

Tarinankertojien aika

Kertova ja etäinen katse entisten neuvostotasavaltojen taiteessa

Time of the Storytellers

Narrative and Distant Gaze in Post-Soviet Art



KIASMA



Kamppailu neliöstä
Battle for the Square
2007

Said Atabekov

★ 1965 Bes Terek, Uzbekistan ▶ Shymkent, Kazakhstan

BATTLE FOR THE SQUARE

Said Atabekov is an artist from Shymkent, southern Kazakhstan, which has preserved its oriental surroundings to a much greater extent than the regions in the North of the country. The South presents a whole collection of souvenir Asiatic exotica, various different national ceremonies, customs and other manifestations of "oriental colour". The region looks as if it has suffered less from global unification, however, a jeal-

ous and at times artificial cultivation of "the constant of national identity" is partially a reaction to the dangers engendered by globalisation and "losing one's cultural roots".

And such "constants of identity, distinctiveness of character and loyalty to the legacy of one's ancestors" are often reproduced by Said Atabekov in his videos. Of course he does not do this in a conventional patriotic spirit; neither does he present them as the

subjects of criticism but more as lexical tokens for his wider and more universal statements. It could be said that the artist uses ethnographically labelled images to express an international, "common" meaning, idiosyncratically returning (the initial) metaphorical meaning to these manifestations of locality and isolation.

Thus, in the video installation "Betashar" ("the unveiling of a face") a Kazakh wedding ritual is played out. The installation consists of two screens placed opposite each other. On the first screen the bride with a veiled face makes repeated bows (according to custom, her respectfulness is addressed to her future family), on the second screen in reply to these bows the men triumphantly yell "Kazakhstan!". Atabekov has filmed this assembly of men in a football stadium. Despite of all the "gender" symptoms (the opposition of "the male-female" is presented as being perfectly vivid), this work could be interpreted in a much wider sense. To which new family is the bride so earnestly bowing? To whom is her obedience destined? The work talks more about the patriotic affectations of the post-Soviet period that is by no means only characteristic of Asia, when the outbursts of sovereign pride and jingoistic patriotism are combined with the peripheral or feudal role of the bastion of pride on a global political scale.

In a different video project "Battle for the Square", documentary clips of the national game of *Kokpar* are presented. In

this game riders violently compete against each other to gain control over the carcass of a dead sheep. The action is split up on to four screens and the clips have been shot at different times of the year. In this way an evolving panoramic performance is created that combines with an impression of the action's continuity and endlessness. The long shots (from the point of view of the observer on the side lines) alternate with close ups that have been shot in the very centre of the action (from the player's point of view), thus the viewer is involuntarily drawn into the action and "tangibly" feels that he/she is participating in it.

On the one hand this brutal competition, in which the primitive element of brute force rules, looks like an incarnation of a multitude of cosmogonic mythological battles. On the other hand it is similar to a coarse, dangerous and at times treacherous (when each of the players literally tries to tear off a piece of the carcass for himself) view on the part of the artist of our contemporary "market" reality with its cult of competition, leadership and success. The world is represented as a conflict, as a collision in its Darwinian and Hobbesian variations. Moreover, the subject of this violent competitiveness is not essentially important – it might be the hide of a sheep, measuring approximately one square metre and therefore like any other measure in "square metres" (property or land) – a sign of success.

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