

AZERI ASPIRATIONS - OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE IN AZERBAIJAN

By: Dr. Zoltan Somhegyi

Let's be honest: until recently not many had known too much about the art scene in Azerbaijan.

Not even the specialists have taken enough effort in discovering its wide perspectives, especially the situation of the contemporary arts. And let's be honest again: it has proved to be a mistake, as the country shows amazing results that make it an absolute must on the travel-schedule of even the busiest art lover.

Though the contemporary scene and the art infrastructure connected to its working is still under construction in certain aspects, we already dare to affirm that what had happened in the last decade is definitely a success story. What we can particularly welcome is that it seems to be a gradual and organic development. It is important to state this, especially because in the decades around the new Millennium we could observe the rapid development of certain art scenes: various cities and even new countries were added on the art map but, in fact, not all of them could maintain their attractiveness. This loosing of the lure of a place, or the quick decrease of potential in an art scene can be explained through many reasons, including the general shift of interest towards new spaces - that might draw the attention away from certain regions, the successful marketing campaign of rival cities, economic drawback, political or social tensions that do not allow the infrastructure to develop and thus to provide a tranquil environment for artists, gallerists and collectors. Hence, compared to these unfortunate cases, Azerbaijan is really on its way in becoming an important new hub as a result of a gradual and overall development. Actually, the progress is really comprehensive, including many factors and aspects that are needed for a well-established centre: museums specialized in both

older and contemporary arts, galleries, art events and festivals, publications, institutes of art, architecture and design education, foundations, residency- and studio-programs, invited foreign artists, curators and museum specialists, and last but absolutely not least the representation of local artists in international events, art fairs and biennials. Unlike the case of art centers that concentrate only on one or a few of these factors e.g. cities where there are a large number of commercial galleries but no museums, or breathtaking exhibition halls without a solid number of private and for-profit galleries that can provide collectors with collectible artworks - the Azeri scene, with the capital Baku in its centre is certainly promising. We can assume that the recent focus on the local scene is not an ephemeral hype, but is a sign of a continuous development.

As a matter of fact, Azerbaijan has all the fortunate factors that can quickly and steadily turn it into a decisive hub. Already the country's history and geographical position asserts a deep source of influence and inspiration, both being essentials for creative minds. Located on the shores of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan has always been a melting pot of cultural influences: Ottoman-Turkish, Iranian, Central Asian and Russian forms and motives can be traced in arts as well as in architecture, though naturally European tendencies significantly appear too. Walking in the downtown of Baku visitors can see mediaeval fortresses next to hundred years' old homes, with state-of-the-art skyscrapers in the background, among others the renowned Flame Towers, designed by HOK Architects, and actually in the far horizon sometimes Soviet-era block-houses show up, though they are becoming less and less dominant. These living-



1) Rashad Alakbarov, Do Not Fear, 2015, installation, various metal, plexiglass, light source, 250x150x130cm. Image courtesy of the artist and YARAT.

2) Shirin Neshat, Gizbasti, from The Home of My Eyes series, 2014-2015, Silver gelatin print and ink, 152x102cm. Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Faig Ahmed, *Threads*, 2012. Installation image, Making Histories at YARAT Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, March 2015. Photo Rauf Askjarov. Courtesy YARAT.



Almaqul Menlibayeva, *Fire Talks To Me*, 2015. Video still, 10 channels video installation, 17 min, ©Almaqul Menlibayeva. All rights reserved. Image courtesy of the artist and YARAT.

together of nations and the layered cultural traditions as well as the rapid transformation of the urban pattern are all pivotal topics, and are important in understanding not only the works from older periods or of traditional and folk art, but this might provide a key in the reading of many contemporary pieces too. Works from local artists, who in their artistic practice are investigating the mutation of their homeland, show a caring attention towards the future of their cultural values, though not denying the drawbacks of this development, especially when the present progress towards the future is made at the cost of sacrificing elements from the past.

These diverse cultural influences are also due to the historical position of the city. Just to illustrate this, we can recall that in the Hellenistic times a large part of the population were follower of the Zoroastrian religion, and then, in late Roman times Christianity became the state religion for a couple of centuries, before converting to Islam - actually, the Koran was translated into Azeri as early as the 15th century. In the 18th century Baku was occupied by the Russian Czar Peter the Great, and also in early 20th century the country came under Soviet dominance, becoming independent only in 1991. The country's rapid development is in great part due to its natural resources: already in the middle of the 19th century oil was drilled near Baku, and still today this natural asset largely contributes to the country's economic progress. As an important recognition of the efforts and as a sign of the socio-cultural blossoming of the republic, Baku was proclaimed Capital of Islamic Culture in 2009.

