

AZERBAIJAN 2025

**HER
IN
ACTION**

**FREE TO
DREAM**

**VOR
FOX**

© NAZRIN MAMMADOVA

HER
ART
IN
ACTION

FREE TO
DREAM

WHAT DO YOU DREAM? PICTURING OUR INNER LIVES

The topic for the 2025 edition of **Her Art in Action** focuses on how women depict and articulate their dreams for themselves. Faced with expectations around family, education, home life, work and community, women are expected to be many things by others. In this exhibition, the commissioned artists depict their own dreams for themselves, showing where expectations and aspirations converge and diverge, and creating a nuanced portrait of how women see their individual and collective futures and their role within them.

SUPPORT



We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our sponsors for making the Her Art in Action festival possible. Special thanks to the Union of Artists of Azerbaijan, "Nar", Pasha Travel, and the Embassy of the Netherlands in Azerbaijan. Your support has allowed us to showcase the creative potential of female artists and reach a wider audience. Thank you for your invaluable contributions.

8 MARCH

OPENING CEREMONY



“HER ART IN ACTION”

is an annual festival dedicated to supporting and empowering women artists in Azerbaijan. Held at the esteemed Union of Artists of Azerbaijan in Baku, our festival aims to inspire creativity, build community, and encourage collaboration among female artists.

We believe in the transformative power of art and its ability to change and challenge perceptions. Supporting women artists is crucial because art has the potential to encourage important dialogues, promote empathy, and foster connections across diverse communities. By supporting women artists, we contribute to a more balanced representation within the art world, providing them with a platform to share their experiences.

Our festival is dedicated to giving local women artists a platform to exhibit their work, gain visibility, and reach a broader audience. We achieve this through exhibitions, workshops, and collaborations, fostering a supportive and inclusive artistic community.

The festival opened with a private preview on March 8, attended by distinguished guests including Leyla Aliyeva and Arzu Aliyeva, and welcomed the broader public on March 9. Over the course of the month, the exhibition and public programs drew an active and engaged audience, with consistent visitor flow, extensive social media engagement, and coverage in more than 80 media outlets - affirming the festival’s growing cultural relevance.



LESLEY GRAY
CURATOR

Lesley Gray is a Dubai and Los Angeles based curator and researcher specializing in contemporary art and museums in the Arabian Peninsula and Caspian Sea regions.

Professionally, Lesley provides curatorial consultancy services on a variety of museum and cultural projects, including large-scale contemporary art and heritage projects in the GCC.

She completed her PhD in Museum Studies and Art History at University College London focusing on contemporary art institutions and art practice in the GCC and Caspian Sea regions and has a research background in Anthropology, Contemporary Art, and Museum Studies. In addition to her professional curatorial projects, she is a contributing writer to ArtAsiaPacific Magazine and the ArtAsiaPacific Almanacs (2016-2020). She published her first book, Azerbaijan Contemporary Art, in 2022.



AYNA MOAZZEN
CURATOR

Ayna Moazzen is a Rome and Baku-based curator and art historian, born in Tehran, specializing in contemporary visual culture, feminist art, and cross-cultural dialogue between the Middle East and Europe. Professionally, Ayna curates exhibitions and panel discussions that explore the intersections of gender, identity, and visual language. She collaborates with institutions, artists, and cultural platforms to create inclusive spaces for underrepresented voices in contemporary art.

Ayna holds a Master's degree in Art History from Tor Vergata University of Rome, with a focus on architecture and transnational artistic exchanges. Her research bridges classical traditions with contemporary expressions, with particular interest in comparative studies between Italian and Iranian visual cultures. She is currently based between Rome and Baku and is involved in ongoing projects that promote artistic collaboration across borders.

By inviting international artists
to Her Art in Action, we aim to
create a dynamic exchange
of ideas and experiences.

FOREIGN ARTISTS

Natela Grigalashvili
Juste Jonutyte
Zarrin Sanvar
Dilyara Kaipova



Dilyara Kaipova

Gazmask, 2025

Textile panel,
traditional cotton ikat 190 x 125 cm

Scream mask, 2025

Handcrafted organic silk ikat,
Traditional women's robe "Munisak"

