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An Exploration of Identity by Kazakh Artist Gulnur Mukazhanova



Photo: Aspan Gallery: Gulnur Mukazhanova

There are some abstract works that can feel like a spiritual encounter.

We are all familiar with the work of Mark Rothko, a master in materializing emotions and bringing viewers to transcendence through simple hues, nuances, and color gradients.

Far fewer people however, will be aware of Gulnur Mukazhanova, a Kazakh artist whose felt paintings are imbued with a tenderness that offers viewers solace and comfort, and grounded in hope, open new horizons.

When I first saw the artist's work at the Parisian art fair 'Asia Now' two years ago, I was immediately struck by her unique use of wool and felt in the creation of abstract art. Delicate and evocative at once, her work successfully elevates craft to the status of fine art.





Photo: Estefania Landesmann: Gulnar at work

Born in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, shortly before the end of the USSR, the artist has been working with textiles since beginning her practice, and influenced by Kazakh traditions, employs felt as a primary material.

Mukazhanova studied at the Art Academy in Almaty and later, at the Kunst Hochschule in Berlin Weißensee. She has now lived and worked in Berlin for many years and it was here, that she started to process her Kazakh origins, heritage, and the state of society, with an international audience in mind.

Spiritual and emotional, her abstractions are informed by issues concerning identity and the transformation of traditional values of her native culture in the age of globalization.

TCA caught up with Gulnur to discuss her latest work, her creative process, and how her Kazakh origins continue to influence her art.

TCA: *What initially drew you to art and how did your journey begin?*

GM: My earliest memories involve drawing animals when I was around five years old. My cousin, also an artist, had a significant influence on me and was the first person to open my eyes to the world of art.



I studied art at the university in Kazakhstan and then moved to Berlin, initially to study textile design. However, I quickly realized that design wasn't my path and so, shifted my focus to more experimental approaches with textiles. By the end of my studies in Berlin, I was fully immersed in working with felt and it has remained a central part of my practice ever since.



Photo: Thierry Bal : Öliara & the Dark Moon

TCA: *Your work often carries deep emotional and historical weight, as illustrated by your series “Öliara: The Dark Moon” and your abstract self-portraits. How do you approach abstraction in these works?*

GM: “Öliara: The Dark Moon” was a solo show in Mimosa House in London that dealt with dark periods in Kazakh history, particularly the tragic events of “[Bloody January](#)” 2022. The series reflects on life, death, and the fragile nature of existence; themes that are unfortunately all too relevant in our world today.

The felt pieces in this series are abstract allowing them a deep emotional resonance which would not be afforded by a literal depiction of the events that inspired them. My ongoing self-portraits series continue to explore these themes but in a more personal way.



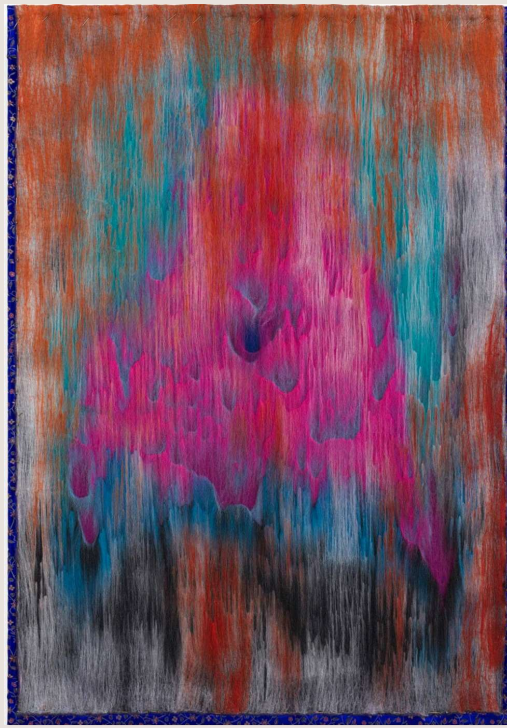


Photo: Gulnur Mukazhanova: Self-portrait

TCA: *How do you choose titles for your works? Do they guide your approach to abstraction?*

GM: Titles often come from the emotional or conceptual space that I'm in during the creative process. For example, "Dark Moon" relates to a very specific period of darkness in Kazakhstan's history, while my self-portraits are more about my internal world. The titles help to anchor the abstraction, giving the viewer a way to connect with the work even when it is not immediately recognizable as a portrait or a narrative.

TCA: *Why did you choose felt as your primary medium?*

GM: Amidst exploring other fabrics, I continue to work primarily with felt. To me, felt has a strong connection to my roots and carries a lot of emotional weight. It's a material that feels both grounding and expressive, and has an organic energy which I think resonates deeply with people, especially in Kazakhstan.

TCA: *How does the reception of your work abroad differ to that in Kazakhstan?*

GM: The feedback is varied but generally positive. People respond strongly to the work, some find hope in it, while others connecting with it on a more personal level, see reflections of their own history and culture.



Exhibiting in Kazakhstan is particularly important to me because the work speaks directly to the Kazakh experience. However, when I show my work abroad, like in Europe, I aim to address

global issues using Kazakhstan as an example. The themes I explore—political and social tensions—are universal despite being rooted in a specific context.



Photo; artist: Installation, Hong Kong

TCA: What can you tell us about “*Shadows of Hope*,” your current solo show at the [Aspan Gallery](#)?

GM: The show in Almaty is a continuation of an installation exhibited in Hong Kong in 2023 and created during my residency at the converted textile factory Mill6CHAT.

The original was a 16-meter-long felt artwork which I intentionally left unfinished at one end, and the new installation, spanning the perimeter of the gallery space, runs to over 41 meters.

Conceptually, it represents ongoing conflicts and societal issues in Kazakhstan. The broken, fragmented line reflects the emotional and psychological state of the country, especially after the traumatic events of the past two years, especially in January 2022.

For me, this work is also a metaphor for the Kazakh steppe, with its endless horizons symbolizing both its history and trauma, and hope for a better future. It’s a deeply personal piece, reflecting how I navigate these complex feelings through my art.



TCA: How did the centerpiece of the exhibition evolve?

GM: For me, the process is just as important as the finished piece. My artistic practice is akin to one continuous journey, where each work is part of a larger whole. The evolution of this installation is likely to continue since I approach my work with neither a fixed theme nor endpoint.

Each piece emerges intuitively, reflecting my emotional state during the creative process. Some days, the colours are vibrant and mixed, while on others, they might be starker and more contrasting. I let the materials guide me.



Photo: Aspan Gallery

TCA: *What can we expect from your upcoming projects?*

GM: I am currently working on several projects, including a group show in London this September and another in Milan in October, featuring Central Asian artists. It will be exciting to see how these works resonate with new audiences.

In terms of artistic research, I have been working with darker colors, especially black which I have always avoided in preference for brighter colors with a more positive energy. However, while preparing for the Aspan show, I found myself drawn to black. It felt like a natural evolution; a way of confronting my anxieties head-on. Using black allowed me to express a deeper, perhaps more sombre, emotional landscape. It's a new direction for me, and a bit scary, but I am curious to see where it will lead.



"Shadows of Hope" will be exhibited at the Aspan Gallery, Almaty, until 22 September 2024.



Naima Morelli



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