



Taus Makhacheva,
Tightrope, 2015,
HD video, colour,
sound, 58min 10sec.
Courtesy the artist
and Narrative
Projects, London

Decolonial AestheSis and the Post-Soviet Art

- Madina Tlostanova

One certainly cannot speak of a well-shaped 'decolonial art movement', so to speak, in the post-Soviet context.¹ However, artists are increasingly developing self-conscious critical practices of subversion and corporeal emancipation grounded in decolonial agendas. What I will refer to here as 'post-Soviet decolonial art' - and as is the case with other examples of decolonial creativity - seeks to engage with forgotten native sounds, tastes and odours. Decolonial artists often aim at reinstating geo-body storytelling and disqualified ideals of beauty. In fact, works by such artists in the post-Soviet space are often ironic, at times grotesque; they include parody, mimicry, chiasmus, overlay, exaggerated nostalgia, deconstruction and creolisation of the previous official aesthetic norms and rules of Soviet modernity. These artists strive to restore human dignity by reclaiming memories and histories, as well as by reviving and reimagining native cultures in tension with Soviet,

post-Soviet, national and global neoliberal modernities. These artists value the resurgence of native cosmologies and local histories vis-à-vis modernity. Instead of positioning native cultures in the modern/colonial sense of *going back to something dead and frozen*, artists negate progressivist temporality and the translation of exotic

Madina Tlostanova discusses artistic strategies of regenerating and 're-futuring' in relation to the darker colonial side of post-Soviet existence.

spaces into lagging behind times, thus advancing a complex interpenetration of traditional and contemporary features.²

In addition to the characteristics above mentioned, among the most recognisable decolonial themes in post-Soviet art is the problematisation of the museum as a euro-modern site for knowledge production and of modern/colonial, man/woman, human/animal or natural/cultural binaries. It will become clear throughout the text that such a decolonial drive in this context mainly affects those artists who belong to ethnic-national minorities and to colonised and indigenous groups within the post-Soviet space. In what follows, I discuss the work of post-Soviet artists such as Kazakh Saule Suleimenova, Chechen Aslan Gaisumov and Dagestani Taus Makhacheva as either in conscious or intuitive dialogue with decolonial aesthesis. Such framing becomes significant as it allows for the identification of one of the many challenges some of these artists face today: is it possible to exist between the devil of the state and the deep blue sea of the market? On the one hand, the international art market seems not yet to have a separate space for artistic practices of this kind. With such space lacking, decolonial post-Soviet works are categorised as ethnic, ornamental, decorative or in a trendier language - multicultural. These categories blur any specificity and works are drowned within the larger category of contemporary art, causing decolonial elements to be rendered invisible or irrelevant. Archival work on coloniality and decoloniality of sensing has become a central goal, in opposition to many post-Soviet artists who continue to concentrate on ideology through replaying the (post)avant-garde models or blending in with the larger fashionable trends in contemporary global art. Additionally, decolonial post-Soviet artists are actively criticised by their leftist underground peers with their predictable progressivist neglect of any ethnic-national agendas such as ancestral bodies and memories, non-linear temporal paradigms and re-existence modes of being, while the postcolonial post-Soviet states have rediscovered the commercial value of national art and actively engage in its appropriation and depoliticisation.³

Contextualising the Post-Soviet Experience Through a Decolonial Lens

The decolonial thought that originated at the end of the Cold War allowed to consider the experience and history of the so called 'second-rate' empires. The Czarist Russia and the

