



# The College of New Jersey

**The College Art Gallery**

PO Box 7718  
Ewing, NJ 08628-0718

P) 609.771.2633  
F) 609.637.5193  
W) [www.tcnj.edu/~tcag](http://www.tcnj.edu/~tcag)

*Parable of the Garden: New Media Art from Iran & Central Asia*  
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## **Curatorial Statement**

Geographically focusing on former Persia and its cultural legacy, the *Parable of the Garden* exhibit presents recent media works by artists from Iran and Central Asia. The exhibit thematically explores not only the traditional garden and a contemporary sense of place, but also notions of paradise lost and found, lessons learned and forgotten, and traditions cherished and rejected. The show features works by ten artists or collaborative teams hailing from Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Two of the artists now live in Europe, but the rest remain in Central Asia, and all engage in the cultural dialogue of place and identity. The media in which they work include digital photography, video, installation, and graphic design.

The entire region represented in the exhibit can be classified as “Central Asia,” however the geographical label is more commonly applied to the former Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. After fifty years of isolation and two decades of independence since the fall of the Soviet Union, the region is finally re-connecting with the world. Indeed, major international art forums including the Venice Biennale have recently exhibited a dynamic range of works by Central Asian artists to great critical acclaim. Through movements such as the free market economy and the development of democratic governments, Central Asian countries are now engaging with other nations around the globe. They are also re-negotiating relationships with one another as well as with neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan and Iran, with whom they share a great many cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties.

Most Central Asian artists practicing contemporary art today were trained in architecture, monumental painting, and sculpture at some of the best Soviet art institutions. They studied these disciplines along side traditional local forms of art making. The 1990s, which witnessed the fall of the Soviet system, represented incredible years of experimentation when artists were able to break through and express their individual and

collective aesthetics with conceptual vigor. This spirit of experimentation and growth continues today.

Just as in the former Soviet states, Iran and Afghanistan's contemporary art scenes are experiencing profound fluctuation and development. Of the countries represented in the exhibit, Iran has had the longest and most well established engagement with the international modern and contemporary art world. Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, Iranian artists were producing works that sought to combine the concerns of international modernism with local traditions. In 1977, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, featuring important collections of works by both Western and Iranian modern artists, opened, but then, just two years later, the Islamic revolution occurred. The political and social chaos preceding and following this seismic event coupled with the long Iran-Iraq war, which stretched throughout most of the 1980s, significantly curtailed artistic production outside of what was created for the government's propagandistic purposes. During this period, many artists left Iran to find support abroad, contributing to a large Iranian expatriate artistic community that is still active today.

While the Iranian Ministry of Culture still monitors artistic output for any dissenting or "un-Islamic" content, the censors have considerably loosened the enforcement of government restrictions since the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Correspondingly, the last decade or so has seen a re-blossoming of the artistic scene in urban centers such as Tehran. Iranian artists now show widely at home as well as abroad, although they receive more attention and acclaim in Europe than in the U.S. due to the ongoing embargo and frosty relations between the U.S. and Iran. Contemporary art from Iran is diverse, encompassing a range of media and approaches, but one reoccurring concern seems to be a preoccupation with expressing individuality and personal voice despite the constraints of society.

In comparison to their peers in neighboring states, Afghan artists work under the most dire circumstances. Afghanistan has been in an almost constant state of war since 1978 and the coup overthrowing then-leader General Daud. The Soviet intervention, which was met by fierce resistance, began in 1979, and that was followed by a civil war, which eventually led to the harsh rule of the Taliban and finally the U.S.-led invasion to overthrow the Taliban and install the interim-government led by Hamid Karzai. Three decades of war and brutal rule have been disastrous to Afghanistan's artistic heritage, both past and present. Ancient and medieval artworks have been, in some cases, deliberately destroyed and, in others, unintentional casualties of war. Many contemporary Afghan artists have been forced to live and work abroad. The work they create speaks powerfully to the experience of exile and loss. Those artists who remain in the country have extremely limited resources. The new Afghan government and most of its citizens are preoccupied with curbing violence and re-establishing basic infrastructures. Working with minimal materials, equipment and funding in a challenging environment, Afghan artists like Rahraw Omarzad and his students, still manage to create poignant responses to war, loss, and recovery that speak equally of trauma and hope, paradise lost and found.

