

CENTRAL ASIA PAVILION
ПАВИЛЬОН СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ
2005



Art from Central Asia a Contemporary Archive

Искусство Центральной Азии:
Актуальный Архив

 KURAMAABI
GALLERY

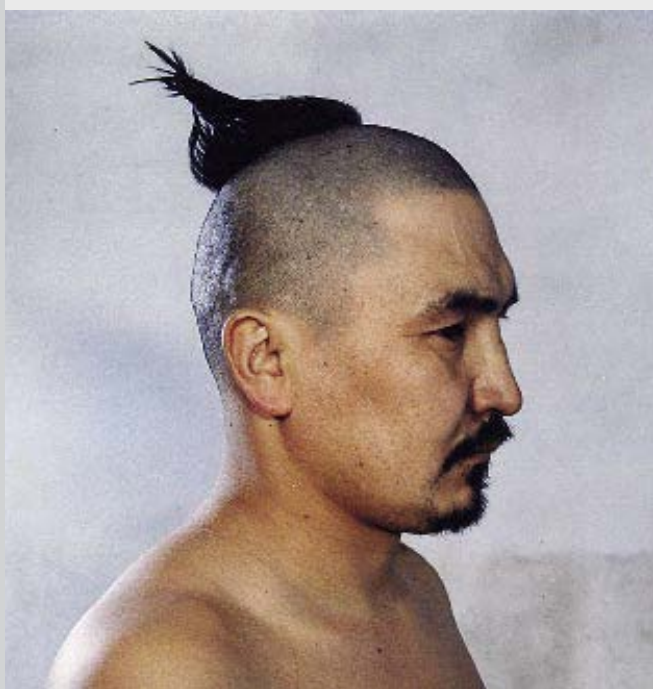
KYRGYZSTAN / КЫРГЫЗСТАН

KAZAKHSTAN / КАЗАХСТАН

UZBEKISTAN / УЗБЕКИСТАН

Erbossyn Meldibekov

Erbossyn Meldibekov. Pastan
Ербосын Мельдибеков. Пастан



Erbossyn Meldibekov is the only artist in Kazakhstan who managed to exactly personify an Asian/barbarian character.

Realizing his national Kazakh roots, Erbossyn prefers to portray himself as a modern nomad, an heir of unbridled steppe tribes. Therefore, his works are characterized by extreme de-sacralization of everything and everyone, mythology actualization, and straightforward presentation. To accomplish his goals the artist manages to organically combine the rough archaism of sheep oblation, Asian execution simulation or assault and battery with new media tools – photo, video and digital technologies.

He presents Islam subject matter from the same position of a myth proclaiming that anything sacred in the world of barbarians is impossible. He creates some virtual Asian state – Pastan, where live all his characters: an elderly couple wearing a turban and a veil made of the American flag; people being sold in sacks like rice or flour; and finally himself voluntarily beaten up by the arm of a stranger to the accompaniment of Kazakh round oath.

The last installation of the series “Pastan 6” depicts a typical Asian village cob (clay and straw) wall/room decorated with traditional slip glazed ceramic dishes. In the center there are pictures of Saparmurad Niyazov (the president of Turkmenistan, called here “Supermurad”); nuclear warheads and radars attached to donkey and camel backs, Asian men with guns in their mouths, etc... In front of this wall, on the floor there is a suzane (traditional Uzbek rug-talisman decorated with plant ornament) in the form of a Muslim prayer's rug. In the center of the suzane one can see a Kalashnikov machine gun and its component details with nametags and assembling instructions.

According to Erbossyn, he likes working with different materials and facts; combining everything to create his own mythology. He calls the present the “time of the Pharaohs”, i.e. absolute monarchs, and is sure that all ideological institutions, including religion, are subdued to the needs of the time.

Erbossyn Meldibekov has been a permanent participant of a number of international exhibitions; his works have always aroused foreign colleagues' interest. He represents the “enemy from the East” of the past decade for the Western public, while those, who happen to know him better, are sure that he is a nice guy, has passion for life and a talent of a remarkable cook, is fond of standing a treat to his friends.

