ALEXANDR BARKOVSKIY: RESTORING HOPE AND BEAUTY

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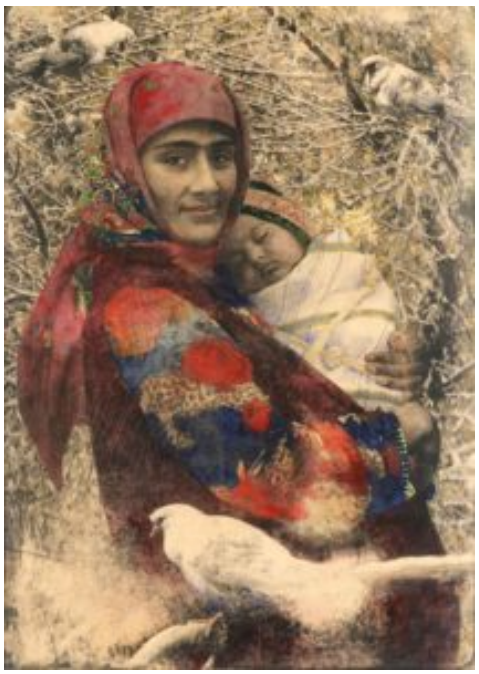
A woman holding a baby looks straight at us from what appears to be a vintage photograph. The pose is that of a Renaissance Madonna, but something is slightly off. Perhaps it is her features, which are too strong, or possibly the colour of her eyes is too dark or the eyebrows too thick. It is probably something to do with her attitude as a whole: more gritty than reassuring. This is not at all what we are used to from the seraphic features of classical iconography. However, neither does she look like a polished, contemporary Vanessa Beecroft *Madonna*. This face oozes authenticity. She is not an archetype from the imagination; she is from real life.

Authenticity is a word that resonates strongly with the work of Alexander Barkovsky, and with his *Gypsy Madonnas* series in particular, to which the aforementioned work belongs. In 2012 the series was awarded the Golden Prize at the 6th Tashkent Photo Biennale for *Best Young Photographer Project*, while *Gypsy Madonna No. 6* was sold at Sotheby's 2013 auction *At The Crossroads: Contemporary Art from The Caucasus and Central Asia*.

The subjects of these unconventional works are the Central Asian Gypsies, called *Luli*. In traditional Central Asian society, *Luli* are seen almost as pariahs, since they are mainly found begging and collecting garbage. They endure discrimination on multiple fronts. Although most of them are Muslim, Uzbek and Tajik Muslims do not consider *Luli*'s religious beliefs as "pure" as their own. In Russia on the other hand, they are neither welcomed by the ethnic Russian population – which see them as parasites – nor by the local gypsies – who do not recognize them as a kindred group.

In the series, Alexandr looks beyond the stereotype, portraying the best and often overlooked traits of the *Luli* women, who embody endurance, strength, openness, humility and love for their children. Associating these uncompromising, authentic faces with classic Christian iconography, he spurs the viewer to find goodness and innocence in a group of people which seems doomed to be seen as inherently bad and untrustworthy.

As we can see from the series, the work of Alexandr Barkovskiy is a great visual paradigm for whoever seeks to understand the contemporary cultural scene in Uzbekistan and Central Asia at large. Having recently exhibited at the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art and Gallery Andakulovoy in Dubai and having been honoured by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art and by the Contemporary Art Museum ART4.ru, this 37-year-old artist encapsulates the key cultural transformations Uzbekistan has been undergoing in recent years.



A son of Russian colonizers who came to Uzbekistan during the Russian expansion in the nineteenth century, Alexander's perspective on his country is simultaneously one of an insider and an outsider:

“While I still do not feel like I fully belong, I deeply love Uzbekistan’s Eastern culture. Islam as both a religion and an aesthetic is a very interesting topic for me to explore in my projects.”

Alexander’s earlier artistic memories are indeed tied to religion. When he was only five years old, his grandmother, who was part of a Christian minority in the country of only 2%, would take him to church. He used to stand in front of orthodox icons for a long time, trying to grasp all the details in order put the image on paper immediately once he got home.

Initially Alexandr studied design at the Benkov College of Art, before choosing to commit fully to art – a path that is not the norm in trade-oriented Uzbekistan: “It was a personal and unconventional choice, and it gave me the most enjoyable way of life and a tool for knowledge and understanding of what was around me.”

Like many Uzbek artists, Alexandr was influenced by the presence of avant-garde works in their museums. Consequentially his first paintings channel Modernism and are exquisitely formal in their interplay of colours, lines and shapes. “Initially, it was about imitating,” he explains. “I drew and painted pictures first in the style of Impressionism, then Surrealism, then the Naives.”

