

Watch This Space

In a vast, Soviet-era, former naval headquarters overlooking the Caspian Sea, YARAT, the Azerbaijani, not-for-profit, contemporary art organisation, has opened an art centre. **Ric Bower** went there and discovered that real power is soft power.

In so many ways Baku is a place where different worlds meet. The fact that everyone over a certain age speaks Russian attests to the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan for the majority of the 20th century. Azerbaijan may be one small nation amongst many small nations in central Asia, but it seems to have a clear understanding of the potential agency of culture.

YARAT, which means 'create' in Azerbaijani, was founded by the artist Aida Mahmudova and a group of her fellows in 2011. This is not a public-funded initiative, although it operates on such a scale as to make engagement with government bodies inevitable. YARAT runs a residency programme giving artists their own space in the city and set up YAY, a commercial gallery, which operates as a social enterprise providing those same artists with a means to show and sell their work. The interface between the delicate, chaotic processes of creativity and the glitzy Middle Eastern art world could, in my mind, be problematic. This prompted me to ask Aida Mahmudova what her vision was for the organisation in the coming years. She explained that she is primarily aiming to further the organisation's educational activities, including the opening of a dedicated teaching space; education forms a central part of the ethos of YARAT. She went on to describe the crucial process of fostering communication with potential investors as being a journey on which partners and artists gradually learn to trust each other.

The first showing of YARAT's permanent collection, *Making Histories*, curated by Suad Garayeva, is the opening exhibition at the centre. Highlights of the show include a number of works that demonstrate remarkable restraint in their execution. Nevin Aladağ's *Five Stone Game* (2009-2012) represents, through a grid of sepia prints, an ancient, central Asian pastime. The impossibility of representing this simple activity intelligibly through still images seems to question whether relocating the past into the present is ever possible.

Idris Khan is perhaps more familiar to western audiences and his 2009 collaboration with choreographer Sarah Warsop, *Lying in Wait*, takes the form of a life-size, triple-screen projection. A dancer is seen performing complex codified gestures in a generic library space. The visually sparse environment, the layering, which is a key part of Khan's vocabulary, and the video's monochrome treatment conspire to force engagement with the dancer's urgent movements. A similar

visual language is adopted by Orxan Hüseynov's eight-screen video installation, *Atelier Sovetsky* (2014), where the formal elements of the work are rigorously controlled to great effect. Perhaps this is, in part, a seldom-heralded benefit of the traditional craft-based training that Hüseynov, and many other Azeri artists received at the Azerbaijan State Academy of Art.

Faig Ahmed's *Threads* (2009) is a light-footed engagement with the traditional processes of Azerbaijani carpet making. He is an extraordinary character and perhaps the embodiment of what programmes like YARAT can bring into being.

The cavernous upper level of the YARAT centre is taken up with *The Home of My Eyes*, a body of work the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat was commissioned to create for the opening of the centre. It is a wholehearted attempt to document her transactions with a cross-section of Azeri citizens through the language of formal, photographic studio portraiture. The task she set herself, to discover aesthetic unity in a nation's diversity, was ambitious, even for a woman of her formidable talents. She has lavished each silver gelatin print with her trademark handwritten scripts; the words, written across the faces, were the subject's own, interwoven with traditional poetry from the region. There are powerful passages of portraiture in the series, but there were some images that did not catch light in the unforgiving furnace of the photographic studio; and the patchwork hang rather diluted images that individually demand serious time and attention.

YARAT is a ship, constantly in motion; it should not be judged as something fixed. That it exists at all is worth celebrating and an example to other small nations who will not, for whatever reason, invest in the facilitation of such projects.—CCQ

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Five Stones Game, Nevin Aladağ, 2009-12
38 Fine Art Photograph Prints, dimensions variable
Copyright Nevin Aladağ, Courtesy of the artist and Rampa, Istanbul
Installation view, YARAT Contemporary Art Centre, Baku
Photo: Rauf Askarov, Courtesy YARAT

