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Art Collective YARAT Opens First Permanent Art Center in Azerbaijan

Ahead of the upcoming [European Games](#) kicking off next month in oil and gas-rich Azerbaijan, local artist community YARAT opens its first permanent space in Baku, the capital. In a local context where complete freedom of expression is still a subculture, the centre opens with *The Home of My Eyes*, a series of non-political portraits by the celebrated Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat.

A non-commercial organisation, YARAT ('to create' in Azerbaijani) aims to promote local and regional artists locally and internationally and already has 120 projects under its belt so far as well as a commercial outpost, the YAY Gallery. The collective was founded in 2011 by [Aida Mahmudova](#), a talented multimedia Azeri artist and London Central Saint Martin's art and design school graduate whose first New York solo show opens on 28th May at the [Leila Heller Gallery](#).



YARAT Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, 2015, Photo Rauf Askyarov, Courtesy YARAT

Formerly a Soviet industrial building, the new 2000m square contemporary art centre opened last March. Located in a new area looking out onto the Caspian Sea, the centre is surrounded by multiple venues for the Games.

The centre opened with a ground-floor YARAT group show entitled *Making Histories* and a moving series of photograph portraits, [*The Home of my Eyes*](#), by the Iranian-American filmmaker and photographer Shirin Neshat and curated by Dina Nasser-Khadivi.



Aida Mahmudova - Courtesy the artist and YARAT

For the artist, who has lived in the United States since 1974 and been living in exile in New York, the theme of home is particularly poignant. *"To be invited by Azerbaijan to explore the theme of home for the people here was extremely difficult for me, who hasn't been allowed back into her country since 1996."*



Shirin Neshat at the YARAT Contemporary Art Centre on the opening day (c) Rooksana Hossainally

The highly stylised monochrome portraits of local Azeris are extremely personal and powerful. Moving inside the poetic exhibition under the building's attic-like roof, it is like stepping inside a chapel adorned with a sea of faces, intense emotion and energy emanating from each pair of eyes. And at the same time, the portraits reflect all the gentle strength of the petite artist whose tender, softly spoken manner is wholly captivating.



Shirin Neshat, Gizbasti, from The Home of My Eyes series, 2015. Silver gelatin print and ink, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. (60 x 40 in.), copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



The Home of My Eyes series by Shirin Neshat – opening YARAT Contemporart Art Space (c) Rooksana Hossienally

The exhibition isn't meant to be particularly political, unusually so for Neshat whose works like *Women of Allah* (1993-96), *Women Without Men* (2009) and *Our House is on Fire* (2013) highlight a need for freedom in repressive regimes that could be likened to Azerbaijan where freedom of speech and freedom of the press are restricted.

Neshat's *The Home of My Eyes* series highlights individuality; it is a patriotic patchwork of diversity that comes together to paint a picture of unity – but not uniformity. *"For me, everyone is an important monument,"* says the artist. The artist hopes that this series of portraits will serve to bring the people of Azerbaijan together. *"Being shown in this first exhibition of the centre is something the people of Azerbaijan can be proud of, that allows them to be proud of their roots."*



One of Baku's four Flame Towers in the background (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Geographically part of Central [Asia](#), the culturally rich and diverse Azerbaijan sits on the edge of the Caspian Sea and shares borders with Russia, Georgia, Turkey and Iran. A baffling crossroads of cultures, languages and religions, Azerbaijan is predominantly Muslim although secular.

Held in the iron grip of the Soviet Union from 1920, it gained independence in 1991 just before the dissolution of the USSR. Today, Azerbaijan considers itself a democratic country despite controversy

surrounding each election. The president in power is Ilham Heydar oglu Aliyev of the New Azerbaijan Party, which, according to Human Rights Watch is guilty of autocracy and various human rights abuses including censorship when it comes to freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Historically, art has always been of key importance in Azerbaijan. Dubbed the 'Paris of the East' in the 19th century, it was the first country in the region to establish an art school, as well as opera houses and theatres. And like the media, art is a key vehicle for expression and freedom but the current regime can be an obstacle. For instance, the most memorable example of the government censoring artistic expression was at the Venice Biennale in 2011, when the Ministry of Culture forced the curator of the Azerbaijan pavilion to cover up statues by Azeri artist Aidan Salkhova that depicted a veiled woman and the Kaaba, the black stone of Mecca sacred to Muslims.

When I sit down with Mahmudova, she is evasive on the subject of how Azerbaijan's politics interferes with art and affirms that *"Artists can express what they like. I do not interfere."* The YARAT founder insists on the collective's independence from the state – despite her connection as the first lady's niece – in that it is funded by a bank rather than the government.

"People think that just because of my relations, it affects our independence. But staying independent is very important to me. Even if we have technical support from the government – they allow us to rent spaces and to obtain permission for the various events we have done – we are not funded by the government."

The issues proved difficult to discuss in any more depth, especially with YARAT's public relations representative jumping in at will to answer questions directed at the artist, which only further highlights the sensitivity of the matter concerning freedom of expression.

