



# IMAGINED FUTURES: TRANSIT CORRIDORS IN HIGH MOUNTAIN ASIA

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



## Exhibitions:

Bishkek  
KYRGYZSTAN

Tashkent  
UZBEKISTAN

Dushanbe  
TAJIKISTAN

Peshawar  
PAKISTAN

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Cover picture: "Texture of Time", 2015. Elena Grigoryan, Kazakhstan. Ceramic panel with collage elements, clay, 35x30 cm.

## Introduction

Over the course of centuries, the Silk Road has connected Asia and Europe through intricate network of paths, transporting not only goods, but also ideas and religions. The projects of new Silk Roads seek to revive the ancient routes starting in China and leading to numerous regions through land and sea corridors for the development of trade and economy. Evoking old images of caravans and new images of smooth connections, the new Silk Roads speak to people's hopes – and fears. These routes traverse challenging geographic terrains including the High Mountains of Asia, that seem impenetrable due to their harsh climate and difficult landscape. And yet this region has a rich culture of movement and migration. Hence, when imagining the new Silk Road, the communities of the High Mountains of Asia and their repositories of knowledge and heritage cannot be ignored. These communities preserved traditions of cultural exchange, that created channels for economic and political exchange in the past.

This volume presents the works from the traveling exhibition “Imagined Futures: Transit Corridors in High Mountain Asia” that took place in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Tashkent, Uzbekistan; Dushanbe, Tajikistan and Peshawar, Pakistan from March 23 to April 12, 2022. The exhibition, supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), UK, has allowed us to revisit the mountain communities residing alongside new transit corridors to explore their knowledge and imagination of a changing landscape. During these trips we explored stories of engagement, survival, resilience and perseverance of living in mountain regions, otherwise known as ‘remote’ yet connected through a network of highways. Works displayed in this volume belong to artisans and artists who have worked with mountain communities to protect and promote their heritage, voice their concerns, and spent time in these geographic regions to better understand their hopes and challenges.

*Dr. Zahra Hussain*

The project was part of the “Resilient Silk Route Heritage Network” funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund, UK and implemented by the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit, Graduate School of Development, University of Central Asia.





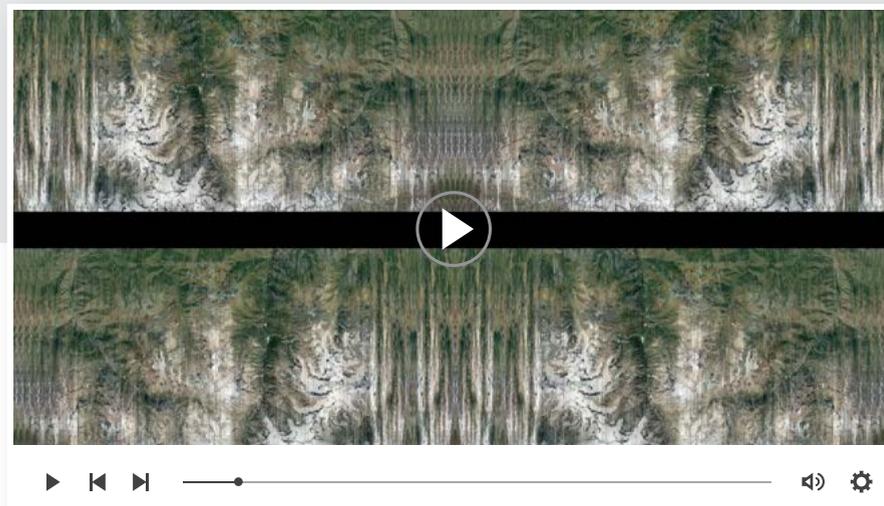
## Views from the Road: Naryn to Tash-Rabat in 50 Google Street View Screenshots

The border closures resulting from Covid-19 did not allow the author to travel to Central Asia. Michael's participation was restricted to videoconferencing on Zoom and WhatsApp. It was disappointing for him not to meet the villagers or fulfill an ambition to travel on the old Silk Road. Thanks to Google Street View, however,

Michael was able to make the 100-km drive from Naryn to the 15th-century caravanserai of Tash-Rabat, without leaving his desk in Sydney. The photographs were shot by Google's truck-mounted camera array in October 2015. In December 2021, Michael framed and sampled those images to produce the works for the exhibit.



