

ACAW

Focus Kazakhstan

Mana Contemporary Fall, 2018

Focus Kazakhstan: Kyzyl Tractor Collective

Thinking Collections: Telling Tales

Asia Contemporary Art Week 2018
Signature Exhibition
Hosted by Mana Contemporary

Curated by Leeza Ahmady and Vladislav Sludskiy
An unprecedented survey exhibition of Kyzyl Tractor,
Kazakhstan's most celebrated art collective.

October 14 - November 30, 2018



Focus Kazakhstan | Curatorial Statement

Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW)'s third signature program for the season, *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, connects New York and Central Asia's art scenes through an unprecedented survey exhibition of **Kyzyl Tractor**, Kazakhstan's most celebrated art collective. The exhibition, hosted at Mana Contemporary, is part of *Focus Kazakhstan*—a landmark series of thematic presentations led by the **National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan** across four cities: London, Berlin, Suwon, and Jersey City.

The exhibition reunites **Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective**, noted for their feverish experimentations in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, after almost two decades of working both separately and occasionally together. Known for reorienting nomadic, Sufi, and shamanistic philosophies as a new artistic language over the past three decades, their work continues to chronicle the seismic socioeconomic and political shifts in Central Asia.

Constant nomadic movement, a common narrative of the 1990s, is present in most of Kyzyl Tractor's performances, sacred materials such as wood, wool, felt, and other textiles found in the steppes of Kazakhstan are frequently used, along with instruments like the shan-kobyz, dombra, and drums. The principles of the spatial-structural composition school and dervish, nomadic and Tengri heritage are visible in the first ten years of their performative practice.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Red Bridge of Kyzyl Tractor*, 2002 Performance as part of a documentary film shot by B. Kairbekov Archival photo print



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Performance East-West*, 2000. Archival photo print

The show comprises two monumental sculptural works—one newly conceived and a reproduction of an older destroyed drum as part of a renowned performance *Purification* that occurred 20 years ago. On October 14, the opening day of the exhibition, the collective will reenact this legendary performance ritual at Mana's entry steps.

Central to the exhibition is an installation of over 45 paintings by [Moldakul Narymbetov](#)—the artist, baksy (shaman), poet, philosopher and former lead member of Kyzyl Tractor—showcasing his work from the 1980s until his passing in 2014. Numerous sculptures, paintings, drawings, found objects and other paraphernalia by current key members [Smail Bayaliyev](#), [Said Atabekov](#), [Vitaliy Simakov](#), and [Arystanbek Shalbayev](#) are also included alongside numerous archival photos of the collective's earlier performances.

Developed around curator [Leeza Ahmady](#)'s thesis of "seeing the artist as the first collector and their studios as collections," the show is staged as a powerful energetic container for the group's entire artistic oeuvre—an accumulation of the artists' seeing, feeling, experiencing and questioning the world together. The second portion of the exhibition title, *Telling Tales*, alludes to **Kyzyl Tractor's** enduring use of mythology and fiction as a strategy for unearthing profound hidden truths within the labyrinth of modern, living and societal conformities. *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales* is not only concerned with the stories being chronicled by the collective's works, but also the story of Kazakhstan itself.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective Exhibition Documentation, *Focus Kazakhstan Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, 2018. Courtesy of ACAW & The National Museum of Kazakhstan, Photo: Michael Wilson.

From the Soviet fall through the country's process of reclamation, **Kyzyl Tractor's** earlier works scrutinize structures of national Kazakh identity, memory, and ritual, and, more broadly, humanity's socio-psychological programming as a call to consciousness in relation to nomadic philosophies in a modern world. The member's recent individual works address the country's booming economic growth and steady integration of global financial practices, the role of digitalization, commerce, climate degradation, and the clashes of civilizations in our present history, referred to as the age of Anthropocene.

At the core of Kyzyl Tractor's practice is a Sufi call to questioning the truth—a multilayered inquiry guided by the spirit of all things connected to nature, the cosmos and living in the present moment. This notion of time and truth is particularly apparent through the collective's radical, open-air performances and monumental sculptures, which are unquestionably created as ephemeral acts that reject the rules of traditional institutional spaces, exhibition making, and collection building.

