

# KAZAKH ARTISTS WOO THE WORLD

FROM Ms MAS TO MISH-MASH, FOREIGN STARS FLOCK TO A SMART CITY

BY SIMON HEWITT

**EUROPE ENDS HERE.** The Tian-Shan mountains loom on the horizon. Kyrgyzstan lies beyond. China is less than 200 miles away.

**Almaty.** South-east Kazakhstan. The country's largest city (1.4 million) and former capital (1929-97). Built to a grid-pattern with sloping, leafy avenues. Lined not with apple-trees, after which the city (ex-Alma-Ata) is named, but mainly oaks.



Almost everywhere – the exception is Abay Square, which looks like a miniature Tianmen – Almaty feels Russian not Asian, sprinkled with Tsarist wooden architecture and Constructivist buildings and awash with Stalinist Neo-Classicism, led by the magnificent Opera house (left), opened in 1941 and sumptuously restored in 2002.



Less appealingly, a barrage of concrete post-war apartment blocks also hark back to the USSR. Yet they are offset by a feast of elegant yet dramatic buildings – the Circus (left), Green Bazaar, crown-topped Hotel Kazakhstan, former Lenin Palace – that smash the drab image of the Soviet Seventies.

Urban sculpture, though, has been going downhill since Piotr Usachiev's Socialist Realist heyday nearly sixty years ago.



Enhancing Almaty's streets and squares is one of the leading tasks assigned to **ArtBatFest**: the city's vibrant annual festival of contemporary art.

## SMART CITY



ArtBatFest – a self-styled ‘marathon’ of outdoor and indoor exhibitions – was founded in 2010 by **Igor Sludsky**. Although it is now run by the Eurasian Cultural Alliance, Sludsky continues as boss – a labour of love he fulfils alongside his principal job as Director of the TaDia advertising agency. He was seconded for ArtBatFest

2014 (August 28-September 29) by local-born curator **Christina Steinbrecher** (right), best known as Artistic Director of the ViennaFair (whose Russian owner Dmitry Axenov heads RDI, an ArtBatFest ‘Strategic Partner’).



The event’s focal event is an array of Public Art displayed in an elongated rectangle, 1½ miles long and 500 yards wide, extending from Republic Square down to Ulitsa Zhibek Zholy, the city’s only pedestrian street (nicknamed Arbat after its famous Moscow counterpart) – located a couple of blocks from Trotsky’s home on Ulitsa Gogol during his Almaty exile of 1927.

The amateurish official map suggests starting your tour on Arbat. The initial ArtBatFest, back in 2010, was confined to this street, and old habits die hard: the idea of beginning at the bottom and working up – Almaty is built on hills – is daft. On the plus side, it incites art-lovers to set off from city’s best contemporary gallery: **Tengri-Umai**.



Since 2007 the gallery has been housed in the bowels of The Monster: a 20-storey twin skyscraper-block that squashes Almaty Arbat underfoot. For this year’s ArtBatFest, Tengri-Umai (founded 1992) hosted an exhibition that would have graced any European capital, entitled 777 and featuring works in various media by the five-man **Kyzyl Tractor** group of local artists.



Focal-point was **Vitaly Simalov’s** *Composition 777*: a simple, poignant array of spiralling wire and faceless dolls, evoking the 298 victims of the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777-200, shot down over Eastern Ukraine in July.





The other four members of Kyzyl Tractor were present both in the gallery and on the city streets, and all keen to show their mastery of different media.

**Abil-Said Atabekov** patrolled the gallery with photo-collages daubed with clay. One showed Astana's iconic Bayterek Tower blasting off like a rocket; others involved tanks, helicopters and crowds of horsemen. His exterior work was contrastingly serene: a giant, poppy-patterned *Rubic Cube*.



**Arystanbek Shalbayev** specializes in stylized portraits. His Genghis Khan doubled as a cosmonaut, backed by planes and the night sky. His sculpted *New Hero*, on the pavement beneath City Hall, was half oil-drum.

**Syrylbek Bekbotayev** had built a giant wooden *Cradle* filled with TV sets and computer monitors – humorously pointing out the perils of modern infancy. His gallery photos featured solemn children aged beyond their years.



**Smail Bayaliev's** abstract canvases could have hung alone, yet were flanked in the gallery by a kettle and Kazakh robe. His colossal, severed head, close to Bekbotayev's *Cradle*, had an electric fan inside its deformed, circular mouth – meant to churn air

around and make the head billow into different shapes, like a *Cloud* (its title).