After this period of experimentation, which is a stepping stone for almost all artists, 2004 saw a turning point. It was during his studies at the Moscow School of Modern Art that the artist started to invest actively in finding a personal style and an individual path in the contemporary art arena. For him it all began with the purchase of a camera, Photoshop and Adobe Suite to re-work images he was attracted to: “It was then that I started exploring video art and photo collage.”

As soon as his work started to reach stylistic cohesion, the themes of religion, tradition and consumerist culture began to materialize. More than outwardly provoking and criticising, however, the artist seemed interested in eliciting reflection and showing hidden beauty and hope. In no other series is this ethos more apparent than in *Tales of the Force*.

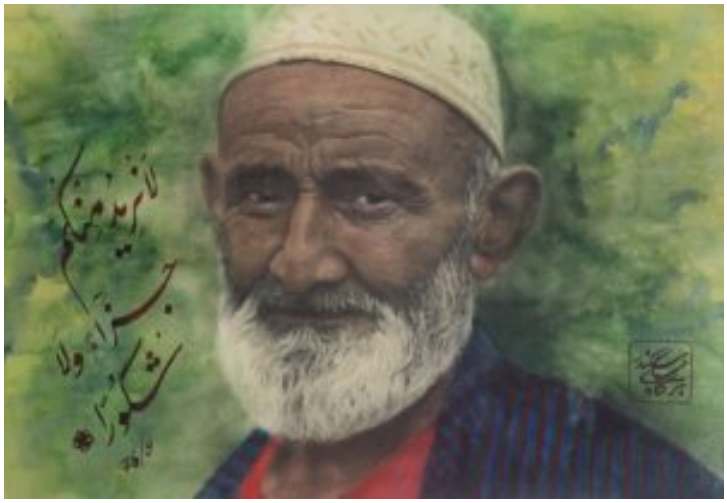
Based on old photographs of Uzbekistan at the time of Soviet occupation*, Tales of the Force* portrays Soviet citizens and scenes from ancient Uzbek life, with surreal apparitions of Western consumer goods and, in some cases, movie actors and characters like Marilyn Monroe or Yoda from Star Wars. “When I was a kid, I always wondered what lay beyond the Soviet Union,” explains the artist, regarding the inspiration for project. “Only later did I learn words like ‘Iron Curtain’.”

During his childhood, the artist experienced small slices of American culture, which came in the most unassuming forms, such as coloured candy wrappers. Every small hint of pop culture was perceived as exotic and fascinating: “A label from a pack of American gum was of a bright crimson colour, which was

not used in Soviet printing. The smell of the candy paper was alluring and magical, as if from another world." In a way it really was.

In *Tales of the Force* he mingles this childhood fascination with an awareness of how consumerist culture can impact tradition. In his intentions though, he is far from militant: "I consider myself an observer and I try to be as objective as possible, without having aggressive reactions or being too harsh in my condemnation." says Alexander. "I try to always have a grip on my emotions and maintain control over the work, although I'm aware that I can't predict the viewer's and critic's perception of my art."

In terms of technique *Tales of the Force* and *Gypsy Madonnas* both employ the same effect of antiquated photographs, obtained through lithographic printing. To Alexander this gives the work a timeless authenticity and sense of human sympathy unachievable through modern printing. The lithographs are printed on a special paper, which allows the artist to refine prints with watercolour, tempera or gouache.



The same methodology was also employed for another series called *Place on Earth*. The project portrayed residents of villages from the Surkhandarya region, a rural area of Uzbekistan. Here the way of life is extremely simple, and radically different from the urban lifestyles of the capital Tashkent. We can see how the people depicted in the series embody the spirit of what the artist considers to be a special place on earth – almost an ideal world.

A calligraphic inscription in Arabic is superimposed on each image. These are *surahs* from the Koran, reminders of the strong religious seam in the Surkhandarya region. The provinces are, in fact, the last places where Islam persists in the traditional sense, twentieth-century Uzbekistan having lost a good part of this ancient connection and evolved towards a more secular society. What the country has preserved of these old traditions is mainly its visual presence in images of the spectacular medieval architecture.

In *Place on Earth* the artist tries to show that Utopian societies exist. Each image fosters the hope that it is possible to restore a world where men live in harmony with nature and their neighbour, and are accustomed to sincere thoughts and feelings. What can sound idealistic to the more disillusioned among us is actually what pushes the artist to create art: "In our short lifetimes we can do nothing but look for spiritual solutions to our problems and try to reach a state of awareness. In this sense, I think art is the way to go."

About the Author:

Naima 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.