

## Jamal Usmanov. Viator



**Untitled, The Dreamseries**, 2010, oil on canvas, 102x150cm. Courtesy of Alif gallery.

Jamal Usmanov began his career in art in the 1990s, when the art of Uzbekistan, having changed its cultural paradigm, turned to the nation's historical and spiritual experience, which was made possible with the fall of the Iron Curtain. It should be noted that contemporary art trends exist in Uzbekistan in a specific context defined by historical circumstances of banned modernism and traumatic experience of the twentieth century atheism, which has resulted in a constant mainstreaming of matters related to the revival of national traditions.

Usmanov was one of the first to explore the depths of Oriental Sufi poetry, creating a series of parable-paintings inspired by the fundamental postulates of the mystical teaching of the Path. Metaphysics of artistic contemplation is the basis of these works. It is expressed in a particular poetics of style that takes the viewer to a state of meditation. Sometimes this state is

induced by the pictured character, as in the paintings showing a contemplating traveller. In Usmanov's other pieces the viewer is captivated by the magic of aesthetics bringing one in a multidimensional, inexplicable and mysterious contact with the universe, which is only accessible through the "mind's eye or in one's heart", as the Sufi poets believed. A keen sense of detail cultivated by respect for traditions and coming from miniature painting is not just a characteristic feature of his style; it is also important for understanding the meaning of a painting. Through the visible the artist attempts to communicate the presence of the super-sensory in the world around, and for this reason the immersion into it that can be seen in the "Reflection" painting series (2009) is not only very much akin to the mystical revelations of Sufi poets, but can also be related to by contemporary audiences.

Unlike many artists pursuing Contemporary Art who work from project to project, or from biennale shows to art fairs, Jamal Usmanov creates as he pleases. His identity lies in existential problems, in self-immersion... The artist turned to Contemporary Art for the first time in year 2000, in the project called "Path". Since then all Contemporary Art varieties – from installations, objects and video to environments – have gotten an individual interpretation in his art practice. Still, he has remained true to his metaphysical persuasions, structuring his content-related discourse on the basis of Oriental mythological and poetic traditions. He has developed his own poetics that has nothing to do with over-exposed themes, semantics or the usual devices common in the Contemporary Art of recent years. The artist, however, is constantly searching for new opportunities offered by different media, which allow renewing his individual poetics. Although it has its genesis in painting, almost all Usmanov's projects, such as *"The Blind Men"*, *"X-Position"*, *"The Valley of Gnosis"*, and *"The Silk Road Coordiogram"*, are fireclay sculptures. In the *"Chupa-Chups"* installation showing a huge caterpillar reaching for the Western-brand candy triumphs the idea of initiation – transition to a new quality, alluding to social transformations experienced by the country in the last decades. In the art of Uzbekistan, Usmanov was among the pioneers boldly experimenting with new video technologies, developing his own experience in interpreting Oriental spiritual heritage in video-art. Thus, the piece *"Reflection"* created in 2007 became a signature event in the country's contemporary art. The poetics of the film comes from the artist's rich painting experience: every frame – an allusion to canvas – is structured following its principles. Long frames where time appears enchanted create a kind of extra-temporal connection between the sacrament of rain, people silently passing by the mosque and their mysterious reflections in the water, appearing and disappearing. Sacred metaphors coming from the Islamic tradition – the visible and the invisible, water, as well as silence and light – all this is expressed through a powerful visual technique communicating the unspeakable mystery of Existence. Having created a number of video works, such as *"Mirror"* and *"The Basic Instinct"*, as well as a video-art

piece inspired by the poetry of Alisher Navoi and Omar Khayyam, Usmanov tried to answer the questions that preoccupied many, such as how one changes the work with Oriental classical heritage in the age of new media technology. How the traditional Oriental perception is sublimated in the aesthetics of a video, installation, or performance? In his projects Usmanov has found the most refined ways of translating the nation's millennial experience and the entire experience of contemplative metaphysics into the language of Contemporary Art. Along the way he has also demonstrated and proved that Contemporary Art does not deny refined artistry. One of Usmanov's recent works is the *"Parable"* project presented in the Fine Arts Gallery in Tashkent in June 2014. It features small rooms overlaid with modest floral wallpaper – a painter's studio. In these rooms, having escaped from the bustle of the city, a young woman-artist creates. Her painted life-size figure is made of fireclay. A large painting of hers is mounted on the easel; next to it one can see sculptures, video, installations, photographs, objects. While in the rooms, visitors can *"observe"* everyday life of urban neighbourhoods through the windows showing built-in video. One window shows typical concrete high-rise buildings, the other – narrow streets and courtyards of the Old Town and its inhabitants. Usmanov's project-oriented thinking has reached a new level: he created a total installation. The term 'total installation' coined by Ilya Kabakov refers to a piece that cannot be viewed from the outside: one has to go in, get used to it... This is what happens in the Jamal Usmanov's slice of ordinary life in a studio where every aspect of the artist's experience is engaged. The audience takes it in directly, from strong impressions of paintings and sculptures, and from the aura of the ambience itself. They are *"total"* also in the sense that the artist seems to leave no neutral space for the observer: the viewer becomes part of the installation in a way, an object among other exhibited objects. Having begun his art career with the turning to spiritual tradition and poetry, which was a sort of Passéism and an "escape" from modernity, Usmanov has now set his mind on the problems of today's world, on searching for ways of regaining the lost harmony.