



Baatarzorig Batjargal und Nomin Bold: Masters of Mongol Zurag

Mongol Zurag, a national painting movement developed after Mongolia gained its independence in 1911, relies on traditional techniques and visual codes pertaining to Buddhist art, but distances itself from its set rules by delving into secular and modernist themes.

In 1912-1913, Baldugiin Sharav (1869-1939) paints the referential work par excellence of modern Mongolian art: «One Day in Mongolia» depicts everyday life across the country, pictured in a dense composition syncretizing the steppe as well as the canvas. Highly descriptive, this art school draws on traditional elements of folk paintings such as hard colors and exaggerated shapes. Sharav inspired several generations of followers, influenced by the roborative juxtaposition of mundane activities. As they recreated an aesthetic specific to Mongolia, they preserved their cultural identity against the onslaught of imported Socialist Realism.

After the demise of soviet communism in Mongolia in 1990, the artistic school of Mongol Zurag remerged with a vengeance and freed itself from socialist political correctness as it went on exploring modern socio-economic upheavals, the ills of chaotic urbanization, commercialism and globalization, all the while referring to ancient fables and myths that were long suppressed, as well as recent underground culture and even Mangas – often heralding the return of Genghis Khan in public lore, after the Soviets tried to erase him from collective memory so as to prevent any Mongolian nationalist revival.

Strongly figurative, contemporary Mongol Zurag transforms realism in doublemeanings and symbolism. Thus, Mongolian artists fill their canvas as they fill the vastness of the Mongolian landscape with their intimate thoughts and unsuppressed shamanic beliefs. Contemporary artists revel in multiplying references to the past and the present, combined in a form of phantasy denunciation of foreign and modern influences disturbing traditional culture and identity. Yet the expected clash of the new versus the ancient is softened by the teeming abutments of improbable encounters and the detached connivance thus established between gods and laymen, warriors and mythical animal deities, noblemen, magnificent ladies and comic strip characters, cosmonauts, priests, artists, sumo wrestlers, robots and gloomy landscapes (Baatarzorig Batjargal). As well, elves and nymphs share the threads of their destiny. Naked human figures wander about in a senseless three-dimensionality that echoes the wanderings of disoriented city-dwellers suffocating in the ceaseless traffic, nomads no more, yet roving on in undecipherable no-man's lands (Nomin Bold). Elsewhere, totemic figures of princesses and ancient nobility recall a people wiped out by communism. Indeed, the Soviets went as far as force-eliminating all family names in a bid to dissolve the Central Asian aristocracy by erasing its roots and identity.

Baatarzorig Batjargal's (born in 1983) paintings focus on the loss of traditional heritage through a succession of political regimes, from the bloody harshness of Soviet communism to the rising inequalities and thoughtless consumerism of present times.

Although prone to large compositions on canvas, Baatarzorig also uses antique wooden chest planks and hand-wrought metal decorations as tangible witnesses of traditional nomadic life, and paints on such artefacts Mongolian aristocrats in refined clothing to recall Mongolia's heritage. He further addresses the unbridled urbanization transforming Mongolian society, the new forms of frantic mobility that disrupt the quieter patterns of nomadic life, the confrontation pitting yesterday's communism, today's capitalism and materialism against Mongolian spiritualism and lasting animism. Deities and animal gods, the Buddhist pantheon and robed monks are often central in his compositions, as if to establish the prepotency of the unseen, the revered and the holy.

Baatarzorig stands out as one of the best Mongolian artists of his generation through his refined mastery of form and color and the depth of his vision.

Nomin Bold (born in 1982) remains true to the aesthetics of Mongolian Buddhist art, replete with gold foil, as well as to the geometry of Tibetan Thangka painting. But this she does through the academic techniques of Western oil painting and with collages enriching her compositions. More recently, she has developed an art form using weaving and intertwining of different materials to create masks dialoguing across tradition - Buddhist gods' faces - and modern contraptions gas masks isolating the wearer from all sensorial perceptions, but for the inner soul protected from the lethal nuisance of our destructive world.

Laden with the spirituality of traditional nomadism, her works are set in the ever growing and suffocating urban environment, or the labyrinths of abstract Edens where fate and destiny, pulling all strings of life and after-life, rule over the insignificance of human lives. Strongly symbolic, dream-like and ethereal, the princesses, fairies and naked human figures that people her canvases speak of worlds known only to the introspective minds of the most sensitive viewers.

Alongside her husband Baatarzorig, Nomin shines at the top of the widening crowd of contemporary Mongolian artists now being discovered around the world, from Australia to the US, from South Korea to Europe, from Kassel to Frauenfeld.

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March 2022