Yulia Sorokina

№ 33/34

WAM

WORLD ART МУЗЕЙ

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№ 33/34

Прогрессивная ностальгия
Progressive Nostalgia

2008



Прогрессивная НОСТАЛЬГИЯ Progressive Nostalgia

Современное искусство
стран бывшего СССР

Contemporary Art
of the Former USSR

Ербосын Мельдибеков

Родился в 1964 году в Тулькубасе,

Казахстан

Живет в Алма-Ате, Казахстан

Карта Чингисхана,

или Шкура красного коня

Фотоколлаж

2007

Фрагменты шкуры с кусками мяса и жира, сфотографированные с близкого расстояния, напоминают топографические снимки, а вышитые конским волосом линии следуют границам Центральной Азии.

«Сталин – это очередная реинкарнация Чингисхана на пространстве Евразии», – писал Шпенглер в «Закате Европы». Название моей работы отсылает и к средневековому завоевателю, и к правителю XX века. «Красный конь» это аллюзия на знаменитую картину Петрова-Водкина «Купание красного коня», которая предлагала своего рода символ русской революции. В моей работе содержится попытка переосмысления старого символа применительно к новой эпохе, когда «красный конь» оказался осужден, а в его внутренностях, если к ним присмотреться, можно увидеть древнюю карту основателя Монгольской империи.

Е. М.

[Yerbosyn Meldibekov](#)

[Born in 1964 in Tulkubas, Kazakhstan](#)

[Lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan](#)

[Genghis Khan's Map,](#)

[or Red Steed's Hide](#)

[Photocollage](#)

2007

Close-up shots of an animal hide with chunks of meat and fat look like topographic surveys, and lines embroidered with horse hair follow the borders of Central Asia.

In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler wrote: "Stalin is just another reincarnation of Genghis Khan in the wide open space of Eurasia." Thus the title of my work refers both to the medieval warlord and the 20th-century leader. The "red steed" in the subtitle alludes to Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's famous painting *Bathing of the Red Steed*, which offered a symbol of the Russian revolution. My work attempts to rethink an old symbol for a new era, when the red steed has been flayed and its innards, open for close examination, reveal an ancient map used by Genghis Khan.

Ye.M.





Ербосын Мельдибеков

Родился в 1964 году в Тулкубасе,
Казахстан

Живет в Алма-Ате, Казахстан

Пик Победы

Инсталляция, объекты (ок. 20),
5 фотографий

2007

Гаттамелата в тени Чингисхана

Объект

2006

Политическая риторика национализма не что иное как плагиат. Политик, создавая собственный нарратив, присваивает исторические и культурные свершения прошлого, с тем чтобы придать позитивный смысл категории «национальная общность», на время утраченный с концом советской эпохи. И потому не удивительно, что национализм – закономерный путь развития большинства постсоветских стран. Ведь мир существует не первый день, и стоит немного покопаться в прошлом, как найдется достаточно героев, чтобы оправдать любую национальную идею.

Yerbosyn Meldibekov

Born in 1964 in Tulkubas, Kazakhstan

Lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan

Victory Peak

Installation (about 20 objects, 5 photographs)
2007

Gattamelata in the Shadow of Genghis Khan

Object

2006

The political rhetoric of nationalism is nothing more than plagiarism. In creating a narrative of his own, a politician appropriates achievements of historical and cultural figures of the past in order to put a positive spin on the category of “national unity,” something that was temporarily lost at the end of Soviet era. And therefore it is not surprising that nationalism has become the pattern for the development of most post-Soviet countries. The world was not made yesterday, and a brief rummage through history will always produce enough heroes to justify any national idea.

Однако каково место художника в процессе ваяния «национальной идеи»? Из истории мы знаем, что обычно художник первым вовлекался в него, если его не возглавлял. Большинство классических мастеров были вознесены на гребне очередной волны «нового национализма». Но сегодня правила изменились: ныне художественные процессы определяются не только локальной политикой, но и глобальным рынком. И художник оказывается перед выбором – играть ли по местным правилам, посвятив себя визуализации нового патриотизма, или же занять позицию внешнего наблюдателя. В первом случае возможна быстрая отдача, во втором – на успех можно рассчитывать лишь при очень большом везении.

Ербосын Мельдибеков избрал для себя один из немногих путей, остающихся у выходцев с окраин системы современного искусства, – он стал намеренно «экзотичным». При этом экзотизм его работ не является их пассивным качеством, чем-то, что расценивается таковым лишь западным восприятием. Постколо-
What is the artist's position in this process? Traditionally, artists have been the first to follow, if not lead it. Most of the great masters arose on waves of new nationalisms. But now the rules have changed, and art is governed not only by local politics, but by the global market as well. And an artist has a choice to make – to play by the local rules and create a visual manifestation of the new patriotism, or to take the position of an outside observer. The first option offers a better chance for a quick payback, while the second takes a lot of luck to work.

