

## THE JOURNEY OF BAKHODIR JALAL

By: Irina Burmistrova

Bahodir Jalal is an artist whose career spans over 40 years and covers a remarkable period in history of his native Uzbekistan. His art is reflective of his time and it is impossible to talk about him as an artist and as a person without looking at the politics of his day. He was born in 1948 in Tashkent and lived and worked through the Cold War, the stagnation of Soviet system that led to the Fall of the Iron Curtain in the 1990's. He was there to witness how Uzbekistan during the Perestroika, was able to break free from USSR and proclaim sovereignty in 1991. This change in the political system had a profound influence on the artists of all generations.

The 1990's euphoria associated with liberal changes evaporated quickly and a painful process of re-evaluation of references and cultural values had started. The artists from Uzbekistan and other newly independent "Stans" began their quest for a new cultural paradigm in the context of globalization and since then the transition from soviet colonization to intellectual and aesthetic independence have been a complex period for all.

The consequences of Soviet rule were deeply ingrained in every aspect of the society; the cultural fabric of Uzbekistan suffered after more than 70 years of imposed atheism and a predominance of Russian language and culture. From 1917 through the post-Soviet period, Central Asia and especially Uzbekistan, went through incredible transformation and served as "a kind of civilization laboratory"<sup>10</sup> as an

unprecedented experiment "aimed to make Uzbeks into Soviet citizens rather than simply imperial subjects"<sup>12</sup>. The formation of national art schools went through integration of Russian/European forms in art education as this was supported by the thesis of the big leap from the Middle Ages to the new bright existence under the socialism. Today, Uzbekistan is rethinking this experience and searching for its place in the globalized art scene. The current agenda for artists and cultured intellectuals includes the revival of national traditions and application of ethno-cultural subject-matters in their art creations. Jalal belongs to the generation of artists in Uzbekistan who were fully integrated within the Soviet system of art. His formative years as an artist were spent in Leningrad's (now St Petersburg) Repine institute of Fine Arts, Sculpture and Architecture - one of the oldest and most respected art institutions in Russia. He came to study to St. Petersburg in seventies during the aftermath of the Thaw which initiated the transformation of Soviet society. The artistic intelligentsia at that time were rethinking the Russian avant-garde's aesthetic methodologies, contemplating its future and experimenting with new, synthetic art practices.

Art makers were looking for new ideas and forms that challenged officially sponsored and supported trends. During the seventies, examples of non official Soviet art as well as Western modernist art masterpieces became available for study.



Dialog, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 185x245cm. Courtesy of Andakulova gallery.

The political changes in Soviet society allowed information to be circulated on the latest tendencies in Western art. The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow included an impressive display of newest American paintings and sculpture. It is hard to believe that this exhibition featured works of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell and Alexander Calder. It showcased the creativity and the intellectual freedom to follow. Even a personal exhibition of Chaqall took place at the Tret'yakov Gallery in 1975.

By the time when Bakhodir Jalal started to study in Repin's Institute, Soviet art was still trapped within the communist ideology. However Soviet art education system was based on of Russian academic realism of the second half of the 19th century. The great Russian artist Vrubel once said, "Only realism can create the greatest depth in imagery". Despite the fact that the information about art outside the official dogma was difficult to come by some fragmentary examples of art-historical models became available for young artists informing them about how to take their art onward. *"I came to study in Repin's Institute of Fine art already possessing a very good set of technical skill which was traditionally seen as crucial for artists development. The artistic atmosphere of St Petersburg with its libraries, museums and a great collection of art in the Hermitage enriched my vision and knowledge about art history. The traditions of Russian realistic school of painting and European Old Masters were major factors in shaping and influencing me as an artist. The works of Mexican muralists Siqueiros . Rivera and Orozco grabed my attention too because their work resonated with my mentality , temperament and attitude."*<sup>(31)</sup>

