

Central Asia Dream

By Leeza Ahmady

I've dreamt of returning to Central Asia for a long time. I dreamt of feeling its distinct air. I longed for a glimpse of its mountains. Finally there I was. Not in Samarkand or Bukhara, as I imagined, but in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek. I breathed the air of my childhood. I was literally next door to my birthplace, Afghanistan. There were no signs of the Silk Road, no tombs and minarets, just a feeling that I was in Central Asia. The jetlag was a bitch – no sleep for three days – but a worthwhile price to pay for my dream to come true. As I roamed the streets, I had flashbacks of Kabul in the late seventies.

Like Kabul, gray-white mountains surround Bishkek. Tall, thin Chinar trees line its streets. White, low and rectangular buildings were everywhere; signs of modernity on a budget. In my childhood city, however, the buildings are now in rubble. I am hopeful still, as hopeful as Mariam Ghani's video, Kabul Reconstruction. Yet, I wonder what Afghanistan would look like if we had not resisted the Russians in the eighties? Most Central Asians had yielded to Russian power at the close of the nineteenth-century. The Afghans however, are stubborn. They fight for self-determination, but they also forget to stop fighting. In either case, it seems there was a price to pay.

In October 2003, the Internet god sent me an e-mail about an event in Bishkek. The words "art festival" bounced forth and I went wild. One thousand and one e-mails later, I was in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to participate in the Second International Festival of Arts, "Peace & Respect: The Central Asian Meeting". The festival brought one hundred and ninety two participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belgium, Japan, Russia, and Switzerland in an effort to link arts & culture to nation states, tradition to modernity, the present to

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past, and Central Asia to the World. Remarkably, I was the only US representative in the Festival. Thank you Internet God!

In the center of the city, in between beautifully dense tree-lined streets, the festival presented its programs inside several illustrious theaters and the Aytiev State Museum of Fine Art. My dream to curate an exhibition in Central Asia was suddenly real as I presented "Contemporaneity," an exhibition of video works by 13 international artists. This exhibition was the festival's first attempt to feature contemporary art. Works in theater, music, dance, fashion design, and craft arts were also presented in a vibrant three-day/evening spectacle which included a conference entitled: "Culture, Dialogue and Sustainable Development in Central Asia".

When introduced to people, I had the urge to make it known to them that I originally came from Afghanistan. My nametag said USA. I felt ridiculously eager to express my hamwatani, to share myself as a fellow Central Asian. All around me, people looked something like me, but they spoke Russian. It was very disorienting at first. People's features and the language they spoke did not match. It felt unnatural. Slowly, however, I perceived and grew accustomed to the underlying Soviet-ness of everything. It dawned on me that if I had not fled Afghanistan, I would not be speaking English either. Central Asia like many regions in the world is a product of a by-polar world: the Cold-War era.

The large Russian population in Bishkek also baffled me. Yet, many Russians almost defensively replied that they considered themselves Kyrgyz. Beyond the Russian population, I met Koreans, Chinese, Poles, and other Eastern European descendents in Bishkek, Osh and Tashkent. They also proudly declared themselves as Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Kazahk. It makes sense of course. The Soviet Empire left many such pockets of diversity behind. It occurred to me that I was forgetting to consider Central Asia in its present realities.

My ideas about Central Asia belong to my mother's fantastic stories, about my grandfather and his family in Samarkand and Bukhara and their eventful flight from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan

at the outset of the Bolshevik Revolution. It is impossible to ignore seventy years of Russian domination and its effects on the region, but it is also naive to continue understanding Central Asia by its past.

When people think of Asia, they think only of its past. They say "oh yeah, it had a great culture and civilization, once." Yet Asia is living, producing, and creating now and it contributes to the world in different forms now. Displacing Asia from the past into the present in people's mind is one of the reasons why I titled my exhibition *Contemporaneity*. I chose the word precisely because of its literal meaning: the state of being in the present. I mainly work with contemporary artists and works on video because it is a contemporary medium.

Contemporaneity opened in the Aytiev State Museum of Fine Arts on April 27. It showcased video works that I had selected from among diverse international artists who address current issues of globalization, immigration, integration, ethics, culture, and adaptation to modern society. Featured works illustrated the present state of world affairs and aspects of humanity like love, nature, sensuality, family, beauty, illusion, decadence, and technology, meeting the overall objective of the biennial which was to promote mutual understanding and ensure peaceful co-existence amongst the nations of the Central Asian states.

Contemporaneity as an exhibit welcomes art that falls under the boundary less ness of formal and conceptual contemporary art: what it is, who decides what it is, and the scope of its language, materials, ideas, and histories. My goal is to increase the visibility of contemporary art to this region by featuring the work of international artists, both western and non-western, who share their perspective and their views on modern society through their work. *Contemporaneity* therefore represented a stepping-stone to establishing the region of Central Asia as a vital element in the international cultural network and to developing its national cultural value by communication with the other participating artists.

