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## ART THAT CANNOT YIELD

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### Art That Cannot Yield

When the first light of dawn illuminates the flat roofs of the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, Timur Akhmedov rises and goes straight to his studio. Every morning is the dawn of a discreet, inner battle, one that all artists know too well. It is the battle between the uncompromising spirit of art and painting as a serious craft. In this struggle, Akhmedov finds strength in his work ethic. The only constant in the way his art comes into being is daily graft. He does not sit and hope his muse materialises or wait for the right mood to visit. He prefers to dedicate himself to the canvas day after day and give his best.

There is a Latin saying "Fortis cadere, cedere non potest": "The brave may fall, but cannot yield". In this sense, the way Timur Akhmedov's paintings come into being has something in common with the formative training of a dancer. All the hard work, damaged feet, trial and error are hidden to the audience. Akhmedov is able to offer the viewer pure spirit encapsulated in colour. The paint strokes of the artist are like the moves of a dancer: fluid, serpentine, elegant, musical. They caress the eye. Each mark a witness to the unyielding practice of the painter.



*Unicorn, 2016*

A leading artist in Uzbekistan, Timur Akhmedov was born in 1968 in Tashkent. His father was a nuclear physicist with a second career as an architect, while his mother was a teacher. Reading was very much encouraged in his family, and throughout his childhood Timur was surrounded by books.

"I was born in the days of the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan was part of the Soviet Empire back then. Consequently, Socialist Realism and classical Russian art has always had a strong cultural influence over us. To this day I speak only Russian," says the artist.

Akhmedov studied for four years in the painting department at the College of Art of Uzbekistan, and furthered his education in the Department of Illustration at the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan. As part of the group of artists operating during the 1980s and 1990s, Timur Akhmedov witnessed the development of contemporary art in Uzbekistan as we see it today: "We artists tried to

overcome the strict Soviet cultural influences by looking at the West. Or else, we tried to find solace in Eastern practices. My work draws from both, even though indirectly I have been very much influenced by the Russian avant-garde and the Moscow conceptual school."

His first collective exhibition was held in 1987, followed in 1992 by *Myth Zone*, which he organized with a group of artist friends at the Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent. From there, he participated in a number of other shows including *Standard Design* in 1994 at the House of Cinematographers, and *Kashmir* in 1998 at the Museum of Applied Art.

Over the many years that led Timur Akhmedov to become one of Uzbekistan's most respected artists, he had the chance to explore painting in all its forms. This is not an obvious choice for a contemporary artist. In the 1950s Lucio Fontana made his mark in art by slashing the canvas, allowing artists to go beyond the one-dimensional surface. Since then reverting to the plain surface has always been a challenge. Becoming a *painter-painter* today is an almost religious choice, like taking vows. In this self-imposed restraint, it is normal to see artists moving between the

extremes of what painting allows throughout their careers. The work of Timur Akhmedov is no exception. We can see him moving from the most textured paintings, in which the pigment reveals the deception of the painted image, to graphic work, which has its strong point in simplicity and synthesis. Here the line dominates the composition.

But it is not only about technique: he also varies his subjects. His figurative works represent people wrapped in precious fabrics rendered

in brushstrokes with clear influences from art history. In some works we can see a universe of figures reminiscent of Picasso's *Blue Period*.

The way they are presented evokes a dreamlike world not dissimilar to Chagall. Akhmedov has absorbed the lesson of his masters, and is able to give it back with a unique, personal language. The trained eye can see the emergence of an anatomy à la Modigliani, the richness of Klimt's golden leaves, the colour exuberance of the Nabis.

However, the palette is not Akhmedov's primary concern when tackling a new painting. In fact, he believes that sense of colour is innate.

Coincidence, a resonance with the spirit of the times, a resilience to change: these are all elements that influence his creating images. For him it is about embracing chance and running with it.

We know that figurative paintings usually seduce us with their subjects. When dealing with abstraction though, it is a completely different story. Abstraction is indeed an open confrontation with the formal. Here harmony has to be reached solely by striking just the right balance (or un-balance, if necessary) of shapes and colour. It is like taking the song-writing aspect away from a musician and judging him based only on his voice. A lover of challenges, Akhmedov decided to put himself in this uncomfortable position. And he came out on the winning side.



