

CENTRAL ASIA PAVILION
ПАВИЛЬОН СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ
2005



Art from Central Asia a Contemporary Archive

Искусство Центральной Азии:
Актуальный Архив

 KURAMAABI
GALLERY

KYRGYZSTAN / КЫРГЫЗСТАН

KAZAKHSTAN / КАЗАХСТАН

UZBEKISTAN / УЗБЕКИСТАН



Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djoumaliev

The work by Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djoumaliev is of great interest reflecting all the pluses and minuses of contemporary art development in the republic.

The artists began their team-work at the time of pioneers – at the end of the 1980s they were participants of "Underground" seminar in Narve (Estonia), and at the end of the 1990s they were still active participants in the "nontraditional" initiatives of the architectural studio "MUSEUM". Before Gulnara and Murat had had long experience of independent work: Gulnara's record of graphic art is distinguished by capricious investigation, Murat's record of monumental sculptures is well-known by established features of the Soviet school. It was easy for them to start experimenting with all genres of contemporary art, though many artists at that time suffered from a lack of clarity, did not want to define themselves (see "Not a Painting", an example of how certain painted works of that period were characteristically named). Education helped Gulnara and Murat quickly determine how installations differed from sculptures, and professionalism helped them feel the opportunities an actual method of artistic reflection provided.

They also were among the first to recognize the signs of the time, the necessity of building a space of self-realization with their own hands. The government stopped supporting art, and this provided space for representatives of a new cultural force to step in. In order to survive, it was necessary, not hoping for others, to begin founding modern institutions themselves. Thus they do not resemble a lot of artists, who even now believe that curators are merely directors of social activities for the masses, critics are unsuccessful artists, and doing social work is shameful.

In 1998 Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djoumaliev initiated founding of "Zamana" group, and in 2002 organized "ArtEast" group. Their most recent projects and initiatives include Djoumaliev's lecture at the 8th Istanbul Biennale about Kyrgyzstan contemporary art (September 2003), the curatorship of Kyrgyzstan section at the 3rd Novosibirsk International Biennale of contemporary graphic arts (September 2003), the organization of "Bishkek intergraphic" - an exhibition of contemporary printed graphics (February 2003 to March 2004), and the International Art tour in Kyrgyzstan and Siberia "Whispers of Earth, Silence of Heaven" (June-July 2003).

Back from the tour Gulnara and Murat brought a film, "Trans Siberian Amazons". The film is a touching and ironic report about the life of small-scale traders in the transitional period, traveling with their goods on trains, and sadly singing songs popular in their Soviet youth. In the hands of the authors this simple plot acquires the depths of a work of drama. Collision of different epochs, an attack on the weariness of the society, and social analysis of the phenomenon can all be found in the film, but, which is most important, it shows the firm spiritual

center of broken human lives. Moreover, "Trans Siberian Amazons" is a lesson, an example, a way for art to survive in a poor country. Our film-makers do not handle such subjects, referring to the absence of good screenplays and government support and the general absence of everything. Without big financial expenditures and without fear of the complexity of the theme, the authors of this film managed to rise to the level of serious filmmaking.

At the "Hand made" exhibition in the Museum of Nonconformist Art in Saint Petersburg, Gulnara Kasmalieva first performed her "Goodbye song" (December 2001). Subsequently it was shown at "Inside Asia 2" (June 2002) and at "Transforma" at the Center for Contemporary Art in Geneva (September 2002).

Kasmalieva has run a few steps forward, incorporating performances, actions, and gestures not yet belonging to contemporary art, using herself as the material for her work. "Goodbye song" is one of several successful examples. This is a beautiful lively work, which incorporates patriarchal rituals and traditions, as well as the revaluation of the syncretic culture of the past. Ethnographic presentations of national rituals are very refined and often evoke feelings of facileness akin to those aroused by opera decorations. After seeing a "preconceived" performance one believes that traditions are exactly as they are portrayed and the masterful usage of artistic methods adds a non-counterfeited authenticity to the performance.

