

## **AAA Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research**

**2005-2006**

### **Grantee's Progress Report**

**Leeza Ahmady**

#### **"Contemporary Art in Central Asia"**

People ask what motivates me to research the arts in Central Asia. I was born and raised in Kabul, Afghanistan and have been exposed to the region's creative practices. Indeed, making visible the invisible perspectives of an area that is largely accessible by way of the mass media inspires me. However, essentially and more simply, my interests in investigating contemporary art in Central Asia is driven by my love for contemporary art, and its diversity and practice in the world at large.

I began my career by organising exhibitions in spaces like nightclubs and lounges and eventually moved on to working with galleries and museums. At some point I felt compelled to apply my acquired knowledge to a specific area in today's globally interdependent world. People didn't believe it would be possible to show a contemporary art exhibition in Central Asia or that there would be artists there. Somehow I was convinced there has to be based on the fact that contemporary art has developed elsewhere in the world like Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America. I was sure it would be in Central Asia.

I initiated my research by attending various local & international conferences, and symposiums on Central Asia, all of which remotely came close to the subject at hand. My efforts did however lead to discovering a few Afghan diaspora artists like Roya Ghiasy, Mariam Ghani and Lida Abdul. I began to present their works in various formats in institutions such as the Whitney Museum (2002), New School (2003) Apexart (2005), Istanbul Biennale (2005) etc.

My first trip to Central Asia was in April of 2004. I visited Kyrgyzstan & Uzbekistan and got a glimpse into a small but strong and growing contemporary art community. When I returned to New York, I was determined to expose Central Asia and its contemporaneity to the rest of the world. I applied to and was granted the Asia Art Archive, Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant while completing my Masters in Arts & Cultural Management at Pratt Institute NYC. (May 2005)

I am pleased to report that Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant enabled me to go back to Central Asia this past August for a period of 4 weeks. I traveled to the capitals of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan where I interviewed a total of 85 individuals. A majority of this number are contemporary artists working in modes of painting, sculpture, and graphic (print) arts. Many of these artists are exploring newer mediums such as video, performance, sound, as well as conceptual works. A number of

these artists are exhibiting in international forums such as the Venice Biennale (2005), Istanbul Biennale, (2005) and Sydney Biennial (2006). It is important to note however that these artists have long awaited such opportunities, and that 2005 has been a sort of opening; a significant year for Central Asian artists becoming internationally visible.

Three years of fiddling through the internet and other resources along with my prior visit as mentioned above. proved useful in my ability to connect to -and- identify many more artists, patrons, artists groups, curators, publications, and educational institutions. In fact just a few weeks prior to my departure, for Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, I received an invitation to participate in an art symposium that was going to take place at the world's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest lake in Issykul, Kyrgyzstan. The *Symposium & Open Air Museum Workshop* entitled: *Transformation* was organised by Shaarbaak Amunkul, whose works I had encountered on the internet before I actually met him at the Venice Biennale this past June.

There are many reasons why I am thankful for participating in the symposium at Lake Issykul. It provided me the opportunity to interact with 25 contemporary artists working of various medias and disciplines, including critics and art historians; all in one place and under extraordinarily picturesque and interesting scenery.

I am very touched by the fact that I was received with open arms in every city and invited to give lectures and talks at institutions, and even in people's living rooms. Things were arranged overnight and I would arrive to a gathering of eager artists and individuals ready to receive as much information as possible about artists and their works abroad. I was impressed by their willingness, but also by some artists' ability, to digest concepts that have taken 70 years to develop in one sitting. Every artist that I interviewed wished for more interaction with artists & art professionals from other parts of the world. A primary complaint for all artists & art professionals in the region is that of an information vacuum.

In the coming months I will sift through all collected materials and interviews to write an essay that will provide more insight about the recent history & development of contemporary art in Central Asia and perspective on its social, political, economical and cultural status in relation to the arts. My findings will be published on Asia Art Archive's website as a photo-diary in May 2006. All collected materials such as catalogues, CD's and DVD's will be archived by the Asia Art Archive and will be available for the use of art professionals, scholars and other interested individuals. I hope that my findings will succeed in closing the gap that exists in the international art community by connecting the scattered and unidentified artists and art practitioners of Central Asia, to art professionals in other parts of Asia and the world. I am most eager to see this project trigger long-term dialogue and exchange.

Another purpose for re-visiting Central Asia was to select works, and foster collaboration opportunities for the purpose of my initiative: *The taste of Others*, which was launched at apexart NY. (March 2005) *The Taste of Others* is a series of educational programs; mainly a proposal for traveling an exhibition of art from Central Asia in university

museums throughout the United States; in conjunction with lectures, screenings and artists talks.

*Grantee of the AAA Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant; independent curator; Managing Director, Asian Contemporary Art Week, NY.*