But the fan wasn't working. Someone had sawn through the wiring.



The outdoor perils for electric-powered artworks were illustrated even more starkly 200 yards away, where a chipboard hut contained a work by Azeri artist **Rashad Alakbarov** – present at the 2013 Venice Biennale and this year's Moscow Young Biennale. A small window in one side of the hut was meant to allow a glimpse of his latest metal-sculptured shadow installation (right)... but the power was off. Visitors were left gawping into a black hole.



Two other Public Artworks depended not on electricity but the weather. On the wind, to be precise. Unfortunately – if you are an Installation rather than a Person, that is – Almaty Septembers are warm, sunny, and still.



For a project entitled *U.N. Camouflage*, France's **Société Réaliste** had peppered the plaza around the glass cupola of Almaty Shopping Mall (of which more below) with dozens of flags. These had individual abstract patterns based on the colours of national flags, altered beyond recognition while retaining the same proportion of each colour (guessing which flag derived from which country was meant to be part of the fun). On a typically balmy Almaty September Saturday, the flags were hanging

limply and inartistically, like tea-towels just out of the spin-drier.

I was enthralled by the *Wind Faces* installation by Russian group **Mish-Mash** at a Manifesta satellite show in St Petersburg in August: three linen sheets with artful slits for mouth and eyes, suspended indoors and powered by a small army of (reliable) electric fans, which ensured their facial expressions changed constantly. There were four such faces in Almaty – picturesquely hung over a gently sloping artificial waterfall – but their expressions were locked in an airless, sinister grin.



All told, ten of the 17 works in the Public Art programme were by foreign artists. They varied from the banal (**Pierre Laurent's** *Ersatz* array of poles and the **Adams & Khan** *Crossroads* involving a metal cube and children's slide) to the elegiac.

Two installations – *Field 01* by German artist **Evol** and *Communication Youth Square* by the self-styled Dutch 'Garbage Architects' **ReFunc** – were displayed next to each other on scrubby parkland which, until 2011, hosted the city's lost and lamented *Косые Дома*





(Constructivist houses built in the early 1930s for officials relocating to Alma-Ata after it had replaced Kyzyl-Orda as Kazakh capital).

**Pavel Kiselev's** *Wall* and **Sickboy's** graffiti mural made a more colourful impact – even if it looked as if Mr Sickboy had run out of ladders (or funds) halfway up the Samal district building he had been asked to beautify. No doubt he hopes to be invited back next year to continue onwards and upwards.



Equally striking, surging from the shady lawn of a city centre park, was **Saule Suleimenova's** *Cellophane Painting*. When not staking her claim as Kazakhstan's first *Nouvelle Réaliste*, Saule is an accomplished brushwoman – whose work I first admired at the *East of Nowhere* exhibition in Turin in 2009. She is also a fine cook, so I was doubly delighted to visit her Almaty apartment/studio and sample her *plov* before inspecting her latest pictures.



Her husband **Kuanysh Bazargaliev**, another gifted artist, is prone to witty pastiche. Henry VIII, Malevich and Basquiat – now *there's* a supergroup – have all turned Kazakh under his brush.



## LOVE UNDERGROUND

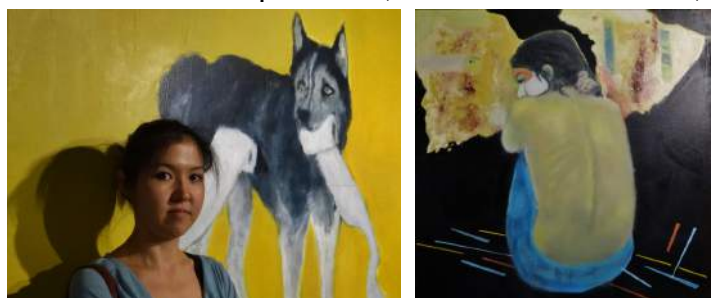
Theirs is an artistic family, with 21 year-old daughter Suinbike one of the most exuberant figures on the Almaty art scene – and one of 16 young Kazakh artists showcased in an exhilarating exhibition assembled by local-born, Paris-based curator **Dina Baitissova** (right) in the Almaty Shopping Mall's underground car-park.