Yerbosyn Meldibekov chose one of the few paths available to a person from the art world's margins: he became deliberately “exotic.” Yet the exoticism of his work is not passive; it is not a value applied only by Western viewers. Postcolonial exotics is a category applied by the outside observer to describe that which is considered the norm in a particular culture. While Meldibekov's work is accepted in the context of global contemporary

ниальная экзотика суть свойство, которое присваивается внешним наблюдателем тому, что в пределах той или иной культуры осознается как «норма». В случае же Мельдибекова его работы, принятые глобальной системой искусства, на родине не воспринимаются как нечто «нормальное». Он редко выставляется в Казахстане, а его последняя персональная выставка «Кентавромахия» (2005) в алма-атинском Центре современного искусства была расценена консервативной прессой как «предвзятая» и оскорбительная для исламской истории и культуры. Один особенно фрустрированный критик писал: «Что сделал... Ербосын Мельдибеков? Он еще раз подтвердил европейский миф о кровожадности, дикости и неотесанности мусульман...»

Совершенно точная формулировка: миф, созданный по преимуществу европейцами, переосмысливается и возвращается им обратно. «Новый экзотизм» Мельдибекова конструируется из присущих западной культуре предрассудков и заблуждений: его образный ряд, эксплуатирующий art, it is not perceived as normal in his homeland. In fact, Meldibekov rarely exhibits in Kazakhstan. His last solo exhibition “Centauromachy,” held in 2005 at the Almaty Center of Contemporary Art, drew criticism in the conservative press as “prejudiced” and offensive to Muslim culture and history. One particularly frustrated critic wrote: “What did Yerbosyn Meldibekov do? He once again confirmed the European myth of Muslims as bloodthirsty, wild and uncivilized creatures...”

It is a very precise formula: Meldibekov takes a myth created chiefly by Europeans, then revises it and sends it back to them. His “new exoticism” is constructed from the prejudices and misconceptions about Asia inherent to Western culture. He exploits violent, ruthless imagery that corresponds to the outsider's perception of Asia. Thus, even when Meldibekov alludes directly to the history and politics of Kazakhstan, he simultaneously holds a mirror up to the Western viewer.

визуализацию насилия и жестокости, адекватен внешнему восприятию Азии. Поэтому даже когда его работы прямо апеллируют к истории и политике Казахстана, художник одновременно держит зеркало перед западным зрителем. Так в предельно централизованном и далеком от равноправия мире современного искусства эта изощренная стратегия позволяет Мельдибекову сохранить независимость и критическую дистанцию по отношению к обеим культурам.

«Гаттамелата...» и «Пик Победы» посвящены насильственным преобразованиям и драматическим переменам, что привносится в мир силами природы и истории. В сознании кочевника обе эти силы предстают нерасторжимыми, их порождение – суровый и бесчеловечный исторический ландшафт.

Работа «Гаттамелата» – это четыре таксидермированные лошадиные ноги, вооруженные на постамент, причем одна из передних ног покоится на пушечном ядре, что делает объект похожим на парадный конный монумент. Но самого героя (как

In the extremely centralized and unequal world of contemporary art this refined strategy allows Meldibekov to maintain his independence and some distance from both cultures.

Gattamelata... and *Victory Peak* are about violent transformations and dramatic changes brought on by the forces of nature and history. In the mind of the nomad, these two forces are inextricable. Together they create an austere and inhumane historical landscape.

In *Gattamelata...*, four taxidermied horse legs are mounted on a pedestal in a position that resembles official equestrian sculpture. One of the front hoofs rests on a cannon ball. But the hero, like the rest of the horse, is nowhere to be seen. He has been cut out and lost in the constant rewrites of history. Under both Russian and Soviet colonization, Asia has seen many heroes cast down and forgotten.

