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Focus Kazakhstan—Thinking Collections: Telling Tales

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Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, Live Performance at *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, ACAW Signature Exhibition, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City (14 October 2018). Courtesy Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Kazakhstan has been inhabited since the Paleolithic period. Its etymology comes from *kazakh*, meaning 'wanderer', and *stan*, which in Persian means 'land'. And so the country—ninth largest in the world—is literally translated to 'land of the wanderers'. From Genghis Khan's Mongolian Empire to the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the land and its inhabitants have witnessed social, political, cultural and spiritual transformations, while the voracious extraction of its rich natural resources has made it into the most economically dominant country in Central Asia.

In Jersey City, *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales* (14 October–30 November 2018) opened at Mana Contemporary, a massive multi-use arts centre housed in a former tobacco factory. A signature programme of Asia Contemporary Art Week and curated by Leeza Ahmady and Vladislav Sludskiy, the exhibition showed the artwork and performance history of the Kazakh artistic collective Kyzyl Tractor through a comprehensive display of their individual and collective performance documentation, photography, sculpture, painting and installation works from 1995 to today.



Opening Reception for Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, ACAW Signature Exhibition, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City (14 October 2018). Courtesy Asia Contemporary Art Week.

In the early 1990s, Vitaliy Simakov—an artist and professor living and working in Shymkent, Kazakhstan—organised a group of artists to collaborate and discuss art together away from the mainstream, politically enforced system. Simakov's instruction differed from Kazakhstan's higher education norm; at a time when abstraction was banned and realism defined the artistic discourse, Simakov was discussing the Russian avantgarde, including the works of Malevich and others from the 1920s and 1930s. This engagement with artworks and movements from the continent and abroad allowed the

artists in Shymkent to create an artistic vocabulary of their own. At first, the group called themselves Shymkent Trans Avant-Garde, but in 1995 changed their name to Kyzyl Tractor (Red Tractor) when the group encountered a public monument of a red Soviet iron tractor fully equipped with a kerosene engine.



Exhibition view: Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, ACAW Signature Exhibition, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City (14 October–30 November 2018). Courtesy Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Over time, the collective has grown and dwindled, with the addition and departure of artists coinciding with a time of dizzying political and social change in the 1990s. Its remaining members delivered a striking performance titled *Purification* (2003/2018) at Mana Contemporary on opening day. The collective's current members Said Atabekov, Smail Bayaliyev, Arystanbek Shalbayev and Vitaliy Simakov recreated the giant purification drum made for their first performance of *Purification* in Prague in 2003. The drum was a large-scale wooden structure measuring over two metres in diameter, wrapped in skin and tied together with rope and white ribbons—representing a tradition of holding onto a memory—and placed at the front lawn of Mana. Clad in traditional shaman garb, the four members of Kyzyl Tractor walked in ceremonial procession with

their audience in stride. One artist pushed the drum as another dragged a stack of heavy felt rugs behind him. Another artist, wearing a red-beaked mask—much like the masks that plague doctors wore in the 1400s to protect their body from disease—carried a Red Cross medic bag on his back. Atabekov lead the troupe with a surgeon's mask, torn and sutured back together, covering his face. The artists burnt a mix of herbs in a shallow pan, and took turns violently banging the drum with sticks—each strike that echoed throughout the parking lot sounded like the shot of a rifle—while their voices shouted back at one another. The procession travelled around the giant building, through the crowded parking lot and back in through a back door. As the procession moved into the building, the space became crowded with visitors. Once inside, Bayaliyev climbed the drum with the stack of rugs and proceeded to beat each of them. Then he poured the contents from colourful moulded water canisters from previous performances over the felt. In the meantime, the others continued chanting, burning incense and spraying flour around the drum. The drum was then rolled to a gallery with a frenzy of white powder dust in the air. The artists traced their bodies with their fingers through the white powder on the floor and drum, banging the instrument with sticks and calling out. Finally, they slotted the drum into its final resting place: a blue corner in one of the building's galleries called the "Shaman Room".