Currently this creative pair is located in the very center of events of a new cultural phenomenon in the republic. Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djoumaliev, like other representatives of our contemporary art, are trying to organize themselves and at the same time continue to work on their own projects: organizing seminars and exhibitins, overcoming misunderstandings and confronting those who do not believe, trying to add a touch of reality to their works, and instinctively responding to their colleagues' critiques.

Gamal Bokonbaev

Gulnara Kasmalieva, Murat Djoumaliev. Tran Siberian Amazons. Video installation. 2004
Гулнара Касмалиева, Мурат Джумалиев. Транссибирские амазонки. Видеоинсталляция



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Прогрессивная ностальгия
Progressive Nostalgia

2008



Прогрессивная НОСТАЛЬГИЯ Progressive Nostalgia

Современное искусство
стран бывшего СССР

Contemporary Art
of the Former USSR

Гульнара Касмалиева
 Родилась в 1960 году в Бишкеке,
 Киргизия
 Живет в Бишкеке, Киргизия
Мурат Джумалиев
 Родился в 1965 году в Бишкеке, Киргизия
 Живет в Бишкеке, Киргизия
В будущее...
 Видеоинсталляция, 5'53"
 2005
 Видео ряд, положенный в основу работы,
 был снят в июне–июле 2003 года, когда
 художники переправлялись на пароме
 через легендарное озеро Байкал. На одной
 из проекций камера скользит по поверх-
 ности прибрежной зоны, документируя
 следы экологического загрязнения этого
 некогда девственного уголка земли, а на
 другой мы видим загрузку и отплытие
 старого заржавелого парома.
 Чисто формально работа узнаваема как
 столь распространенное сегодня социально-
[Gulnara Kasmaliyeva](#)
[Born in 1960 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan](#)
[Lives in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan](#)
[Murat Djumaliyev](#)
[Born in 1965 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan](#)
[Lives in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan](#)
[Into the Future...](#)
[Video installation, 5'53"](#)
 2005
 The visuals at the core of this installation
 were filmed in June and July of 2003, as
 the artists crossed the legendary Lake
 Baikal on a ferry. In one projection,
 the camera glides along the banks,
 documenting the traces of pollution
 of this once-virgin land, while another
 shows the old rusty ferry loading up
 and leaving shore.
 In a purely formal sense, this work is
 the type of social documentary that is so
 common today. And indeed, the ability

документальное видео. И действительно,
 способность авторов этически «видеть»
 реальность, непосредственно реагировать
 на драматизм постсоветского опыта, сбли-
 жает их творчество со многими социально
 ангажированными западными художни-
 ками. Однако присущий работе характер
 глобальной мифопоэтической метафоры
 выводит ее далеко за пределы узкой со-
 циальной аналитики и не ограничивается
 разоблачительным пафосом (в данном
 случае, в духе сторонников экологических
 идей). В то же время многое выдает при-
 надлежность Касмалиевой и Джумалиева
 к центральноазиатской художественной
 традиции – пластика изобразительного
 ряда столь самодостаточна, что вызывает
 в памяти национальную орнаментику
 и оказывает ощутимое воздействие на
 документально-констатирующий план.
 Эта работа, программно названная авто-
 рами «В будущее...», столь же программно
[of the artists to ethically “see” reality](#)
[and to react directly to the drama of](#)
[the post-Soviet experience brings their](#)
[work in line with many socially engaged](#)
[Western artists. Yet much in this work](#)
[belongs to the Central Asian artistic](#)
[tradition. The work’s inherent quality](#)
[of global mythopoetic metaphor takes it](#)
[far beyond the bounds of narrow social](#)
[analysis. It is not limited to the melodrama](#)
[of an expose, like an ordinary](#)
[environmental documentary. At the same](#)
[time, the visuals are so self-sufficient](#)
[that it recalls traditional Central Asian](#)
[ornament and exerts a palpable effect on](#)
[the documentary component.](#)
 The artists gave this work a programmatic
 title, *Into the Future...*, and now it
 has an equally programmatic role as
 the final accent of this book, its epilogue.
 Although the spectacle that unfolds

