

Collecting

Central Asia in the spotlight at Asia Now fair

Craft, nomadism and spirituality feature prominently in the region's artistic practices

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“If you think about it, central Asia really misses all the Venn diagrams,” says Payam from artist collective Slavs and Tatars. “It’s largely Muslim, but it’s not the Middle East. It’s largely Russian-speaking, but not by choice. It’s largely in Asia, but it has never been under Chinese rule, with the exception of Xinjiang or Uyghur territory. It’s largely Turkish, but was never under the Ottomans. And that is why it’s so interesting.”

Contemporary art of the region — an enormous landlocked area which Slavs and Tatars defines as “east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China”, encompassing Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the other “stans” — will be the focus of the ninth edition of the Asia Now fair in Paris (October 20-22), which Slavs and Tatars are guest curating. While gathering attention at an institutional level, there is still relatively low market demand for art from the region, in part thanks to political complexities and a cultural identity that is difficult to pin down. The fair hopes to start redressing that.



‘What Was My Name’ (2020) by Saodat Ismailova © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ilyas Ualiyev

In the region, Kazakhstan is a dominant player. Its largest city, Almaty, is home to a number of galleries, such as Aspan. “For many European curators, art critics and collectors, an art fair like Asia Now would be their first encounter with artists from the region,” says Aspan’s co-founder Meruyert Kaliyeva. “As a gallery situated thousands of miles away from any centre of contemporary art, it is very important for us to participate in art fairs.”

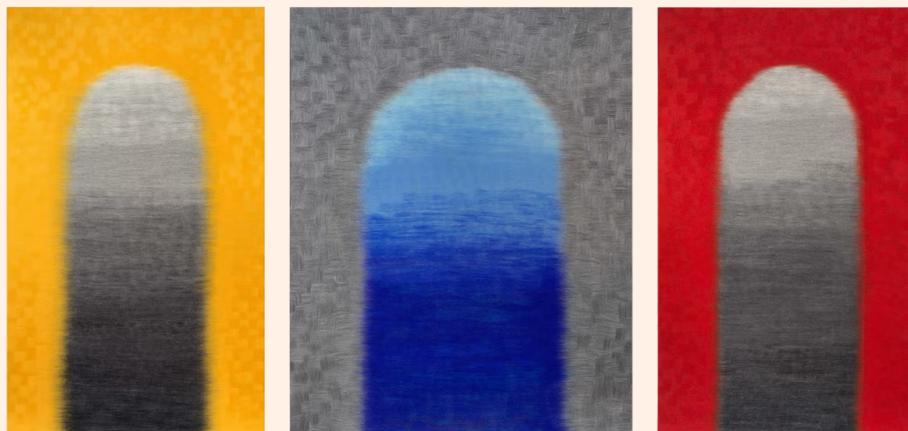
Danagul Tolepbay, director of Pygmalion Gallery, based in Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana, is joining Asia Now for the second time. The region’s role in international politics, energy resources and initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the New Silk Road, has piqued global interest in central Asian artists in recent years, she says.



'In the room of memory' (2023) by Dariya Nurtaza © Courtesy the artist/Pygmalion Art Gallery

To Tolepbay the mistaken perception that their art is merely an extension of Russian art is finally shifting: “Today we are increasingly inclined to view ourselves as integral members of the Asian region rather than being solely associated with the post-Soviet world.” Pygmalion exhibits artists across different generations who have a common artistic signature: “Their works convey a spirituality that resonates regardless of your faith, and a sense of connection with history.”

Nomadic culture, still present in the area up until 100 years ago, adds another layer: “We have a lot to learn today from the nomads’ relationship with nature in the context of today’s ecologies,” says Payam, who identifies nomadism as a recurring theme in the work of central Asian artists.



Untitled (2021) by Gulnur Mukazhanova © Courtesy the artist/Michael Janssen Gallery. Photo: Lepkowski Studios

Sara Raza, a central Asian art expert and author of the book *Punk Orientalism: The Art of Rebellion*, says that European museums and academic spaces have great awareness of this part of the world. “For instance, Tate curator Dina Akhmadeeva has created acquisition strategies that have enabled several regional artists to enter the collection, including multimedia artist Taus Makhacheva, who has roots in the north Caucasus.”

However, for the moment the growing interest among museums and collectors concerns individual artists rather than the scene as a whole. “There aren’t many museums or collectors creating a ‘central Asian collection’,” says Kaliyeva.

The central Asian art scene and society, with its contentions and complexities, its popular culture, its myths and esoteric traditions, have been Slavs and Tatars’ focus for many years, from both an artistic and a curatorial standpoint. For Asia Now, the collective will create a *chaikhaneh* (tea house) and a reading room, consisting of an Eurasian-style salon with literature on the arts of the region, hosted in a Kazakh yurt in the courtyard of the Monnaie, Paris’s mint.



'Breast Collection' (2021) ...



... and 'Vinyl Record' (2023) are both by Madina Joldybek © Courtesy the artist (2)

Their main project will be a show featuring textile-inspired contemporary works. “We connected complex traditional and regional techniques, like ikat [a form of dyeing], with the idea of digital clouds creating virtual worlds,” says Payam. The 14 artists on show will use fabric as a metaphor for the information age, with threads evoking the entangling of data as well as the intermingling of different cultural roots.

Among these artists are Almagul Menlibayeva, who photographs Soviet nuclear reactors to question human vulnerability and colonisation; Madina Joldybek, who creates tapestries of women’s breasts to represent social pressure and the romanticisation of motherhood; Dilyara Kaipova, whose Great Cotton Road Project uses symbols from the Soviet period to denounce exploitation in the cotton industry.



Works by Dilyara Kaipova © Image courtesy CHAT, Chris Lusher

“At Asia Now we always strive to challenge a western-centric reading of art,” says founder Alexandra Fain. “This includes a sharp division between arts and craft, which is more blurred in central Asia.” In past editions, the fair focused on ceramics and bamboo, and this idea of breaking the barrier between high and low art, alongside other important issues in contemporary Asian art such as decolonisation, diaspora and exoticism, will be explored in a series of expert talks.

To Payam, art fairs such as Asia Now are instrumental in increasing momentum for emerging art scenes: “Our art history going forward will be increasingly written by the market, as much as by the institutions, the scholars and the curators. That’s why we need to get central Asian artists into collections,” he says. “Collectors will be the guardians of these works when none of us will be around.”

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