If we try to overview the recent history and current state of the cultural infrastructure in Baku, we can observe that the local professionals and decision-makers in the art scene had to, and in part still have to face some challenges when attempting to establish a well-functioning environment for practicing contemporary art, as well as to turn Baku into an important hub. Curiously, some of the challenges contain not only negative aspects to overcome, but also positive ones, that can still be useful in the organic development of the scene. As an illustrative example, we can think of the partial inheritance of the recent past's Soviet-style education system in art. As it is well known, in the Soviet Union, as well as in the countries under its influence, from East Berlin to China art education and official art appreciation was dominated by the socialist-realist style, mostly in the service of state propaganda. Works, predominantly in realistic and "easily-understandable" way of expression were created, often in large-scale and monumental proportions for public spaces, or distributed through the state-controlled mass media. Obviously it affected not only the possibilities and limits of artistic self-expression, i.e. artists and designers were not allowed

to create in whatever style and form they wanted, or to deal with certain topics, but it also had a significant influence on shaping the average viewers' artistic taste and preferences. In this way, people in the post-Soviet countries were, and sometimes still are less receptive for the newest forms of contemporary art, including not only abstract and informal art, but also new media too. This is certainly a challenge that can be defeated through a long-term strategy of rising public awareness of contemporary art. On the other hand, and this can easily be counted among the positive side of the legacy of the recent past, many of the art academies in the ex-Soviet countries had a meticulous and precise education system, especially when instructing skills and techniques. Actually, many of the Azeri-educated artists whom I had the chance to talk to were thankful for having strong basis and extensive technical knowledge that turned to be extremely helpful, even if they do progressive contemporary works. Nevertheless accurate and provident strategy and vision are still needed from all the actors in the professional art world to work on the further education of the nation's understanding and sensitivity of contemporary art.

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan has already a very good departure point for fulfilling the ambition of placing the country as an inevitable spot in the global art map. Just to quote some of the recently established or reconstructed and re-opened institutions: in 2009 the MoMA Baku, Museum of Modern Art was inaugurated, by the initiative of the first lady Mehriban Aliyeva, and with the support of the Heydar Aliyev Fund. The innovative mythological concept affected the design of the building too, ideated by the artist Altay Sadikhzadeh: no strict divisions between the works of art or even the exhibitions, more like a continuous "moving abstract structure", as we can read in the MoMA Baku website⁽¹⁾. Open passages, inclined walls and halls with no corners providing an innovative space for displaying art pieces both from the collection and of temporary exhibitions. From the 20th century works of classical masters, likes of Picasso and Dali are shown, though focus is naturally given to Azeri artists. Very importantly, when presenting art from the 1960's and 1970's, many works were inserted from artists who worked outside the official guidelines and requirements, and created on their own alternative and underground level, maintaining their artistic freedom of expression, even at the cost of invisibility and lack of both official recognition and public awareness of their activity. In this way, the museum can pay homage to the oeuvre of artists who were silenced during the Soviet era.

As another example of cutting edge architecture with inventive interiors, Baku is certainly proud of its new landmark: The Heydar

Aliyev Center was completed in 2012. The Zaha Hadid-designed centre contains conference- and concert halls, as well as exhibition and museum spaces. As in many instances of contemporary museum architecture, the "container" is just as important as the "contained": the multi-purpose art centre of the renowned Iraqi-British architect is an artwork in itself. Approaching the building and entering the interior with its fluid forms and curving shapes, the walls smoothly turning into pavement is certainly a unique experience where the exhibiting or performing artists have no easy task: the building competes with the art it is designated to present.