Victory Peak is a series of objects with the contours of mountainous landscapes in

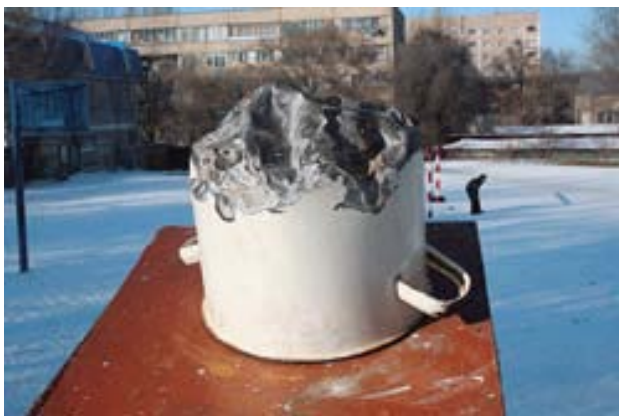
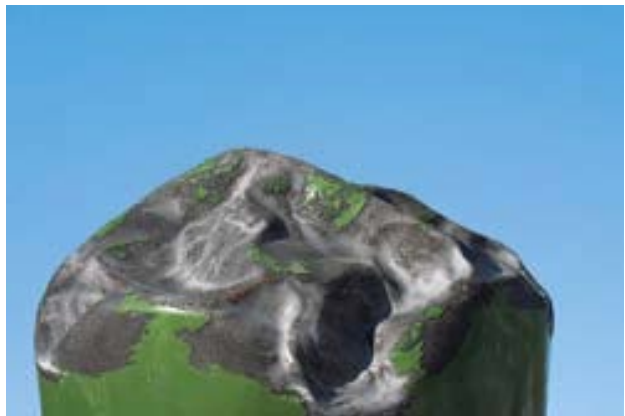
и остальной части лошади) нет как нет: он был «срезан» и по ходу постоянного переписывания истории где-то затерялся. В Азии в эпоху российской, а потом советской колонизации перевидали многих низвергнутых и вскоре забытых героев. «Пик Победы» представляет собой серию объектов, которым приданы очертания реальных ландшафтов Центральной Азии и Кавказа: алюминиевая фольга, смятая в виде горной цепи Гиндукуш в Афганистане, эмалированный котелок, по форме напоминающий горную вершину, и т. д. Художник обращается к объектам, вторгшимся в Азию извне, воплощающим историческое влияние Запада, и один за другим превращает их в некий первобытный ландшафт. Эти работы одновременно и комментарий к совершавшимся в прошлом попыткам «приручения» Азии, и обращение к собственному опыту: Мельдибеков берет нечто пришедшее с Запада и силой переделывает его в нечто «азиатское».

Ева Некляева

Central Asia and the Caucasus: aluminum foil crumpled in the shape of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush range, an enamel pot hammered into a mountain peak, and so on. The artist has used objects brought to Asia from beyond its borders. They represent the historical influence of the West, and one by one they have been transformed into a wild landscape. The work is as much a comment on historical attempts to "tame" Asia as they are self-referential; Meldibekov takes something of Western origin – contemporary art – and forces it into the shape of something "Asian."

Eva Neklyayeva







Universes in Universe / Nafas Art Magazine / Yerbossyn Meldibekov: Mutations
http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/yerbossyn_meldibekov (Published:
July 2011, print version)

Yerbossyn Meldibekov: Mutations

By Georgy Mamedov | July 2011

The research of various metamorphoses, stratification, and paradoxical intersections occurring in the background of a turbulent political situation in Central Asia in the last twenty years, is one of the main motives of Yerbossyn Meldibekov's artistic work. Mutation (2010), presented at the Central Asian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale 2011, is one of the many possible configurations of this long-term research project, in which Meldibekov is interested in the changes — or better say mutations — of visual language in which political power communicates with the public. The project represents a comprehensive study of the transformation of urban environment — primarily sculptures and monuments — associated with the change of political priorities, trends, moods, or the change of political regimes themselves in Central Asia. According to Meldibekov, the starting point for this research was a rather well-known situation; the change of a few monuments in the central park of Tashkent. The first monument, a sculpture of Turkestan Governor General Kaufman was erected there in the early 20th century, and the last one was of Tamerlane, in the years of Uzbek independence.

Meldibekov's research includes three approaches. The first approach may be called psychoanalytic. As we know, the unconscious reveals itself in slips of the pen, in slips of the tongue and in involuntary gestures. The artist listens to and observes the unconscious in the discourse of power — paradoxical quotations, oxymora and 'punctums' of the official visual language. The artist identifies the flickering Christian image of the Virgin Mary, embodied in the Soviet "Motherland", and then in the "Mother of Uzbekistan". However, the most interesting are the pedestals — left without the statues of leaders and other ideologically significant characters of the Soviet history, and having lost their functionality they turn into avant-garde sculpture par-excellence — abstract self-referential objects.





