



ART REVIEW

'Silk Road' takes a new path -- to present

Art Institute puts 'Focus' on contemporary artists

By Alan G. Artner

Tribune art critic

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Most of the exhibitions and works that make up the Art Institute of Chicago's extensive Silk Road Project, which has to do with the network of trade routes across Asia, are about and from the distant past. But the museum's small "Focus" shows are for contemporary artists, so the current one devoted to the team of Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev -- the first by the Kyrgyz artists in a United States museum -- represents a welcome extension of the Silk Road theme into the present.

On their own, the two video pieces and 23 color photographs prove slight, yet in relation to the rest of the Silk Road material in the museum, the contemporary works take on weight, presenting sobering pictures of historic routes that once conjured exotic, romantic, even fantastic images of luxury.

The "Silk Road" shown here, between Kyrgyzstan and China, is given over to caravans of large trucks bearing scrap metal. And around this trade, which has been pursued since the end of the Soviet Union, has grown up small roadside efforts intended to service the truckers, which the artists also have atmospherically documented.

The still images on view balance those who work in the landscape with those who move through it, the former seeming to be people from the past; the latter, from the present. In one memorable picture (plus scene on a video) the two poignantly, naively come together, as a child on horseback races one of the trucks and, of course, is immediately outrun. Everywhere else, the two are unsentimentally shown to coexist, linked by trade but distanced by economics and, apparently, custom.

A new, short, five-channel (screen) video (astounding -- video art in Kyrgyzstan!) presents aspects of this coexistence within various stages of the caravan's journey, though it does not significantly enlarge upon what is shown in the still pictures, and both medium and format are explored only tentatively.

An older, even shorter, three-channel video has a tighter focus and less of a documentary look, which gives the opportunity for more poetry. Two middle-age women are transporting goods on a train, the central screen showing one singing as screens on either side indicate where the train is going as well as where it has been. The song is a Russian ballad from the '80s, so to a native audience it has an instant nostalgia that ultimately suggests the disappearance of an entire way of life.

Kasmalieva and Djumaliev, partners professional and personal, had Soviet training with emphases on graphic art, printmaking and sculpture. Little we see indicates radical sensibilities, but they are in the forefront of a push toward the use of new technologies at home. They are fortunate to emerge in a conservative period

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worldwide that easily embraces what they do.

The work's distinction comes from its direct relationship to everyday life. It is not concerned with strategies or ideas not embodied by the work itself. That directness allows an immediate connection with viewers who are moved more by documentary content than self-consciously artistic treatment.

The 2007 edition of Art Chicago at The Mart, the international art exposition scheduled April 27-30, will include 131 galleries from North America and abroad, according to organizer Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. Several of the galleries, which specialize in modern and contemporary art, have been enticed back to Chicago after absences in recent years when the exposition was under other management.

For the full list of galleries and their points of origin, go to chicagotribune.com/artchicago.

aartner@tribune.com

"Kasmalieva and Djumaliev, A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope" continues at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave., through May 6. Call 312-443-3600.

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