призвана выполнить роль последнего
 акцента книги, ее эпилога. Хотя развер-
 тывающееся перед нами зрелище являет
 собой негативную апологию цивилиза-
 ционной катастрофы, замедленный ритм
 съемки придает воссоздаваемой реально-
 сти характер завораживающей мистерии.
 А потому медленно отваливающий от
 берега паром должен оставить у зрителя
 чувство надежды, вселить в него иррацио-
 нальную веру в «светлое будущее».
Виктор Мизиано
[before us on the screen is a negative](#)
[apologia for a catastrophe of civilization,](#)
[the slow rhythm of the film lends an air](#)
[of spellbinding mystery to this recreation](#)
[of reality. And for this reason the ferry,](#)
[slowly receding from the bank, should leave](#)
[viewers with a sense of hope, and instill](#)
[in them an irrational belief in a bright](#)
[future.](#)
Viktor Misiano





Carrie Moyer,
Shebang, 2006,
acrylic and glitter on
canvas, 84 x 60".

raised fists and images of Emma Goldman, also mark a significant departure for the New York-based artist. Moyer has moved further into the realm of free association, allowing her political references to hover suggestively rather than spelling them out. Biomorph shapes evoke the "central core" imagery of '70s feminist art at the same time that they resemble simplified Rorschach inkblots onto which we may project our own interpretations.

The imagery of *The Stone Age* (all works 2006), for example, alludes to ancient female figurines such as the Venus of Willendorf, but its shimmering veils of brilliant red and magenta additionally refer to the poured pigments of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. Moyer's hard-edged, matte surfaces contrast with iridescent flows of paint that shine like glaze on earthenware. Indeed, many of these paintings speak the language of ceramics; *Vitrine* is constructed around

vibrantly layered pours contained inside vessel-like outlines. In *Shebang*, two pale, kissing forms are placed next to a looming figure that seethes with color, its cracked surface as luminous as raku ware. Framed by a dark shadow, the figure flickers like a flame, shape-shifting to recall a Max Ernst woman/bird hybrid or the drooping bulges of Betsy Damon's *7000 Year Old Woman*, 1977. Its crust of black glitter becomes ominous, as its hooded silhouette also unmistakably summons associations with photos of Abu Ghraib.

Works such as *Trophy*, with its simplified, almost symmetrical form, demonstrate Moyer's strong design sense. In fact, the artist is an experienced graphic designer—she co-founded the lesbian agitprop duo Dyke Action Machine with Sue Schaffner in 1991. The paintings' sumptuous surfaces, meanwhile, are the result of Moyer's complex methods of fabrication. Often working on the floor, she rolls, stipples, mops, and handworks her paints over raw canvas until it becomes hard to discern the order in which the layers were introduced. The musical instrument of *Gimcrack*, for example, has strings—thin red rivulets—that plunge into a hole which is equal parts Picasso guitar and O'Keeffe pelvic bone. Its multiple strata—by turns abstract and figurative, flat and glossy—suggest that we are looking back through time, as if art history has been compressed into a compilation of key moments laid in overlapping planes. As much as these works investigate the feminist iconography that celebrated matriarchal prehistories, then, they also revel in the modernist qualities of paint—its specific weight, viscosity, and transparency.

Given the current resurgence of interest in feminist art, Moyer's work reads like something of a manifesto. She argues for the ongoing relevance of feminism's diverse legacies, excavating and then updating the traces of goddess worship often neglected in contemporary critical reassessments. The obliqueness of her allusions does not make them unreadable—in fact, like inkblots, their openness only intensifies their psychic power. These paintings are hardly subtle—witness the campy use of hot pink, chartreuse, and glitter—but they demonstrate a fresh discipline that strengthens Moyer's usual fiery intensity. With their emphatic vision of how a politics of contemporary abstraction might operate, these are invigorating, even thrilling works from an artist increasingly confident in the range of her powers.