## Heavenly Mountain Chaos



Heavenly Mountain Chaos explores the Tian Shan mountain range of Kyrgyzstan as a liminal space of possibilities. Building on his practice of making the invisible visible, the author applies a sorting algorithm developed in collaboration with Jan Andruszkiewicz to a satellite image of the mountain range. To achieve its transformations, the algorithm repositions every pixel in the satellite image, randomly selecting Husimi quasiprobability distribution data from a text of 223,966 samples, resulting in the gradual restructuring of the original. A progressive accretion of animated

motion transforms the mountain images – exhibiting a natural form of classical chaos – into another, born out of quantum chaos. The transformation reveals new patterns that correspond to a probability of meaning: chaos begetting chaos as an ongoing, entangled real-time process. The video visualizes a liminal space between worlds, a fitting tribute to a mountain range that is simultaneously positioned at both the centre and periphery of its region, a region of infinite order and chaos, in which the visible and invisible reflect and construct each other.

Paul Thomas

AUSTRALIA





## Shepherds of Baltistan

This photo essay explores Bara Brook, a part of the Ganche district of Gilgit-Baltistan, that towers high above in the mountains of Northern Pakistan. For local population, livestock – sheep, cows, yaks, and goats, is an important resource. Over centuries, Balti people adapted to harsh mountainous environment. However, now, the

pastoralists of Gilgit-Baltistan face an uncertain future. Climate change and socioeconomic development bring new challenges and even tougher conditions. Can these rugged mountain people, with faces weathered from a tough life, adjust to the new social and environmental landscape that now confronts them?

Victor Jose



## Edge of Heaven

Kyrgyzstan's cemeteries in the mountains and desert plateaus reflect the country's complex religious and cultural identities. The scenery blends Islamic architecture with nomadic and Soviet influences. Visiting the dead is not part of the Kyrgyz cultural code, so exploring these spaces feels lonely. However, one sometimes encounters horses, goats or snakes basking in the sun. Cemeteries are poetical places of wind, skies, and birds.



## Mountain Landscapes

In the mountainous countries there are very wealthy regions that live off tourism. In the immediate vicinity, however, there are also entire villages that have become extinct. Rich and poor coexist in the same space.



## Silk Road

Elena Grigoryan has always been interested in the interactions between Eastern and European cultures. According to Elena, these interactions that took place in the ancient cities of Central Asia and spread to Constantinople and Venice, helped to create incredible cultural alloys. These interactions, in fact, determined the fate of states and continents.

By using collage, the author included genuine artifacts in her work. There is a fragment of an old Otrar ceramics, an ancient Chinese coin, and a copy of a Persian miniature.



*"Silk Road", clay, glazes, smoke, artifacts, 40x50, 2018  
Ceramic panel with collage elements.*





*Consonance. Oriental motif. 60x43, 2021.  
Oil on canvas. Diptych.*

## Consonance

Vladimir Grigoryan focuses on color associations reminding viewers of the East. Gradations, harmonious color schemes vibrate and create a color symphony. The canvas contains elements that

imitate fabrics – lace, and allude to Asian clothing and ornaments. The combination of textured surfaces, the absence of a plot, the dominance of blue express the integrity of color consonance.



## Sal and Seri

For the past eight years, Qantar has been creating digital art using traditions, folklore and culture of the peoples of Central Asia as her inspiration. Through her visual stories, she connects times and cultures.

