

The Realism of Alexander Nikolaev



Wisdom of kindness, 2012, mixed media on canvas, 90x60cm. Courtesy of Alif Gallery.

The art of Alexander Nikolaev vividly reflects the recent history of conceptual art of Uzbekistan – brief yet self-sufficient in terms of its genesis and evolution. Isolated from European influences, even more so from exposure to modernity in the late 20th century, Soviet Central Asia experienced momentous transformations where artists began to express these shifts through their aesthetics. The first experiments were made sporadically, either within the artist collective community, or individually in the quiet of a lone-artist studio. The reckless 90s saw the formative years of a group of young artists who began their expressions around the same as Nikolaev. These artists were neither social activists, nor non-conformists but when faced with great political and social transformations they felt compelled to challenge, to question, to contest through their art. Such artists especially attempted to articulate a critical discourse on

the then institutionally accepted parameters of what was considered as art. Once artists such as Nikolaev broke away from traditional artistic representations, he moved towards the freedom offered by conceptual tactics. He progressed by dropping the “framework” of a picture finding it too restrictive, preferring installations, utilizing objects, and appropriating ready-mades. “Modulor” objects were painted structures representing the stages of human evolution and alluding to the constructivist experience of Le Corbusier, from whom Nikolaev borrowed the term.

The years between 1999 and 2005 were crucial: the artist explored various artistic strategies. In 2004 Nikolaev showed his first video artworks that highlighted the conflict between urbanism and the fragile world of nature through environmental disasters “*The Aral Sea*”, “*Fishes*”, and spiritual impoverishment in the faceless

quarters of a ferro-concrete city “*Elevator*”, “*Shaman*“. By illustrating such tensions, he displays his ease in dealing with uncomfortable and controversial issues cleaving Central Asia.

Over time, as his practice matured, Nikolaev turned to develop expression of his personal experience as a reflection of challenges posed by the time. His video “*I Wanna Go to Hollywood*”, the sublimated aspirations of the entire generation, launched Nikolaev to the international art scene. This artwork is an ironic narrative about a young man who becomes a hostage of his *idée fixe* to visit the shining “*Olympus*”, home to Western movie stars. As frame per frame reveals, the viewer is privy to how the young man loses his identity, trying to match up to the movie-star stereotype. The video showing an episode from the life of an everyman relapsing into the Sovok (*derogatory name for a man with Soviet mentality*) inferiority complex is in actuality a very accurate reflection of a Soviet-man’s idea about the world with his limited knowledge about western paradise. This effect of access into the private world of a lonely man imagining himself to be a movie idol is amplified by its intentionally poor image quality, its amateurish shaky camera perspective, essential to communicate a sense of loneliness and deprivation.

A milestone in Nikolaev’s art was an artwork titled “*Constellation*” (2005) that showed in the first exhibition of contemporary art in Uzbekistan, held on the premises of a former maintenance plant. Nikolaev presented “*The Aral Sea Water*” which referenced one of the worst environmental disasters on the globe—the Aral sea’s remarkable shrinking due to agricultural policies of recent decades. Another installation titled “*In Search of Perfection*” is an engineering invention of the artist: white plaster arms steadily stamping human figurines onto a lengthy sheet of paper that rolls out of the contraption. Offering a layered reading, the cold mechanic movements offer seemingly identical human figures alluding to fail-safe perfection achieved by technology. However, as the ink in between the stamping process replenishes itself unevenly, each figure-stamp on close scrutiny is unique. The tension that the artist creates, between form and its opposed meaning, is palpable.

In 2007 Nikolaev presented a meditative black-

and-white video called “*Prayer*”, capturing one of the trends in contemporary art: a study of religious and metaphysical subject-matter. In the stylistically minimalist video art piece the slow narrative telling of a lonely man praying amidst snowy landscape captivates by its suggestive power. The man’s state of spiritual unison seems unbroken. On the contrary, away from the hustle, in the silence of nature, considered sacred in Sufism, the sound of wind and water is woven into the recitation of the Koran. Weaving in scientific, ecological and spiritual notions together, the artist puts man at the centre, conceptually indicating how all matter, animate or inanimate are interconnected and inseparable from one other. A clear critique of capitalist mentality whereby one simply consumes to keep the economy going without contributing anything back, be it to community, society, or ecology.

At the 2005 and 2007 Venice Biennale and other famous art forums Alexander Nikolaev’s videos “*I Wanna Go to Hollywood*” and “*Prayer*” represented contemporary art of Uzbekistan for the first time. Not merely a validating fact on the international art scene, but such artists affirm self-determination through artistic processes in Uzbekistan, representing the country in international dialogue on social, cultural and political critique. Nikolaev’s work “*The World of Good People*” attracted a lot of attention at the 5th International exhibition “*The Signs of Time*” in Tashkent at the Moscow and then the 54th Venice Biennale. This work consists of six textile panels made in the aesthetics of kitsch and naïve art. Bringing these unsophisticated patterns into the context of contemporary culture as something ingenious, authentic and pure he changed their triviality through the lens of perception. Shiny inserts, satin patches, sequins and other tinsel communicate the ancient traditions and rituals, shining their lustre on the new characters of salesmen and owners of technological companies or kebab stalls.

Alexander Nikolaev, together with his colleagues, has gone through the period of storm and fury in the Contemporary Art of Uzbekistan. He refers to himself a realist, believing that the truth of life and the study of certain realities have since taken new forms, expressions and meanings of which are yet left to explore.