—Julia Bryan-Wilson

CHICAGO

Kasmalieva and Djumaliev

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

For thousands of years, the trade routes of the Silk Road have linked China and the West. It was almost exclusively the cultures at either end that benefited economically from these routes, and the vast but sparsely populated regions of Central Asia that they traversed came to develop a fascinating quasi-parasitical relationship to the exotic riches that moved through them. The former Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan (independent since 1991), a landlocked nation directly west of China, was and is such a place. It is also home to artists Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, who use photography and video to document the young nation's curious and ambiguous position, its perpetual in-betweenness.

While many of the valuables that used to travel along the Silk Road have gone airborne, the routes remain, now used by trucks of every size and kind. Sometimes traversing Kyrgyzstan's rudimentary highways in convoys like the caravans of old, sometimes making their way singly, the vehicles have come to define the vast denuded plains and barren hillocks they cross. Kyrgyzstan is all trucked up, a condition that Kasmalieva and Djumaliev chronicle comprehensively. Their images—relayed here in a video and twenty-three digital prints, nine of the latter drawn from the "Metal Truck Caravans" and "Last Stop Before Border" series (both 2006)—feature depictions of families playing in trucks' shadows, boys on horseback aimlessly chasing trucks down the dusty road, men singing folk songs beside trucks, the hulking carcasses of abandoned and junked trucks, and the loneliness of the long-distance trucker moving his rickety rig toward the setting sun.

Scrap metal and other junk seem to be the trucks' preferred cargoes, jammed into every crevice, rust-zone flotsam seemingly endlessly transported from one place to another, often to be scavenged by other Kyrgyz. Kasmalieva and Djumaliev treat their subjects in a pretty straightforward documentary manner, and even *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope*, 2006, a five-channel video projected across three walls, seems largely motivated by an impulse to collect evidence concerning the traffic in junk. Colonial exploitation for economic purposes is a very old story, but Kyrgyzstan's situation is different, as its current occupation by outsiders is neither politically motivated nor likely to constitute a permanent condition. It is as if the nation were a temporary truck stop, partially defined by its catering to those who are only passing through. Idiosyncratic signs in English trumpet the availability of tour guides and hamburgers,



Gulnara Kasmalieva
and Muratbek
Djumaliev, *Hotel*,
2006, color
photograph,
39 1/2 x 26".

REVIEWS

and entrepreneurial shops and rudimentary factories dot Kyrgyz towns and villages.

Kasmaliev and Djumaliev record these uneasy intersections, where the local populations, which centuries ago could interact more regularly and casually with the traders on the Silk Road—the journey then required months—now have a more fleeting and cursory relationship with the truckers whizzing by. The exhibition illustrated the dogged determinism of place, though, the sense of geography as destiny, of populations adapting to their geoeconomic reality. The footage in *A New Silk Road* of a Kyrgyz boy on horseback galloping after a rapidly disappearing and seemingly impervious truck functions as a metaphor for the artists' project as a whole, a tabulation of the frictions—and wistful encounters—that occur when worlds collide or narrowly miss engaging one another.

—James Yood

SAN FRANCISCO

Rosana Castrillo Diaz

ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS

Office supplies have been a consistent subject of and medium in Rosana Castrillo Diaz's demure art for the past few years. Over that time, she has become known for near-invisible Scotch-tape installations and exquisitely detailed drawings of stacks of paper, notebook spines, and wads of rubber bands. Castrillo Diaz's recent exhibition took things a step further, revealing both the effectiveness and the shortcomings of a practice reliant on obsessive detail.

The show's visually elusive centerpiece was a 2007 work (all works untitled) constructed from loops of transparent tape affixed not to the wall but to each other, forming clusters of larger circular forms. These hang on pins that extend from the wall, so that the tape forms seem to float parallel to the vertical surface at slightly varying distances (looking at the work head-on, the circular lines look razor thin and appear to be alternately etched or suspended). The whole reads as a geometric abstraction that might allude to cellular structure, or suggest large, ghostly, Pop-ish polka dots.

