

## TIME OF THE STORYTELLERS HELSINKI

lar image, is by far the most disturbing of the *Camouflage* series. In it, a body lies on the ground, wearing the same uniform and the same military hat as in the other images. But the face is unrecognizable, a swollen mess of bright, bloody flesh. Closer inspection reveals that this purple-crimson surface is a mask made of raw meat, manipulated to echo the original face—a bit of nose, eye slits. *Carne de cañón*, Spanish for “cannon fodder,” also literally translates to “cannon meat,” a meaning which Flores exploits for its most awful connotations.

Recently I saw a Nina Berman photograph of an American soldier wounded in a bomb blast in Iraq. His face, melted away by fire, had been completely reconstructed, leaving him with a hairless white mask incapable of registering emotion. The disfigurement this man had suffered was not far from the meat-face in this final photo. Although Flores tells me that the time he spent in Angola was relatively free of action, this work shows that he understands something the current U.S. administration either can't or won't recognize: that wars are neither systematic nor disciplined, and that they are waged first and foremost on human bodies.

—Cecilia Aldarondo

*Time of the Storytellers* presents a striking introduction to the art of Central Asia [Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma; June 21—September 30, 2007]. Not only do the works capture the upheaval and inherent contradictions associated with the transformation of these post-Soviet nations, but they also evidence newfound independence and a spirit of rediscovery. Visually eclectic, the work nonetheless presents a common point of reference: a shared history. Through largely documentary means, artists from Moldova in the west to Kyrgyzstan in the east reveal societies yearning to find their identities and reach equilibrium.

As some of the work on view points up, Westerners tend to know very little about this region. Kazakhstan's Erbosyn Meldibekov, for example, tackles this head-on by zeroing in on Western prejudices and misconceptions with regard to Eastern aggression and violence. In his *Gattamelata in Hide of Genghis Kahn*, 2006, and *Victory Peak*, 2007, he enlists violent imagery that corresponds to the dominant Western view in order to claim a different identity. In *Gattamelata in Hide of Genghis Kahn*, taxidermied horse legs exposing flesh and bone at the point of dismemberment have been mounted on a plinth in the manner of Donatello's famous sculpture to evoke unnecessary cruelty rather than a legendary warrior's glorified image. The title *Victory Peak* refers to a mountain in the Tien Shan range renamed by the USSR in honor of their victory in the Great Patriotic War. Made of imported goods forcefully reshaped to resemble mountain landscapes, the work amusingly symbolizes Asia's resistance to westernization.

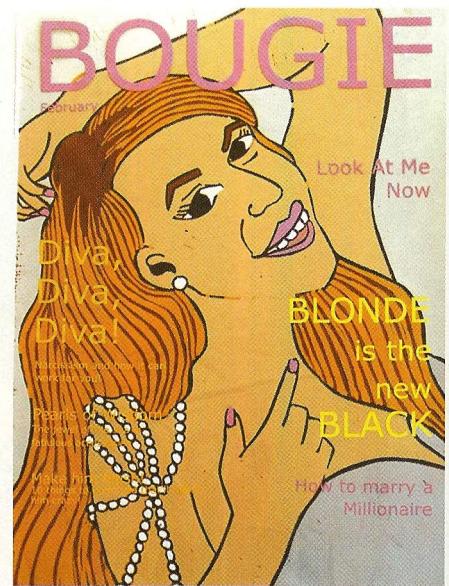
Almagul Menlibaeva's shamanistic video performances and Said Atabekov's video installation of a Kazakh game played on horseback reinforce the notion of cultural differences. Though one might believe that these works supply authentic glimpses of a robust traditional culture, they are also indicative of the current struggle for

identity and economic survival, which ushers in a revival of old customs. Gulnara Kasmaliev and Muratbek Djumaliev's *A New Silk Road: Algorithm for Survival and Hope*, 2006, echo these contradictions. While the route to the Orient is still in use, the noise and exhaust of trucks hauling scrap metal to China in return for bales of textiles have now replaced caravans of the desert.

Other works enlist the region's stunning architecture to focus on individual pursuits or examine cultural history and social phenomena. Uzbekistan's ancient Islamic architecture is the backdrop of Vyacheslav Akhunov's video performances. In *Ascent*, 2004, a man endlessly climbs the spiral staircase in Bukhara's Kalyan minaret. Upon reaching the top, he opens his notebook computer to review the event and the ascent starts over again. In *Corner*, 2004, a Muslim man, seen from the back, inexplicably stands in the corners of buildings of Samarkand. One cannot tell if he is praying, merely seeking a moment of privacy, taking part in some kind of ritual or, with the regime change, struggling to re-orient himself religiously, mentally or territorially. *Middle Russian Antiquity. The Last Judgment*, 2006, by Vladimir Kuprianov unites pre- and post-Soviet eras by combining views of disintegrating religious frescoes with other historical edifices undergoing restoration to recast our view of Russian culture. Not only does he bridge the distant past with the present, but he also reminds us that Russia remains a major force in the region.