In reference to the theme, “Parable of the Garden,” the profound social, political and economic changes taking place throughout Central Asia—the former Soviet states as well as Iran and Afghanistan—can be seen as a kind of re-blooming of a forgotten garden. The garden is abundant not only with impressive amounts of energy reserves like minerals and petroleum, but also with glorious histories of arts and sciences. Modern day cities such as Samarqand (Uzbekistan), Isfahan (Iran) and Balkh (Afghanistan) once served as artistic centers for the entire Islamic world. While today the artistic communities in these regions are only just being globally recognized, the artistic seeds they sow are strong and grow in rich, fertile soil. The artists featured in this exhibit represent the artistic resurgence happening across Central Asia, and through their works featured here, they share with us their garden, with all of its wonders and limitations.

Much like artists of other regions around the world, Central Asian artists work in whichever media are able to clearly express their ideas while also being readily available and inexpensive. This includes video, installation, and photography. The artworks in this exhibition challenge the viewer in two ways: through employing new media that emphasizes conceptual approaches and by introducing unfamiliar perspectives on a region largely misunderstood or unknown to American audiences. While the former Soviet Central Asian states are rarely mentioned in the U.S. media and remain largely anonymous to the average American, Iran and Afghanistan are often featured in news reports—Iran because of ongoing political hostilities with the U.S. administration and Afghanistan because of the current U.S.-led war there. This exhibit offers an opportunity for an American audience to see these countries not filtered through the negative lens of the evening news, but rather from the viewpoints of artists who live or were raised there.

Their works, however, are not documentary in nature. Instead they address local as well as global issues through the exploration of concepts of paradise, constructions of identity, and senses of place. Many of the works embody paradoxes that challenge the viewer to reconsider easily found truths. In fact, the artists seem to question the very idea of truth. There is no attachment to the authenticity of the suggested narratives. Instead, the narratives serve as a tool for constructing new relationships that may last or may be immediately destroyed to create something else entirely.

At the same time, reality is never completely forsaken by the artists in this exhibit. Indeed reality is emphasized through re-constructions of local, continental and global traditions, both old and new. The many religious practices of the region, including Islam and Shamanism, are also reflected in the works. Ritual in all its forms is therefore appropriated as a method for investigating reality. Many works incorporate gorgeous landscapes, as well as natural and man-made imagery, mixed with contemporary artistic practice that is performance based and action-oriented. These works gesture towards the hopes, disappointments, contradictions, and general disrepair present in all facets of life in Central Asia, but also in the world at large.

The focus of the Religion, Culture, and Identity Learning Community, a yearlong scholarly exploration conceived by the religious studies committee at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) provided the inspiration for this exhibit. TCNJ gallery director, Sarah

Cunningham, and art history professor, Deborah Hutton, conceived of a dynamic contemporary art exhibit featuring artists from Central Asia that would provide a meaningful learning opportunity for four audiences: the general public, the TCNJ campus, the learning community, and the students enrolled in Dr. Hutton's fall 2007 *Arts of Iran* course. To best achieve this goal, we reached out to independent curator Leeza Ahmady, a recognized expert on contemporary art from Central Asia, to collaborate on this project. As co-curators, the three of us chose the theme, artists and specific artworks. We wanted to present a modern view of the region while referencing its rich heritage. To do so, we focused on new media while exploring an age-old theme found in artworks from the area since the pre-Islamic period—the garden as paradise. After the artists and artworks were selected, Dr. Hutton gave her students the semester-long project of researching and writing about the individual artists, the thematic focus of the exhibition and the region's complex history. Students completed research through email interviews with the artists, in-class discussion with each other and the exhibit curators, class lectures, and individually collected data. Excerpts from the student's final research papers comprise the following essays. We hope that their insights, culled from all that they learned over the semester, provide a useful context in which to situate the works on display in the gallery.

Leeza Ahmady, Sarah Cunningham and Deborah Hutton  
Curators

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