Diaz's materials and methods evoke those of Tara Donovan, who uses common objects en masse to make deceptively solid sculpture. But Castrillo Diaz's use of accretion is more an attempt to redefine drawing in a three-dimensional (yet oddly wraithlike) form. It's an ambition that she has realized ever more completely since first contributing an abstract tape work to the group show "Warped Space" at the CCA Wattis Institute in 2003. But she now runs the risk of allowing her signature methodology to devolve into schtick. A commissioned tape piece on view concurrently at the Berkeley Art Museum benefited from more breathing room in the angular modernist interior, but otherwise was essentially the same piece as the one on view here.

Similar looping shapes are also apparent in two photorealistic graphite drawings of rubber bands that feel as substantial as the tape does atmospherically ethereal. Clumped and bound together, the bands are tightly rendered in the center of pieces of otherwise unmarked paper and look to be illuminated by the harsh, flat light of a scanner. Another graphite drawing depicts a small pile of legal pads, seen from

below against a dark background. Formally, these works evoke Felix Gonzalez-Torres's pile pieces and allude to his interest in making art at the margins. Castrillo Diaz also emphatically makes work that may easily be overlooked.

Such is also the case with a few pieces in which the artist expands her range of materials. Two works from 2007 are small sheets of graph paper from which the squares have been carefully removed from between the lines, turning them into webs that slump and curl from the wall. Unfortunately, these fragile skeins suffer from the current ubiquity of this kind of labor-intensive, Eva-Hesse-with-an-X-Acto-knife deconstruction of binding geometry. Castrillo Diaz employs a correspondingly familiar strategy of fanatical delicacy in a 2006 series of small white-on-white paintings on paper, each with a square of nearly microscopic painted acrylic pattern at its center. Like the tape piece, these monochromes require the viewer to get close and shift angles in order to observe the fine brushwork.

More memorable is a compact 2006 drawing of three gourds with mottled, moldy-looking surfaces, the patterning of which extends to the edges of the composition. Reminiscent of Vija Celmins's drawings of rock surfaces, Castrillo Diaz's objects, rendered in dense pointillism, are imbued with an alluring ambiguity not found in the subjects procured at Office Depot. An anomaly in this exhibition, the drawing affirms that Castrillo Diaz has the skill to render whatever she trains her eye on, but, at the same time, it makes one wish that she would take advantage of that ability to expand her purview.

—Glen Helfand

LOS ANGELES

John Wesley

DANIEL WEINBERG

While walking around this tight show of seven works spanning thirty years of John Wesley's career, my friends and I concurred that although Wesley is not among those on the tips of the tongues of hedge fund collectors, so-called edgy curators, or, sadly, many younger painters, there is more to look at in his work than in many rooms at MOMA.

"Retroactive Pop" and "meta-representation," two idiosyncratic terms that Donald Judd used to negotiate the strange, powerful paintings of John Wesley, resonate even as Judd noted, in an early review, seemingly structural concerns: "Most of the paintings are like or are copies of the pictures and patterns of blue and white china. Most of the forms are nineteenth-century. The forms selected, the shapes to which they are unobtrusively altered, the order used and the small details are humorous and goofy. This becomes a cool, psychological oddness."

Specifically, the colors are the blues, whites, greens, and pinks of Wedgwood along with the pearl of Belleek. Wesley's inky blacks, often deployed to question the outlines or edges of things, equal those of Alex Katz and Henri Matisse. The forms selected, however goofy, can, unexpectedly, summon a deep emotional response, which might be due to "cool, psychological oddness" or to Wesley's ability to conjure narrativity without definite story, the novelistic in a single-stranded graphic frame. "Retroactive Pop" implies a boomerang-like sweep, starting nowhere near "Pop," swerving toward it only to end up not exactly where it began. When this is joined with "meta-representation," Wesley's painterly methods can be viewed as representations about the means of representation, not Pop per se but rather clarifying the possibilities of the intellectual and sexual conditions of the popular.

In *Lust*, 1990, a study in the variegations of the artist's doted-on Wedgwood hues, a Donald Duck-like character stares out caught in the act, his pink beak engorged with five softer pink, Busby Berkeley-esque

Rosana Castrillo Diaz,
Untitled (detail), 2006.
Graphite on paper,
12 1/2 x 15 1/2".





New In ARTMargins Print



ARTMargins Print has released its new issue, 3.2. (June 2014)!