As for developing the contemporary art scene in Baku, and putting Azeri artists in the global focus, YARAT also has a key role. Founded by Aida Mahmudova with a group of other artists in 2011, the non-profit art organization has a pivotal role in creating a platform for local art, as well as in promoting the work of artists on an international level. The organization has a multifaceted array of activities in various art spaces. Since its foundation, YARAT (meaning "Create" in Azeri) has commissioned more than 140 projects, both in Baku and abroad⁽²⁾. Among these commissioned events we can find art residencies, public art festivals, film festivals and education programs with the invitation of leading figures from the global art scene who held guest lectures and workshops. The curated exhibitions often showed classical as well as leading international artist, thus contextualizing the recent developments in the Central Asian region: as an example we can mention a 2012 exhibition, in collaboration with Christie's London, where Picasso, Warhol, Gerhard Richter, Andreas Gursky and Damien Hirst were shown together with Ali Banisadr or Farhad Moshiri. In 2013 Baku MoMA in association with YARAT presented the works of Lalla Essaydi, curated by Dina Nasser-Khadivi. Besides these, since its foundation YARAT has put a strong accent on participating in art fairs, that is considered as one of the most efficient ways of giving a wide international exposure for an artist: in 2014 the center featured various artists at the Marker-section of the Art Dubai (a regularly organized section of the fair dedicated to highlight a geographic area, where the focus changes each year). In the same year further participation in START Art Fair in London, at Contemporary Istanbul and at Viennafair took place.

The next important step in both YARAT's timeline and in the progress of the art scene in Baku happened in 2012, when the institution opened "Yay" Gallery as a social enterprise. This art space functions as a commercial gallery, however all the revenues are shared between the artists and YARAT, where it is used for funding other ongoing and forthcoming projects of the organization's programs, education commitments and festivals. Located in the old city, a UNESCO World Heritage site and close to busy tourist attractions,

the gallery occupies a stylishly renovated multi-storey old building with a roof terrace, from where a breathtaking view on the old and new Baku can be observed. The gallery that opened with a solo show of Ramal Kazimov currently represents ten artists, however in their annual program collective exhibitions are also included, where the participation of foreign artists create inspiring dialogues between the local and the global art practices. Also, the organization often collaborates with Kicik Qalart Gallery, being not far from "Yay" Gallery, still in the old city and sponsored by ArteEast, this exhibition space works as a forum for contemporary art⁽³⁾.

As mentioned above, for the continuous and progressive development of a new hub not only those places are required where artists can exhibit and sell their works, but also where they can create them. In many art capitals around the world, artists struggle to find or to financially maintain a studio space. YARAT is trying to offer a solution for this by one of their latest initiatives called YARAT Studios, that was inaugurated in late 2014. Situated slightly out of the old city centre, the well-designed four-level building offers working spaces for about a dozen artists. Especially for early-career and emerging artists, the opportunity of having one's own space could be a significant help. Many of the artists staying and working at the studios are among the founders of the organization, and are also represented in "Yay" Gallery, however the organizers seem definitely to be in favor of not keeping the circle closed: the studio building has a place dedicated to a guest artist in residence, who can stay there for a couple of months to create, discover the city and to get inspired by the Azeri culture.

Already these projects, the YARAT organization, the gallery and the studio space can be interpreted as major contributions for the Azeri art infrastructure, however a recently inaugurated large-scale undertaking turned to be the ultimate achievement: in March 2015 YARAT Contemporary Art Centre was opened. The centre efficiently complements the other museum- and cultural venues of the city and operates as a multi-functional space. Its main aim is to present several exhibitions throughout the year of both local and international artists, and to bring the latest trends of contemporary art to the public. Apart from these shows, the Centre also has a steadily growing permanent collection of contemporary works from leading artists of the region, especially from the Caucasus, Central Asia and the neighboring countries. This group of art pieces provides a strong basis to curate exhibitions along multiple topics that are relevant for the local public as well as for the global audience visiting Baku. Last but not least, education has a central role also in the new art centre: lectures, workshops, screenings are regularly organized, where the target audience varies from school groups to adults, or from those interested in but less knowledgeable

on arts to those who already have a remarkable specialization in contemporary issues and want to learn more. Some of the programs are specially tailored for artists, including professional development and mentoring programs as well as master classes. Also in the education programs YARAT opens up to international collaborations, some of the most successful projects were the results of cooperation with the National Centre for Contemporary Arts in Moscow and the Contemporary Art Centre in Tbilisi.

As of the location of YARAT Contemporary Art Centre, the building is a fortunate choice: situated just off the city centre, it was originally constructed in 1960, during the Soviet era of the country as a repair- and maintenance site of naval ships. The two-storey building spans over 2,000 square meters, and besides the spacious exhibition halls it is also equipped with presentation rooms, an auditorium and a library, all of which are serving the education purposes of the Centre. Although earlier the whole area was part of Baku's docks and filled with industrial buildings, it is quickly becoming a trendy cultural quarter that will be accessible from the old city even by walking along the shores of the Caspian Sea. In this way, the new building is nicely inserted in the urban cultural pattern, where the visitors can start an art discovery day by exploring the historical downtown sights, then hit the seafront promenade to visit YARAT and other attractions in the new centre, including galleries and public art installations.