According to the author, the notion of *sal* and *seri* was used to describe skilled singers, storytellers, and even wrestlers, and magicians. *Sal* and *seri* were representatives of musical and theatrical art, who travelled from one *aul*, village to another, visiting distant clans, throughout the territory of Kazakh steppes. They performed drama, epic and mythological stories. In contrast to *zhyrau* and *akyn*, the *sal* would create a bright and cheerful theatrical and amusing spectacle. The performers themselves would wear bright clothes and perform unusual dances.





## Women, Variety, Scarves

Dolls could tell a lot about the local culture and society: about the plants that grow in the area, climate, local costumes, rules, and taboos. In the age of consumption, Aida Baltabaeva creates dolls from the remnants of fabric, using plastic bottles for their body. Every doll is unique:

Aida's dolls might have children, or be childless, young or old, with long or short hair. The author usually creates dolls wearing traditional head scarves in various ways. Through these head scarves, Aida Baltabaeva documents this dying art of wearing headscarves.



## The Road of Hope and Heritage

The stories of craftspeople and musicians in the film of Aibek Bayimbetov create a big picture of trials, tribulations and hopes of people living along the ancient Silk Road. The camera shows faces of representatives of mountain communities in the Alai region of Kyrgyzstan and Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan: craftspeople at work talking about their trade and handicraft skills inherited from their ancestors. A woman from Alai tells how the harsh climate and elevation do not allow to grow agricultural products, so the small village relies on profits from mountainous tourism and handicrafts.

A farmer expresses concerns of the proximity of the huge industrial mining project to his village: the extraction brings dust and deteriorates mountain pastures in Kok-Suu. In a different part of the road, a local researcher talks how the ethnic Kyrgyz and the Wakhi people shared the same space for centuries in the Pamir mountains. According to the creators of the film, this project looked at mountain communities in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan because they share similar mountain geography and culture. At the end of the film the director asks the participants:

Aibek Baiymbetov



what does it mean to be happy? Karim-Ulo-Khan, a local researcher from the Sost village in Gilgit-Baltistan, gives a simple recipe: "The happiness is in good words, good deeds, and good wishes".

The Road of Hope and Heritage is an ethnographic documentary produced with the support of the Resilient Silk Road Heritage Network Project funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).



## Innocent

Patchwork in Central Asian traditional cultures is the process of combining layers of multi-coloured fabric from patterns and shapes into a larger design. In contrast, the patchwork panel “Innocent” contains white pieces of cloth, with the choice of colour supporting the theme of the art piece; a dedication to the memory of the victims of the 1916 events and tragedy in Kyrgyz history. In the aftermath of the 1916 revolt by the Kyrgyz people against their conscription into the Russian army and their subsequent flight to China, the bodies of thousands and thousands of people were left lying in the mountain cliffs. The layers of white cloth stand for thousands of victims of violent political decisions of the colonial power; thousands of people who were innocent... In the Kyrgyz language, the word for white



is *ak*, which symbolizes innocence and honesty. The white cloth also represents the *kepin*, which is used to wrap the bodies of the deceased. Finally, the patchwork implies unknown pages of the 20th century Kyrgyzstan history.

Using survivors' accounts, like the pieces of fabric in the patchwork, Altyn and Manshuk are stitching together the stories and emotions and creating a whole picture of the tragic pages in the history of Kyrgyzstan and its people.





## Crossroads and Destinies

Cholpon created this patchwork from fabrics collected by the research team during field trips to the mountainous regions of Tajikistan,

Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The textile panel demonstrates the diversity and fusion of cultures within mountain communities.

Cholpon Alamanova

KYRGYZSTAN



## Sisterhood

Traditional knowledge and craft skills are passed down from older generation to the new, from grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters. Women surrounded by mountains and green trees listen to the sounds of water running around stones, while perfecting their craft. Dinara Chokotaeva notes, that she often recollects this image of women's solidarity and reproduces it in her art.