This was meaninglessly entitled *On Love and Other Teachers* but hit a number of high notes, starting with **Kamilla Gabdullina** (below), who is 28 but looks younger and has also lived for many years in Paris.

The need for Kazakh artists (and curators) to seek exile to further their careers is a familiar story in countries of the ex-USSR and former Eastern Bloc. They move to gain exposure to the international art scene, but their talent and output often subsequently outpace domestic demand: unless they land a contract with a foreign gallery, their professional outlook is murky.

There is plenty of wealth in Kazakhstan – home to a reported 12,000 millionaires – and, unlike that of neighbouring Russia, the economy appears stable and prosperous. But, as in Russia, most oligarchs with a yen for art prefer to invest in established international names rather than emerging domestic talent.





Gabdullina has sensational potential and any gallery worth its salt should snap her up tomorrow. In the car-park she was represented by two paintings and eight watercolours. One painting showed a *Husky* holding a toilet-roll on a mustard-yellow ground. The other, *Spine*, showed a girl's back against a black ground, peopled at top by what resembled two large scraps of paper with abstract patterning and, at bottom, by multi-coloured chopsticks arrayed at odd Suprematist angles. Both works were hesitant, exploratory and startling.



Gabdullina's originality was even more evident in eight watercolours hung in two rows of four on a wall which curator Baitissova had opted to paint mud-brown. The watercolours were collectively entitled *Nails*, and painted in autumnal tints with nail-outline abstract patterns – although one looked like a tank, and another like an angry hedgehog. They were painted on cheap Kazakh paper, which has rippled, which is a shame. Miss Gabdullina deserves the finest parchment money can buy.



Hanging two-dimensional works in a huge, concrete-walled venue best suited to spacious installations is no easy task – but one Baitissova did not shirk, helped by a skilled choice of artists. The lyrical abstractions of **Anya Sand**, whose technique blends elements of Zao Wou Ki and Gerhard Richter, would have wall-power in any setting. So would **Alexandra Ali's** stylized mountainscapes, created with deft, vigorous strokes of black in the manner of Chinese ink drawings. Yet these were all-but concealed by a preposterous forest of white neon tubes dangling from the roof, entangled with unruly wires. Ms Ali could be a great painter, or possibly a Kazakh Dan Flavin, but probably not both.

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Another female artist, **Asel Kadyrkhanova**, also strives to straddle genres, and was generously granted three separate units at the far end of the car-park to do so. Her series of river paintings, *Journey by the Water*, were hung against a thoughtful yellow ground but were neither big nor good enough to dominate the space. Her Comet installation opposite, consisting mainly of a black sheet, was incomprehensible but her *Greenfields of Memory*, with its tilted red ladders and basketfuls of

red paper messages, was intriguing: a worthy follow-up to her *Machine* installation (featuring a Soviet typewriter, blank arrest-warrants and yards of blood-red thread) created for the *Territory of Remembrance* exhibition held in Almaty in 2013 to honour victims of Stalinist terror. Asel's grandfather was one of them. He spent 15 years in a labour camp.

Two other works made a valiant effort to tame the space. **Sholpan Sharbakova's** abstract paintings on folded tarpaulin, *Windows – Liberated Canvas*, were suspended from wooden beams like coat-hangers or ox's yokes. Sinister shadows, created by sharp spotlighting, enhanced their drama.



*Graffiti Room*, by three-man street-artist group **Repas**, made a jolly job of turning several parking-bays into a spray-paint living-room. Team-member Dmitry, known to Repas fans as **DMN**, showed his dexterity on paper as well by drafting me this pencilled Art Nouveau beauty with day-glo eyes and lips.



The ubiquitous **Syrlybek Bekbotayev**, already encountered at street and gallery level, resurfaced here with an underground mountain pass – 250 domed felt hats, dangling on wires suspended from the roof to form a work called *Kyrgyz Pass*. It premiered last year in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. The effect 120 miles away here in Almaty, above a sloping incline with kerb lines and arrow sign, was superb.





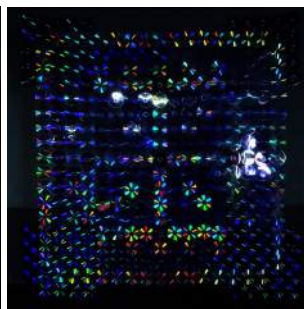


**Aygerim Zhumagalieva** also exploited the car-park setting with a fun parade of road-signs where prehistoric Kazakh drawings had replaced latterday pictograms. An anonymous array of 20 coloured, determinedly static mannequins



were amusingly strung up nearby next to a *Man Crossing* road-sign like plastic carcasses.

