zolghadr, and Ralph Rugoff. "Venice Biennale 2005." *Frieze* 93 (Sept. 2005), p. 99.

Sorokina, Elena. "Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, Plus Ultra." *Arforum* 45, no. 2 (Oct. 2006), pp. 268–69.

Winkleman, Edward. "Zone of Risk—Transition." *Universes in Universe*. http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/islamic_world/articles/2006/zone_of_risk_transition

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
Trans-Siberian Amazons, 2004
3-channel video on DVD
Collection of the artists

A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope, 2006
5-channel video on DVD
Collection of the artists

A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope, 2006
27 digital prints
Courtesy the artists and Winkleman/Plus Ultra Gallery, NY

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OPENING EVENTS

THURSDAY 1 FEBRUARY

EXHIBITION PREVIEW
5:30–8:00 p.m.
Gallery 139

ARTISTS' TALK
6:00 p.m.
Price Auditorium

OPENING RECEPTION
7:00 p.m.
Gallery 50

GALLERY TALKS

FRIDAY 23 MARCH
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Lisa Dorin
Gallery 100

TUESDAY 17 APRIL
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition coordinator
Jenny Gheith
Gallery 100

FRONT AND BACK COVERS: Untitled, 2006 (detail), from the series *A New Silk Road*. Courtesy the artists.

THANKS

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THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

1 FEBRUARY–6 MAY 2007