*Electric Angel, 2016*

We can see this in his most recent abstract output. In works like *Electrical Angel* from 2015 we are reminded of the explosive power of cutting-edge graffiti. Conversely in *Asian Tales* the point of departure is a vase of flowers, until we notice the petals have morphed into confetti. It is then that we realize that flowers are just a pretext to represent a carnival of joy into which the viewer is emotionally drawn.

*Asian Tales* belongs to the artist's most recent body of work from 2016, simply called *Untitled*. It draws upon the natural world to evoke a universe of free forms. Akhmedov's interest in plants is quite recent and started about two years ago, after the artist read Houellebecq's novels *The Map and the Territory* and *Submission*, which he admits had an important influence on him. The first of the two stories has as its protagonist a contemporary artist working with maps and portraits, obsessively revisiting his body of work.

Because of the versatility of his painting, it is not at all surprising to see the artist drawing inspiration from a variety of sources: "I usually start from pre-existing images that are around me: on the internet, in books, in museums." This way art becomes the alchemic process of the life of the individual, an inevitable litmus paper which reflects the fluctuations of the artist's soul.

"Sometimes I am not directly inspired by an image but by a text. It can be poetry or even long and boring literary novels. When you wade through the text, you feel as if you have just crossed a forest. To a lesser extent cinema also inspires me; there are more interesting stories there than in the visual imagery per se."

In visiting museums and exhibitions, the brushstrokes of other painters would register in his subconscious and emerge later, completely integrated into a pre-existing artistic arsenal.

While European modernist paintings are definitely part of the artist's background, it must be pointed out that Central Asian cultural traditions are also an inevitable influence. Turquoise, gold and ochres are recurrent in his palette, and to the viewer these chromatic choices immediately recall the mosques of Bukhara and Samarkand. The decorative ethos which drives artists to create beauty is indeed very natural to Akhmedov.

This approach is shared by other contemporary Uzbek artists, who frequently combine tradition and folklore with contemporary practices and reference the Western avant-garde. Lately though, the artist has sought to explore horizons somewhat beyond the traditional: "For my latest projects I have tried to take a route which is the opposite of that found in the best-known Uzbekistani art, trying to work without the omnipresent traditions and embroidery skills."

Today Timur Akhmedov regularly participates in exhibitions of Uzbekistani artists and his works are in many international private and corporate collections. Collectors include the musician Seal, Dr. M.W.J. Smurfit, Prince Albert of Monaco and The Kildare Hotel & Country Club, Ireland.

Last year he was part of a residency featuring six Uzbek artists at The Abu Dhabi Art Hub, where they created original works on the theme of *Inspired by the UAE* and established connections with local artists. The month-long residency coincided with Central Asia Month at The Art Hub.



*Tashkent Contemporary Art Exhibition Installation*

For the last Tashkent Biennale, which was sadly cancelled at the last minute, Timur Akhmedov prepared a series of installations. Housed in glass cases, the installations were again tackling the ghosts of modernism. They were in fact explicitly dedicated to the Russian abstract art movement Suprematism. This was developed by Kazimir Malevich around 1915 and was characterised by simple geometrical shapes and associated with ideas of spiritual purity. We can imagine this struggle for utopia continues to torment artists, even those rising every day, negotiating between spirit and materiality. After all, the brave may fall, but cannot yield.

#### **About the Author:**

Niama Morelli is an arts writer and curator with a particular interest in contemporary art from Asia. She regularly contributes to Hong-Kong based collector's magazine CoBo, to the Italian magazine Art a Part of Culture, and is the arts writer for Middle East Monitor and Escape Magazine.

#### **About ENE Central Asian Arts (ENECAA):**

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*Pond in the Forest, 2014*



*Asian Tales, 2016*

private collectors. Our research programme contributes to the discourse surrounding Central Asian Art through quantitative and qualitative research. In addition to publishing the results of field based research, the ENECAA team has successfully completed client projects in the Middle East and South-East Asia. And offers specialised courses on modern and contemporary Asian art history, curatorial strategies and art investment. For more information visit [www.enecaa.com](http://www.enecaa.com) (<http://www.enecaa.com/>)

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