At the crossroads of a historical moment, where there is such a polarity of differences raging across so many countries and regions, it is a befitting challenge to organize an exhibition of such unfamiliar content in New York. Being a relatively isolated art scene, the artists working in Central Asia are distant enough to observe not only their own local historical processes but are engaged in transnational art discourses. *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, in turn, creates a thought-provoking arena for critical analysis, not only regarding the artistic disposition of a nation nestled in the heart of a large continent but also confronts how artists process reality and document a world in constant flux.

Focus Kazakhstan is implemented by the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in association with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the program *Ruhani Zhangyru*. The curator of *Focus Kazakhstan* is **Roza Abenova**, Head of Centre of Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Thinking Collections: Telling Tales is open to the public through daily Mana guided tours Tuesday-Friday at 3pm and Saturday's at 11am and 3pm. And by appointment from Tuesday-Saturday 11am-5pm.



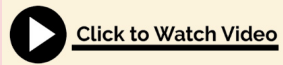
OPENING DAY PERFORMANCE

1:30-3:30PM | Curator Tour and Collective Performance

On October 14th, the opening day of *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, Kyzyl Tractor reenacted *Purification* — one of the group's legendary performances presented in Prague nearly twenty years ago. As a processional ceremony, the performance in Jersey City involved the artist rolling and sounding off one of their largest drums to date (specially built for this iteration.) With a captivated crowd following them across Mana's outside grounds, the four Kyzyl Tractor members burned sage, generating large clouds of smoke while sprinkling water and making deep grunting shaman noises. The performance symbolized an effort to cleanse Jersey City and New York populations from "bad energy". In this manner, the giant drum was transported with hundreds of spectators to Mana's first-floor where it temporarily lives in a designated space called the *Shaman Room*.

With a tendency to monumentalize sound instruments, **Kyzyl Tractor** has often used the drum to assert ancient and indigenous materials along with Shamanistic customs into contemporary society. Shamanism is a spiritual practice that is an essential fabric of traditional Kazakh folklore and is characterized by a profound connection to consciousness, spirits, and the relationship between humans and nature. Kyzyl Tractor treats shamanism as an artistic strategy, similar to any other conceptual or physical material used in their practice. The group does this as both a way of seriously contemplating shaman philosophies while also spoofing them.

Mana Contemporary
888 Newark Avenue
Jersey City
Studio 510, 3rd floor





Images from Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Purification*, 2018, Performance Documentation 'Focus Kazakhstan—Thinking Collections: Telling Tales', October 14, 2018. Courtesy of ACAW & The National Museum of Kazakhstan Photo: Michael Wilson.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Various Actions / Performances*, 2002. Archival photo print as part of a documentary film shot by B. Kairbekov.





Images from *Focus Kazakhstan—Thinking Collections: Telling Tales* exhibition and installation views at Mana Contemporary, New Jersey, 2018.

TEA ROOM

As a part of the unprecedented survey exhibition of Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective (Room 307)

For centuries, drinking tea has been a significant personal and communal activity across Asia, Europe, and beyond. Invented in China around 300 A.D., tea became a coveted trade item during the Silk Road Era, facilitating international economic and cultural exchanges, including with Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan. Since then, tea has become an essential aspect of daily Kazakh culture, serving to relax, encourage conversation, and provide ritualistic and medicinal benefits.

In a tribute to Kazakhstan's hospitality and the Sufi and Shaman philosophies of living in the present moment, the **Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective** and *Thinking Collections: Telling Tales* curators have recreated a traditional Kazakh tea experience. They invite audiences to rest, reflect, and meditate like a true Sufi.

As you step into this space, allow yourself to be enveloped by the environment, energy, and textures around you. Take a break from the hustle and bustle of city life and simply exist in this moment. Remember, wisdom often emerges from the most unexpected places, and you might just find the answers you seek in this room, over a cup of black tea.