## Gold Diggers of the Icy River

Photo essays explore the life of Esengul Isabekov who has been mining gold on the banks of the Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan for 24 years. Mining is a source of income for rural residents, living in the village that does not provide

other employment options. Despite Esengul's worsening health, he did not give up gold mining. Because his family's income was tied to gold, Esengul believes that Kyrgyzstan can become Switzerland in the coming decades.





## Mountain Cedar Woolens

The collection of Gulmira Akmatova was inspired by *Bugu Ene* (Mother Deer), a legendary Kyrgyz deity. The pieces in pure merino wool have been hand woven by Kyrgyz artisans. Some clothes contain wool and silk threads. The brand is a beautiful combination of historical traditions and contemporary fashion.

Gulmira Akmatova

KYRGYZSTAN





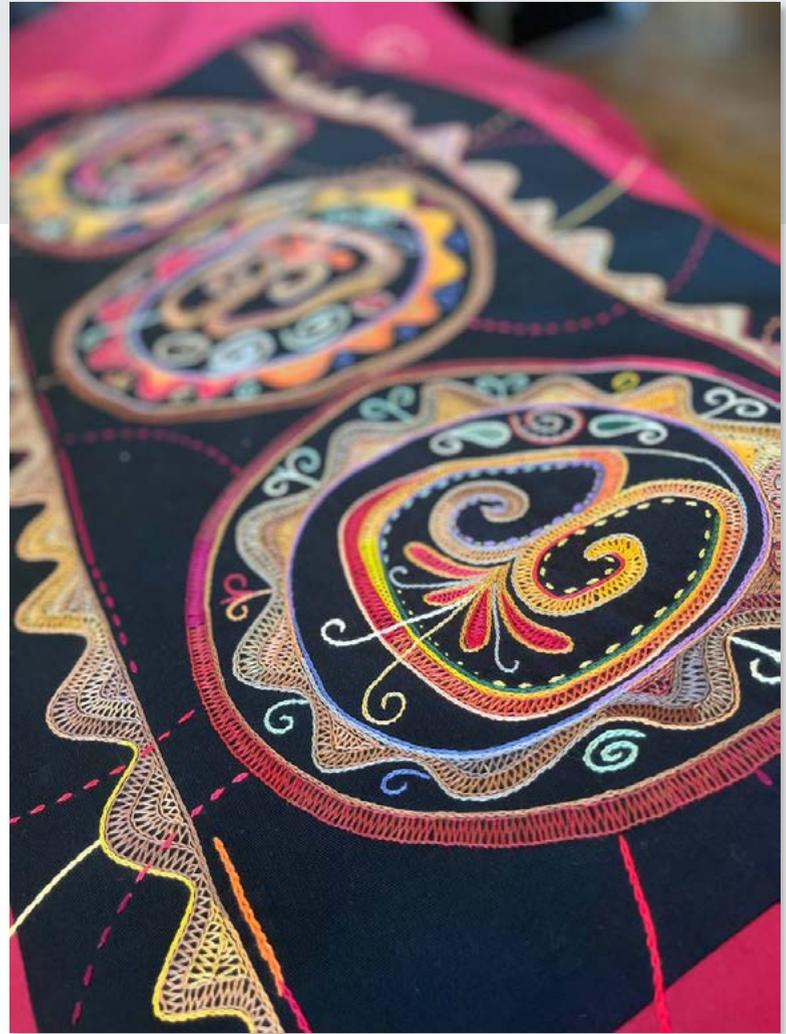
## Mountain Communities

The highlanders, people living in the mountains, are perceived as strong and fearsome. However, surrounded by mighty mountain peaks, these people and their houses remind of delicate colorful embroidered patterns, as in Gulmira Kutueva's work. Gulmira draws her inspiration from nature and mountain environment.



## Dedication

This work consists of three circles. In traditional embroidered art pieces, patterns are always framed but the artist decided to break the rules. These three circles represent women who do painstaking work. This beautiful piece is dedicated to their tenacity, strength, and freedom of expression.



