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Thinking collections, telling tales: "Focus Kazakhstan" Part III in Jersey City – artist profile + curator interview

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Jersey City's Mana Contemporary hosts the third instalment of "Focus Kazakhstan" featuring the work of Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective.

Art Radar speaks with curator Leeza Ahmady about the collective's work amongst nomadic, Sufi and Shamanistic philosophies.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, 'Red Bridge of Kyzyl Tractor', 2002. Image courtesy the artists and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Following the success of London's "**Post-nomadic Mind**" exhibition, the third instalment of "Focus Kazakhstan" is due to open at **Mana Contemporary** in Jersey City, USA under the banner "**Thinking Collections: Telling Tales**". The show is nestled within the larger programming of **Asia Contemporary Art Week**, offering itself as a retrospective exhibition of **Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective's** momentous breadth of work. This unprecedented survey reunites the group, known for their "feverish experimentations" in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, and gives them the space to both revisit old projects and envision new performances for a Western audience. As such, the exhibition highlights each artist's individual practice and contextualises their work within their lost-but-not-forgotten collaborative working model.

Kyzyl Tractor – Kazakh for Red Tractor – is commended for reorienting nomadic, Sufi and Shamanistic philosophies and presenting them as "new artistic languages". Constant nomadic movement, a common narrative of the 1990s, is present in most of their projects and performances, demonstrated by the use of "traditional materials" such as wood, wool and felt and instruments like the *Shan-Kobyz*, *dombra* and drums, all found in the steppes of Kazakhstan.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, 'Red Tractor', 1995. Image courtesy the artists and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

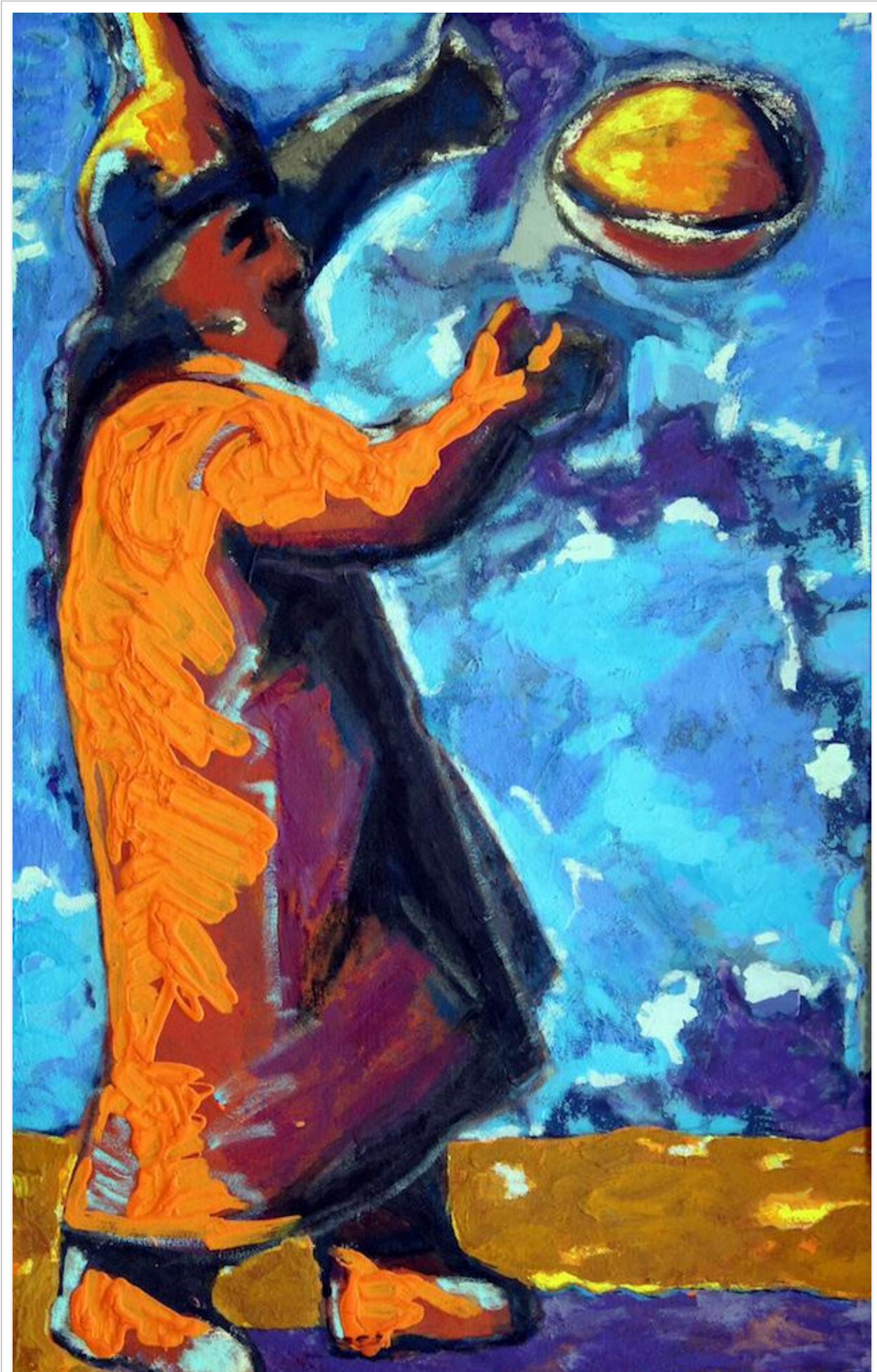
Founded in the early 1990s by Vitaliy Simakov, a college professor and member of the spatial-structural composition school, Kyzyl Tractor's name and members have fluctuated throughout the collective's existence. The first known title of the collective was Shymkent Trans Avant-Garde (followed shortly by SAA,) a verbal expression short for *saalem*, meaning 'hello' or 'peace be with you'. Thus, central to the exhibition is the display of over 45 paintings made by **Moldakul Narymbetov** – the artist, shaman, poet, philosopher and former lead member of Kyzyl Tractor – from the 1980s until his recent passing in 2014, which are on loan from the **Eurasian Cultural Alliance**.