The opening exhibitions in March 2015 convincingly illustrated the aforementioned key aims of the Centre. On the ground floor a wide selection from the ever growing center's collection was shown. The title of the inaugural exhibition, "Making Histories" aptly referred to the practice of many artists from the region: as it is often stated in analyses on the art of the Central Asian lands, one of the key features is the artists' focus on the narrative character of the local tradition. Archaic myths, folk tales and songs, poetry, different religious beliefs from across the centuries and naturally events and symbols from the recent common past, including that of the Soviet period serve as an endless source of inspiration for many contemporary painters, who make their own histories or personal mythologies by letting themselves inspired by the storytelling of their predecessors. Hence, this looking back will secure the relevant answers for the questions of the present and future. As Suad Garayeva, the Curatorial Director of the Centre wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition: "Some artists reference the symbolism of ancient traditions; some find nostalgia in transitory moments of the everyday; some question the infallibility of existing narratives, while others project quasi-utopian optimism for a better future. Nevertheless, all works shown in this exhibition are explorations into what it means to live today and construct, block by block, the

new histories of tomorrow"^[4]. These questions were then examined in various media, not only in the most traditional ones like painting or sculptures, but also installations and videos or in an interactive work of Orkhan Huseynov that required the active involvement of the visitors. Aida Mahmudova's large-scale paintings on the natural and built environment of Baku examine her personal attachment to the location. Faiq Ahmed re-interpreted the traditional Azeri carpet-weaving techniques by embedding references to Western art forms, and what's more, in his installations he even came out to the space by three-dimensionally disassembling the original pattern of the carpet. Rashad Alakbarov's metal sculptures might seem pure abstract forms at first sight, though when lit from a certain angle, their cast shadow form patterns or texts, thus questioning the division between not only abstract and "figurative", but also between visible and invisible, reality and the distortion of sensory perception. Erbossyn Meldibekov examines an iconic Western art historical example from a Central Asian perspective through his work: "Gattamelata in the Hide of Genghis Khan", where from the well-known Renaissance portrait of a warrior on horseback only the feet of the horse remain, thus mocking the desire towards monumentality, known from the recent Soviet history of many countries in the region.

On the upper floor of the new Centre its first temporary exhibition took place: the widely acclaimed, Iranian-born, New York-based Shirin Neshat's show, entitled "The Home of My Eyes", curated by Dina Nasser-Khadivi, that was newly commissioned by the organization and was especially designated to be the first major display. The exhibition is the result of a research and creative period that the artist spent in Azerbaijan in 2014, photographing over 50 people living in the country, within the wide age-array between two and eighty years old, coming from different national and religious communities. Actually, the exhibited works could also be considered as a large installation, instead of the presentation of singular pieces, as the photos were installed in the impressive 11-metre high gallery hall. The individual portraits are shown in front of a deep black background thus the monumental presentation of the large-size photos were particularly impressive, rendering an almost sacred character and mystical resonance in the space. Observing the portraits, one could easily identify connecting motives between them, especially in the gestures: many participants held their hands closed in front of them, though the final appearance does not seem to be forced or posing - more like a natural pose of average men and women, definitely not of trained actors, an impression that the artist surely wanted to avoid. Actually, this focus on the hands is an element that derives from some classical artists, for example El Greco, the Mannerist artist Shirin Neshat claimed

to be influenced by. However, as usual in her works, she is not focusing only on the pure aesthetic qualities of the portraiture, but through the representation of the faces she tries to reach out to the very individual as well, to create a series made up of these singular personalities that will then represent the community - this is why the wide ethnical and age-selection of her subjects. Apart from photographing them however, the participants were also asked about their cultural identity and what the concept "home" meant to them. The answers were then written with amazing calligraphy over the portraits. In this way, as the artist formulated it, the "tapestry-like" presentation of human faces pays tribute to the rich cultural history of Azerbaijan and its diversity^[5]. Hence we can say that the assembly of the individual portraits from the country became the portrait of the country itself.