**Alexey Shindin** caught the eye less for his clichéd assemblage of CDs than for two woollen rugs which looked traditionally Kazakh but, on closer inspection, revealed the presence of modern-day artefacts, including two pairs of jeans. The defiantly foursquare presentation of all three works suggests Shindin intends to make an impact.



**Suinbike Suleimenova** (*below left*) was represented by a grainy video of an old man and teenage girl waltzing beneath a cursory fairy-lights installation to the strains of Billie Holiday. Poor sound and lighting conditions undermined its wistful effect. Another Suinbike installation, *1-2-3*, conceived with



**Ainur Kozhabayeva**, beckoned participants to enter a fairground booth fronted by garish neon signs, in order to 'exist within a new and uncertain space.' Inside they found darkness, a chair and an ungraspable metaphysical message.



The shiny tin foil untidily scattered across the floor of **Ada Yu's** *Elysium* recalled Alexander Brodsky's installation at the 2013 Moscow Biennale, involving acres of neatly crumpled (matt) foil surrounding a wooden hut. Yu's mirror-backed, curtain-framed phantasmagoria held greater excitement. That excitement reached fever-pitch during an opening-night performance when nine nubile dancers enacted Beethoven's *Ode To Joy*.

## MAS CULTURE



ArtBatFest further boosted its cosmopolitan credentials with a major exhibition devoted to **Oksana Mas** at the Kasteyev State Art Museum, organized by Mariana & Madina Gogova of ARTWIN Gallery – whose new Moscow space is set to open later this year.

Mas was born in Illichivsk on the Black Sea, 12 miles west of Odessa (where she studied art and philosophy), but ‘lives and works’ in Barcelona, Moscow, Paris, Stockholm and New York, as well as her native Ukraine. With her mop of curly hair she looks like a feminine version of Sir Simon Rattle. She shares his charisma and is conducting her career with equal panache – an international celebrity at just 35.



Her show was held in two spacious halls of the Museum, each with gleaming parquet floors and walls painted an effective grey for the occasion. The 25 works (mostly from 2014) were divided between square monochrome pictures featuring buildings and human figures, and colourful canvases embellished with a central mandala. The second hall also contained three low plinths bearing car engines, sardonically entitled *Heart Transplants*, encased in leather and embellished with 24-carat gold plating.

Mas is famous for her *de luxe* craftsmanship and, in 2010/11, caused a sensation with her giant compositions made from meticulously assembled painted eggs – displayed in Saint





Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev, then at the Venice Biennale. She has since used painted eggs on a smaller, commercial scale, notably to turn car wheels into miniature flower gardens.

The glitz and glamour is tempered by spirituality. Mas feels that 'a new era in art is about to appear. We will move away from superficial art. Hopefully the current financial crisis will help people understand that spiritual values are more important than material ones.'

Underpinning her Almaty show, entitled *Culture Code*, was her belief that 'a single cultural code once united human beings' – and will do so again.



Two series of square lacquer panels (four red, four white) were adorned with black plastic elements symbolizing the buildings of ideal *Spiritus Cities* of the future, 'where all cultures and religions are united.' The cities are viewed from the sky, as if by a spacecraft or satellite.

This echo of ArtBatFest's *Smart City* theme was explored further in three square, gold-ground canvases peopled with silhouetted, pictogram-like figures engaging in various activities (skiing, cycling, sunbathing). There was no indication of location or ethnic background: such figures (first used by Mas in her *People* project of 2008) bear a simple yet powerful message. 'Whatever we do and wherever are,' she explains, 'we are all linked to one another.'

The figures also appeared on the translucent plastic curtains Mas designed partly as an exhibition backcloth, partly to filter the bright light pouring in through the Museum's vast windows. She first explored painting on film for a 2008 show at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, when her figures were large and colourful. Here – in a restrained palette of red, blue and black – they echoed the pictograms in her square



paintings (as well as bringing to mind the street signs and mannequins in the ArtBatFest car-park exhibition). The curtains also accelerated the theatrical mood established in the Museum entry hall, which was transformed into a giant stage by a huge *Oksana Mas* exhibition poster spanning the staircase landing (see above).