Articles: **Joan Kee** (Ann Arbor) considers the problem of scale in contemporary art practice. **Carla Macchiavello** (Bogotá) discusses the problem of influence in Latin American art during the 1970s and 1980s. **Ruben and Maja Fowkes** (Budapest) examine East European artists' approaches to the natural environment during the 1970s and beyond.

In the **Document section**, we present two pre-revolution Iranian manifestos of modern art (introduction/translation: **Bavand Behpoor**).

Artist Project: **Shady El Noshokaty** (Cairo), *Rat Diaries*, a series of drawings that attempts to map the intensity of everyday life in Egypt intertwined with intuitive visual and verbal comments on art practice.

Review Article: **Monica Amor** (Baltimore) discusses the exhibition *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934-1973)* and Alejandro Crispiani's book *Objetos para transformar el mundo: Trayectorias del arte concreto-inventión, Argentina y Chile, 1940-1970* [Objects to Transform the World: Trajectories of Concrete-Invention Art, Argentina and Chile, 1940-1970].

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Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev's A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope



Exhibition Reviews

Written by Susan Snodgrass (Chicago)

Monday, 11 June 2007 00:00

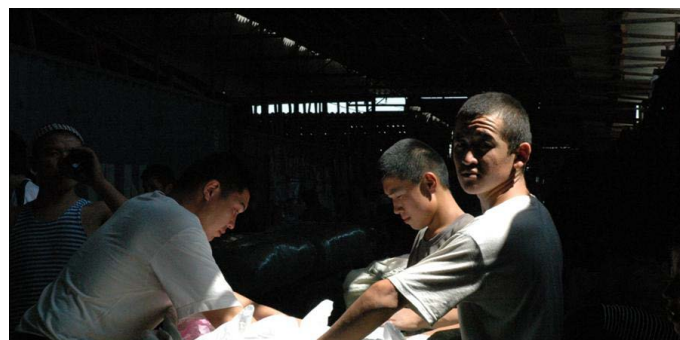
GULNARA KASMALIEVA AND MURATBEK DJUMALIEV'S A NEW SILK ROAD: ALGORITHM OF SURVIVAL AND HOPE; THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 1-MAY 6, 2007

The photographs and video installations of Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev draw on various documentary styles and techniques to capture the changing social landscape of their native Kyrgyzstan since it became an independent republic in 1991. Like many artists of post-Soviet Europe and Central Asia, their practice is a discursive one that casts a critical yet empathetic eye on their indigenous subjects (human and otherwise) and the political spaces they occupy.

Their collaborative projects engage in what Thomas McEvilley (quoting George Marcus and Michael Fisher) terms "anthropology as cultural critique," in his description of several works exhibited in the video festival "Videoidentity: Sacred Places of Central Asia".¹ Applying the term to Kasmalieva and Djumaliev's work (also included), the artists assume the role of detached, albeit informed strangers to create a multi-sited ethnography of place that considers intercultural systems alongside local and global relations.

In all of the artists' work, the diversity of Kyrgyz identity is examined against the backdrop of a complex, layered history that includes nomadic traditions based in pastoralism followed by centuries of colonist rule. The country's central position between Asia and Russia accounts for its multiethnic population; once an important trade station along the renowned Silk Road, it was truly a cultural crossroads. Much of its modern history was spent in subjugation to first the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union who imposed decades of enforced settlement, collective farming, and unregulated industrialization, among other abuses of civic and economic freedom.

Kyrgyzstan's difficult transition to independence is the subject of Kasmalieva's and Djumaliev's internationally acclaimed multimedia works. Based in the capital city of Bishkek, they document the effects of political upheaval and transformation, in particular the decentralization and privatization of the country's economic resources and their impact on traditional ways of life. In the series *New Menhirs* (2005), for example, color photographs of crumbling factories stand as haunting reminders of a utopia never achieved. Desolate industrial landscapes similarly inhabit the dual-channel video *Into the Future* (2005); when juxtaposed with images of passengers boarding a Siberian ferry, they create a portrait of the present confronting its past while facing an uncertain future.