Balancing the fragmented history and beauty detailed in Akhunov and Kuprianov's contributions, Vahram Aghasyan delineates the legacy of Soviet architecture in Armenia. While the video *Bangladesh*, 2003, succinctly and effectively communicates the oppressive and inhospitable qualities of apartment blocks outside the capital of Yerevan, his photo essay of disused modernist bus shelters discloses the fate of a quixotic Soviet transportation program. While *Ruins of Our Time*, 2007, rouses no

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Adonis Flores, *Honras fúnebres [Funeral Rites]*, 2007, video (courtesy of the artist and Galería Habana, Habana); Elena Vorobyeva + Viktor Vorobyev, *Kazakhstan. Blue Period*, 2002-2005, installation detail (courtesy of the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki)



### WANDA EWING LINCOLN, NE

empathy, it lets us marvel at the dilapidated condition of structures made purposeless once routes were changed. Finally, the lavish houses of Soroca, Moldova, documented in Pavel Braila's video installation *Barons' Hill*, 2004, stand as the most incomprehensible architectural phenomenon. Built a decade ago by the Romani, a nomadic people who prefer to live in nearby huts, the houses-cum-monuments boast sumptuous interiors in a mishmash of decorative styles, and are used only for important social events. As in the work of Aghasyan, the objectiveness of Braila's approach lets the images speak for themselves.

*Time of the Storytellers* features memorable images. Their unique power derives from the unmitigated directness with which the artists present their stories. They also successfully convey the region's economic, religious, and ethnic complexities, which hold general observations at bay. The withdrawal of Soviet control has obviously yielded numerous new challenges and contradictions. Though many works on view tackle forms of limitations, the drudgery of struggle also gives way to joyful energy. Elena and Viktor Vorobyev's *Kazakhstan. Blue Period*, 2002-2005, firmly refutes the notion of melancholia. In an installation comprising dozens of photographs, they show the effects of a spontaneous color spree. Anything needing painting will be painted a vibrant turquoise blue.

—John Gayer

"Beauty Fact: It's What's On The OUTSIDE That Counts," reads the lead article for the April issue of *Bougie*, a magazine geared toward African-American women. The cover features a woman with glowing caramel skin, thick flowing hair, and ridiculously large breasts. The magazine also urges women to "Find Your Inner Barbie," in order to live up to the unattainable standards set by this meta-super model.

In many ways, *Bougie* is a typical women's magazine: it preys on feminine fears by exhorting women to ignore important issues in favor of superficial beauty and unnecessary consumption. Except that *Bougie*, with its cloying sass and chirpy tone, is fictional, the creation of print-maker Wanda Ewing, whose work tackles life from the perspective of a black, single woman living in today's society. In Lincoln, the artist exhibited one year's worth of reductive linocut magazine covers [Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery; August 28—December 2, 2007]. To give these covers an authentic look, she used cut vinyl on acetate for the lettering, thus mirroring the slick, high-gloss quality of many women's publications. This sheen also underscores the phoniness of the ideal beauty touted by the publishing industry. Even though they look fantastic, vinyl and acetate are far from natural, and so, Ewing implies, are silicon implants and a host of other things women ingest and inject in the search for beauty.

Because her subject is printed material, Ewing relies on words to create in-your-face contemporary commentary that has a biting, narrative wit. The magazine's title is first and foremost a cultural jab: "Bougie" is slang for "bourgeois," a word that, in the African-American community, negatively describes putting on social airs. Accordingly, Ewing's play on words makes the *Bougie* series fascinating: each month offers slyly subtle critiques of the absurdities that occupy women's time as well as stinging disparagements regarding the African-American community itself. "Look at me now!" a pale, blonde Whitney/Beyoncé/Mariah hybrid model bleats from the

February cover. She is literally and figuratively white-washed, and *this* is how a black woman should look. "Blonde is the New Black," *Bougie* chirrup. And the "Tom Tom Club" touted on May's cover—complete with Halle Berry's Doppelgänger—has nothing to do with the musical group and everything to do with becoming an Uncle Tom.

The "actual" women who grace *Bougie's* covers are equally significant. Initially, they appear beautiful: they have perfect skin, coiffed hair, and breasts that defy gravity. But as with all sirens, closer inspection reveals ugliness beneath the surface: crooked teeth, dead eyes, and contorted expressions. While the models differ, they are nonetheless blandly homogenous. They pose identically, wear similar clothes, and regard the camera with the same vacant expression. For this reason, there is something sickly and garish about these women; they are twisted objects of desire, literal and figurative caricatures. Just as Photoshop and airbrushing techniques suck the life out of magazine models, so too do Ewing's cartoon cover girls. They are fictitious, the artist wants us to know—just like the women who stare at us from magazine racks.

With *Bougie*, Wanda Ewing is working in the satire tradition of such caricaturists as Honoré Daumier, Thomas Nast, and Al Hirschfeld. Her issues are clever and fun to decode, but this amusing aspect should not detract from her criticisms of contemporary society. It will be interesting to see how Ewing develops this project further. Will *Bougie* evolve to include editorials, articles, and photo shoots? Will she collaborate with other artists or perhaps even writers to accomplish this? Whatever she decides, it will make for equally intriguing reading and viewing.

—Kim Carpenter

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Gulnara Kasmaliev + Muratbek Djumaliev, still from *A New Silk Road: Algorithm for Survival and Hope*, 2006, five-channel video installation, 9:34 minutes [courtesy of the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki]; Wanda Ewing, *Bougie—February*, 2007, reductive linocut, vinyl lettering on acetate, 22 x 30 inches [courtesy of the artist]