The artist's cosmic message assumed a more stylized form in the exhibition's other pictures, taken from half-a-dozen different series of works collectively known as *Mandala Dens East*.



Most had gold-leaf grounds, which Mas uses on a scale pioneered by Russian artist Alexei Belayev-Gintovt. But, whereas Gintovt's works are often swamped in large, stencil-like figures that are macho in scale and totalitarian in mood, Mas explores gold's mystical qualities in a manner more akin to Gustav Klimt – as a setting for decoratively intricate mandalas inspired by the Buddhist symbol of the universe, and formed by circular stickers with her own abstract patterns (leaves, snowflakes, Gaelic or Da Vinci knots) or tiny *People* pictograms.

Two large, rectangular works from her *Solemnity* series – one with a gold ground, one silver – stood out. Instead of a mandala, they had a central shaft with stickers shooting off to either side like excited molecules; and they were displayed next to each other at different heights... no doubt for added dynamism, but creating an effect disconcertingly at odds with the symmetrical approach to hanging elsewhere.



The overall display, however, was sophisticated, meticulously planned and coherently arranged by theme, size and colour. The trilingual captions (Russian/English/Kazakh) on square black card, also containing miniature images of the work they referred to, were (despite lacking dimensions) informative and elegant. The exhibition was set off superbly by the site-specific curtains, and segued effortlessly into the Museum's adjacent Old Master galleries.



Eyebrows were, however, raised by the presence of Fabergé jewellery in one corner. I was less perturbed by the inclusion of (luxuriously creative) jewellery in a fine art exhibition than by finding display-cabinets positioned directly in front of, and partly obscuring, a Mas masterpiece (*Mars Eclipse*).

Purists may scoff about commercial opportunism; others will see here a marriage of beauty and commonsense that spells the art market of tomorrow (if not today). After all, the modern Fabergé company is advised by Tatiana & Sarah Fabergé, great-granddaughters of the legendary Karl.



For Oksana Mas, arguably the greatest artistic exponent of the egg since Fabergé's imperial heyday, the mandala wheel has turned full circle.



## HONI SOIT QUI MALL Y PENSE

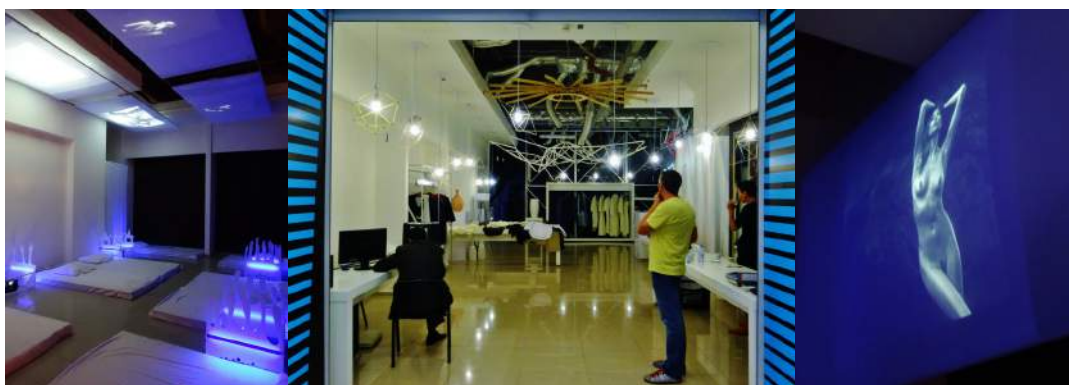
The dividing line between Art and HighStreet Commerce is increasingly hazy. Among the best places in Almaty to see contemporary art: Shopping Malls. The **Dostyk Plaza** opened this year with quirky artworks inside and out – including balloon sculptures and a snow leopard made from dried flowers. The Plaza's chief current attraction is a spectacular, multi-screen video show called *Van Gogh Alive*, created by Australian company Grande Exhibitions in 2007. This 40-projector extravaganza, charting the career of the firebrand Dutchman, has been granted asylum in Almaty until October 1.



There is an even more impressive array of contemporary art at the super-sleek six-storey **Esentai Mall**, which opened in 2012 on the same site as the Esentai Tower, home to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Both belong to local businessman Serzhan Zhumashov, Chairman of Capital Partners, and are graced by sculptures from his personal collection.