The second approach of Yerbossyn Meldibekov is anthropological. German Egyptologist and researcher of cultural memory, Jan Assman was one of the first ones who suggested the idea of the monument as a medium for transmitting culturally significant content. The ancient Egyptian ‘monumental discourse’, which he investigated, was “an environment in which the state clearly embodied both itself and the eternal order”. [1] Perhaps the desire to get in contact, if not with eternity, but at least with something epochal and stable, which is expressed in the monumentality of sculptures, explains the habit of modern humans taking photos of themselves in front of monuments.

Such photographs are always the intersections of two lines, two histories — the small and the great. Family or personal micro-narratives in these photos are always supplemental and somehow accidental in the background of a ‘greater History’. People grow old and die, while monuments remain unchanged. On numerous photographs that were collected by Yerbossyn Meldibekov, in his project Family Album, part of which is presented in Mutation, the opposite is true. An image that was taken recently corresponds to an old, Soviet era photograph. On the former, there are the same people photographed in the same place a few decades later, but in front of an entirely different monument. In a lifetime, people experience the change of several epochs, each of which tends to express itself monumentally, clearing the sacred site of profane ‘idol’ of predecessors in advance. Connotations that are traditionally associated with representations of micro-stories are carried over to images of macro-narratives and vice versa. In a world devoid of eternity, permanence and stability are only acquired in oneself or in the closest relatives and friends, while the monumental granite and marble giants are no more than decorations, a temporary and easily removable milieu.



While a researcher-scientist presents his results in the form of texts, a book or a scholarly article, the researcher-artist creates an image. The creation of the image gives the artistic research the status of a unique cognitive act. The third research approach of Yerbossyn Meldibekov is actually the creation of an image. Yerbossyn studied sculpting. The choice to do so was a conscious decision, as he wanted to sculpt 'the leader of the world revolution'. Of course, he was not led by ideology but by purely mercantile considerations. The unique images of Meldibekov — sculpture mutants — are satirical imitations of frank tili [2], the language which official sculptors speak, and also a visual summary of his whole research. This is how the author describes it: "Some ideological sculptures I 'bring' to post-modernism with my own hands, or expose them to a process of de-ideologization... Let's take the example of a small bust of Lenin - if it is stretched horizontally, it becomes like Genghis Khan. If it is crushed vertically, it will look like Giacometti. If you increase the size of its lips, it turns out to be Lumumba — this reminds us of the similarities between African and Kyrgyz riots. The main meaning and method, which is used in creating the sculptures in this project, is the instability and fluidity of the situation in Central Asia."

Notes:

1. Jan Assmann: Cultural Memory: Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations. Lingua Franca / Франк тили [frank tili] is the title of the exhibition presented at the Central Asian Pavilion of the 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2011 (ed. note)
Georgy Mamedov * 1984, curator of the Platform SHTAB (School of Theory and Activism – Bishkek). Lives in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

© Text: Georgy Mamedov. Courtesy of the Central Asian Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale
The text is part of the essay "Франк тили — Франк тілі — frank tili", published in the catalogue of the exhibition "Lingua Franca", Central Asian Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale 2011.

Lingua Franca Central Asian Pavilion 54th Venice Biennale 4 June – 27 Nov. 2011 Palazzo Malipiero San Marco Venice

11 artists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. Curators: Boris Chukhovich Georgy Mamedov Oksana Shatalova

Yerbossyn Meldibekov * 1964 Shymkent, Kazakhstan. Lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan.
<http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/intartdata/artists/asia/kaz/meldibekov>

Universes in Universe / Nafas Art Magazine / Yerbossyn Meldibekov: Centauromachy
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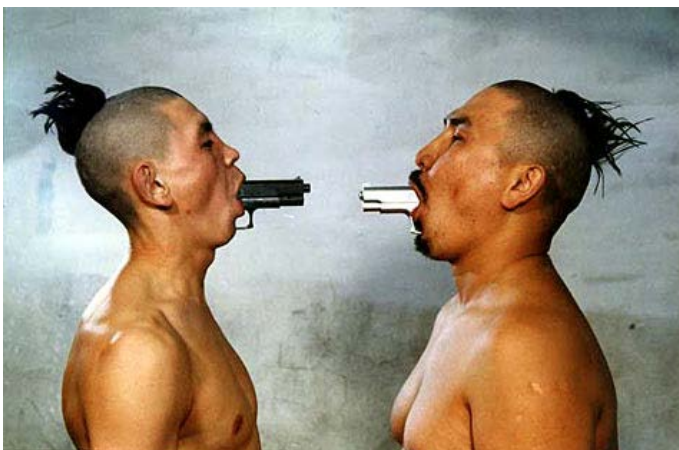
Yerbossyn Meldibekov: Centauromachy

