

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Vasvani, Bansie "Passing By...Aida Mahmudova." *Art Asia Pacific*. (June 2015).

## ArtAsiaPacific



AIDA MAHMUDOVA, *On My Way Home*, 2015, mixed media on canvas, 270 × 515 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

## PASSING BY... AIDA MAHMUDOVA

WEB REVIEW BY BANSIE VASVANI  
LEILA HELLER GALLERY

USA



AIDA MAHMUDOVA, *Mulberry*, 2015, mixed media on canvas, 165 × 210 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

Painting one's homeland, especially one like Azerbaijan, tucked away between the Caspian Sea and the Lesser Caucasus mountain range, can be tricky. Recreating the charm of the unfamiliar, and the lure of exoticism, often places undue expectations on artists. But Aida Mahmudova's deeply emotive landscape paintings in "Passing By..."—her first United States solo exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery in New York—unfold like a magical panorama that is surprisingly refreshing.

Commingle associations from memory with actual scenes from her surroundings in Baku, Azerbaijan, Mahmudova's panoply of paintings tell a composite tale. A tactile landscape untouched by the spoils of modernity is captured in her works through her signature style of *plein-air* impressionism using thick impasto brushstrokes. In *Mulberry* (2015), the spare structure of a home amidst trees and shrubbery is visible through a palette of olive green, violet, purple and brown hues. Viscous swabs of paint, often manipulated with

her bare hands, appear in splashes and dabs on the canvas, engaging the viewer to take in the rustic quality of the terrain. Organic and tangible, Mahmudova's sensuous strokes, combined with her deft choice of colors and unexpected medley of violets and earth tones, convey her deep-felt attachment and palpable celebration of her remote homeland.

Regardless of whether or not the artist paints outdoors (as did the impressionists before her), the effect of *plein-air* painting and the suffusion of light is ingrained in her work. Much like the impressionists, Mahmudova practices an invigorating use of color, as seen in the yellow ochre and varying hues of asparagus and pistachio-green in *Somewhere in Between* (2015), which recall mustard fields and swamps of water at the same time. Light shimmers on the surface of the vegetation, giving it a golden hue while contrasting it with the surrounding lavender-tinged body of water and pale blue sky above. A sense of atmospheric movement is captured through subtle reflections and shadows in the translucent water, and our perception of the vastness of the land is created through Mahmudova's skillful use of perspective. Her talent lies in her ability to transport the viewer to a place of raw sensation, enhanced by her personally conceived myth and allegory of the region. Without falling prey to undue exoticism, her paintings come alive and pulsate with her deep commitment to the country of her birth.



AIDA MAHMUDOVA, *Somewhere in Between*, 2015, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 250 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.



AIDA MAHMUDOVA, *The Neighbors*, 2015, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

Contrary to popular images of mountain ranges and urban construction in the Central Asian region, Mahmudova's work focuses on the countryside. Devoid of people, her canvases are compelling for their dexterous use of scale to create wide-angled overviews of various scenery. In *On My Way Home* (2015), rows of trees get bigger as they recede into the background. By reversing the traditional process of establishing perspective, Mahmudova devises a convincing technique to bring visual impact to the multiple layers of topiary in her painting. Using her favorite, subdued color palette of purples, greens and browns, each layer of trees—which grows proportionately with distance—becomes prominent in its own right. Seen in the background are large, purple, rounded formations that could be trees, clouds or both, which capture the essence of nature without formally resembling it. By using such abstractions to convey her ideas of nature and beauty, Mahmudova's works take on metaphysical and intangible qualities.

Acrylic bricks in translucent shades of blue and brown accompany the paintings in the gallery to form a vital part of the display. These

tactual rectangles, which are placed on the ground in stacks, and also serve as extensions of the brick and mortar depicted in works such as *The Neighbors* (2015), broaden the impact and earthiness of the countryside. If the common view of Azerbaijan is that of a country once devastated by Russian occupation until 1991, Mahmudova upends that belief by presenting a territory of eternal beauty.

*"Passing By..." is on view now at Leila Heller Gallery, New York, until July 3, 2015.*