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Packing. 34.9 x 22.2 cm. 23 Digital Prints by Kasmalieva and Djumaliev. Courtesy the artists and Winkelman/Plus Ultra Gallery, New York, 2006.

The video installations and photographs in *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope*, recently on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, record the trials and triumphs of the Kyrgyz Republic's emergent market system as it defines itself within global capitalism. The country's leading exports are primarily agricultural goods as well as nonferrous metals and minerals. Although Kyrgyzstan was the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization (in 1998), its market-oriented policies have been countered by economic hardship and political instability, resulting in the overthrow of former President Askar Akayev in 2005. Yet despite new democratic reforms, skepticism is pervasive.

For the Art Institute, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev recast *Trans-Siberian Amazons* (2004), previously shown in the Central Asian Pavilion of the 51st Venice Biennale. This more minimalist, three-channel version of the original video installation portrays two women who, out of economic necessity, must trade domestic goods to train passengers traveling across Central Asia. The elder woman woefully sings a Soviet-era pop song about a lost love, while her companion smiles in comfort and admiration. Framing this central scene are two screens, each depicting mirror images of the same seemingly endless stretch of railway track as it traverses a barren landscape. These women are both the casualties and the heroines of the country's still harsh economic reality, as the artists acknowledge the essential role women play in providing for their families.

Projected onto five screens that play simultaneously is the video installation *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope*, created specifically for the Art Institute. Here, the artists follow a caravan of trucks transporting scrap metal from Kyrgyzstan to western China, recording a different aspect of the country's transient economy. The opening scene captures the arduous task of collecting and sorting the metal, which is then loaded onto worn green trucks. Making their way through dusty mountain roads, the trucks next land at a bustling marketplace; workers bundling and taping large packages add to the cacophony of sight and sound. Viewers are returned to the traveling fleet that eventually stops for repairs along a rural stretch of road, where villagers whose livelihoods depend on such transients greet the drivers.



Racing. 34.9 x 22.2 cm. 23 Digital Prints by Kasmalieva and Djumaliev. Courtesy the artists and Winkelman/Plus Ultra Gallery, New York, 2006.

The work reaches a climax when all are united by a man singing a traditional folk song; in the final scene, a young boy on a horse trails the trucks as they drive into the distant horizon. Throughout the video, there are echoes of Moldavian artist Pavel Braila's *Shoes for Europe* (2000), a film that details the painstaking process of changing the wheels of a train commuting east to west from the Russian gauges still used in Moldavia to those used in Western Europe. Similar issues of labor, the duality between East and West, between past and future infuse *A New Silk Road*. However, Djumaliev and Kasmalieva shun the cool objectivity found in Braila's work for a more subjective reality. For instance, at various moments the artists' subjects are keenly aware of the camera's presence (as is true in *Trans-Siberian Amazons*, in which the women are shot in an intimate cinema verite). This humanistic approach is enhanced by the employment of multiple screens that cast slightly different views of the same scene while creating a sense of dislocation, and by the artists' ability to construct an experience that is pleasurable visual.



Hotel. 100 x 66.2 cm. 23 Digital Prints by Kasmalieva and Djumaliev. Courtesy the artists and Winkelman/Plus Ultra Gallery, New York, 2006.

Accompanying this work are twenty-three digital prints, many of which are stills from the video. Other images capture the diversity of roles played by the Kyrgyz people in the new market-oriented economy, mainly those who provide services to travelers on the New Silk Road. Included are men and women selling clothing and mannequins from the backs of trucks, a hamburger vendor at a roadside stand, and a man who gives guided tours on horseback and whose trailer was converted to a hotel.

A feeling of rhythm unites the video works, from the use of folk songs to the pulse of the train to the clamor of metal. Interwoven throughout the exhibition is the sense of tradition and human spirit that survives despite adversity (suggested by the algorithm of the show's title), one that connects Kyrgyzstan's past and future, allowing it to preserve its cultural identity while engaging the larger world. In essence, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev point to a new nomadicism that creates economic opportunities as well as the promise of hope.