Initially, I had planned to show the works as an installation, a room – typically large and black-box,

but I ended up showing the works as a continuous screening for two days in the Museum's small film theater. I thought that the ceremony of sitting – with an intention to watch – is not only appropriate but also an intimate way to introduce the audience to video art. Later, Miran Mohar from the famous Slovenian artists group: Irwin, expressed that he appreciated sitting down to watch the videos rather than having to zoom past them as he would in a typical gallery setting.

Video art is still quite unknown in Central Asia. It is a novel idea for artists in the region, but so is contemporary art, which is almost entirely absent in fine art curriculums. Young artists have very limited access to information and participation in contemporary international art forums and therefore are just beginning to approach mediums such as video.

My "Curator's Talk," at the opening reception of Contemporaneity invited discussion on various issues such as: the increased visibility of Central Asian contemporary art, and the acceptance of art in a conflicted world of cultural divide. I shared my objective of solidifying the relationship between eastern and western artists, and strengthening the identity of contemporary art in Central Asia, so that the artists of this region can be actively involved with the dialogue and issues of the global art forum.

Contemporaneity was also presented in Osh, a smaller city in the South of Kyrgyzstan and in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. In this trip, I visited only three cities, but I feel comfortable declaring that Central Asia is Contemporaneity! It is a modern melting pot, but its ingredients are distinct. It always has been. We are talking about the Silk Road, the nucleus of Asia, and a territory where civilizations meet. As I roamed the Bazaars, I could not help reminiscing; I imagined myself here a century earlier, speaking to people in many languages, among many cultures. We would select dialects randomly and at will: Farsi, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Kazakh, etc. Today however, we are reduced to communicating with each other in two languages – Russian and English – both of which are foreign. What comforted me is that native or not, people there are still connected to their spirit in a distinctly Central Asian way.

It was remarkable to be in rooms full of musicians, artists, and cultural scientists from all over Central Asia. I asked questions and they were answered. I asked to meet and interview so & so and it was arranged. The information I thought I was going to work so hard for was somehow easily accessible. Before arriving to Bishkek, I had only managed to meet two Kyrgyz artists over the Internet. A young Kyrgyz woman activist that I had met in a conference in Vienna in 2003 introduced Muratbeck and Gulnara to me as "pioneers of contemporary art in Kirgystan." I was excited to include their video "Asian Pastoral" in Contemporaneity and delighted to meet them in Bishkek. I am indebted to their kindness. They were helpful with the installation of Contemporaneity in the Festival, and instrumental in informing me about other artists in the region.

Soon after my arrival, Gulnara and Murat informed me that my visit was very timely. Beyond the Biennial, I was going to have another unique opportunity to meet artists from Central Asia and other former Soviet Republics. An exhibition entitled "...And Others" had been organized independent from the Biennial by a newly established Kurama Art, the only gallery focusing on contemporary art in Bishkek. ...And Others was curated by Ulan Djaparov of Kyrgyzstan and Elena & Victor Vorobyev of Kazakhstan. It opened at the Museum of Fine Arts just two days before my exhibition.

The exhibit ...And Others included painting, installation, video, and performance art mainly concerned with exploring the personality of a "contemporary artist:" perception, uniqueness, creative expressiveness and reasons for behaving within (or outside of) the context of the processes taking place in Central Asia, as well as in all the countries of the former Soviet Union. It was based on the notion that very often, a contemporary artist combines an "outsider" and a "hero" in daily life to create artistic forms, to express ideas, feelings, and concepts about life. A contemporary artist uses his right to research the changing world and his own private life to reveal "the other" sides, new aspects and phenomena in trivial things.

Contemporaneity and ...And Others overlapped in time and content, bringing many participating artists, critics, and curators from Central Asia,

Russia, and Eastern Europe. Those in attendance included Viktor Misiano, curator of the Russian Pavilion in the Venice Biennial, the famous Slovenian artist team Irwin, and the impressive Kazakh artist Yerbossyn Meldibekov.

It feels great not to be a hopeless dreamer about a contemporary art scene in Central Asia. I admit I was surprised to discover as many artists as I did. I was also stunned by the quality of their work and moved by their commitment to the development of contemporary art in their respective countries. We are talking about a region that has been absent from critical 20th century art practices, yet their work lacks traces of such a gap. The same can not be said however, for the art institutions in Central Asia. Museums, academies and universities (all state run), have long road ahead in overcoming seventy years of Soviet mentality.

Indeed the ground for contemporary art in Central Asia is fertile. When I first thought of curating Contemporaneity, I could hardly imagine the kind of response it would generate but it was received with a lot of enthusiasm, curiosity, and interest. My official and unofficial talks with artists, managers, and art practitioners revolved around contemporary art, its visibility and practice in the region, and the need to create further East-West exchange/dialogue. Contemporaneity was a successful first step towards my intention to create a long and continuous exchange between America, Europe, and Central Asia.

Leeza Ahmady
Curator, educator and cultural manager. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Lives in New York, USA.

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