

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

McDermott, Emily. "Aida Mahmudova in New York, May 2015." *Interview*. (June 2015).

Interview



AIDA MAHMUDOVA IN NEW YORK, MAY 2015.
PORTRAITS BY [CARL J ASQUINI](#). SPECIAL THANKS:
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After studying at Central Saint Martins in London, Aida Mahmudova returned to her home country of Azerbaijan, just outside the city of Baku. Once there, she founded YARAT Contemporary Art Space in 2008 and YAY Gallery in 2012. An artist in her own right, Mahmudova's works have been included in exhibitions around the world. Currently, her seascapes are on view in the Vita Vitale group show at the [56th Venice Biennale](#) and her first solo show in the United States, "Passing By...", opened last week at Leila Heller Gallery in New York.

Exploring ideas of impermanence and memory, "Passing By..." presents eight newly created landscape paintings interspersed with a few sculptural elements. On the back wall of the gallery hangs *On my way home*, a 16-foot-long canvas covered with a dark gray sky, abstracted trees, and two hardly visible fences. On the ground, just in front of the

painting, translucent blue glass bricks extend a fence outward into the viewer's space. So while this series depicts landscapes, rather than photorealist reproductions or calm contemplations, Mahmudova's images exude energy and emotion, appearing like impasto interpretations of scenes witnessed while quickly driving by. Although she has previously delved into the rapidly changing aspects of Baku, here she focuses on scenery from rural Azerbaijan, and coincidentally, the exhibition opened on the country's independence day.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: Congratulations on your first show in the United States.

AIDA MAHMUDOVA: Thank you. It feels great. The last time I came to New York was about six years ago. I'm scared of flying, so I don't come often. But this time I came, and now I have to come back. It's very different than in Europe. There's a different sense of life and scale and relationships with people; they're very open. For being such a big city, it has a sense of lightness and happiness.

MCDERMOTT: I saw YARAT's commission in Venice and the two artists showing were very powerful. I want to talk about how you balance running such a large organization while also producing your own work.

MAHMUDOVA: The main reason why YARAT was founded is because I'm an artist. I wanted to create something where people would unite and work together and help contemporary art in Azerbaijan develop. Being an artist and understanding art from a different perspective, when I started YARAT I wasn't just the person who founded the organization; I was part of the community. Then I founded the gallery [YAY Gallery] two years later. The Center for Contemporary Arts opened in March with Shirin Neshat on the second floor and the first floor the permanent collection. The space will change every year.

At the same time, I've been working on my own art. On one side, it works well because what we do is art and what I do is art, then I put it together. But from another point of view it's difficult because of time and energy. The first two years, I think I slept for two hours. I would go out during the day, work on YARAT and exhibitions, and at night I would paint. Since it was initially a group of artists, I would communicate with artists and be around art. That helped me in my

personal work, to develop and move forward.

We inspired each other, but at the same time you have your personal world that you develop. For the past year, I've concentrated on my own art. Most of the time I spend in the studio, and maybe twice a week I go to the office. If I go to the office, I can't go to the studio the same day because I don't feel anything. I can't concentrate.

MCDERMOTT: What's the studio like for you?

MAHMUDOVA: I work on about three or four paintings at a time and now I'm doing more large-scale paintings. It gives me more freedom. At some point I was doing quite small ones, and then suddenly I moved to very large canvases. I don't know why. Maybe at the time I needed a freedom of movement. When it's small scale, it becomes monotone and too precise. When it's large scale, I use my hands most of the time. I don't even use brushes. I use the roller to do the base, but the rest is hands. I do the magic with my hands; it's like cooking, and I love to cook as well. I like to use my hands; you pass your energy and you get the energy back. It's a close, physical contact. It's about what you feel.

MCDERMOTT: Do you feel the process is as important as the finished work?

MAHMUDOVA: Process for me is more important. The process is a relationship. It takes me sometimes three or four months to make a painting. There's a lot of conflict and love, all together. There's a sense of sadness in it. At the same time, you can't judge it when you look at it. These [paintings in the show], I haven't seen them in one month, and now I look at them differently.

MCDERMOTT: So how do you know when to stop the process?

MAHMUDOVA: Sometimes I stop because I feel like there's nothing I can do and it won't get me anywhere further. I've ruined a lot of paintings. About 50 percent of my paintings I ruin and cover on top. There's two paintings here that underneath, there's three or four different images that I covered, and covered, and covered, and covered... I cry a lot when I paint. The main purpose of painting is for me to be able to pass my emotions, feelings, and state of mind that I'm at in that moment. The image is important, of course, a lot of people tell me, "You make landscapes. It's very pretty," but

that's not the point.

MCDERMOTT: You're addressing the change.

MAHMUDOVA: And the slow change. The architecture and Azerbaijan—it's fast change. But this series is more based on the outskirts of the city and the landscapes. The idea is more about universal time, rather than time in Azerbaijan. The landscapes, they shift slowly and it's based on the images that I pass by when I'm in the car.