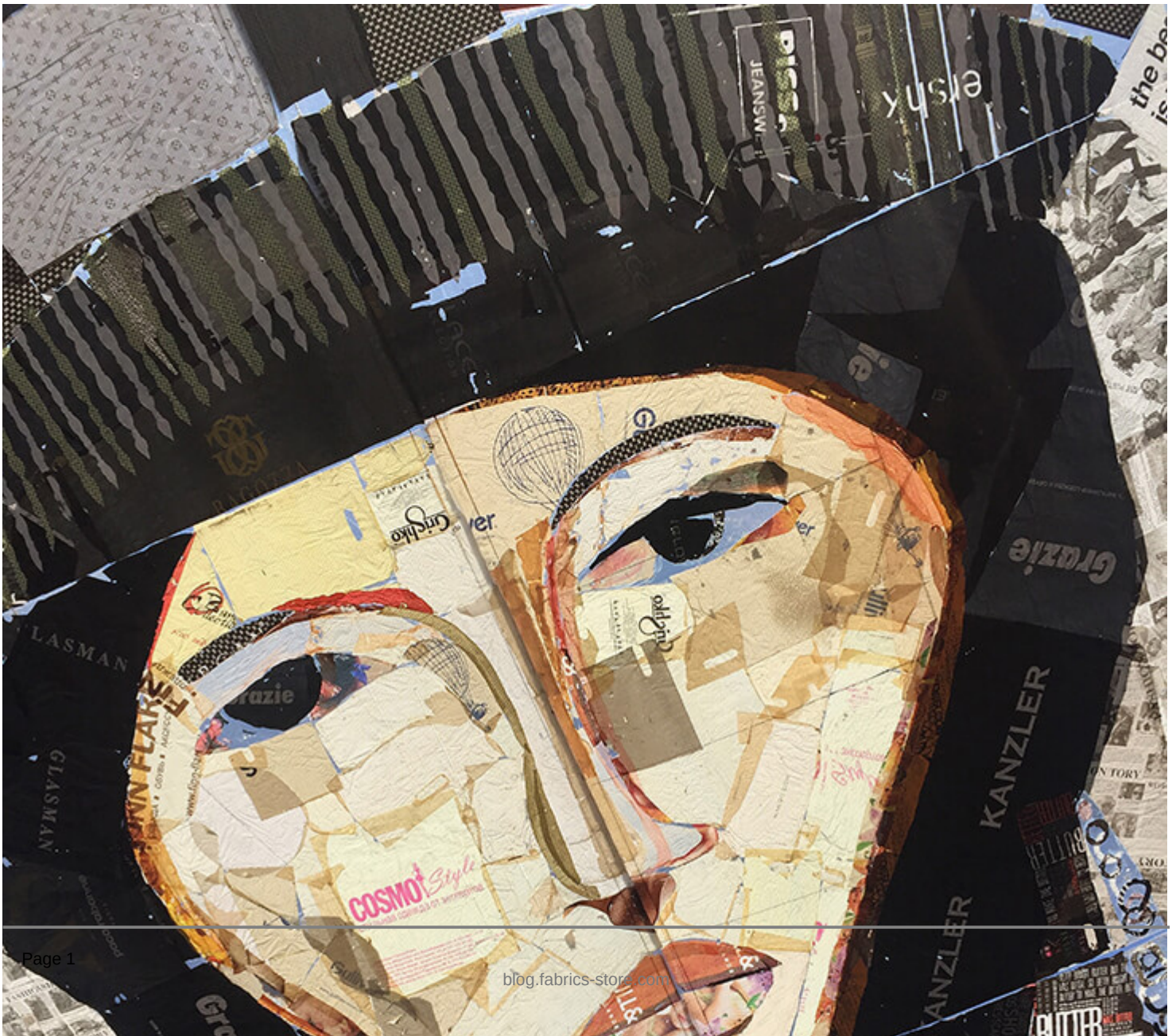


Yurts, Blankets And Plastic Bridal Gowns: The Craft Tradition And Contemporary Kazakh Art

Description



Saule Suleimenova, Kelin (Bride), 2015, plastic bags on polycarbonate

In this series, Iâ??ll look at art works featuring fabric by three very different women from Kazakhstan.

Iâ??d like to find out why Almagul Menlibayeva created epic videos and photographs of women swathed (or strangled?) by traditional fabrics in front of historical monuments. Iâ??ll discover how Gulnur Mukazhanova reapplies felting techniques to create haunting face masks, and uses floating polyester silks to expose facelessness and falsity of modern society. Iâ??ll also examine what Saule Suleimenova wants to say in using old plastic bags to depict a bride in traditional dress.

Kazakhstan is a Central Asian country sandwiched between Russia and China. In its recent past there were gulags, nuclear tests, and the Aral Sea. In the present, it has a space rocket launch site, oil and gas. Itâ??s also a country with vast and vastly different landscapes: from mountain peaks to barren steppes, pine forests and flamingo lakes.



Gulnur Mukazhanova, Transformation of traditional values during Globalization,
#3, 2013-2016, cheepwool felted masks, handmade and glued together

Kazakhstanâ??s traditional crafts are similarly rich and diverse â?? needlework, carpets, woodwork, silversmithing â?? and its contemporary art scene is both vibrant and socially active.

When I co-curated an exhibition of Kazakh art in London in 2018, someone remarked that we did a good job including so many women artists. This surprised me. We were not trying specifically to include women; it just happens that among the brilliant contemporary artists in Kazakhstan, many are female. Indeed, except for major collectors, the rest of the Kazakh art world â?? curators, gallerists, critics â?? is predominantly female. But the remark made me realise that this is in stark contrast to even the most feminist of Western societies.



Almagul Menlibayeva, video still 1 Butterflies of Aisha Bibi, 2010, HD video, Sound OMFO,
single channel, 10 min, Production Kazakhstan, Courtesy American-Eurasian Art Advisors
LLC, Almagul Menlibayeva Â©

Could there be a link between the history of craft and the presence of women in Kazakhstanâ??s art world? Traditional crafts involving fabric â?? from clothing to carpets, to blanket making â?? were all in the female domain. While most of these items served a utilitarian purpose, a large number were also (or only) decorative.

Being principally nomadic, Kazakhs used mobile houses known as *yurts*. Although plain on the outside, these were richly and colourfully decorated inside with fabrics including cotton, silk, and (mostly) wool in the form of felt. Women designed these yurt interiors: they made choices on what fabric to use, which colours to combine, and most importantly the pattern.



Kazakh Yurt

I remember my grandmother telling me she had devised a special pattern for a blanket sheâ??d made for me. I must admit, I wasnâ??t interested in the detail back then, but clearly it stuck in my mind. I was a child of the city, born in the late Soviet period, the 1980s, when sovietisation was gradually replaced with westernisation. We were interested in jeans and sneakers. Only on leaving Kazakhstan did I become intrigued by its cultural heritage.

Is it possible that this association of women and crafts meant that when the Soviet Union fell apart, some women decided to revive traditional techniques, while others discovered contemporary art and its methods, which allowed them to channel their inner experiences as well as their social and political views?

Was it also this association that meant that, in Kazakh society, women artists were not perceived as unusual? And men were not perceived as having a special gift? I think so, and look forward to exploring this more with you.

CATEGORY

1. WOMEN IN ART

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