

Why Are Plastic Brides Always Alone?

Description



In 2014, Kazakh artist Saule Suleimenova took a trip out of Almaty and realised that the steppes â?? which one imagines wild and unspoiled â?? were covered in plastic bags.

She immediately abandoned all her materials and produced her first plastic â??paintingâ??, a beautiful bouquet of flowers made entirely out of discarded shopping bags glued to a flat polycarbonate surface.

Saule originally studied architectural design and her earliest works incorporated a variety of media â?? prints, drawings on newspaper, paintings on photographs and performances, to name a few.



Saule Suleimenova, Kelin, plastic bags on polycarbonate, 2015

Among the many subjects that she has now rendered in plastic are street workers in their bright gilets, refugees escaping famine, stunning steppe landscapes, chaotic queues in municipal buildings, riot police and protesters.

But there is one theme Saule comes back to again and again: an image of a woman in a traditional Kazakh bridal dress, inspired by a nineteenth-century photograph. She first reinterpreted it as a painting on a photograph, then it grew into her largest work in plastic â?? originally hanging above a pedestrian street like a canopy.

â??The bride is all women â?? my mother, grandmother, my daughters. It is also my own identity â?? the feminine inside me,â?• explains Saule.



Saule Suleimenova

For a woman, marriage rites were (and are) three in one. A transformation from one status to another, but also the death of her pre-married self and the birth of a married self. For this moment in her life, a womanâ??s clothes and jewellery were (and are) extremely significant, not only as symbols of status, but as amulets of protection.

Traditionally, a Kazakh bride or *kelin* (â??the one who comesâ??) would have to move far away from her parentsâ?? home after marriage due to strict laws that prohibit marrying even distant relatives. She, therefore, became part of her husbandâ??s family, subservient to him and his older relatives, with no access to her own.

While today much has changed and not everyone shares their home with their in-laws, the *kelinâ??s* position in Kazakh society stubbornly remains: she is expected to be wife and daughter-in-law first, everything else second.

â??I donâ??t like to invent images â?? I reference existing photographs,â?• says Saule. She studies the faces, clothes and jewellery in the photos, and learns what they signify. Then she inserts hints of contemporary society â?? brand names, advertising, suggestive words like â??touchâ?? or â??womanâ?? â?? which come directly from the plastic bags in her collection, found on streets, and given to her by others.



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Saule Suleimenova,
Life in a Basement (Mariupol), 2022, Plastic bags on recycled polyethylene.

These printed messages underline the universal significance of Sauleâ??s work. Has the world really changed? Are women, and men, genuinely free? In the past women were products of familial exchanges, now we are all products of a consumerist society.

â??Plastic bags have been an integral part of human life, they are the remnants of human activity on earth, they represent humanity,â?• Saule adds. Is that why her brides never seem to have grooms? The *kelin* is all people, not just all women â?? her stern face and traditional attire made of plastic â??remnantsâ?? that will haunt us for hundreds of years to come.

CATEGORY

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