

GAZELLI ART HOUSE



© Farhad Khalilov, From the series 'The Meeting', 2019

Farah Piriye on 'The New Verge' Ashraf Murad & Farhad Khalilov

Private View: Thursday February 27th, 6–8pm
Exhibition: February 28th–April 4th, 2020
Artist Talk: March 2nd, 2020

"Being has no need whatever of nothingness in order to be conceived of, whereas nothingness, since it is a negation of being, needs being before it can posit itself as its negation." Vincent Descombes on Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"

"Everything perishes in the brilliant varnish of refined lines and colours. We uncover new chapters in art in anarchy's new dawns." Kazimir Malevich, "To The New Limit"

Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones once described Francis Bacon as "the divine Devil of Modern British art, a demon of dark ecstasy," referring to the latter's "perverse" colours as something that could be drunk like "blood or wine". When looking at the exceptionally sensual work of Azeri non-conformist artist, Ashraf Murad, where hot iron reds readily absorb his characters that are visually dissolving into the dark nothingness of the background just before the beholder, I am reminded of Jones' words, as well as of the first part of Dante's "Divine Comedy"—"The Inferno".

Firstly, Murad's work is rife with caustic satire, excoriating the Soviet regime and its suffocating totalitarian doctrine—the slavedriver mentality of the state officials and the claustrophobic destiny of the nation. Art historian Gregory Anisimov compares Murad's spirituality to that of Kazimir Malevich, stating that the artist must have come across Malevich's work as a student in the storerooms of Leningrad. He describes his characters as Gogolesque for their "exclusive suddenness". Indeed Gogol's tradition of mysteriously and unexpectedly appearing heroes, as well as

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his diabolic moods and use of irony, hearken back to the short narratives Ashraf creates in his work, communicating “laconically”.

Secondly, there is a sanctity in Murad’s work—often beyond our understanding. It is as if he perceived some truth about humanity—a code that will only be deciphered hundreds of years from now. Primal power and innocent moralism interplay throughout his work, which is full of grief, anxiety, and a deep love for mankind. An existentialist, he lived through the Second World War and later, traumatic life events in the early 1960s. His protagonists, however, are not screaming in existential agony; his existentialism is akin to Sartre’s—it is presented as humanism, and can be interpreted via aesthetic, ethical, and religious dimensions of the human experience. Murad’s portrayals are visceral and unsparing, with utter absence of facial expressions and a crossing out of the eyes that perhaps reveal the artist’s own renunciation.

Referring to his work as ‘timeless and transcendental’ art critic Gulrena Qajar says: “Ashraf Murad is one of the most iconic, most mysterious, almost surreal figures of Azerbaijani art of the second half of the 20th century. Little was spoken about the artist; he was hardly written about; his works were rarely exhibited.” Unknown to many of his compatriots during his lifetime and after his untimely passing in 1979, today this long-neglected artist is considered to be one of the key figures of the so-called Absher-on School of Colourists, probably creating the most influential body of work in post-war Azerbaijan. Ashraf’s artistic identity was shaped by the luminosity and magnetism of his early hero, Rembrandt, and his own work was not always devoid of light. After being viciously beaten by police, on a night out with friends, Murad’s style changed drastically, almost mysteriously opening up a new dimension, an utterly novel edge, from the radiant palette found in his Socialist Realism paintings, to the profound darks manifested in his grotesque work. “This artist is not well mentally, and his work does not fit into the framework of social ideology”, said Soviet state officials, who would deny having approved Murad’s exhibitions.

Perhaps, like in Ingmar Bergman’s “The Seventh Seal”, Ashraf was faced with a curious bargain with death itself; a bargain that would only terminate if he managed to fulfil it. Curious, hot-tempered, persistent, ingenious, kind, Murad, an astute observer, created a highly autobiographical, yet selfless and confident body of work—an immortal comedy, a daydream parable, a ballad illustrating the absurdity of the realm he inhabited. Overcoming madness and death itself by tuning into his creative genius, his work, inhabiting a dreamy reality filled with irony and pitfalls, is the artist’s journey to discovering his authentic self. Indeed, like one artist recently told me: “all the best stories are made up with a pinch of reality”.

The title of the current exhibition is inspired by Kazimir Malevich’s “To The New Limit” (literally “On-to the New Verge”), where the ‘father of Suprematism’ speaks to the essence of freedom in art. “And our spirit like a free wind will make our creative work flutter in the broad spaces of the soul.”,

[Malevich “To The New Limit”, originally published as “K novoi grani,” Anarkhiia 31 (1918)] (p220-1)

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declares Malevich. Azeri abstract artist Farhad Khalilov, who was also known as Absheronchu continuing the 'anti-Soviet' ideology of Absheron School of artists, professes his deep admiration for Malevich and discusses the Suprematist's influence on his own work. Undoubtedly, the philosophy of the latter's powerful statement reminds of Khalilov's bold and mesmerising pieces, like a free wind indeed, generously applying and moving jagged patches of colour liberally and expansively around the vast surface of his canvas, portraying the borderless nature of his very soul.

