



ELUDING CAPTURE

Three Artists From Central Asia

MASS MoCA

Dwelling in and on Central Asia

By Jessica Chen

M.A., Williams College, 2024

Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

In the summer of 2023 I attended a seminar on Central Asian histories in Almaty, Kazakhstan. During class, a participant bitterly commented, “We are no one. We are nothing,” a provocation which has stayed with me ever since.¹ What I take this remark to mean is that the region of Central Asia—modern-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—has been sidelined by labels like “post-Soviet” and “Russian-speaking,” assumptions that flatten the specificity of Central Asian lives.² What I heard that day signaled a desire to become known as oneself to oneself and the world, in all of the messiness, contradiction, and complexity that endeavor entails. Artists Saodat Ismailova, Gulnur Mukazhanova, and Alexander Ugay embark upon this venture of self-definition, interrogating what it means to dwell in and on Central Asia.

The seminar led me to a conversation with curator and writer Dilda Ramazan, whose recent manifesto about Central Asian identity discusses how representations of the region are always fraught, and often inadequate.³ Central Asia tends to slip out of Western academic and geopolitical categories. The title of this exhibition, *Eluding Capture*, refers to how Ismailova, Mukazhanova, and Ugay avoid being defined by others. These artists express a commitment to the unseen—to the difficult, complicated, and unexplainable. Their works elude capture through a

variety of strategies, such as abstracting the pictorial field; materializing traces of overlooked histories; and embracing the metaphysical concept of multiple realities.

At different points in time, Central Asia has been ruled by Indigenous khanates, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. Although the term “Central Asia” unites the region, there remain important linguistic, cultural, and artistic distinctions between and within these communities. For this reason, *Eluding Capture* cannot and does not aspire to be a comprehensive survey of Central Asian art. Rather, by bringing together three artists with different approaches to the poetics of belonging, the exhibition aims to express the complexity of making a place of one’s own in Central Asia.

The artists in *Eluding Capture* approach Central Asia as both a source of identity and a lived space. Their works seek pictorial, material, and metaphysical agency from colonial legacies, a search for self-definition that acknowledges the reverberations of empire.⁴ By moving against the secular and mimetic impulses of Soviet modernity, including the Soviet Union’s rejection of Islam and censorship of much critically engaged, often abstract, art, these artists gesture toward the long history of anticolonial thought and South-South solidarity in Central Asia. That history includes the Afro-Asian literary and film

festivals in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which began in 1958.⁵ In the 1980s, filmmakers of the Kazakh New Wave experimented with a new cinematic language that rejected the heavy didacticism of Soviet filmmaking, while Kazakh students protested against Soviet rule in a series of 1986 demonstrations called *Jeltoqsan köterilisi* (December uprising). Such moments suggest an alternate genealogy of solidarity and self-definition, one that is highly resonant in the work of these artists.

Ismailova, Mukazhanova, and Ugay highlight broad affinities with anticolonial intellectual and artistic movements in their work at a time when Russia's invasion of Ukraine (and Georgia in 2008) lays bare the existential threat of being postcolonial and post-Soviet. Refusing narrative closure, all three artists unsettle distinctions between past and present to examine the boundaries of Central Asian identity. Together, their works question what it means to belong and to express a relationship to place, putting Central Asia in all of its elusive multiplicities front and center.

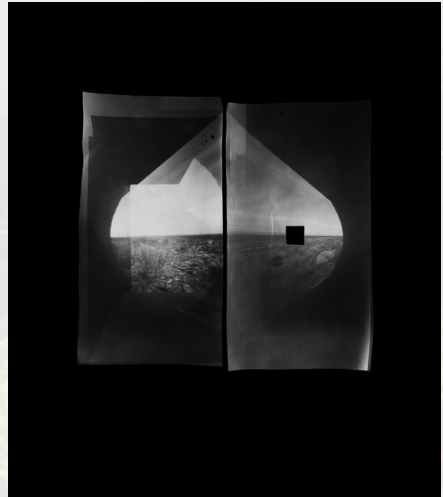
Alexander Ugay

b. 1978, Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan

Alexander Ugay's practice makes unfulfilled desires visible and material. He employs seemingly outdated technologies—from the camera obscura to Super 8 film—to create works that tunnel through space and time. Folding insights from psychoanalysis and image theory into his work, Ugay seeks new positions from which to question what is allowed into the domain of conscious language, and what eludes articulation in speech.