However, to Aida Mahmudova's credit YARAT is a grass-roots

collective that formed organically and while I felt it was tricky for her to express views that could be deemed controversial with regards to her country's political situation, I felt there was hope for change.



Artist Ramal Kazim at his studio, Baku, Azerbaijan (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Art in Azerbaijan is traditionally anchored in history and crafts but YARAT opens doors to exploring beyond these confines. In founding the collective, Aida Mahmudova was inspired by the work of Leyla Akhundzadeh who created the Wings of Time art association, which sadly didn't come to fruition due to the founder's sudden passing away. Although Mahmudova admires this starting point very much, YARAT is different in that it was created by artists for artists, "*she (Leyla Akhundzadeh) had a historical approach, whereas we are coming from an artist's perspective,*" she explains.

Prior to the opening of the new art centre, I made my way to the artists' studios located in a concrete Soviet style block on a residential backstreet of the capital. And there wasn't a traditional carpet in sight. Through their work, the artists express a general fracture in society and in the individual (which they did not say is specific to Azerbaijan) like Ramal Kazim and his dark tortured figures twisted in anguish ripping their flesh apart or highly skilled YARAT founding artist [Rashad Alakbarov](#)'s clever metal and light sculptures that project wry phrases like 'This is not chaos' and 'All that glitters is not gold'.



Rashad Alakbarov at his studio, Baku, Azerbaijan (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Also a founding artist of the collective is world-renown enfant terrible [Faig Ahmed](#) who experiments with the traditional Azerbaijani carpet-weaving craft by taking carpets apart as though dissecting history to bring meaning to the present where tradition is fast being cast aside.



Faig Ahmed, *Threads*, 2012. YARAT Contemporary Art Centre opening group show *Making Histories* (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Other artists whose works are noteworthy include that of Afghan artist Reza Hazare who expresses the horrors and confusion experienced in his home country, and the hypnotising and rich paintings of the mind-bogglingly talented and world-acclaimed [Farid Rasulov](#).



Farid Rasulov paintings, studio, Baku (c) Rooksana Hossenally



Artist Reza Hazare's work at the YARAT studios, Baku (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Curious to view art outside of YARAT, I visited the [Baku Museum of Modern Art](#). Testimony to the Soviet era, the art here is a clutter of mildly curated Soviet Realism works, which illustrate wide-ranging themes from the voting system to the female anatomy. However, suspect nondescript titles like 'Composition' used multiple times to describe works and the lack of titles altogether, suggests hidden truths in the paintings, truths artists aren't allowed to express outright, but that exist silently, undescribed and uncaptioned. But without any confirmation, the latter remains a Western viewer's speculation. What is telling though, is that no painting in the museum is outwardly entitled anything pertaining to a political matter, let alone a critique of the country.



Baku Museum of Modern Art (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Being an artist in Azerbaijan might come with plenty of funding – and the YARAT opening sit-down dinner for 200 special guests at the lavish Four Seasons Baku is a hint – but it can't be easy. And coming from the free and democratic Western world as I do, it's easy to succumb to the temptation to bash eastern repressive regimes. However, despite the obvious issues tied to oppression, it is important to remember the context of Azerbaijan's newly found freedom: after all, it has only been 24 years. If we consider that Azerbaijan is starting

anew then comparisons between its policies on freedom of expression and those of centuries-old western democracies, might not be accurate ones to draw.

Despite Baku looking like the Dubai of Central Asia with its brash architecture and string of designer boutiques along Neftchilar Avenue, allowing local artistic expression is significant progress. Unlike countries like Qatar, which obnoxiously seeks to build an art scene on foreign art instead of giving centre stage to its own local artists, Azerbaijan is giving a voice to its home-grown art.



YARAT Contemporary Art Space, opening conference – left to right: Suad Garayeva, Shirin Neshat, Sara Raza and Aida Mahmudova (c) Rooksana Hossenally

Further to creating a structure that allows for Azeri artists and those from the region to create works, education is key for YARAT. *“The university teaches about technique, how to work with materials, but not how to explore your own ideas,”* Aida Mahmudova tells me.

In fact, Suad Garayeva the curator of the new centre talks about education being at the centre of the new space and in order to push this angle forward, YARAT has teamed up with the respected British art curator and critic [Sara Raza](#). There is even talk of an art academy in the future.

And the future looks bright indeed: at the opening YARAT conference,

up on the stage were the four leading women of the centre and exhibition. Noteworthy progress indeed in a country where gender equality is still problematic, as illustrated by video interviews of Azeri women in *The (Dis-)Appearing Woman*, a temporary exhibition by [Sarah Knill-Jones](#) at the Baku Museum of Modern Art, and in the work of YARAT artist [Vusal Rahim](#).

While it can't be denied that there's a gaping hole for progress in Azerbaijan's politics on freedom of expression, the YARAT collective is a huge step forward and a means for advancement in more ways than one – so even if all that glitters in Azerbaijan isn't gold, it might not be long until that changes.

The Home of My Eyes will run at the Yarat Contemporary Art Space, Baku, until June 23rd, www.yarat.az