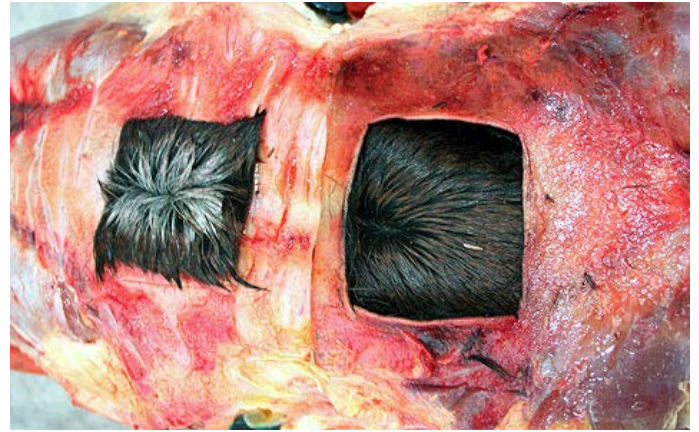
By Valeria Ibraeva | March 2007

The Yerbossyn Meldibekov's photographic work "My Brother — My Enemy" (2000) has become a kind of trademark of contemporary art from Central Asia. Exhibition curators in Mexico, Italy, and Poland have put it on the covers of magazines, catalogs, and art guides and on posters and invitation cards. At first sight, this testifies to the fact that this powerful work corresponds fairly exactly to the general ideas about the region; i.e., it confirms a certain stereotype that has emerged from the tangle of florid concepts of European Orientalism - namely the aggressiveness, exoticism, and the "mystery" of the East.

On the other hand, it is obvious that merely exploiting an idea is not enough to make one famous. That would require that one cause an explosion in the subway or draw caricatures, confirming theory by means of practice. But one doesn't go as far as to conduct a thorough anti-Orientalistic discourse with references to Edward Saïd or Tarik Ali. Yet Yerbossyn Meldibekov clearly belongs to those who take part in polemics: he sincerely tries to come to terms with the situation and he confirms the conclusions of those who oppose European prejudice. In point of fact, Asian reality is difficult to modernize, because people cling to values, some of which have petrified into strict dogmas. But that is the specific quality of the region: it tends to Isolationism and thereby underscores the priority of the local over the general human mentality. Archaism is conspicuous in the current discourse, but the defensive line is visibly crumbling, and not only in theory.

The original impulse behind "My Brother — My Enemy" is a regional problem of Kazakhstan: the existence of a system of competing clans and tribes competing for





political influence and control of financial flows. The work of art is structured like a report based on a traditional ornamental motif: a heavy module, laconicism, and the use of a negative-positive composition from a Kazakh felt carpet. The work is many-faceted and takes up the problematical relationship between the neighbors in the region, which in the Soviet period was propagated as “brotherly” and was seen as a definition of human relations in themselves. After September 11, 2001, the work “My Brother — My Enemy” took on more explosive power, because it seems to confirm conflicts of humanity that have now become more visible in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the caricature dispute, the “collapse of civilization”, etc.

The phenomenon of this photo work’s lightning rise from local to global significance is confirmed by a formula of “artistic anticipation” that is banal but important in characterizing Meldibekov: everything he expresses seems to come true. No less significant than “My Brother — My Enemy” is the video work “Pastan” (2003), in which a man with an Uzbek cap, a tjubeteika, is defenselessly exposed for hours to a hail of slaps. This recalls the quietude of the population of Uzbekistan in 2005 when government troops in Andijan carried out a massacre. The version “Pastan 2”, shot in Bishkek and shown on the display of a cell phone, anticipated the unending Kyrgyz revolution and the abhorrent execution of Saddam Hussein.