Visitors are greeted outside by a beefy Botero bronze, *Seated Woman with Fruit*, and a Jaume Plensa letter-sculpture, *Nomad*. Along with Loreto Verrocchia's coloured metal *Panachee Horse*, Plensa also stars inside the Mall: with three elongated female heads in alternately smooth and rough-hewn alabaster. But perhaps the most intriguing sight is a golden frieze of heads of famous people – Kazakh heroes, Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, John Lennon, Marilyn Monroe and others – over the main entrance. This has been created by **Nurlan Turekhanov** using his unique *alaayna* ('mottled mirror') technique – here involving over 50,000 tiny pieces of mirror and reflective palette.

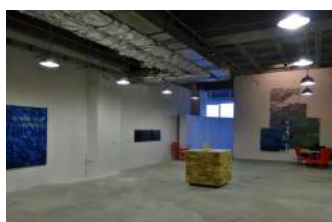




More of Turekhanov's work can be admired in one of the Esentai Mall boutiques, *Mechanical Piano*, where they complement ladies' fashions by his wife Aigul Kuandykova, one of Kazakhstan's top designers. Along with chairs and lighting, Turekhanov stages a metallic reinterpretation of a Modigliani nude; an overhead wood and metal installation that descends and whirs like a giant piece of clockwork; and a smaller *alaayna* mirror-picture of a lotus flower. In a separate room at the back – containing a full-scale installation with soothing purple fluorescent lighting, half-a-dozen mattresses and sensuous images projected overhead – customers are invited to recline and dream about art (or extending their wardrobe).



Next door to *Mechanical Piano* is the Serik Booxikov Workshop, which (with the support of the Vladimir Smirnov & Konstantin Sorokin Foundation) was hosting another ArtBatFest event: an



exhibition of three artists entitled **The Visual Library** and charting the 'substitution of text with visual material.' Along



with paintings by Moscow's Misha Most and ready-mades by Prague's Ivars Gravlejs, it centred on this giant *Cube of books* by Andrey Syalev from Samara on the Volga.

## GALLERY POSTSCRIPT

With the exception of Tengri-Umai, and the eclectic Booxikov Workshop, Almaty's contemporary art scene remains embryonic: the city's few other galleries concentrate on the Figurative tradition espoused by the still-thriving, Soviet-founded Soyuz (Union of Artists). Pick of the bunch is **Ular Gallery**, housed in the same building as the Soyuz next to Zhibek Zholy metro station. It was launched back in 1993, has taken part in a smattering of foreign events, and is the city's only gallery that also deals in photography.





Along with the enthusiasm of manager Tatyana Kukushkina (left), Ular's forte lies in its roster of Kazakh artists from Soviet times. But, although a portrait of President Nazarbayev hangs dutifully in the gallery office, there is a rebellious spirit about the best works on offer: pungent, ironic

graphics by 41 year-old Alexander Yerashov from Aksu in north-east Kazakhstan. It is a shock to learn he joined the Soyuz in 2010 – although the dividing-line between originality and conformity is often blurred in post-Soviet art space. Ular even share an exhibition hall (below left) with the Soyuz. Amidst all the steppe landscapes and neo-Impressionist cityscapes, it can be hard to tell if a show is hosted by the Gallery or the Union.



Two other galleries are housed on the ground floor of the Kasteyev Art Museum: **Zhaunar** (below centre) and **BonArt** (right), which doubles as an auction house. Both major on old-fashioned Figurative art, although at least Zhaunar looks to the future by staging art classes for young children.



The Museum itself regularly stages exhibitions by living artists, but they seldom embody Contemporary Art in the international sense of the term. Rubbing shoulders with Oksana Mas this September, for instance, were Kazakh painters Alexander Pavlovich Belov (born



1938) and Kanagata Kodekova (born 1976). Their works ranged from Belov's harvest-scenes and bravura portraits of bemedalled generals to Kodekova's enigmatic views of the Steppe.



Both artists display a lively palette and an assured sense of composition. The Academic tradition has its strengths, and its lingering presence in Almaty is nothing to complain about. In fact, it weaves into the rich tapestry of the city's evolving art scene which, as ArtBatFest 2014 enticingly revealed, is multi-faceted and multi-talented.

Whether in galleries, shopping malls, museums or car-parks, the artists of Kazakhstan have shown their ability to welcome and confront the world. ■