

Studio Practices: Uzbekistan

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Alexander Barkovsky



Caca Cola in Uzbekistan, 2010, digital print on archival paper, 60x100cm. Courtesy of the artist and Alif gallery.

A younger generation is thought to be a catalyst for new ideas and perhaps this has been true for artists in Uzbekistan. However, today, more than ever, when young artists need the nurturing support of public and private institutions, the infrastructure is mostly lacking. Such is the case for not only the country but also the entire Central Asian region. Within this limiting contemporary art ecosystem, the dynamic emergence of artist Alexander Barkovsky from the city of Tashkent, is notable.

Upon completion of his training as book illustrator in the Art College in Tashkent in 1998, he quickly decided on the vector towards Contemporary Art and began to master its language. He attended lectures at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, took part in a project called “Media-Laboratory” and completed a directing course at the Goethe Institute in Tashkent. He began boldly

experimenting with mediums such as computer graphics, photography, photo-collage and video, combining them with painting in search of his own visual style. However, he soon realized that the main substance to articulate on lay in the domain of semantics. In 2005, when Barkovsky formally began his career as an artist, the local art scene illustrated little connection to realities on the ground, this being the same year of the “*Andijan*” massacre where several hundred protesters were fired upon by State troops, leading to an extensive loss of life and its contested circumstances. Sensing that most of the art on show lacked any relation to the repressive environment, Barkovsky presented works that held elements of social critique. One such work is the photo-collage series “*Tashkent and its Residents*” which showed portraits of marginalized people and their dilapidated residential quarters that were built in the heyday of



Gypsy Madonna # 6, 2008-2010, water colour and tempura on lithograph with sequins, embroidery and velvet in artist's wooden frame, 72x53cm. Courtesy of Alif gallery.

Soviet era. Over time, the young artist has learnt to parody and present a skilful pastiche of modernity and its implications, an example of which can be seen in his other series *"Coca-Cola in Uzbekistan"* and *"Uzbekistan, the City of Peace and Friendship"*. Through coloured photographs of the 1930s, one can see the device of habitual models mutating against the background of the famous American beverage logo the *"emancipated women"* sit in poses typical of Soviet-era photographs. The title of the latter work is a playful riff on such State epithets as *"Tashkent- The City of Peace"*, *"The city of Friendship"*, somewhat exposing them as propaganda to promote tourism and foreign investments.

Another series, *"Gypsy Madonnas"* is an important milestone in Barkovsky's practice. The work is about gypsies roaming in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These ancient people with mysterious culture and language who have lived off begging for centuries are known as Luli, or Jughli, or Mugat (Muslims). The local Police

often scatter them away and the townsfolk try to avoid or ignore these vagrants. The Luli usually have no identification documents and are not counted by census, meaning that formally they do not exist. The artist explores this taboo zone beyond the boundary, dividing the people into decent people and the gypsies. These photographs of gypsy women carrying babies whom the artist encountered in market-places, cemeteries, railway stations, by the mosques, and along motorways, are presented in the format of classical Renaissance iconography of the Madonna, thus blurring the definitions of status and class. The irony of course is in the denial of Uzbekistan's or indeed Central Asia's rich history composed of overlapping cultures and religious syncretism, bringing into question the modern constructs of national identity. Barkovsky has elaborately framed these portraits in carved wood with expensive inlay to contextually and visually signify the lives of these gypsies, their history, their value and their place in an increasingly unequal society. This series is also accompanied by film inspired by Raphael's *"The Sistine Madonna"* that depicts images of gypsies.

Barkovsky treats these images through an unusual technique. The photographs are printed as lithographs and the artist then colours the prints by hand using watercolours and tempera. Mechanically produced photographs then receive a warm immediacy of the artist's hand-drawn finishing touches thereby transforming their message and meaning. *"Myths and Legends of the East: Surkhandarya"* (2013) is a recent undertaking in which Barkovsky explores the complicated history and intricate culture of a unique ethnic group that lives in the Baisun area. Thirty photographs produced as offset prints on watercolour tea-soaked paper and a video document men and women of ancient appearance, their adaptation to new social and economic shifts, and the changes occurring in their isolated community today. Capturing their way of life much like an anthropologist, he creatively represents their traditions in unexpected modes. This series is produced not as a straightforward photographic documentation. Each portrait has the individual's name embossed carefully on a small metal plate in Arabic, lending these individuals a place in modern history lest they be forgotten in the digital age.