Khimiya Torogeldieva

KYRGYZSTAN





## Felt, Feelings, and Freedom

History has not left us the names of craftswomen who for centuries created the finest samples of felt carpets. Even today despite the popularity of their handcraft these women remain in the shadows. The photo project by Saniya Nurova is an attempt to show faces, hands and feelings of female

creators who devoted their lives to creating felt art. In Saniya's photos, women are no longer silent. Instead, they are ready to face economic and social challenges: they create jobs, promote their products, transfer their skills and create new knowledge.





*The photo was taken by Malik Alymkulov.*

## Confluence of Times

The collection of clothes by Yntymak Abdyldaev was inspired by shamanic beliefs in the healing power of the wind. These beliefs were prevalent among nomadic peoples, including Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Altaians. When a person fell ill,

a healer took an iron ladle, poured oil into it, heated it on fire, and then threw pieces of red or blue cloth into it. It was believed that the rising steam had healing powers, and the method was known as the wind spell.

Yntymak Abdyldaev

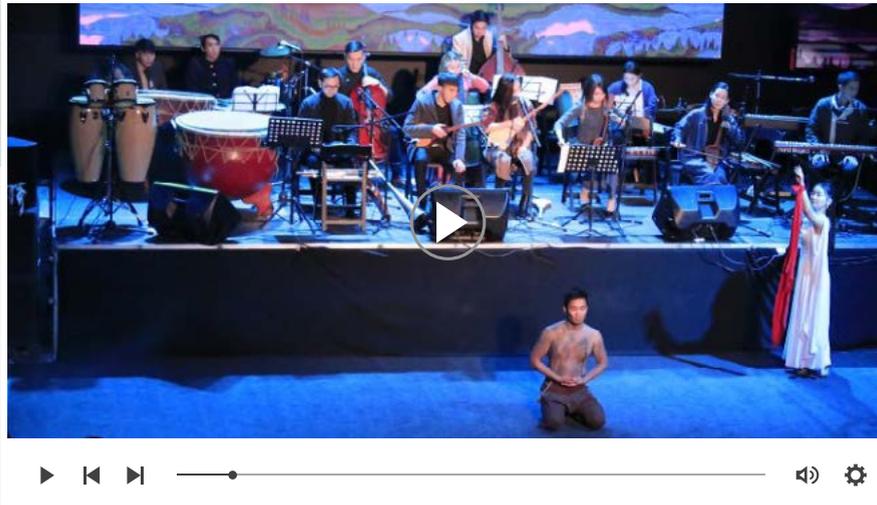
KYRGYZSTAN



## Self Portrait

Zura Turdubaeva has many identities. She is a professional artist, university teacher, world traveler, and mother. According to Zura, she has another identity: she appreciates traditional aesthetics, and for this reason, the artist often shows traditional clothing in her work. In this piece, Zura portrays herself as a representative of a traditional culture.





## Kyrgyz Kairyk

Kyrgyz Kairyk is a contemporary musical ensemble creating traditional music. The project aims to preserve and develop musical heritage of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. The Kyrgyz Kairyk

ensemble includes young professional musicians who are rooting for the preservation of nomadic musical art through creative musical expression in various forms and genres.





## 2202 m

Finally free – Escape from civilization – Freed from all constraints. The mountain world, which is so hostile to life in the first place, immediately conveys a feeling of security and becomes a place of longing for the beholder. The floating ceiling gives the

place something mystical. A little church in the background and the unapproachable place becomes the source of deeper knowledge for those who reach it. Shoes that no one owns, footprints in the snow – departure to another life.





## Balda

A film is a story about struggle for salvation. The director explores the lives of local mountain porters, who carry loads for mountaineers. These people are challenged to survive in extreme conditions.



## Ghazek

Ghazek is a bowed string folk instrument found in several countries across the High Asia region, i.e Hunza-Gojal of Pakistan, Xingian region of China, Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. The instrument has “relatives” in Armenia, Greece, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, where it is known as Gazek, Kemenche, Kamanchah. This instrument was revived through the efforts of the musicians.