Hundreds of other works in the exhibition are by current key members **Smail Bayaliyev**, **Said Atabekov**, Vitaliy Simakov and Arystanbek Shalbayev and were gathered directly from the artists' studios, archives and a series of private collections strewn about Kazakhstan and Central Asia. The collaborative show also comprises two monumental sculptural works – one newly conceived and a reproduction of an older destroyed work – alongside a plethora of archival photos of the collective's earlier performances, sculptures, paintings, drawings, instruments and other found objects.

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In celebration of their momentous exhibition at Mana Contemporary, *Art Radar* got in touch with **Leeza Ahmady**, curator of "Focus Kazakhstan"'s second instalment and Director of New York's esteemed Asia Contemporary Art Week.





Moldakul Narymbetov, 'Untitled (An Old Worrier Throwing a Stone)', 2009, acrylic and mixed media.
Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Could you speak about the title "Thinking Collections: Telling Tales" and what you call the "artist-as-collector phenomenon"? What role do you see this 'archive' of work playing in the "Focus Kazakhstan" series?

For the 13th edition of **Asia Contemporary Art week**, I have chosen to focus much of our signature programming on investigating the rightful place of the artist in relationship to one of the most prominently used terms in the art-world: "collection". My thesis of the 'artist as the first collector' is centred around the definition of "collecting", meaning to gather and accumulate something significant, whether [it is] tangible or not. Artists gather everything, be it specific aspects of reality, fiction or other diverse subject matter. Put another way, artists create bodies or containers for the collection of their own ideas, insights and mechanisms that become identified as art objects in the world.



Said Atabekov, 'Untitled', 2002. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

The second portion of the title, "Telling Tales", is a play on words and works within "Focus Kazakhstan"'s theme of "Modern Kazakh Culture in the Global World". The word 'tale' is used to mean a story or a fable, but, in this context, it also refers to the way artists use mythology to play with truth and reality. What makes tales or stories captivating is the fact that they can be made up or, let's say, deliberately twisted truths. Thus, what I am trying to convey is that the show is not only concerned with stories being chronicled by the collective's works, but also the story of Kazakhstan itself. From the Soviet fall through the country's process of reclamation, memory and symbols of national identity have been used as a way of creating a new nation. In this light, Kyzyl Tractor's work questions and archives these mechanisms and schemes and provides a kind of call to consciousness in relation to nomadic philosophies in a modern world.



Arystanbek Shalbayev, 'Portrait of Chingiz Khan', 2013, diptych, oil on canvas 97 x 130 cm each. Image courtesy the artist.