Discoveries made by Jalal during his student years in St. Petersburg became his points of reference, anchor and inspiration for the rest of his life. He graduated in 1974 with Honors from the Department of Monumental and Decorative Painting. Jalal also received a grant and was allowed to travel to Italy where he studied classics. By the second half of seventies and the beginning of eighties, when he went back to Uzbekistan to get on with his artistic career the short lived period of liberalization was finished. By this time the national school of painting in Uzbekistan had already been established and was flourishing with his generation of artists, who were enthusiastically seeking their inspiration from their local environment, the national character of their people and the traditional forms of their applied arts. Many artists in Moscow and Leningrad who had started working in non-conformists styles consciously choose an underground status. For artists such as Jalal whose ambitions were within official structures the path to move forward with their art was to remain within the bounds of realism and diversify their artistic style through the exploration of the art history. *"I was very engaged in a search of my own pictorial language. Russian avant-garde and European modernism were clear influencers of my style. I have introduced the*

*decorative principle combined with a romantic stylisation derived from the best examples of traditional architectural decor in Central Asia to my monumental pieces of that period."*<sup>(4)</sup>

The distinct style in which he created his monumental pieces: "Per aspera ad astra, 1978 - Italy", "Navroz, 1981 - Russia' & "Messengers from Eternity, 1984 - Uzbekistan" combined together the excellent technical mastery with concepts of universal humanist themes of personal and national memory turned Jalal in the renowned muralist in his native Uzbekistan. As early as ten years after his graduation from Repin's he received the highest awards the USSR State Prize in 1984 and the Uzbekistan State Prize in 1991 for reinvigoration of the mural genre. Those murals that brought him fame and recognition were Soviet government-funded form of public art. He has handled the themes of "Harvest", "Genesis of Dance" and "Chronicles of Uzbek national theatre" appropriate to the characteristics and scale of his art form. Public art in USSR since 1917 was considered as an important form of monumental propaganda. Critic Joseph Backshtein once noted that in the Soviet era aesthetics were inseparable from ideology. By mid-eighties, monumentalists like Bakhodir were also looking for a way to deviate from the ideological function of their pieces. The way to downplay the propaganda aspect of their work was by increasing complexity. Jalal together with his peers had a sincere interest in their country's history and its fate and wanted to express their views in realistic terms. 1970-1980's in Central Asian art was defined by polystylism<sup>(5)</sup>. We can also talk about the concept of 'carnival'<sup>(6)</sup> to describe the temporary appropriation of stylistic masks and direct citations from the classics: "stylization after Renaissance and other historical periods became a fashion, which confirmed the official self -image of the Brejnev era"<sup>(7)</sup>. There are a few examples of those searches and stylistic borrowings reflected in his oeuvre where the overall result reflects the artistic fashion of his time when artists were using historical styles as masks or codes.

One of them is "Genesis of Dance" (1981) a mural for concert hall Bakhor in Tashkent. He explored the theme of dance by taking his stylistic and iconographic references from Renaissance sources. The mural depicts groups of Boticelli like graceful young women floating in heavens of the superficial and idealized world of golden age of harmony and culture. The central axis of this work is defined by figure of woman in the national costume radiating out her happiness and creativity<sup>(8)</sup>. The dreamy and optimistic " Genesis of Dance" is in effect a balancing act that could be potentially read as a hymn "to socialist humanism"<sup>(9)</sup> the term that was widely used by official art-critics analyzing similar art creations. However the sincerity and affection of the artist towards his subjects and multilayered poetical and art historical references did not " facilitate a single, clear, unambiguous reading which is a prerequisite for propaganda"<sup>(10)</sup>.

1970's also a time that brought the language of new decorativizm<sup>(11)</sup> which became a predominant characteristic of artistic production in Uzbekistan. Decorative approach in art was as a result of "pro- active creative search by the Uzbek artists for new aesthetic experiences" allowing the cross pollination of European, Russian and local art traditions. Murals "History of Uzbek National theatre" and "Messengers of Eternity" both are seemingly different in style but still give an idealized visual representation of the subject matter. The major step forward in the 1980's for Jalal's artistic practice was to move towards abstraction. At the time abstract art was seen as a symbol of freedom and as a way to escape from ideological function of the art. "My works since the mid 1980's progressed to two directions, one is my figurative production and other is abstract. I usually refer to this type as ornamental or decorative. I exhibited first time my abstract works at my solo show in Moscow's Central House of Artists in 1990 . Since then, my work follows both directions"<sup>(12)</sup>.

