

I have a complicated relationship with “truth”. Ever since the movie *Borat* came out (2006) and became quite widespread in Europe, USA and Russia, it replaced the already little-known facts about Kazakhstan with these problematic misconceptions. For example, in *Borat* the screenwriter Sacha Baron Cohen wrote a fictional anthem of Kazakhstan. Later, that year during the Olympic games after a win for Kazakhstan, the fictional anthem of Kazakhstan was played instead of the real one. My work revolves around politics of fiction/nonfiction, trust, roots and belonging.

Questions of race, immigration and just simply being a non-US citizen in the US all have been touchy subjects lately. This has come up in my work. I discuss very personal subjects of living in an aggressive environment for queer individuals, such as Kazakhstan, and simultaneously feeling out of touch with my own culture while in a place where being queer is relatively accepted (USA). My work has developed around issues of binaries in sexuality, gender, racial stereotyping. In my approach to storytelling, I tend to question the validity of statements and facts stated as truths as portrayed by visual artists. Artist’s subjectivity, my own subjectivity, is impossible to grasp completely, in my opinion. That thought is what drives me to make personal work, to use my body in my videos, as an act of self-awareness.

I think a lot about education and privilege. I am aware of my own process of self-education through queer theory, feminist theory, art history, news and various issues existing within cultures, countries and ethnicities. I think about how much privilege it takes to be educated.

I’m interested in taking from the popular culture, I’m interested in a way that a viewer can recognize a phrase of a hit song in a video and the meaning that it brings to the work.



Fig. 1 Kerry James Marshall, *Slow Dance*, 1992-1993, acrylic and collage on canvas. Detail.

I’m interested in a way a fashion brand can bring meaning to the work. My enthusiasm in fashion is rooted in stereotypes of how a person of a certain class, ethnicity and age should look. In my work I try to dissect stereotypes of Kazakh culture, specifically a word *mambetka* which is a derogatory term that can be used on a person of Kazakh ethnicity and lower class. The stereotypical image of someone who can be called “mambetka” is a person wearing fake brand clothing (Abidas [sic] tracksuits, fake Nike shoes, fake Gucci bags, etc.)

When I think of color in my work, I think of three categories: gold, silver and plastic. Such divide creates unexpected color combinations. Traditionally, gold is worn by Kazakh women of older age, women that are wiser, mature. Silver is a younger and less valued metal, worn by younger

girls, but still a signifier of wealth. And finally, plastic is an artificial product that is in everything, starting from plastic bottles and ending with cheap polyester. If worn, produces sweat underneath the clothing but will never let it out and let your skin breath. Usually, very affordable, usually, very convenient.



The process of teaching someone a curse word, a derogatory word in a different language is of big importance to me. "From ancient times, the most distinctive feature of the Kazakh people was the hospitality. Dear guest was more than welcomed in the house; he had the opportunity to seat at the place of honor, and was offered with the best of what was in the house."<sup>1</sup> For me teaching someone a curse word in Kazakh is an act of almost "welcoming" the viewer into a weakness. Living in a place where your culture is unknown to people can bring a certain amount of empowerment, since you become the moderator of information on you to your audience. However, I tend to keep the balance of welcoming/unwelcoming the viewer into my work with very clear visual indicators that one in fact cannot enter the work, thus breaking the ancient Kazakh tradition. My paintings do not imply a space in which one can be "welcomed", my videos tend to have sudden transitions, music accompanying them and a flat layer of text overlaid on top of the moving image that does not let anyone inside. Like a public service announcement, it's informative and giving in its literal sense, but unwelcoming in its acts of expression.

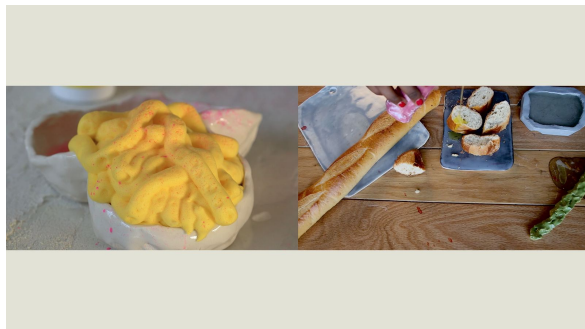


Fig. 2 Illana Yacine Harris-Babou, *Cooking with the Erotic*, 2016, video. Still.

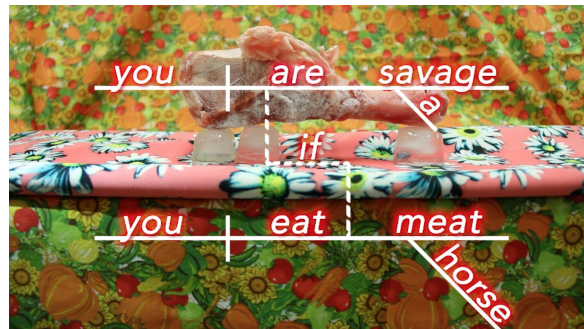


Fig. 3 Aigerim Akhmetova and Kristen Shea, *Prepositions*, 2017, video. Still.

"At first, the guest is offered a kumis, shubat or ayran, then a tea with milk or cream, boursaks, raisins, irimshik or kurt. Then followed the snacks made from horse meat or lamb - kazy shuzhuk, zhal, zhaya, sur-et, karta, kabyrga."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The traditions of hospitality." *Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in USA*, n.d. Web. 10 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "The traditions of hospitality." *Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in USA*, n.d. Web. 12 April 2017.

My painting could be a flag, a rug, a fabric, but never a three-dimensional space which one can possibly enter. The dichotomy of welcoming and unwelcoming comes from ideas of secrecy. Not being out of the closet. Most of the queer individuals of Kazakhstan not being out of the closet and that being a deciding factor of the success of your life. However, the validity of this statement is of course to be questioned, since as I established earlier, subjectivity of the artist is impossible to grasp.



Fig. 4 Aigerim Akhmetova, *Signifiers*, 2017, video. Still.



Fig. 5 Aigerim Akhmetova, *2 Rules*, 2017, video. Still.

"We have stooped so low that LGBTs no longer hide their orientation. One can see a lot of people in the city's malls and other public places — these are young people in coloured pants. This means they no longer hide their (sexual) orientation. I think it is very easy to identify a gay person by his or her DNA. A blood test can show the presence of degeneratim in a person,"<sup>3</sup> Dauren Babamuratov, the leader of the Kazakh national movement, said.

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<sup>3</sup>Urazova, Dinara, and Tatyana Kuzmina. "Kazakhstan looks to ban gay 'propaganda' and identify gays by searching for degeneratim in their DNA." *Tengrinews.kz*. n.p., 12 Sept. 2014. Web. 8 Apr. 2017.