## Practices of Making

The Practices of Making are explored with craftswomen of Laspur valley, Pakistan where 'making' is conjoined with the natural landscape, seasonal variations and everyday practices that define life in high mountain communities. This art piece looks at the story of the craft that is made up of time, matter and motivation. It revisits the relationship between the tools, the material, the land, and the hands that created it. The aim is to preserve the local practice inspired by landscape and leverage it for sustainable economic development of craft communities.



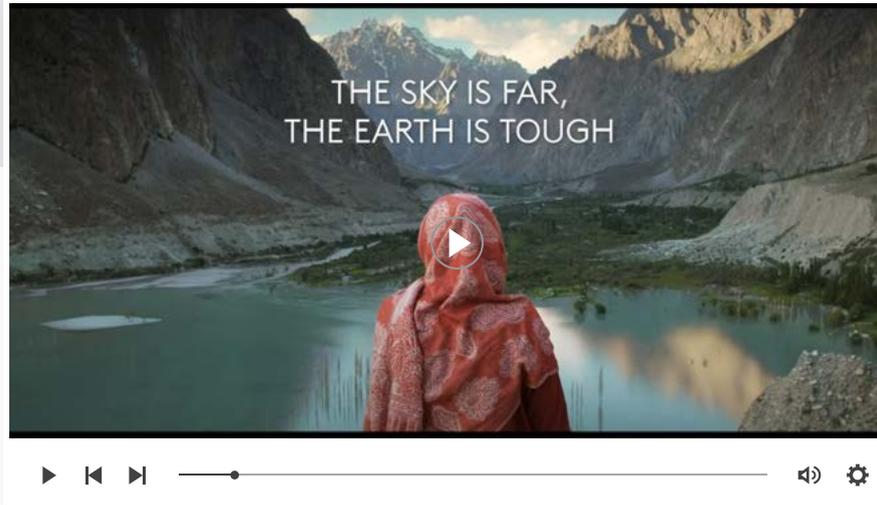


## Visual Dispatches

Visual dispatches represent stories and narrations from inhabitants living in places that are dealing with the effects of large infrastructure projects. Through dispatches we aim to gather a deeper understanding of how large infrastructural development has affected the lives and everyday spaces

of local communities. Visual dispatches provide the account from inhabitants living in Gilgit and Gojal in Pakistan and Angren and Pap in Uzbekistan. They allow us to visualize the fragilities; hopes and fears that are brought about by the material presence of infrastructural development.





## Voices from the Roof of the World: The Sky is Far, The Earth is Tough

When storm clouds gather at the top of mountains and it begins to drizzle, a 35-year old Shahbano, resident of Badswat village in Gilgit Baltistan, starts to shiver. She hears the sound of thunder and lashing rains in her head, and her body goes numb. Shahbano

has posttraumatic stress from a glacial lake outburst that destroyed her village in 2018. Shahbano and her neighbours now live in temporary shelters, braving harsh winters at minus 20 degrees Celsius in barely liveable conditions.



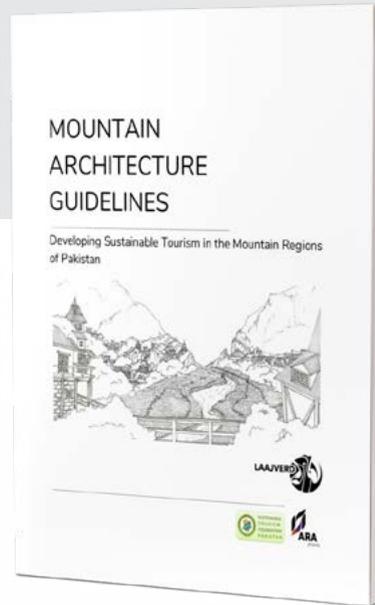


## Fragile Heritage Ecologies

Fragile heritage ecologies explore how heritage is created, lost, sustained and adapted in landscapes that are shifting and transforming due to the effects of climate change. We try to understand how communities experience change

and loss of heritage in multiple ways: the material loss of vernacular homes, significant places within the landscape and the immaterial loss of practices of everyday life, cultural practices and engagement with the landscape.