Abstraction for him meant freedom of choice - where he can use color and the symbolic language of lines and fluid forms to experiment, play, break boundaries and to move away from having to paint something that is real or representative. The point of departure for Jalal's abstraction, follows the path of the Malevichian pursuit of a 'non-objective' painting . inspired by the notion of art as an epitome of the universe free from established aesthetic and social norms. Nonetheless the building blocks for abstract language are also found within his own Central Asian heritage. Working from the position that abstraction follows a reflection of the Islamic preoccupation with the transitory nature of the material world, he developed his vision based on many forms and artistic concepts remained unchanged over the centuries and creatively reinterpret accepted forms and canons. His paintings are the result of a careful design process which brings together intuitive gestures and marks along with quotations and references from the world around him and history of his country heritage. Jalal creates a system that takes two forms - first as 'abstract' art, whose starting point is a recognizable image that is progressively abstracted to a necessary minimum. Another form could be referred as 'concrete', which stems solely from the mind of the artist or the process of creation. This style had characterized his production until now and brings us a fusion of different traditions and beliefs, of different themes and different places.

In his 'concrete' phase of pure abstraction, the artist builds the structures of visual metaphors to communicate the complexity of the lived experience. Jalal follows a task to explore a language free of cultural associations and removes anything that might distract the viewer from focusing on the eternal now of the present. Bakhodir is one of the most influential artists of Uzbekistan. His generation of artists lived and worked in between the light and shadow

of official Soviet culture and their works were marked by strong desire to express new ideas and to find genuine artistic freedom. From the 1980's, he created a unique oeuvre, halfway between figurative and abstract, producing works that merged abstract techniques with references to ancient traditions and drew upon Uzbekistan's heritage. His paintings are connected by an underlying thread of reflection of his multiple philosophical searches allowing him to boldly express himself through this medium.

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#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Irina Bourmistrova was born in Russia and currently lives and works in UAE as the . Curatorial Director of Andakulova Art Gallery. A Sotheby's Institute of Art graduate, Irina after graduation worked at Christie's and Sotheby's in London before moving to Singapore in 2010. Arriving in Asia at a time when Southeast Asian contemporary art was erupting onto the international scene, Irina developed an expertise of regional art first through her art-market reports on regional art fairs. Irina has curated and co-curated a wide range of exhibitions including "From Picasso to the New Roman School" and "The Glass of Shadows". Since joining Andakulova art gallery as a Curatorial Director Irina has been a dynamic force in the contemporary art scene in UAE. In her curatorial practice she focused on themes of identity and conceptual practices in contemporary art and artists from the Central Asia. Irina also works on independent curatorial projects in various art institutions in UAE including Sharjah Museum of Art, Arthub (Abu Dhabi ),The Big Picture, N2N gallery, World Art Dubai , as well as various ongoing projects in London and Tashkent . Irina has previously written for publications such as The Art Newspaper (Russia), Artchronika etc and also various art exhibition catalogues.

#### END NOTES

- 1) D Northrop Veiled Empire: gender and power in Stalinist Central Asia, Cornell University Press, 2004, page 7.
- 2) Ibid, page 23.
- 3) Interview with the artist in December 12th 2015.
- 4) Interview with the artist in January 2016
- 5) Ahmedova Nigora Art of Central Asia in XX century . Tashkent 2004 p 103
- 6) Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-party state, 1917-1992, M C Bown, B Taylor, Manchester University press, 1993 p170.
- 7) Ibid, page 170
- 8) The woman portrayed in the mural is Mukkaram Tourqunbaeva founder of the female folk dance troupe "Bakhor".
- 9) Ibid, page 170.
- 10) Art of the Soviets, page 168.
- 11) Ahmedova Nigora Art of the Central Asia in XX century . Tashkent 2004 page 106.
- 12) Interview with the artist on February 2016



1) Life Cycle, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 80x160cm. Courtesy of Andakulova gallery.  
2) Poet and Muse



1) Khiva, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 182x90cm. Courtesy of Andakulova gallery.  
2) Minaret, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 180x54cm. Courtesy of Andakulova gallery.