In recent years, Ugay has focused his attention on the Koryo Saram diaspora. The artist himself is part of that community of ethnic Koreans who Stalin deported from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia. Since 2000, South Korea has passed immigration laws easing the return of the Koryo Saram community, engendering fierce debates over exactly where members of the Koryo Saram can call home.

In *Obscuraton #10* (2022), Ugay placed a homemade camera obscura at the geographic coordinates where Koreans were deported first to Russia, then to the Kazakh SSR. The resulting images depict landscapes that have been distorted to the brink of unrecognizability. His photographs acknowledge the fact of their own construction, echoing art historian W.J.T. Mitchell's argument that the landscape



ABOVE: Alexander Ugay, *Obscuraton #10*, 2022. Installation with photographs and camera obscura (gelatin silver prints, plywood, inkjet prints). Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by the Busan Biennale, South Korea

BACKGROUND: Alexander Ugay, *More than a hundred thousand times* (detail), 2019–2020. 35 min. 39 sec. HD video. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Art Sonje Center, South Korea

is unnatural and should be conceived of “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”⁶ Ugay’s deconstruction of landscape photography in *Obscuraton #10* reminds us of the Koryo Saram’s displacement from their original homeland and of the construction of their identity through relationships to place. The border crossing indicates where old identities are sloughed off and new ones assumed, however impartially and imperfectly.

Riffing on the term “camera obscura,” the title “Obscuraton” suggests a machine that does more to conceal than reveal. Invented in the seventeenth century, the camera obscura is a dark box with a small aperture that allows light to reflect an inverted and flipped image onto photosensitive paper (essentially functioning like a photographic negative or contact print). *Obscuraton #10* includes a deconstructed model of the camera obscura that Ugay used to take his photographs. The technology of the camera obscura introduces a sense of closeness to the work that digital cameras lack. Punctured with holes of different shapes and sizes, Ugay’s camera obscura produces images of remarkable abstraction. Overlapping forms, amorphous shapes, and plays of light and shadow populate the photos on the wall and the negatives which the artist has glued to the camera. The camera-turned-sculpture and the images are equally important parts of the installation, the former because it was physically present at the border crossing, the latter because they make the act and absences of crossing visually present. Ugay has remarked on this interaction between image and object, presence and absence, noting that the *Obscuraton* sculpture



Alexander Ugay, *More than a hundred thousand times* (detail), 2019–2020. 35 min. 39 sec. HD video. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Art Sonje Center, South Korea

“is a camera, an image, a physical object, a reference, a registration of surroundings—all at once. Something visible and invisible, empty and full, open and closed.”⁷ *Obscuraton #10* registers the symptoms of being caught in between as a condition of diasporic belonging.

Engaging with the same history, the video *More than a hundred thousand times* (2019–2020) proposes a coda to the 1930s deportation that is grounded in the contemporary moment. In 2019, Ugay began working with other Koryo Saram migrants at different factories in South Korea to support his artistic practice in Kazakhstan. In the video on view, these migrants rehearse the repetitive motions of their factory labor in front of their homes. Absent the factory environment, their quasi-choreographed gestures highlight the alienation of both their labor and their status as migrants. For Ugay, who like many in the Koryo Saram community grew up speaking Russian and not Korean, a “return” to Korea is yet another stage of displacement.

The descendants of the Koryo Saram’s first generation, whose journeys are conjured by the artist in *Obscuraton #10*, appear in *More than a hundred thousand times* as laborers

who migrate back to South Korea in search of economic opportunity. Traversing the journey of two Koryo Saram generations between the 1930s and the present, Ugay's works adumbrate real and imaginary geographies of belonging.

Gulnur Mukazhanova

b. 1984, Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan

Gulnur Mukazhanova turns to the centuries-old practice of felting as a site for reimagining relationships between oneself, the body politic, and the state. Her MASS MoCA commission consists of a series of 75 abstract, felted portraits, which the artist began after the January 2022 protests (referred to as Qantar ["January"] in Kazakh) in Kazakhstan, protests fueled by widespread discontent with the government. The police killed at least 232 people during the protests, including children, and they arrested and detained thousands more.⁸

There are no human features or objects visible in these works; instead, expressionistic splashes of color extend across the surface of each work. Mukazhanova is careful to emphasize that her textiles do not represent those who were killed in the January 2022 events, explaining, "I do not want to take their image from them—to speak for them."⁹ Implicit is the fact that for the artist, the work of dealing with the violence is psychological, and therefore situated within the self. The textiles locate different stages of witnessing state violence in Mukazhanova's own process.