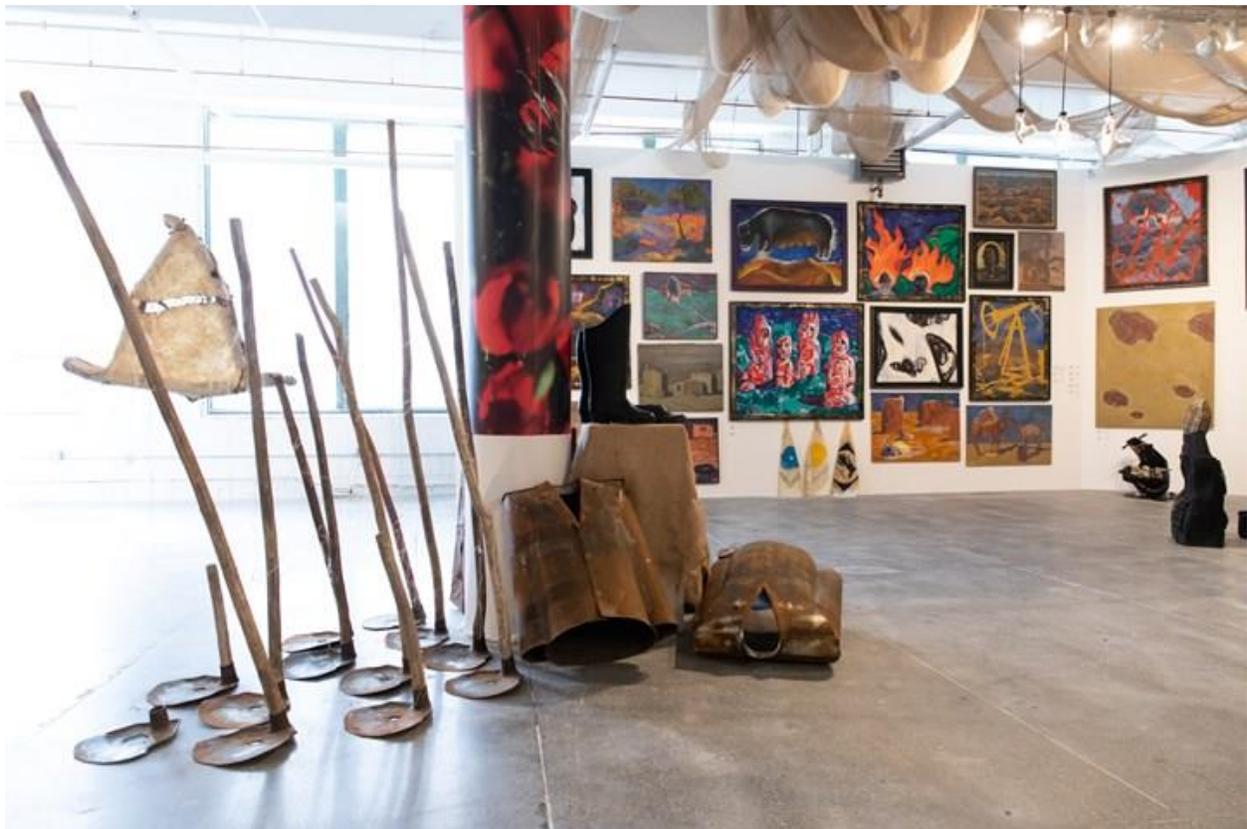


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The collective's use of musical instruments, shamanistic ritual and native materials such as felt is a recurring theme in their practice. *Purification* is a monumental performance that with each rotation emanated questions and conflicting imagery and ideas about native philosophy and its conundrum and place in our world today; the curators described it as 'a proposition for creating flow within a chaotic world'. The performance—set against the backdrop of an area undergoing gentrification (prompted by Mana Contemporary's very presence)—was full of critical contradictions, historical clues, and poetry that took its audience on a sometimes-humorous journey to beat into sublimation the negativity and conflicts in the city and among the group of people present at the performance.

On the main exhibition hall on the third floor, the collective's artworks and performance documentation are displayed in a salon-like hang. The group's idiosyncratic energy could be felt in their individual and collective works, which were rich in diverse materials and histories, from found objects to symbolism, abstraction and figuration. Two works stand out. *I am Kazakh! I died a thousand times and yet again revived* (2012) comprises a set

of 100 sculptures made of stone, resin, tires and wood by Moldakul Narymbetov. Each sculpture of varying size is made up of a tube of a tyre packed with a *balbal*—a memorial stone that is traditionally carved into a figure. These ancient stones are found throughout the Kazakh steppe, facing East—according to Tengrism belief—with the blue sky above, the brown earth below and the human in between. In Narymbetov's sculptures, tradition and modernity are tangled in efforts to supersede one another. Out of each tyre—a product of modernity and natural resources—the head of a white stone appears, as though rebirthing itself from the clutches of a present that keeps reinventing itself. Similarly—partially recreated for the exhibition—Said Atabeko's *Dreams of Genghis Khan-1* (1995) displays numerous hoes used for farming. Each hoe stands on its metal blade and their raw wooden handles lean to one side in unison, resembling a feeble army poised to face the globalised agricultural farming by looking to the former emperor's cutthroat organisation and command for guidance.



Exhibition view: Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, ACAW Signature Exhibition, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City (14 October–30 November 2018). Courtesy Asia Contemporary Art Week. Photo: Michael Wilson.

Transitioning from nomadic culture to communism to capitalism in less than a century, Kazakhstan has seen dramatic social and political transformation. The 1980s to the 1990s witnessed both the implementation of and end to Perestroika, the government's restructuring of the economic and political system that is allegedly to blame for the ascent of nationalism and dissolution of the union. These concerns are evident in Kyzyl Tractor's works as they both entangle and unravel tradition and modernity. Their spiritually induced artistic process since the 1990s has resisted standardisation of thought, lifestyle and consumption by returning to the gestures of pre-Islam and calling forth ancient ritual, shamanic states and Sufi ceremony to touch and permeate our contemporary moment. —

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