subsequent Soviet modernity/coloniality, for example, have been the zones of external imperial difference, bound to ‘catch-up’. Decolonial thought humbles the mostly anglophone field of postcolonial studies – downsizing it to a mere reflection of its specific geopolitical and corpo-political experiences.⁴ In decolonial interpretations, the Soviet past and post-Soviet present are seen as complex intersectional conglomerates of ideology, ethnic-racial, gender, religious, colonial, indigenous and other factors instead of homogenous ideological constructs. The end of the Cold War generated both the dominant neoliberal ‘end of history’ narrative and decolonial thinking with its central concepts of coloniality and decoloniality. These concepts came to replace previous ones, such as colonialism (as a historical and descriptive term) and decolonisation (as a political process), focusing on knowledge production instead. The collapse of state socialist modernity, which allowed neoliberal globalisation to take centre stage, became the proverbial elephant in the room as it changed the global geopolitics of knowledge that remained unnoticed. Western liberal and neoliberal thought interprets post-socialism in an exclusively temporal sense, as after socialism, ignoring the spatial and what is most important, the human dimensions. Likewise, decolonial



thought initially largely ignores both the experience of state socialism and what has come after it. The actual lives of those who were told to forget about their socialist experience, to go back to the end of modernity’s queue and start from scratch in a different paradigm, were not considered relevant on either side of the decolonial/neoliberal equation.

Starting from the mid-2000s, a number of decolonial and post-socialist thinkers have begun to establish connections that allowed the post-socialist discourse to enrich decolonial thought with certain ideas linked to our specific experience.⁵ Art plays a central part in such cross-fertilisation. In many post-Soviet countries art remains the only provisionally allowed form of critical thinking and venue for designing an alternative image of the future. Metaphorical artistic expressions are also strangely more effective than bare facts as they call directly to our emotions and sensibilities, thus launching a painful process of existential liberation.

Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez present the concept decolonial aestheSis in opposition to aestheTics, which they associate to the colonial matrix of power.⁶ AestheSis is here understood within the context of its original meaning: an ability to perceive through the

Saule Suleimenova,
*Everyday Aul
(Village)*, 2017,
from the series
‘Somewhere in the
Great Steppe’, plastic
bags on polycarbonate
sheet, 150 x 210cm.
Courtesy the artist

senses, and the process of sensual perception itself. Decolonial aesthesis originates, then, in the affective experience of those who have never been given a voice before or have been seen as dangerous or noble savages and native informants. It acts as a mechanism of producing and regulating sensations, and hence is inevitably linked with the body as an instrument of perception that mediates our cognition. Decolonial aesthesis proves to be a useful interpretative tool when discussing post-Soviet artists coming mostly from the non-European ex-colonies of the USSR. These artists were weary of the prescribed Soviet aesthetic models, including those created specifically for the ethnic-national others, and uneasy about simply emulating Western trends. They attempted to decolonise their aesthesis in turning to forgotten native models of perception censored during the Soviet time, and dismissed as outdated in the only remaining global neoliberal modernity after 1989. Decolonial impulses are often the only source of re-existence⁷ as another way of being in spite of coloniality and beyond modernity. Decolonial aesthesis plays a key role in strategies of regenerating and *re-futuring*, found in the darker colonial side of the post-Soviet existence. Its immediate (though not only) sphere of realisation is art. The outcome of decolonial aesthesis is the 'decolonial sublime'.⁸ This special optic is triggered by the audience's recognition of the enormity of global coloniality, and through a process of learning to identify it in various phenomena, people, events, institutions and artworks, including one's own self-reflexive positioning in relation to coloniality.

Zooming In: Decolonial Artistic Practices in the Works of Saule Suleimenova, Aslan Gaisumov and Taus Makhacheva