The Azerbaijani scene and YARAT's activity has already had wide international exposure through the aforementioned art fair participations or through many of the individual artists' shows in galleries and other collaborations. However, among the most significant global-reaching exhibitions we can quote the events connected to the Venice Biennial. The Pavilion of Azerbaijan in the 2015 edition of the Biennial shows a selection of those non-conformist artists of the 1960's who were ignored and silenced during the Soviet era. The works of Javad Mirjavadov, Tofik Javadov, Ashraf Murad, Rasim Babayev, Huseyn Haqverdi, Shamil Najafzade and Fazil Najafov - co-curated by Emin Mammadov and Simon de Pury - are shown under the title "Beyond the Line", that clearly indicates the aim of putting light on the oeuvre of those artists, who were given practically no possibility of exhibiting their art pieces, only because they did not want to follow the official regulations on art back then. In this way, just like in the exhibition concept of MoMA Baku, historical justice is provided to these classical masters of the Azeri scene. Besides this exhibition however, in the Azeri Pavilion another international show is also on view, curated by Artwise: Susie Allen, Laura Culpan and Dea Vanaqan. Unlike "Beyond the Line" that is concentrating on the re-interpretation of the past, the show "Vita Vitale", a selection of international artists is investigating global future perspectives and environmental threats through multimedia works and installations. Among the artists we can find Edward Burtynsky, Mircea Cantor, Tony Cragg, Erwin Wurm and Andy Warhol, along with Azeri artists.

As of YARAT's contribution to the Biennial, already in 2013 a collateral event was organized, under the title: "Love Me, Love Me Not", where 17 contemporary artists from Azerbaijan and the neighboring countries, including Iran, Turkey, Russia and Georgia showed their works. For the 2015 edition of the Biennial, YARAT has commissioned another collateral event: "The Union of Fire and

Water", curated by Suad Garayeva, with the participation of Almaqul Menlibayeva and Rashad Alakbarov. Presented in Palazzo Barbaro, the former residence of Giosafat Barbaro, a Venetian ambassador who extensively travelled and documented cities in Azerbaijan in the 15th century, the site-specific video work, sculpture and installation of the two artists investigate the historical and cultural interrelations between Baku and Venice. What this Venetian exhibition aims, i.e. the examination of the complex and oscillating historical, political and cultural relationship between Baku and Venice - actually, through the international collaboration of the Kazakhstan-born Almaqul Menlibayeva and the Azeri Rashad Alakbarov - could be interpreted as not only a relevant description, but also as a perfect symbol of the strive of the whole contemporary Azeri art scene too: being in a constant dialogue with the tradition, investigating the cultural identity, own roots and its connection with the rest of the world, as well as the multi-ethnic and multi-religious geopolitical position of the country right in the heart of Central Asia in order to create fascinating contemporary artworks that will have significance for not only the local public, but are putting a theme of such universal issues that are in the interest of the global art-loving community as well.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr. Zoltan Somhegyi (1981) is a Hungarian art historian, teacher and writer currently based in Sharjah, UAE. As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he is specialized in 18-19 century art and art theory, having written his PhD-dissertation on German Romanticism. Apart from being an art historian of classical arts, his other fields of interest are contemporary fine arts and art market trends, with a special focus on the arts of the MENASA-region. He curates exhibitions, participates in international art projects and often lectures on art in conferences of aesthetics. He is a consultant of Art Market Budapest - International contemporary art fair and Delegate-at-Large of the International Association for Aesthetics. Currently he is Assistant Professor at the College of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah, UAE. He is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews.

End Notes

^[1] See at: <http://www.mimaz/content/tarix.html>. Last accessed on 18 June 2015.

^[2] A comprehensive publication summarising YARAT's projects so far is: Graham Erickson (ed.) *Making Histories*. Baku, 2015.

^[3] See more on Yay Gallery's activity in the catalogue published in March 2015 on the Gallery's history. ^[4] Suad Garayeva's text in the exhibition catalogue: Rizvan Alasgar - Benjamin Jones (ed.) *Making Histories*. The YARAT Collection. Baku, 2015: p. 10.

^[5] Shirin Neshat's explanation during the press meeting before the opening, 23 March 2015. See also the catalogue of the exhibition: Dina Nasser-Khadivi - Farah Rahim Ismail: Shirin Neshat. *The Home of My Eyes*. Baku, 2015.



Aida Mahmudova. *On My Way Back Home to the Sea*, 2014, mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and YARAT.