At the heart of this series lies the entanglement between the self and the state, and Mukazhanova's provocation



ABOVE & BACKGROUND: Gulnur Mukazhanova, *Portrait-Reflections (on the history of my homeland, Gandy Qantar 2022)*, 2023. Felt and pins. 100 × 70 cm (39.37 × 27.56 in). Courtesy of the artist

that the two are inseparable. Through her portraits, she suggests that to respond and witness such events is not merely a matter of sensory input, but a process of understanding where the self begins and ends. When the state becomes the center of our civic or ethnic identity, to what extent are we implicated in its decisions? Mukazhanova's project knots together 'us' and 'them' divisions, quite literally through the compression of disparate fibers into felt. Each portrait mimics the proportions of a head-and-shoulders profile and directly confronts the viewer. The series expands the boundaries of the self to interrogate where they overlap, intersect, and converge with the state.

Other points of reference in these works include decorative motifs found on Kazakh carpets that once corresponded to social



Kijasova Nurgajsha, **Syrmak (type of carpet)**, 1950. Felt. Reproduced in: *A. Kastejev State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: abilhan Kastejev atyndary Kazakstan Respublikasy memlekettik öner muzeji, 2015), 80

status. Produced for centuries, felt carpets (image above) are embellished with a wide variety of vegetal, zoomorphic, and geometric ornaments delineated with crisply articulated borders. Originally used to furnish and insulate yurts, these textiles communicated a complex network of social and political relationships. Under Stalin's 1934 mandate, "national in form, socialist in content," these ornaments became a general signifier of Soviet Kazakh identity. The same logic was at play after the Soviet Union's collapse, when newly independent Kazakhstan sought to assert its identity through the proliferation of ornaments in public spaces and on clothing.

Mukazhanova's textiles, however, dissolve these symbols into saturated drips akin to glaze-like layers. Her deliberate distortion of these familiar visual markers expresses how Soviet legacies have warped once-clear modes of communication in Kazakh society. The series critiques the "branding" and dilution of Kazakh ornament, alluding to both the repression of Kazakh culture under the Soviet regime and its commodified character under globalization.

Unlike traditional Kazakh textiles, each work in the series is stretched across a wooden frame. That feeling of tightness

is key to interpreting her artistic practice, which is centered on felt. In this case, the elasticity of felt—its ability to bear tension—becomes a potent metaphor for the public and private burdens which individuals shoulder. The portraits bear witness to the state's appropriation of collective identity, even as it enacts violence against the people it claims to represent. According to Mukazhanova, the series will continue indefinitely.

Rehearsing and documenting the struggle between state and self, the portraits form an integral part of the artist's intellectual, intuitive, and artistic processes of making.

Saodat Ismailova

b. 1981, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

In a 2018 interview, Saodat Ismailova remarked, "For me, it's about going back to the territory that was once one, when we could understand each other without switching into Russian as a lingua franca. It was when our ears were open and tuned to understand each other without intermediating language, when we were not divided."¹⁰ Ismailova's films are unmistakably imbued with Central Asian land and spirituality. Panning over newspapers from 1924, when Central Asia (then Russian Turkestan) was carved into five Soviet republics, her most recent film *18,000 Worlds* (2023) shows the artifice of the region's national borders and emphasizes cultural traditions and philosophies shared across national identities.

18,000 Worlds begins with a quote from 12th-century philosopher Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, founder of a Sufi order and

the Illuminationist school of thought, who describes “18,000 worlds of light and darkness” emanating from holy light in his treatise *Bustan al-Qulub* (Garden of Hearts). Suhrawardi believed that the material world was only one of many different realities—and an illusory one at that.¹¹ Ismailova’s film mobilizes this aspect of Sufi metaphysics to propose forms of spiritual and intellectual resistance that evade the grasp of Soviet world-building.

Time proceeds in a dreamlike fashion in *18,000 Worlds*, where Ismailova’s vision pushes toward the cosmic. We find ourselves swept along the wing of a mosaic referencing the Baikonur Cosmodrome, a Soviet-era space facility; gazing at the geometry of roofs and courtyards from the sky; and soaring above the rippling waves of the Syr Darya river, which winds through Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Ismailova’s camera is not an imperial gaze that seeks to track, conquer, and plot. Rather, the very lack of a consistent perspective, the density of images that verge on abstraction, the blurs and archival fragments, suggest her resistance to single-point narratives.