Ironically Russia is increasingly represented at international art biennials by non-Russian artists who have little to do with its imperial culture, history, language and imagery. In fact, some of them come from the former and present colonies of this empire. Artists with postcolonial origins – for the purposes of this essay, meaning ethnically and culturally belonging to non-European Soviet ex-colonies – and decolonial in their political, ethical and aesthetic stance are involved in prestigious exhibitions.⁹ 'Focus Kazakhstan' (2018), an international series of exhibitions of Central Asian art, included strong decolonial voices like Saule Suleimenova, Almagul Menlibayeva and Said Atabekov. Suleimenova strives to decolonise and reinvent Kazakh national identity and self-esteem in her collage series *Kazakh Chronicle* (2018), *I am Kazakh* (2010), *Aruahs* (Ancestors Spirits, 2017) and *No Cultural Value* (2014). Moving from wax engraving to painting superimposed onto archival and contemporary photographs to collages of plastic bags, the artist uses photographs as a more sincere and less embellished way to reflect the times. Suleimenova tries to cure the persistent inferiority complexes and coloniality of perception typical of contemporary Kazakhstan, urging her compatriots to unlearn someone else's artificial ideas of the beautiful and sublime: Western, Russian or local. In the project *Cellophane Painting* (2014–ongoing), the artist turns the used plastic bags into art, striving to show that contemporary Kazakh reality is 'awful and beautiful at once', and people must learn how to appreciate this complexity, this symphony of life.¹⁰ Art should not take this reality to flat images and stereotypes, to rosy prettiness or stylized archaism. The artist links ethnic-national stereotypes to a more global, ecological dimension and a reflection on colonial forms of consumer society and second-rate modernity. For example, one of the collages in this series depicts the primordial blooming steppe (the main symbol of Kazakh national identity). The artist ironically refers to the fact that staunch patriots are proud of the steppe yet continue to profusely litter it with the very plastic bags the work is made of. The bags themselves are indicators of how Kazakhstan's postcolonial/post-Soviet consumerist boom goes hand in hand with its indifference to environmental responsibility. As with her scraperboard collages, Suleimenova invents her own technique for the cellophane paintings, using a hot glue gun and silicon sticks to attach multicoloured plastic bags. The artist refuses to depict people in this series according to Western aesthetic conventions, Russian orientalist representations of the exotic or demonic other, or the recently reconstructed Kazakh canon of beauty that has nothing to do with past ethnic-cultural patterns and values. Instead, she recreates unadorned faces of ordinary people, often children and the elderly, whose low-key beauty manifests in a feeling of unity with the native land and a joy of life.

The exhibition 'Residual Memory' (2019) is entirely devoted to the decolonisation of collective and personal memories through an act of collective mourning and commemoration. Suleimenova's cellophane collages are based on rare archival media, and

revisit the erased, forgotten or distorted pages of Kazakh history, such as the genocidal famine or the political repressions and massacres, censored both from official textbooks and memory. She investigates periods of history recorded in rare, residual photos and video documents; she depicts these scenes of historical trauma in collages of plastic bags, which are as difficult to destroy as memory, performing a ritual of purification and acceptance.¹¹ A particularly striking work from this series is *Kazakhian Exodus*, a collage in which there is a reproduction of an old photograph of Kazakhs migrating from their devastated native homeland in the hopes of physical survival.¹² Significantly, Suleimenova made this collage out of plastic packaging for tea, chocolate and bread – trying to pay homage to the victims of famine with the very food they were deprived of, and at the same time stressing that the empty food packaging won't bring those lives back. The exhibition encourages the audiences to revisit and set free their suppressed memories, to reconnect with their forgotten ancestors, to reject the sanctioned versions of the past, and through reliving these dark histories anew, to critically rethink the present and themselves as contemporary Kazakhs.

Soviet national republics were put through a contradictory, accelerated and forced modernisation, which, among other things, prescribed particular models of making national art according to the infamous formula 'socialist in its content, national in its form'. After this grand experiment was over, people who longed to reconnect with their forgotten roots realised that any return would have to take into account the experience of Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet modernity. Decolonial post-Soviet art partly emerges out of the painful yet fruitful transculturation of the local and the imperial/global, as it critically reflects on both ethnic national traditions and Russian and Western canons. However, in the case of post-Soviet artists coming from originally Muslim societies, the revival of the 'Islamic aesthetics' that has become possible after the end of the USSR often acts as a decolonial lens through which they engage in their critical dialogues with modernity and with modern and contemporary art.