## Mountain Architecture Guidelines

Geographic zones with complex and interrelated ecosystems are where the impacts of climate change are most visible. Frequent and ever-increasing events of earthquakes, glacial lake outburst floods, river erosions, landslides and changing rain patterns affect life of mountain communities. Strategic planning for the built

environment in mountain areas should be considered and addressed at early stages before its effects are irreversible. Vernacular mountain architecture narrates years of knowledge of masons and craftspersons living in harmony with nature, using locally sourced materials and designing buildings with respect to the environment.





*Canvas, oil.*

## **Kishlak (Village)**

Small sketches of rural landscapes are created from fragments of childhood memories. The rural streets; the slowed down life at home. The contrasting hot and cold days, as is typical in mountain villages. The women with their children

in their garden, collecting brushwood and drinking tea. Of course, life in the mountains is not easy and requires hard work. But at the same time, it has its own poetry of everyday life and everyday beauty, which are found in simple things.



## Thunderstorm

The roots of every Tajik originate from the *kishlaks*, small villages in the remote mountainous areas of Tajikistan. Aini Tajiks, Faizabad Tajiks, Darvaz Tajiks, Dangara Tajiks – we all originate from villages. When clouds gather in the mountains and a thunderstorm approaches, the *dekhkans*, or villagers, herd cattle into their pens. The smell of impending rain is in the air. But the strong-willed villagers are not afraid of the coming storm.



Paper. Alcohol ink.





*Sisters. Size 60x80 cm. Canvas. Acrylic.*

## Guardians of Cultural Heritage

In mountain communities, women, in addition to everyday hard work, continue to be the creators and the crafters. Producing traditional embroidery, felt and woven carpets, beautiful clothes and shoes, the women kept their

traditions alive, unleashing their fantasy and demonstrating their skills. These crafts amongst many others are preserved for future generations thanks to their skilled work and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Manizha Abdullaeva

TAJIKISTAN



## Being a Child

The author writes: "I used to be a child. I remember being a happy child even I had only a few toys that were passed to me from my older siblings: a doll, a Soviet *Azbuka* , a box of wooden alphabet blocks that my father bought in Leningrad for my older sister, and a small bucket. My playground was outside. Nature was my playground. I ran, got hurt, got dirty, screamed, cried, and laughed with my friends outside. I had a favourite game. All children had a part to play. Us, the younger kids, would steal potatoes from the garden and together with the older children, we would collect wood and make a fire close to the river and then bake the potatoes. Being accepted by the older kids and roasting potatoes in the 1990s Tajikistan was priceless. We were unaware of the civil war then. We were children."





*Canvas, oil.*

## Highlanders

Mountain villages in the Pamiri region of Tajikistan appear as if they grew out of the mountains themselves. The local materials used to build houses blend in perfectly with the overall landscape.

People alter the world around them through communication with nature – mountains, rivers, stones, earth. A caring and a reasonable relationship with nature is embedded in the traditional knowledge of mountain communities of Pamir.



The University of Central Asia was founded in 2000. The Presidents of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan, and His Highness the Aga Khan signed the International Treaty and Charter establishing this secular and private university, ratified by the respective parliaments, and registered with the United Nations.

The Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU) is part of the Graduate School of Development, University of Central Asia. CHHU works for preserving and promoting the rich and diverse cultural heritages of Central Asia through research, documentation, archiving and support of regional scholars and cultural institutions.

This exhibition catalogue is designed under the Resilient Silk Route Heritage Network of GCRF to celebrate mountain heritages along the Silk routes. The project links local organizations and academic institutions in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to help develop resilient local economies and sustainable mountain societies. The GCRF Network also aims to develop a stronger South-South collaboration and knowledge sharing platform for building lasting networks for communication and future development.