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The Van Gogh of Kazakhstan who feigned insanity to escape the Soviets

The country's first ever pavilion at the Venice Biennale plunges you into the eccentric world of Sergey Kalmykov

Dreamer: Sergey Kalmykov Credit: Alamy

Somewhere near Georgia's border with Russia, 2,500 LED lamps, two robotic arms, a walking refrigerator, 3,000 sq ft of aluminium foil and many, many rolls of duct tape sit in storage.

They were destined for bigger things: namely, pride of place in the Kazakhstan Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, but a last-minute reroute to avoid travel through Russia, combined with sizeable border queues, mean that the "First Radial Cardboard Light Generator of Genius" are not up and running for Venice's opening week.

Undeterred, the five commissioned artists, who work collectively under the name ORTA, have scoured Venice to make do. Having relieved the city of almost its entire supply of foil, dowelling and brown paper, they have created a playful temporary installation that will stand in until the cargo arrives.

The Pavilion, named the "Centre for the New Genius", is Kazakhstan's first at the Biennale. ORTA has spent five years developing the set and a series of "spectacular experiments" designed to plunge visitors into the magical world of Sergey Kalmykov (1891-1967).

Kalmykov, creator of dream-like Expressionist paintings and a 10,000-page manifesto, lived a life of poverty and died in psychiatric care. He is little known outside Kazakhstan, or inside it, for that matter. To this day, no one knows where he is buried. Recently though, his reputation has begun to skyrocket, and his works, many of which were seized by the Politburo on his death, are starting to go on sale for anything up to $15,000.

Kalmykov's Fantastic Still Life, 1946 (detail) Credit: A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts

“He is regarded in Kazakhstan as our Van Gogh,” says ORTA’s Rustem Begenov. Both sought a union with invisible higher forces, and were absorbed by their art to the detriment of their health. Both, too, were prone to outlandish behaviour: Kalmykov may not have razored his ear, but he favoured colourful, medieval-style dress (so that he could be seen from space) and, while painting on his easel on street corners, liked to discuss his cosmic beliefs with passers-by.

“Many called him a madman,” says Begenov. “But we have found much that is beautiful in his work and real wisdom in his teachings. I compare the experience of reading his manuscripts to being irradiated.”

Kalmykov began his artistic life in St Petersburg, where he joined the “Youth Union” association of the Russian avant-garde. Marc Chagall was a fellow member. After the 1917 revolution, though, Kalmykov fell in with the artist Kazimir Malevich. The two were equally into the idea of a fourth dimension (a fairly unrigorous belief that there was an additional space in the universe where the spirit could thrive) but eventually fell out. By this time, it had become impossible to engage in un-Soviet art, and Kalmykov withdrew from every official sphere.

In 1935, he moved to Almaty (about as far from Soviet HQ as was possible) to be costume and set designer for the city’s Opera House. His one-man creations for Aida, Faust and Tosca were said to be so beautiful that the audience would stand up to applaud the moment the curtain opened.

Kalmykov’s Red Horses, 1911 (detail) Credit: A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts

Key to Kalmykov's philosophy – and to the Biennale Pavilion – is his concept of the New Genius, which maintains that we are all brilliant, if we choose to believe so. At Venice, ORTA will open a portal into the fourth dimension for visitors.

Despite Kalmykov's eccentricities, Begenov does not believe that he was actually insane – only acting so to fool the Soviet authorities. "Like many, he felt that the state was trying to suppress and violate free life on Earth and that to escape it he had to create an imaginary world. And he did."

At the end of his life, Kalmykov was diagnosed as schizophrenic and for two months, doctors tried to save him. Their notes detail his profound enjoyment of hot food (he had lived on bread, milk and fruit) and that in demeanour, he was as glad as a child.

"It's very moving," says Begenov. "He always believed that he was creating for the future and here he is, 55 years later, at the Biennale. We hope by bringing him here he will inspire others as well."