Since individual artists in all Muslim regions of Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus were forced by the Soviet powers into a decidedly secular (Eurocentric) aesthetic system, today we mostly find creolised forms of secular/Western/Russian (post-Soviet) and native/Muslim sensibilities ironically seen through the prism of modernist and postmodernist art. For example, works resembling Western abstract painting – often automatically tagged as second-rate, lag-behind imitations – in reality have little or nothing to do with the genealogies

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of Western abstract art. Instead they contain elements that link them to the textures of indigenous and Muslim art, its symbolism, semiotic system, rhythmic and compositional patterns. These works are abstract not because they wish to enter the global contemporary art market, but rather because they perform a radical return to multiple cosmologies and aesthetics grounded in non-figurative, symbolic, ornamental and esoteric elements.¹³ One interesting example is Dagestanian Oleg Pirbudagov's series *Structures* (2008–13), which seem completely abstract. On closer inspection, the shapes resemble mountains,

and there are elements of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures and human-made objects – all similar to ornaments one can find in traditional local crafts (jewellery, weapons, carpets). Such art informed by diverse global influences refuses to remain within the singular prescribed Russian/Soviet realistic tradition (a pale copy of the Western original), and longs to re-enter and remake its own native epistemic and aesthetic sphere in a dynamic dialogue and debate with modernity/coloniality.

Decolonising memories through art entails a restoration of agency: the right and the ability to finally make our own choices and decide what to remember and how. The cathartic power of such art is realised through resisting and re-existing acts as forms of embodied memories, evoking the most primal senses – sonic, visual, olfactory, tactile – causing uncontrollable avalanches of previously censored remembrances. Some decolonial post-Soviet artists reflecting on troubled relations with the past strive to fix the rupture in the

Saule Suleimenova, *Mullah's Family*, 2009, from the series 'I'm Kazakh', acrylic, photoprint, vinyl, 100 × 140cm. Courtesy the artist



texture of memory connected with violence, trauma and humiliation in order to force the audience to self-critically face ugly truths. For instance, Aslan Gaisumov's *The Household* (2016) consists of a big, tightly closed crate. Inside are everyday objects, such as utensils and clothes, that had been used by the artist's family during a long period living as refugees during the post-Soviet Russian-Chechen wars of the 1990s through 2000s. Made specifically for Gaisumov's solo exhibition at M HKA (Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp) in the summer of 2016 and subsequently bought for their permanent collection, this installation materialises a past, carefully packed and stored in a Western museum. In 1944, deported Chechens were sent to Central Asia in cargo and cattle cars; this work is then historically relational – an act of 'sending back' to the centre.¹⁴ Gaisumov makes a reciprocal gesture of sending the meagre objects collected from his family's homeless past to a museum, ridding himself of memories through making this past public and preventing further disembodiment of its palpable materiality. This is an act of decolonial radical return.¹⁵ The artist recalls his ancestors' similar destiny, commemorating the negative lineage capable of triggering emancipating drives, through the parcel containing the embodied past. It is sent to the museum for permanent storage to mark the end of refugee existence and deposit the processed past, which he wants to let go, but not erase.

Gaisumov keeps returning to decolonial readings of silence and overcoming it. The short film *Keicheyuhea* (2017) shows the artist's grandmother talking about her deportation from her village, and her return after 70 years. The work closely traces her trip, taking the audience with it. A car slowly climbs an abandoned mountain road. One can look out the windows at the depopulated planes and hills, sharing in Gaisumov's grandmother's emotional and physical difficulty as she gets out of the vehicle and walks to the edge of the road. She looks down on her birthplace below, finding only a deserted landscape and the last traces of human presence barely visible. Gaisumov is a silent interlocutor, a humble recorder of his grandmother's looks, reactions, words, movements, terrifying stories, prayers and songs – of her potent decolonial coming back to speech and memory. The affective power of the decolonial sublime is too strong for the long-suffering woman. In the end it's unbearable. The film concludes with her bursting into tears and asking her grandson to stop filming and go back. The artist focuses on a painful struggle to take back the right to find the words to narrate her mournful testimony. Putting memories into words runs the risk of trivialising a cycle of exile and abjection. It aches for an act of exorcism and healing that is not necessarily verbal. Indeed, 'some things can be left unsaid' and not just because it is painful to talk about them, but also because of the inadequacy of language to represent this suffering.¹⁶