A signature exhibition of Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) 2018 in collaboration with the **National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

Curated by Leeza Ahmady and Assistant Curator Vlad Sludskiy



SHAMAN ROOM

In *Genghis Khan's Clothes*, **Said Atabekov** of the **Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective** examines the historical memory of the controversial Mongol leader. In the 13th century, Khan ruled an empire stretching from China to Eastern Europe. The coat's exterior features a traditional pattern, while the interior is lined with military khaki, referencing the consequences of Khan's victories and conquests. The empty jacket, with its massive scale compared to the human body, symbolizes the myth surrounding Khan and highlights how history often focuses on the most potent and aggressive figures.

This work, *Genghis Khan's Clothes*, shares a thematic connection with Sui Jianguo's *Mao's Jacket* series. Both artworks scale up a leader's iconic attire, presenting it without the leader's body. This parallel conveys a sense of power, suggesting that systems can endure without their great leaders.

With a tendency to monumentalize sound instruments, **Kyzyl Tractor** uses the drum, made with wood and animal skin, to insert ancient and indigenous materials along with Shamanistic customs into contemporary society. Shamanism, a religious practice characterized by a profound connection to consciousness, spirits, and the relationship between humans and nature, is a fabric of traditional Kazakh folklore and is often used as a guiding framework for Kyzyl Tractor's practice.

Following Shamanistic philosophies, the *Purification* performance is a proposition for creating flow within a chaotic world — a movement towards a state of consciousness, transcending from darkness or depression to lightness and ecstasy. This process suggests that instead of fearing or banishing undesired qualities or feelings, such as envy, anger or bitterness, one should find a way to transmute them, ending in their sublimation.

Drum-based rituals, like this one, are still widely practiced today by shamans in Latin America, South East Asia, Africa and Siberia. Though this particular drum is modeled after the one used in Kyzyl Tractor's 2003 performance, stagings of this type appear in the group's work as far back as the early 1990's. Kyzyl Tractor has performed *Purification* in Prague, Perm, Vienna, Shymkent, Almaty and now, for the first time, Jersey City. In light of the location and context of this newly recreated work, it is especially critical to address questions about the future of humanity, the Earth, kindness and appreciation.

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Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Purification Drum*, 2018. Wood and sheep skin.



Said Atabekov, *Genghis Khan's Clothes (Coat)*, 2013. Fabric, cotton, sintepon.

FOCUS KAZAKHSTAN FORUM

2-5PM | Open Forum

Curators: Leeza Ahmady and Vladislav Sludskiy (Manager & Curator of Ethan Cohen Gallery and co-founder and organizer of ARTBAT FEST)

Moderator: David Borgonjon (Curator, Writer)

12 arts professionals from institutions in New York and beyond joined for a special walkthrough and discussion surrounding the exhibition *Focus Kazakhstan Thinking Collections: Telling Tales* and its presented artists, one of Central Asia's legendary contemporary art collectives, *Kyzyl Tractor (Red Tractor)*.

Participating Respondents:

Livia Alexander (Curator, Writer and Chair of the Department of Art and Design at Montclair State University), **Daniela Bertol** (Research Artist, Scholar, Designer and Author), **Beth Citron** (Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Rubin Museum), **Jin Coleman** (Art Advisor, Curator), **Christina Davis** (Independent Curator, Researcher), **Jeanne Finley** (Media Artist), **Robert Lee** (Executive Director and Curator of Asian American Arts Centre), **Lydia Matthews** (Professor of Visual Culture in Parsons Fine Arts program and Director of the Curatorial Design Research Lab at the New School), **Rashmi Viswanathan** (Postdoctoral Fellow of Global Contemporary Art at The New School University and Senior Fellow of the American Institute of Indian Studies), **Christina Yang** (Director of Education and Public Programs at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), **Amy Zion** (Curator, Writer)



Kyzyl Tractor | Focus Kazakhstan

Artists' Bios

SAID ATABEKOV

Born in 1965 in Bes-Terek, Uzbekistan, **Said Atabekov** currently lives and works in Shymkent, Kazakhstan. Said Atabekov began creating art in 1993 as a member of the **Kyzyl Tractor artist group**. As a witness to the successive waves of social and political change in Kazakhstan, an area which saw a transition from nomadic culture to communism and then to capitalism in less than a hundred years, Atabekov explores the intersections and local impact of often conflicting cultures and skillfully identifies and animates elements that reveal their deeper paradoxes.

