



e-flux Criticism

Saodat Ismailova's "Amanat"
Furqat Palvan-Zade
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Saodat Ismailova, *Amanat*, 2026. Still from 2K video, 36:00 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

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Commissioned for this exhibition, Saodat Ismailova's latest film extends the artist's long-term research into the legend of Arslanbob and the eponymous forest in Kyrgyzstan. According to one version of the legend, Arslanbob was entrusted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with bringing the sacred knowledge to Central Asia. After eons of traveling, he fulfilled this task by educating Ahmad Yasawi, the Sufi mystic and spiritual ancestor of Turkic peoples, before secluding himself in the Ferghana Valley and planting one of the largest walnut forests on Earth. The forest is known today as Arslanbob, and it is here that Ismailova filmed *Amanat* (2026), which follows its protagonist as he collects walnuts from its floor and, eventually, falls asleep beneath its canopy.

I was told in my *perestroika*-era childhood in Uzbekistan that one should not sleep under walnut trees: they bring bad dreams. The knowledge embedded in such stories can be described by the Arabic word Ismailova takes for the title of her work: *amanat* might, in this context, be translated as "entrustment" or "legacy." Yet an *amanat* is also a deposit or a contract, and the role of someone so contracted is to transmit knowledge to the next generation, to ensure that the chain is not broken or else to face the consequences. *Amanat* is presented on the ground floor, establishing a dramatic tension with another of Ismailova's films addressed to the transmission of knowledge through culture.

Installed upstairs, *Swan Lake* (2025) is the more historically specific work. This two-channel essay, composed of footage from Central Asian film archives, addresses the period running from a decade before to a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The film includes familiar visual markers of the era: long queues outside shops, popular television programs hosted by healers and hypnotists, ballerinas performing Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1876). This was a typical television intermezzo in the late Soviet empire, when high culture often filled the airwaves during moments of political uncertainty, whether the death of another elderly leader or an emergency declared in Moscow. What may be less familiar to Western audiences is the footage drawn from Central Asian films of the same period. These fragments extend the usual visual aesthetics of *perestroika* into a different regional context, introducing other ethnicities, landscapes, and urban spaces into what is often remembered as a predominantly Russian narrative of late-Soviet culture.

While *Swan Lake* is addressed to Central Asia's recent history, *Amanat* suggests a deeper, ahistorical non-space. At one point in it, the forest speaks through voiceover, describing an existence that precedes and exceeds human chronology and the social worlds that periodically infringe upon it. At another moment, human figures sleeping in the forest enter the realm of the primordial through the medium of the walnut trees. These reclining bodies may also evoke the many victims of ethnic conflicts that erupted in the Ferghana Valley during the collapse of the USSR. Yet the forest asks us to move beyond historical contingency and to follow the contract: *amanat* takes the form of an injunction—"turn the stones in your hands into seeds" (or, "transform hardship into growth").

In *Swan Lake*, human history appears as an ornamental pattern that has grown out of *Amanat*'s primordial ground. These two lines of inquiry—primordia and history—have run through Ismailova's work since its beginning, and their juxtaposition in this exhibition presents her work as an ambitious and convincing attempt to render a cinematic bridge between them. Here is a link between the depths from which myth and cosmology originate and the superstructure of historical process, with its shifting political, cultural, and aesthetic forms.¹

Ismailova's show also features sonic elements—two immersive sound installations recorded in the forest, one on the ground floor and the other on the second—and objects that extend its sensory field. Among them is a gold sculpture of an “imagined seed” produced in collaboration with the designer Astrid Jeweler and a walnut gathered from the forest. If a walnut can be seen as a medium that grants access to ancestral knowledge that is otherwise lost, it may also be understood as a remedy. Yet as the landscape of a people can become a hellscape, to which Ismailova alludes through prone bodies in white cloths beneath the walnut trees, or in scenes of drug abuse drawn from *perestroika*-era films, so the walnut can function not only as medicine, but also as poison.

In connection with the exhibition, a screening at MoMA, New York on April 6 will present a selection of Ismailova's films.

Notes

- 1 The primordial line can be found in many of Ismailova's works, where ancestral ritual, landscape, and imagery of maternity are central. The historical line in her practice, by contrast, is—one might say— less widely recognized. In *Her Five Lives* (2020), for instance, Ismailova renders the history of Uzbekistan as a sequence of stages in the representation of women in Uzbek cinema. The film, much like *Swan Lake*, is conceived as a montage of archival footage.

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Furqat Palvan-Zade is an independent curator, scholar, and filmmaker. He is the co-founder of *syg.ma*—a self-organized online platform connecting writers, activists, artists, and designers—and editor of *EastEast*, an online and print publication on culture, art, philosophy, and everyday life in the Global East.

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