The artist is masterfully able to create a strong, precise, and passionate oeuvre, whereby his directness arouses associations of cruelty and “Aziatchina” [1]. His works are like a great mirror that immediately casts back upon the viewer splinters of metaphors, thoughts, and allusions. After one has recovered from the shock of viewing “Pol Pot” (video, 2000; living people are crushed by a pile of stones), one is riveted by references to history (Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, the “pyramid of Isfahan”) and to cultural stereotypes (verses by Michelangelo, pictures by Vereshtshagin, the Soviet film “White Sun of the Desert” (beloe solnce pustyni), and Terminator and by anticipations of the future: photographs from Abu Ghraib and even computer games like “Snood”. The return from catharsis makes the personality’s lack of freedom understandable in principle: we are all somehow buried by cobblestones consisting of rushes to judgment, prejudices, traditions, religious limitations, or norms of behavior that are part of what is called good manners.

Since the author has sufficiently tried out postmodern practices, he consciously exploits his own ethnic traits by deepening and playing with stereotypes of the Orientalist discourse; it is no coincidence that self-portraits are included in many of his works (“Pastan”, “My Brother...”). In the installation “...baj batyry” (2007), five otherwise identical busts are distinguished solely by the decorations on their warrior’s helmets. Here is an obvious parallel to the uniformity of Kazakh monuments, which display only a single heroic figure. But since the cult of personality around President Nasarbáyev has not yet completely blanketed Kazakhstan, the artist once again uses traits from his own portrait. In this sequence, which could be continued, and in this kind of depiction, the unchanging portrait becomes the impersonal type of a kind of ruler’s monument, which

could appear in this or a similar way in any of the authoritarian systems of Central Asia's oil- and gas-producing countries.

In the photo series "Centauiromachy" (2007), the artist plays with his favorite material, the pelts and bones of animals. The "Portrait of an Anti-Terrorist", a camouflage with a horse's skull instead of a face, ridicules the efforts of the Central Asian rulers to suppress every form of protest and independent thinking using the excuse of the "struggle against international terrorism". "Winnie the Pooh", a teddy bear sewn from the bloody pelt of a horse turned inside-out, is an extremely barbaric invention. The television images of children killed in Iraq or Palestine look less shocking. Another shocking work from the series "Centauiromachy" shows the pelt of a horse, from which extends the lower body of a man standing on his head, with a feebly dangling genital exposed for all the world to view.

Destitute Asia, torn by wars, corruption, and intrigues and divided up among a powerful few for access to its raw materials, is nonetheless in a position to evaluate itself in the global context and thereby not only to become aware of its situation, but also to bring forth powerful works of art and ideas. The East truly remains the East. Its "mystery" and its "exoticism" are displayed in the fact that vibrant people live here, people consisting of bones, flesh, and nerves and who — often — have keen minds.

Art in America

Art in America

Erbol Meldibekov

MOSCOW,
at Gelman

by Yulia Tikhonova



Erbol Meldibekov has been mining the history of his native Central Asia for almost three decades now. Walking through “Hallucination,” his second exhibition at Gelman Gallery, one felt thrown back to desolate Soviet times. In this show, sculptural installations, photography and videos (all 2011) attest to the struggles of Kazakhstan (the artist’s birthplace) and other Central Asian countries to reconcile their Soviet legacy with the reality of a capitalist present.

Mutation consists of four bronze busts of a man in a suit. One portrays Lenin and recalls the mass-produced figurines that were de rigueur in homes throughout the Soviet Union but which many people discarded after perestroika. As a student in Soviet times, Meldibekov worked in a factory that turned out such tchotchkes. The other three busts, though clearly of different men, retain some of Lenin’s characteristics. The second has been altered by elongating the head so it recalls a Giacometti; the third is flattened and takes on Mongoloid features, perhaps meant to evoke those of Genghis Khan; the last wears glasses and resembles the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. Displayed on pedestals, these mutants signify that power can assume various guises.

The installation Communism Peak presents six smashed pots that have been upended and hammered until all the white enamel has fallen off the sides. The two at either end are beaten down almost to the level of the kitchen stools on which they stand; the tallest pot, in the middle, is less damaged. The piece is named for Communism Peak, the highest mountain in Tajikistan, which has, at various times, been renamed for Stalin, for Communism, and, in 1998, for Ismail Samani, the “father of Tajikistan.”