Like many of today's artists, Atabekov's work spans a variety of media, from video and photography to sculptures and installations. His use of ethnographic signs is heavily influenced by recollections of the Russian avant-garde and Post-Soviet realities, along with an intimate and often touching analysis of his condition as a contemporary artist. While acutely aware of the attractiveness of the exoticism associated with iconographical stereotypes of Central Asian art, he often refers to them with a touch of irony.

Notable recent exhibitions include *Suns and Neons above Kazakhstan* at the Yarat in Baku (2017), *The Other & Me* at the Sharjah Art Museum (2014), the 5th Moscow Biennale (2013), Central Asia Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011, 2007, 2005), *Ostalgia* at the New Museum in New York (2011), *Time of the Storytellers* at the KIASMA in Helsinki (2007), the 9th Istanbul Biennale (2005).



Said Atabekov, *Way to Rome* series, 2017-2018. C-print on aluminum dibond.



Said Atabekov, *Supersoldier with 12 stone Bal Bal*, 1999-2000. C-print on aluminum dibond.



Said Atabekov, *Steppe Wolves*, series 2007-on-going. Photograph and acrylic paint. Courtesy of the artist.

SMAIL BAYALIYEV

Born in 1952 in the village of Iskander, a former South Kazakhstan region now belonging to Uzbekistan, **Smail Bayaliyev** graduated from Tashkent College of the Arts. Since 1981, Bayaliyev has lived and worked in the city of Shymkent, Kazakhstan, where he was a part of the first stages of the formation of the art collective **Kyzyl Tractor**. By the early 1990's, Kyzyl Tractor became one of the most recognizable artistic phenomena of its time.

Starting his artistic journey through painting and collage, Bayaliyev has slowly transmitted massive public art pieces, performances and mixed-media artworks which often involve the use of kashma, a central Asian wool. Bayaliyev's work centers around classical and regional themes, picturing still-lives of horses and nomadic heritage that is encrypted in cultural codes of today's society. Bayaliyev has created his own unconventional way of deconstructing and revisiting these themes.

His sculptures of horses are often left undone and raw, uncovering the ontological incompleteness of those animals when it comes to their roles in the past vs. modern society. In his other series, Bayaliyev was inspired by suprematism, surrealism, and cubism, placing those rather western movements into an authentic context of Central Asian crafts and motifs. An active and contributing member of Kyzyl Tractor, Bayaliyev's signature exhibitions have included the seventh biennial in Tashkent, the 2003 quadriennale in Prague, ARTBAT FEST 8, and other local and international exhibitions.



Smail Bayaliyev, *Threshold*, 2015. Sculpture metal, resin and paint, 200x100cm.



Smail Bayaliyev, *Kurt Daiyndau*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas and collage.

MOLDAKUL NARYMBETOV

Noted for his bright individuality and rebellious charisma, **Moldakul Narymbetov** (1946-2012) was a key figure in the Kazakh art-group **Kyzyl Tractor** (1990). Narymbetov made great contributions to the development and popularization of contemporary art not only in Kazakhstan but also in the Central Asian region. His shamanistic myth-making is archaic in form compared to modern content but allows for Narymbetov to speak and express his identity clearly.

While Narymbetov's sculptures of old rubber auto-tires are some of his most iconic works, his paintings are intense, bold, and conceptual. Narymbetov's color strokes often correspond with the dynamics of natural life, corresponding with the sonorous colors of the Fauvists. Many times taking the forms of abstract and landscape paintings of rural and tiny settlements, Narymbetov's uses the victim as a theme in many of his works and often comments on consumer culture, technology, and existential problems.