NOTES

1. Thomas McEvilley, "Report from Central Asia: Video Comes to the 'Stans,'" *Art in America*, December 2005. "Videoidentity: Sacred Places of Central Asia" took place in Almaty, Kazakhstan in fall 2004. [[back](#)]

frieze

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev

The Art Institute of Chicago

In their video installations, the collaborative team of Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev use the emotional energy of popular music to calculated effect. Songs with ready-made emotive value lend meaning to otherwise straightforward pictures of labour, leisure, protest and national identity. Culling imagery from travels through their homeland – the former Soviet Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan – the artists offer a rare glimpse into the political and economic realities of their world. However, the musical accompaniment, along with other editing processes such as montage, undercut a fact-based or judgement-free presentation. Without irony or apparent critical subtext, these videos are characterized by a consistent tone of matter-of-fact sincerity. Realism is thus the first step towards regaining a foothold after the Soviet pullout and, as such, survives because it is so easily internalized and adapted to the new political cause; stylized realism may just as easily connote Socialist Realism.

Recently The Art Institute of Chicago commissioned Kasmalieva and Djumaliev to create a work specifically about the economy and culture of the Silk Road, the ancient trade route that connects East and West. Also included in the exhibition is one of their better-known works, *Trans-Siberian Amazons* (2004), which appeared in the first Central Asia pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. This work has been streamlined into a three-channel video installation. Not content with simply providing tourist snapshots or documentary footage, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev employ various filmic techniques in a subtle way to produce an artful vision of the real. The artists create Social Realist music videos that incorporate melodies either found along the journey or else taken from the songbook of the popular imagination.

A New Silk Road (2006) compressed a journey of several days from Kyrgyzstan to China into a bite-sized, nine-minute montage. The focus was on a caravan of long-haul tractor-trailers transporting rusty

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Published on 15/04/07

By Jason Fomberg



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scrap metal to the industrial giant to the east in exchange for cheaply made clothing. This rattletrap cargo constitutes the remaining ruins of the former Soviet empire being literally and metaphorically stripped clean, carted off and exchanged for a free-market way of life. Halfway through the video we encounter a Kyrgyz man playing accordion and singing a traditional folksong. With the introduction of the music, the concerns of the caravan segue to rural activities such as ball games, casual conversation and horseback riding in the remote terrain near the border. It isn't necessary to know that the folk song is a nostalgic paean to the surrounding mountains; even if the lyrics are indecipherable to Western ears, the emotional cues are clear. As music and image converge seamlessly, a humble and sympathetic portrait of the Kyrgyz people emerges. But the format of *A New Silk Road* is familiarly stylized – it's basically a highbrow fluffy promotional video. Common to tourism committees and venture capitalists (and far-flung biennial boosters), the promotional video solicits enthusiasm and sympathy in the name of information dissemination.

Kasmalieva and Djumaliev are fond of this particular format. In 2005 they documented Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution, which violently ousted the country's corrupt leaders. Using Edvard Grieg's well-worn 'Hall of the Mountain King' (1876) as a structuring device, the edited action swells and climaxes only within the parameters set by the music. Grieg's classic (written for Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*) demands the consistent satisfaction of expectations. To borrow this effect for the video is to deny a viewer's dissent. *A New Silk Road* works us over in the same way; traditional folk music justifies, and patches over the messier and arguably more interesting realities glimpsed at the edges of the frame.

Such sincerity might be described in some circles as kitsch, in others as a compassionate portrait of humanity. As a mode of activism, *A New Silk Road* only goes as far as increasing our awareness of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Or perhaps it enacts an unhealthy memory, a bit of feel-good Agit-prop scar in Kyrgyzstan's collective Soviet-era psyche. If, however, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev are taking a critical stance towards their country's inability to thwart the determined machinations of globalization, then their methods may be too subtle and safe to register such unease. If they are genuinely interested in glorious representations of the rural folk and the working class, they've travelled this road before, and an artist's idealism, no matter how heartfelt, is no guarantee of a viewer's empathy.

Jason Fomberg