For Meldibekov, who lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan’s former capital, history’s changes are also embodied in architecture. The Family Album is a collection of photographs of vacationers, including his family, taken on a central square in Tashkent in the 1980s. During the last 90 years this square has changed its name 10 times as its namesakes came into and fell out of favor with the authorities. Meldibekov has restaged many of these snapshots, sometimes including the same family members. While young girls have become middle-aged women, the commemorative statues in the square have also changed, from Lenin to local heroes. The photos together set in contrast the natural changes of time and the willed changes of men. Meldibekov collaborated with his brother Nurbosyn Oris to create these works. As Central Asia adopts a market economy, Meldibekov shows that regardless of socialism or capitalism, power has a similar face.

Photo: Erbol Meldibekov: Mutation, 2009–11, bronze and mixed mediums; at Gelman.

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KAZAKHSTAN | HONG KONG

A PERPETUAL LOOP: THE WORK OF KAZAKH ARTIST ERBOSSYN MELDIBEKOV

BY KITTY VAN LEEUWEN



ERBOSSYN MELDIBEKOV, *Transformer*, 2013, bronze and wood, dimensions variable. Courtesy Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong.

Kazakh artist Erbossyn Meldibekov is in constant conflict with his identity. His exhibition “Mountains of Revolution,” now on view at Rossi & Rossi gallery in Hong Kong, demonstrates some of the struggles faced by an artist emanating from a region that remains relatively unknown. In his performance at the 2005 Venice Biennale, Meldibekov introduced himself and was accepted as being from the fictive nation of Pastan. When questioned on the gullibility of his viewers, the artist responded challengingly, “Few people care where Tajikistan or Turkmenistan is. To them, Central Asia might as well be a meteorite that exploded out of Venus.”

Where’s the conflict in wanting to put one’s country on the map, one may wonder. For Meldibekov, a politically engaged artist, the answer is evident in both his practice and in the fact that he has few friends in his own region. The latest example of alienation resulting from his hyper-critical stance occurred at the opening of “Mountains of Revolution” earlier this month. When the wife of the Kazakh counsel saw the artist, she ran off, too afraid of being associated with his take on the historical and contemporary politics of the country. The artist laughs off this incident, having long since accepted that he will never gain full recognition in his own country.



ERBOSSYN MELDIBEKOV, *Peaks of Lenin*, 2013, enamelled basins and bath, dimensions variable. Courtesy Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong.

The show's title "Mountains of Revolution" nods to the notion that everything comes full circle, and this theme is apparent in most of the works. In *Transformer* (2013), a sculpture of bronze and wood, that Meldibekov jokingly calls "a serious toy for adults," the viewer is invited to create his own monument. The artwork references a monument in Uzbekistan that has gone through ten changes in the past hundred years. Due to politics, shifting ideologies and ensuing conflict, various individuals and events have been commemorated, all perched upon the same pedestal.

In another work, *Peaks of Lenin* (2013), Meldibekov depicts the highest mountain of Central Asia, which has also been subject to transient naming. Having gone through four over the past hundred years, it is still regarded differently from each side of its peak. In Tajikistan, the mountain is known as Ibn Sina Peak, while in Kyrgyzstan it is called Lenin Peak, each referring to the country's ruler at the time of its naming, respectively. To represent these transformations, the artist created three versions of the mountain. Made from bathtubs that have been bashed in with a hammer, they allude to Central Asian countries' constant re-visioning or "washing" of their previous identities, which fits perfectly with the theme of the exhibition.



ERBOSSYN MELDIBEKOV, *Mountain Village*, 2014, plywood, 122 × 168 cm. Courtesy Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong.

Meldibekov often finds metaphorical meaning within the materials he uses. In one of his most recent works *Mountain Village* (2014), he created a village out of plywood rather than his typical medium of bronze, which he cites as “being too expensive and scarce,” to represent a country in which wood and cardboard are more prevalent.

For Meldibekov, Central Asia seems stuck in a different time and in a perpetual loop. While other countries are growing and changing, the artist describes change in Kazakhstan as seasonal—spring, summer, fall, winter—“it’s always a circle, a never-ending circle,” he says. Despite this slightly pessimistic outlook, the artist strives to achieve political engagement with his work, believing this to be the only topic worth confronting.

Erbossyn Meldibekov’s “[Mountains of Revolution](#)” is on view at Rossi & Rossi through May 3, 2014.

Kitty van Leeuwen is a writer currently based in Hong Kong.

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