Also, because the Kyzyl Tractor artists have never adhered to conventional practices, they were able to incorporate a wide range of truly novel expression in their art during the 1990s, a period in Kazakhstan in which the art world still contained residual Soviet influence. They also rejected the idea of a modern art that did not consider the materials, aesthetics or philosophical sensibilities of their own environment. In particular, Kyzyl Tractor never really cared about complying with the rules of the museum space. Thus, from the 1990s to today, they have often chosen to work in the open air, launching mostly performances in festivals, public events or among groups of their friends and family. They used common materials in nomadic culture as forms and mediums in their own right. What they were doing was so authentic that it actually caught the attention of the arts scene within the Central Asia region.

The artists really appreciated this kind of clamouring together and making work that was not thought of in terms of being exhibited, written about or included in a collection. So, for me, when I call it "Thinking Collections", what actually ends up being a collection is not necessarily what the artists are thinking about when they are making art, but that's the best kind of collection. It's more of an accumulation of a range of inquiry that is naturally launched by the artist.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, 'Untitled', 2002, archival photo print, part of a documentary film. Photo: B. Kairbekov. Image courtesy the artists and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

The press release mentions that Kyzyl Tractor's work is "well known for reorienting nomadic, Sufi and Shamanistic philosophies as new artistic language". Could you elaborate on this process? How does their research come about, and how are these ideologies in juxtaposition with Kazakhstan's ongoing socio-economic and political shifts?

I would say that the exhibition is a kind of Sufi call to what truth is, as truth has many sides. In Sufi and Shaman culture, things are rarely black and white, but guided by a spirit. So, in this way, the happenings in the world are not rationalised through conspiracy theories but rely on the mysteries of nature and the cosmos. Kyzyl Tractor's projects are always in the context of the present moment, and that is a very Sufi/Shaman way of living and thinking about life.

For instance, the performance work *Purification* is a timely performance, because it was a procession that signified what occurred in Kazakhstan 20 years ago when they first did it and, now, here in New York, it will have its own context and meaning in the form of what the world is going through right now. Issues such as environmental devastations are specifically relevant, along with all the other challenges the world is facing. How can we as human beings, as artists, as a group of people who have energetic power, change things and not just sit with or accept them?



Said Atabekov, 'Supersoldier with 12 Stone Bal Bals', 1999-2000, 69.85 x 119.8 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.



Said Atabekov, 'Supersoldier with 12 Stone Bal Bals', 1999-2000, 69.85 x 119.8 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Could you speak a bit more about *Purification* as a ritual-performance? How does it tie together the artists' already multifaceted practice and exhibition?

The beauty of Kyzyl Tractor's works is that they don't always give you a script, so it leaves a lot of room for all of us, both the public and art professionals, to engage with it by creating our own readings of the work. My personal reading is that it is a work that is very important in epitomising their tendency to monumentalise sound instruments.

They have always worked with instruments of sound and [percussion] because these are very particular sounds and strategies used in Sufi traditions. It's a form of movement towards a state of consciousness – moving from one state that is heavy, a state of depression and general daily life, to a state of ecstasy, a state of lightness, of happiness, appreciation and connection with all. *Purification*, in a sense, is a proposition for creating flow out of what is generally known as entropy or a state of chaos. In Shamanism, there is an embrace of the darker side of nature and also in our own beings. It suggests that instead of fearing or banishing undesired qualities or feelings, such as envy, anger or bitterness, we should find a way to transmute them. It is a process of sublimation.



Said Atabekov, 'Untitled', 2002. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Of the two sculptural works on display in "Thinking Collections: Telling Tales", one is a revival of an older, destroyed piece. Why was it important to re-imagine this project in 2018 and in Jersey City?

The work we asked the artists to recreate for this show is actually a massive drum, or *dyra*, that is three metres in width and two metres in height. The artists had originally made it as part of their performance *Purification* and, thus, it will be once again activated in their recreation of it on the opening day of the exhibition on 14 October 2018.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, 'Shaman Wheel', archival image of performance. Image courtesy the artists.

What's interesting and unique about Kyzyl Tractor's work is that the collective is not necessarily concerned with the preservation of their art for the future. The older piece, therefore, was not deliberately destroyed by war or political events. Most of the objects that Kyzyl Tractor made were meant to serve as props for their performances. Some of them survived the performances, and people were able to keep or take care of them. In general, though, Kyzyl Tractor's work is more of an act. It is about a moment in time. They provide a very ephemeral exchange between themselves and a group of people in a particular time and space.