Khalilov's work is a testimony to freedom and harmony of dichotomies, with the contrast between immenseness and laconic expression prevailing in his work. The never-ending road captured in his paintings is almost hypnotising in its infinity. His canvases withhold a destination, speaking only to the journey itself. At the same time, the artist's work is highly detailed and fragmented, much like Ashraf Murad's. Khalilov talks me through his female series, as I stand in his studio in Nardaran, located on Absheron peninsula in Azerbaijan, trying to identify a hint of a figure: "Could you capture a whole vastness of sky in a painting? You won't be able to fit it in. Same here, you cannot fit the figure of a woman onto a canvas, no matter how big it is." As art historian Alexandr Kamenski observes: Khalilov paints with "conciseness, brevity, aphorism—in a manner close to that of national Azerbaijani poetry since the medieval times". A free poet, as his contemporaries refer to him, Khalilov refuses any narrative, and yet, each one of his pieces feels, at times, like an epic odyssey or a sensual love poem.

When painting his early landscapes and portraits in the 1960s, abstraction would visit him out of nowhere, like a flashback or a dream. He tells me he would capture it and leave it aside, returning to figuration. With time, Khalilov abandoned all suggestion of figuration, instead exploiting the expressive power of colour by deploying it in large fields that might envelop the viewer when seen at close quarters. Balancing large portions of colours and shapes, his work consists of verges, where the sun meets the sea, where horizons line up, where layers of earth change form and texture. Khalilov creates a "layering phenomenon", as curator and critic Vitaly Potyukov puts it, "a 'textual' dramaturgy". He moved on to "a newly found freedom that infuses his work with a striking force and sensitivity", curator Paolo Colombo, who I accompanied to Khalilov's studio back in 2014, writes about the artist, further describing his Rothkoesque abstraction as "reflections of an expansive inner life". Khalilov's work is infused with spontaneity, improvisation, and free-wheeling gestures, the "eccentric and syncopated rhythms" of jazz, as Colombo puts it. "One can easily visualise the dissonances and melodic twists of Thelonious Monk's music in his bold brushstrokes." Growing increasingly protective of his paintings, Khalilov does not consider himself a colour field painter, although his approach matches up with the critics' understanding of style. Rather, the artist creates his own very utopian realism, just like Ashraf Murad.

'The New Verge is a meeting point of two creative geniuses, born on the same day. Harmony of contrasts can be viewed not only in Khalilov's work but in his canvases vis-à-vis those of Murad, a master who has deeply inspired his work. "The most precious Azerbaijani artist of the 20th century, Ashraf Murad was born free, as a gift from nature", says Farhad Khalilov. These two outstanding Azeri artists, members of two closely related artistic movements, are kindred spirits; one mirrors the other in power, depth, and relationship to the canvas itself. United by a political epoch, these artists managed to remain, freethinkers, maintaining their individuality and internal independence, despite the framework of Soviet ideology. This is a juxtaposition of two brilliant artist-philosophers, both distinguished by a sophisticated sensuality and grace, subtly portraying the anguish, restraint, and wisdom of generations. Both artists struggle for freedom in their own powerful and spiritual way, captivating spectators

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with the depth of their talent and an endless thirst for life; inviting the beholder to plunge into the space of their canvases. Art historian Roger Cook, muses about abstraction, in an essay dedicated to the work of Khalilov, interestingly pointing out Ad Reinhardt's 1940s satirical cartoon saying: "An abstract painting will react to you if you react to it. You get from it what you bring to it. It will meet you halfway but no further. It is alive if you are. It represents something, and so do you. You sir, are a space too." When I look at Khalilov's spiritual realism, that is precisely what occurs—it talks back to me. Looking at his work, I see the endless road to Nardaran, to his studio; I hear the sounds of the car engine, as I lean back in the warm passenger's seat, and gaze out of the window as trees, fields, and clouds flicker past one another. The Absheron landscape feels infinite—switching out like film slides. Eventually, though, the very horizon fills with fields, smoothly flowing into the sapphire of the sky; everything loses figuration, becoming one layer of colour expanse. Much like life itself, which like the view from a car, passes by so quickly...

Notes to Editors

Ashraf Murad (1925-1979). Graduated from Azim Azimzadeh College of Art in Baku and later in 1948 from Repin Leningrad Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.

Farhad Khalilov was born in 1946 in Baku. In 1961-66 he studied at the Azim Azimzadeh College of Art, then continued his education in Moscow at the Stroga-nov School and in 1969-75 at the Moscow Polygraphic Institute. He lives and works in Azerbaijan.

Farah Piriye - London and Milan based curator, co-founder of research led socio-cultural platform Zeitgeist19, focusing on art and sustainability. Graduated from Sotheby's Institute of Art (2011) and UAL: Central Saint Martin's (2017), in art history and curating.

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