Narymbetov was a Member of the Arts Academy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, member of the Artists' Union of Kazakhstan, and winner of the Zhiger reward. He has represented the Republic of Kazakhstan in many events across the world in countries such as Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Czech Republic, USA, Italy, Russia. He opened the School of Modern Art in Almaty and has participated in the festivals of contemporary art such as ArtBatFest in both 2010 and 2011.



Moldakul Narymbetov, *Bal Bals*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas.



Moldakul Narymbetov, *Scarab*, 2000s. Acrylic on fiberboard.

ARYSTANBEK SHALBAYEV

Arystanbek Shalbayev was born in the Keless country of South Kazakhstan in 1959. Soon after graduating from the Almaty Institute for Arts and Theater in 1984, the artist returned to Shymkent where he became a teacher at the Kasteev school and met fellow teacher Vitaliy Simakov. Shalbayev and Simakov's close proximity created a space for each to learn from each other and experiment with the compositional qualities of painting.

Using painting, graphics, installation, video, and performance, Shalbayev's practice is an exquisite juxtaposition of subjects and mediums. Shalbayev's artworks display strong conceptual visual aspects which come together using a solid, almost scientific, methodology—making his process just as important as the message of his artworks. The artist is interested in absurd representations of Kazakhstan's current-day social, cultural and economic dilemmas, as well as its history and mythological discourse. His latest series of artworks, collectively called *Boomerang*, reveal the self-destructive fate of Kazakhstan's natural-resource-driven economy.

Arystanbek has participated in a number of personal and group exhibitions in Kazakhstan, the UK, Czech Republic, France and Spain where his pieces have been acquired by local and public collections. Of note, Arystanbek was a part of the show *Nomads*, a collective exhibition of artists from Kazakhstan in Moscow; *Life is a Legend*, a show of contemporary Kazakhstan art in Strasbourg, France; and the ArtBat Festival in Almaty, Kazakhstan.



Arystanbek Shalbayev, *the game from series of matches, barrels*, 2016. Oil on canvas.



Arystanbek Shalbayev, *Golden Man*, 2014. Photo print on dibond.



Arystanbek Shalbayev, *Portrait of Genghis Khan*, 2013. Diptych, photoprint covered with oil.

VITALIY SIMAKOV

Vitaliy Simakov was born in 1954 in the Republic of Bashkortostan. In 1983, the artist graduated from the National Institute of the Arts in Ufa with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. Soon after, the artist moved to Shymkent and taught a class on spatial-structural composition which resulted in the formation of **Kyzyl Tractor**. Simakov became a pivotal critical influence in the academic understanding of the Kyzyl Tractor's artwork as well as an active participant in their performances in the 1990's. Later, Simakov concentrated his attention on teaching and slowly passed the leadership of the art collective to Moldakul Narymbetov. The artists remained a collaborator and close friend to the artist group until the death of Moldakul in 2012. In the past 35 years, Simakov has lived and worked in Shymkent where he still teaches part-time and has up to 50 graduate students per year.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective Exhibition Documentation, *Focus Kazakhstan Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, 2018, Courtesy of ACAW & The National Museum of Kazakhstan, Photo: Michael Wilson.



Vitaliy Simakov, *Celebration Theater*, 2008. Oil on canvas.



Vitaliy Simakov, *Night Riders Series*, 2012. C-print on aluminum dibond.

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[The Brooklyn Rail | Osman Can Yerebakan | "Thinking Collections: Telling Tales: A Survey Exhibition of Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective"](#)

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[Art Radar | "Thinking collections, Telling Tales: 'Focus Kazakhstan' in Jersey City"](#)

[OCULA | Fawz Kabra | "Focus Kazakhstan-Thinking Collections: Telling Tales"](#)

["Purification" Performance Video | "Focus Kazakhstan-Thinking Collections: Telling Tales", Asia Contemporary Art Week 2018— survey of Kyzyl Tractor collective's artistic collaborations from mid 1990's till the present day.](#)



In 2019, **Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW)** updated its name to **Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)** to reflect nearly two decades of programmatic evolution and growth. In 2014, the "n" was dropped from "Asian" in the organization's name to emphasize Asia as an expansive and inclusive artistic state of mind, transcending geographical and national boundaries.

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