Of course, as a curator and as someone who thinks about institutional memory, I am programmed to consider how we can conserve and create access to everything that artists make. Yet, I have encountered that most artists do not concern themselves with conservation issues. It is not their problem.



Moldakul Narymbetov, 'Self Portrait with a Dark Spirit', 2004. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

It was important for me to reimagine this work in this time period and place because it is a testament to what making artwork, collecting artwork and creating a collection mean in different parts of the world. It has taken a long time for Western institutions to consider works by performance artists in their exhibition programmes and collections. So, by recreating this work in Jersey City, so close to New York, I am giving something remarkable a second chance to be lived and experienced. I am asking: can this work, in its second incarnation, be preserved over time and beyond the lifetime of the artists here or back in Kazakhstan?

These are all very interesting things that the recreation of the drum is a symbol of, but it was also important for me to give Kyzyl Tractor the opportunity to make a new work together. Immediately, when we (Vladislav Sludskiy, the Assistant Curator of this show and myself) shared the news of dedicating an exhibition to Kyzyl Tractor, their work and their history together, the artists came up with the *Chest of Knowledge*. It is another very large-scale work made out of wood, leather and felt. It is supposed to be an energetic container of everything the group has ever done together.

It is a knowledge of Sufi, Tengri and Shaman philosophies. This knowledge is something that is purely energetic. The *Chest of Knowledge* does not necessarily have a physical form, and so, while there will be some things inside of this chest of knowledge as symbolic to what the experience of being a collective is, it is much more about what insights the chest is holding about the world and about life and nature.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, 'Untitled', 2002. Image courtesy the artists and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

You also mention in the press release that the collective's body of work delves into nomadic movement and implements 'sacred materials' found in the steppes of Kazakhstan. We also see instruments like the Shan-Kobyz, dombra and drums, all of which are tactile, sensory and symbolically-loaded objects. How do you foresee audiences interacting with them in this exhibition?

I think it is going to be an off-kilter type of encounter. The exhibition is going to be incredibly loaded with content, objects and works. I am deliberately installing this exhibition as if it were in a studio setting, as if the viewers were stumbling through the living workspace of the individual artists and the collective over the last 30 years. Some works are not preserved well and I am choosing to show them intentionally. There is a lot of experimentation involved. I would say the audience will encounter a different vocabulary that is not all about a laboratorial way of making art in the sense of a studio. It is much more about a group of friends and visionaries who are very intellectually driven. Their training and interest in the avant-garde art movements of the 20th century will also be very apparent.



Moldakul Narymbetov, 'They Have Walked Through', 1999. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

I think a lot of the materials that people will encounter will be unexpected, but, at the same time, it is very universal. At the end of the day, they are artists who are asking similar kinds of questions as other artists in a different way. So, the universality of their practice, who they are, and how they belong to the art historical canon, is going to be something that curators, writers and scholars will have to face. I think many will be challenged and hopefully say, "Wow, this is something I don't know anything about. I have no idea how to contextualise this". They will have to connect to their sense of the 'other' or what I call 'worldliness', and current world affairs. To read this exhibition, you would really need to go outside of your comfort zone, and try to understand, all the symbols, all the details, of what has been going on in the last 75 years, 150 years or perhaps even 500 years.



Said Atabekov, 'Untitled', 2002. Image courtesy the artist and Asia Contemporary Art Week.

Also, the question, "what does it mean to make work in Kazakhstan?" is quite relevant. How does this country's environment, nature, politics, spiritual and linguistic historical backgrounds come into play? I think when looking at this exhibition there is a learning and embracing of a region [that] people don't have access to, or they have access to in very distant ways. Perhaps this access takes its form in an orientalist manner. Of course, the artists are playing with these sources of orientalism, as well. They are using what people in the West may know of this region. Kyzyl Tractor recycles stereotypes and clichés that have been formed in the collective mind of the world and uses them as a strategy like any other material or paintbrush used for their work. That's their brilliance. For Kyzyl Tractor, everything can become a material or spiritual content for contemplation.

Megan Miller

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"Thinking Collections: Telling Tales" is on view from 14 October to 30 November 2018 at Mana Contemporary, 888 Neward Ave, Jersey City, NJ 07306, USA.

This exhibition is a part of the "Focus Kazakhstan" initiative, four exhibitions from September 2018 to March 2019 across London, Berlin, Suwon and Jersey City. The initiative is implemented by the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in association with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the programme Ruhani Zhangyru. Visit www.focuskazakhstan.com for more information.

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