Decolonial post-Soviet art can take less traumatic forms. Dagestanian artist Taus



Makhacheva deals with the decolonisation of museums in complex performances such as *Tightrope* (2015) and *The Way of an Object* (2013). In the latter, the artist questions the disciplinary role of the museum as an imperial/national institution that provides one legitimised historical or aesthetic truth. Instead, the artist narrates multiple histories, putting museum objects – mute after being torn away from their original contexts – in unfamiliar contexts outside the institution to give their voices back to them. In *Tightrope*, the central figure, a funambulist, crosses a tightrope strung between one mountain and another, balancing himself by holding paintings, which he then places in improvised storage. The fragility of art in the face of humanity’s responsibility to preserve it amid changing times is exemplified by Dagestan’s history. The funambulist is a fifth-generation representative of a famous local dynasty (tightrope walking being a venerable tradition in the region) and the paintings he carries are twentieth-century examples of Dagestani art, a peculiar mix of stubborn local tradition and forceful Soviet modernity with its predominant realist aesthetics. Makhacheva regards artists as custodians of continuity – risk-taking acrobats for art’s sake. The project muses on the complex transfer of ethnic-national traditions, and the

Aslan Gaisumov,
Keicheyuhea, 2017,
single-channel, HD
video projection,
colour, sound,
22mins 57secs.
Courtesy the artist
and Emalin, London

precarity in artists' works that end up in museums as easily as the abyss of a crevasse. In this work the museum becomes movable, and the art, hanging in the balance, becomes more alive, part of the de-canonised present, not yet or no longer framed by institutional restraints.

I have discussed three different forms that decolonial post-Soviet art has taken in the works of three artists: Suleimenova, Makhacheva and Gaisumov. Each come from the ruins of the Soviet empire. Decolonial artworks are less straightforward than *artivism* – open instead to various interpretations and grounded in different temporalities, unfixed in the actionist metaphysics of presence, reflecting on multiple pasts, without which there is no present or future.¹⁷ In repressed societies such as most of the post-Soviet states, decolonial transcendence of modernity/coloniality through the medium of art is one of the few remaining paths to *re-futuring*.