Ismailova pauses and zooms in on several images. In one scene, the Chillpiq Tower



ABOVE & BACKGROUND: Saodat Ismailova, *18,000 Worlds*, 2023. 26 min. HD video. Color, black & white, and stereo. Courtesy of the artist. Supported by the Eye Art and Film Prize, Amsterdam

of Silence in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, a Zoroastrian funerary site, is seen first in a photograph, then framed as a print, while in another scene, the camera slowly pans over a strip of film negatives. These moments affirm our position as spectators whose experience is mediated by the work. Pulling us out of an absorptive mode, Ismailova reminds us that what we see is a construction—of Central Asia, of the land, of the archive, and of material reality itself, which Suhrawardi and other Sufi thinkers considered subordinate to the divine. At the Chillpiq Tower, corpses were left for animals to eat before the cleaned bones were collected and taken away, a process that poetically echoes Suhrawardi’s distinction between material and immaterial realities. It also exemplifies the artist’s general orientation toward Central Asian spirituality as an interconnected whole, sharing relationships to land and cosmos across different religious traditions.

The film, however, refuses any spirituality that does not also consider history. Rippling flags on the automobiles of Russian residents parading in Uzbekistan are replaced in quick succession with Soviet-era footage of billowing smoke from destroyed mosques and madāris, centers for Islamic education. Toward the end of the film, the narrator intones, “Those who tried to erase and take away didn’t know that we were seeing through 18,000 eyes. Those who wish to replace truth should know that we will reflect this in 18,000 moons.” Neither past nor future, the narrator’s words—and the film—are cast in the multiversal present.

- 1 Nari Shelekpayev, "Workshop on the History of Central Asia," (seminar, Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, Almaty, Kazakhstan, July 22, 2023). Shelekpayev is Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University.
- 2 Xinjiang is sometimes considered to be part of Central Asia as well, but following other scholars in the field, I restrict my definition to the five republics, since the historical trajectory of Chinese-controlled Xinjiang has differed significantly from that of other Central Asian countries since the 1750s.
- 3 Dilda Ramazan, "What Does It Mean to be Central Asia today?," *Ruyo Journal* no. 1 (May 5, 2023), <https://ruyojournal.com/whatdoesitmeantobecentralasiantoday>
- 4 These artists' works relate to a broader current in global contemporary art that seeks to employ cultural heritage to confront imperial histories. See David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*, October Books (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020).
- 5 See Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020). Valeriya Kim, Dona Kulmatova, Zumrad Mirzalieva, and Saodat Ismailova, members of the research and art group Davra Collective, have also undertaken important archival research about the Tashkent Afro-Asian film festivals and literary conferences for *Survival Kit 14: Long-Distance Friendships* (2023), curated by Inga Läce and Alicia Knock at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art.
- 6 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1994]), 1.
- 7 Alexander Ugay, Elsbeth Dekker, and Robbie Schweiger, "An Unknown Return: A Conversation with Alexander Ugay," *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 12 (January 11, 2023): <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/an-unknown-return-alexander-ugay/>
- 8 "Kazakhstan: No Justice for January Protest Victims," Human Rights Watch, May 5, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/05/kazakhstan-no-justice-january-protest-victims>
- 9 Personal communication with the artist, September 2023.
- 10 Saodat Ismailova, Sophie Krier, and Rolando Vázquez, *Q. Meandering in Worlds of Mourning (Field Essays #5)* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2022), ed. Sophie Krier, 18.
- 11 See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Saodat Ismailova Gulnur Mukazhanova Alexander Ugay

Eluding Capture: Three Artists From Central Asia

February 3, 2024 - January 2025

Curated by Jessica Chen, M.A., Williams College, 2024,
Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

Eluding Capture: Three Artists From Central Asia is made possible by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in support of MASS MoCA and the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art. Special thanks to the Williams College Department of German and Russian, and the Williams College Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Programming at MASS MoCA is made possible in part by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and Mass Cultural Council.

Front & back cover: Saodat Ismailova, *18,000 Worlds* (detail), 2023. 26 min. HD video. Color, black & white, and stereo. Courtesy of the artist. Supported by the Eye Art and Film Prize, Amsterdam

