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'Punk Orientalism' looks at Russia’s complex relationship with Arab world through art

Author Sara Raza explores in her new book the relationship of art between the former Soviet Union and the Arab world through the eyes of several artists.



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It is fascinating when worlds that seem to be light-years away from each other suddenly come together, materializing unexpected commonalities. Take the term “Orientalism,” a concept established by Palestinian-American author Edward Said to describe the West's commonly contemptuous portrayal of the East. Would you ever associate it with punk counterculture?

Probably not, but that's what curator, writer and academic Sara Raza did with her new book, titled "[Punk Orientalism: The Art of Rebellion](#)." The book explores the spaces and places associated with the former Soviet Union, focusing on the artists and ideas hailing from Central Asia and the Caucasus, which were long perceived as an extension, or "client" states, of the USSR.

Raza coined the term "Punk Orientalism" more than a decade ago, coupling the idea of punk with a critical study of Orientalism and its historical association with imperialism. "I think now the themes and DIY aesthetic of punk are more relevant than ever," Raza told Al-Monitor. "Punk was by nature always decentralized."



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In the book, the author expands Said's Orientalism in reference to the Arab world, to elaborate on its association with this territory to explore former Soviet possessions in Central Asia and the Caucasus. But the book also looks at the USSR's complex relationship with the Arab world, Iran and Turkey, and what has become of it nowadays, all through the eyes of the artists.

An example is the work of Ala Younis from Amman who created the multimedia project "[Ex-Soviet Archive](#)," which explores the establishment of Soviet film clubs in Arab cities during the 1960s and 1970s. "Something that I often look at in my practice is how to connect two disparate points," said interviewee Younis in the book. "I was compelled to undertake this project because of these transcultural connections."

The result of Raza's 16 years of research as an art curator, writer and academic, the book is organized into seven thematic chapters and in-depth interviews. These areas include geopolitical games, proxies, conceptual landscaping, and poetic codes as alternative cultural barometers, alphabet politics, whistleblowing, and the ideologies of formal and informal architecture in the making and unmaking of state narratives.

"I have been working on this project since 2014, with a lot of interruptions and projects that created many diversions," Raza said. "However, I am grateful for the time it took to complete since it allowed me to truly reflect upon my work as a retrospective exercise with the [coronavirus] pandemic allowing for that."

Punk counterculture surrounded Raza's upbringing in London, but what really got her close to the ethos of the movement was studying art history at Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art in the late 1990s into the early 2000s. This was the time and the place where the infamous [Young British Artists](#) movement and New Contemporaries artist phenomena started. "It's impossible to disentangle the punk legacy from what these contemporary artists were trying to achieve," she noted.

"I was a student at the tail end of what was known as the multicultural decade," Raza added. "Although the punk movement preceded me by about a generation, its legacy was certainly present. In art schools such as Goldsmiths College, where punk emerged, students had a strong DIY attitude. They formed punk bands and created a confluence between art and music."

Raza considers herself fortunate to have studied in that environment, but she didn't want to be confined in the West. She rather chose to look at what was happening east of Europe to Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East, and explore the post-Soviet and post-colonial art history in tandem. That is perhaps also due to her heritage, which is Persian, Central Asian and Ottoman, which allowed her to travel and live in Europe, Asia and the Middle East since early childhood.

As a subject of study, she became interested in the post-Soviet landscape after 1991, and there are many histories both familial and art-historical that personally intersected for her. "I was born in 1979 and that's the year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution, as well as a lesser-known event called the [Incident of Mecca](#), when insurgents stormed the holy site of Mecca in Saudi Arabia," she said.

Ten years later, the world shifted again in 1989, with the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the end of Apartheid and the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Another decade later, we had the internet and the few years following was marred by 9/11. "My research is sandwiched somewhere between these pivotal moments and I explore these complex periods through art and ideas," Raza said.

Raza's curatorial work challenges the Western gaze on the art from corners of the world relegated to exoticism, but she explains that her interest was never in examining art within the colonial or imperial frames of East-West binaries. "I was more interested in exploring East-East dialogues, hence my research into Soviet Orientalism, which is much more nuanced as it's about the confluences of ideas

that have been swapping hands for centuries. The history between Central Asia and Russia is an example of this and is akin to 'oil and water,'" she explained.

We see an example of this in the work of Kazakhi artist Erbossyn Meldibekov, who in the book presents works such as the series of paintings called "[Seasons](#)," which plays around the idea of postcards and monuments of past Soviet leaders. "Regional and global politics have always been of great interest in my work, particularly the history of Central Asia and its relationship with the USSR, following its independence," Meldibekov said.

Raza thinks that it would be impossible to separate the work of the artists from the socio-political context they hail from. "However, I would say that the artists are political with a lowercase 'p,' not a capital letter," she noted. "Their approach akin to punk is far more rooted in the now less organized socio-political context in comparison with other political social groups that were activist at their core."

To this day, Central Asia and the Caucasus are one of the most under-researched regions in the contemporary art world, and this is one of the reasons why Raza is mentoring young curators and researchers who are expanding on what she started. "The work that we do as art historians exists for the next generation to build upon," she concluded. "To expand upon knowledge as part of an encyclopedic exercise is something that I am very interested in."

It seems that with this book, Raza is taking on the punk movement's proclamation of "NO FUTURE" and suggesting an alternative. In her words, "A new multifaceted prism for a different kind of future."

Expression of this energy is one of the artworks featured in the book, called "[In Transit](#)," by Afghani artist Lida Abdul. This is a short film that features children playing with an abandoned Soviet plane. "I wanted to film children because in some sense they represent a kind of fantasy world; they are willing to forget a little to move forward, something their parents' generation is less capable of," Abdul says in the book. "The children approach the theme of violence by disarming it through playfulness."

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