Endnotes

- 1 The post-Soviet people including myself understand the term post-Soviet spatially, temporally and existentially, focussing on the countries, and the millions of people there who struggle to survive in and as the aftermath of state socialist regimes.
- 2 It is important to clarify that it is not the case that decolonial post-Soviet artists exoticise their own culture. Instead, they move towards forgotten models and ways of artistic thinking. They rely on means no longer restricted by exclusively local sources. During the Perestroika years artists turned to various neo-mythological ways of representation by using recurrent leitmotifs and symbols. As in other countries, this was a realisation of ethnic renaissances and efforts to reinstate the remaining elements of indigenous, colonised and suppressed cultures outside the prescribed official multiculturalist forms. See Patimat Gamzatova, 'Aktualniye Problemy Iskusstva v Musulmanskom Areale Stran SNG v Nachale 21 Veka' (Topical problems of art in the Muslim area of CIS countries in the early 21st century), in ed. Patimat Sultanova, *Iskusstvo Turkskogo Mira. Istoki i Evolutsiya Khudozhestvennoi Kulturi Turkskikh Narodov* (The Art of the Turkic World. Sources and Evolution of the Artistic Culture of the Turkic People), Kazan: Zaman, 2009, pp.56–67.
- 3 See Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.
- 4 See M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-existence*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- 5 See, for example, M. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012; W. D. Mignolo and Rolando Vasquez, 'The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier', *Social Text Online*, 15 July 2013, available at https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_topic/decolonial_aestheSis/ (last accessed on 6 April 2019); and W. D. Mignolo and Pablo Gomez (ed.), *Estéticas y Opcion Decolonial*, Bogota: UD Editorial Creaciones, Bogota, 2012. Along with many artistic, academic and activist projects, the annual Decolonial Summer School in Middelburg for the last decade has always included post-socialist thinkers and artists such as Ovidiu Tichendeleanu, Manuela Boatça, Tanja Ostojić and myself.
- 6 Colonial matrix of power (coloniality of power) is a central decolonial concept meaning a naturalised world order that emerged with the colonisation of the Americas and was subsequently extended to the rest of the world through four interrelated spheres of social organisation: economic control, control of authority, control of gender and sexuality, and control of knowledge and subjectivity. See M. Tlostanova and W. D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*, op. cit., p.44–45.
- 7 See Adolfo Albán Achinte, 'Artistas Indígenas y Afrocolombianos: Entre las Memorias y las Cosmovisiones. Estéticas de la Re-Existencia', *Arte y Estética en la Encrucijada Decolonial* (Zulma Palermo), Buenos Aires: Del Siglo, 2009, pp.83–112.
- 8 See M. Tlostanova, 'La aestheSis trans-moderna en la zona fronteriza eurasiática y el anti-sublime decolonial', *Estéticas y Opcion Decolonial*, op. cit., pp.49–89.
- 9 The postcolonial is meant here as an objective condition, the geopolitical and geo-historical situation of those who were born and raised in ex-colonial societies. The decolonial is different as it is an option, a choice of how to interpret reality and act upon it. See M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art*, op. cit., p.19.
- 10 Email from the artist, 5 November 2010.
- 11 Samira Satieva, 'Saule Suleimenova vossozdayet nepafosnyu istoriju Kazakhstana iz nepafosnykh materialov' (Saule Suleimenova creates a non-pretentious history of Kazakhstan out of non-pretentious materials), *Express K*, 4 February 2019, available at https://express-k.kz/news/ekspozitsiya/saule_suleymenova_vossozdaet_nepafosnyu_istoriyu_kazakhstana_iz_nepafosnykh_materialov-136143?fbclid=IwAR07pY5VISCCn415aHf20-2SoxhUZPESQNYqewIbwV0IIOyJOvEg0T5sviA (last accessed on 25 January 2019).
- 12 According to independent historians at least 1.5 million Kazakhs died due to the famine in the early 1930s as a result of Stalin's collectivisation policy. See also Robert Kindler, *Stalin's Nomads. Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2018.
- 13 See M. Tlostanova, 'A museum between heaven and earth', in Vladislav Shapovalov (ed.), *Taus Makhacheva. Tightrope*, Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2017, pp.75–96.
- 14 In 1944–57 Chechens, similar to several other ethnicities residing in the North Caucasus, were forcefully deported by the Soviet authorities from their native lands to Central Asia (many of them to Kazakhstan). Gaisumov's works often make a connection between the deportations of the Stalin's époque and the post-Soviet Chechen campaigns that plunged the people once again into death, homelessness, exile and humiliation. The negative refugee experience is what at least three generations of Chechens share.
- 15 See Rolando Vázquez, 'Decolonial AestheSis Overcoming the Post/Human', *The Human Condition: International Interdisciplinary Project*, National Center for Contemporary Art, Moscow, 27 November 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKEzFauzn0g> (last accessed on 20 December 2016).
- 16 Aslan Gaisumov, *Keicheyuhea*, HD video, colour, sound, Chechen with English subtitles, 26h, 2017.
- 17 Anton Nikolayev, 'The Chronicles of Virtual Revolt. Artivism and Actionism', *Bombila*. [blog], 6 June 2011, available at <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/510998.html> (last accessed on 16 December 2016).