A women's robe made from "Krik" fabric follows a traditional cut. These robes, known as "Mursak," (or Munisak) were an essential part of an Uzbek bride's dowry, with up to 15 pieces included. The dowry (sarpa in Uzbek) was what a bride took with her from her parents' home to her husband's house, marking the beginning of her new life. The textile panel "Gas Mask" is created using the traditional Central Asian technique "kurak," which involves stitching together different textile fragments into a single fabric. These panels could incorporate patches from garments of past generations, antique embroidery, and fragments of both old and new fabrics and were often imbued with sacred meaning. Uzbek ikats, traditionally known as "abro fabrics," are handcrafted using ancient artisanal techniques. Their patterns are applied to warp threads through a resist-dyeing process, giving them their characteristic blurred, fluid contours. The textiles used in these presented works were produced in collaboration with folk artisans from Margilan, in the Fergana Valley. With the collapse of the USSR, the production of abro fabrics began to revive, as artisans sought to restore forgotten techniques and patterns. Traditional ornamentation is seamlessly combined with contemporary minimalist imagery, creating a dialogue on modern issues. The image of the "outsider" is woven into traditional patterns, forming a new, unconventional narrative that remains clearly understood. The archaic language of ornament is adapted to address pressing regional concerns—globalization and identity, gender inequality, environmental issues, and security.





Natela Grigalashvili

The Final Days of the Georgian Nomads, (ongoing)

Photography / 29.7 x 42 cm and 21.0 x 29.7 cm

The Doukhobors' Land, (ongoing)

Photography / 29.7 x 42 cm and 21.0 x 29.7 cm

Women of Pankisi Gorge (ongoing)

Photography / 29.7 x 42 cm and 21.0 x 29.7 cm

The Final Days of the Georgian Nomads, (ongoing)

Adjara is a mountainous region in Georgia, distinguished for its remote landscape and the preservation of traditional practices. The physical isolation, difficult socio-economic situation and lack of developed infrastructure, educational and healthcare services in Adjara have made this life even harder to sustain, which has led to many villages being abandoned. The people of the Khulo and Ghorjomi Gorges live in the highest settlements in Adjara. Primarily Muslim cattle breeders, they move seasonally with their herds and many of the men still work in Turkey during the rest of the year to support their families. As the villages empty, this way of life and the traditions they carry are slowly being forgotten.



Women of Pankisi Gorge (ongoing)

Pankisi Gorge is one of the most distinctive regions of Georgia. It's multiethnic and diverse, with interesting history, traditions and special modernity. The majority of the population in Pankisi are ethnic Kist Muslims. Their ancestors started to settle in Pankisi Gorge from the XVII century and from the XIX century the entrance of Chechen and Ingush families became intensive and continued in the first years of independence in 1918-1921's, but the largest number of refugees entered Georgia during the first and second wars of Chechnya.

Women that live in villages near Pankisi Gorge are almost isolated from the rest of the world. This isolation prevents them from economical and social development and it does not allow them to make decisions independently. Because of the religious and cultural peculiarities that exist in Gorge, after the divorce children stay with their father and this is the reason why divorce is very rare in Pankisi. They give birth and raise their children, but later some of them don't even ask their opinion when they are going to war. Locals say that before no man could go to a war without the blessing from their mother. Everything is changing in Pankisi and beautiful and hospitable Pankisian women are slowly covered with the shadow of chador.

The Doukhobors' Land, (ongoing)

The Doukhobors – or spirit-warriors – as they call themselves, are a Protestant Orthodox society who were relocated from the Russian Empire to Georgia's Javakheti region three centuries ago. Centred around the village of Gorelovka, which they consider to be the centre of Doukhobors around the world, they built a prosperous community of eight villages that found economic success, with their collective farm being the second most wealthiest in the Soviet Union. They were also supported by Lev Tolstoy, who founded a school in Gorelovka, which still functions today. Their religious practice is one of simplicity – for the Doukhobors, God is everywhere and everything, and each person is a temple to the divine. Notably, spiritual leaders were often women.

Today the lack of opportunity for their young people is forcing people to leave the villages and country, but their longing for their homeland and community remains – for the Doukhobors, Javakheti is the only place where they can find peace.



Zarrin Sanvar

Free to Dream, 2025

Video installation

In this deeply personal work, the artist explores themes of childhood dreams, societal expectations, loss, and rediscovery of one's self as a visual narrative in the form of a fairy tale. Drawing from her own life experiences, she metaphorically illustrates the journey from a child's belief in limitless possibilities to societal constraints, and ultimately, a rebirth of dreams. It is both an intimate exploration of personal history and a universal story about the human spirit's resilience. In experiencing the work, the artist invites viewers to reflect on their own dreams and the societal influences that shape them.



LOCAL ARTISTS

Aliya The Mushroom
Arzu Jabrayilova
Aygün Bakhshiyeva
Ayten Abdullayeva
Fidan Abilova
Fidan Humbatli
Fidan Nazimgizi
Gunel Ravilova
Jala Azizova
Jamila Ahmadova
Kafiya Eyvazova
Lali Binyatova
Minira
Nazrin Mammadova
Nigar Rahmanova
Sabina Mukhudinova
Sabina Shikhliinskaya
Saida Mirzayeva
Sitara Ibrahimbayli
Sura Madatova
Tamira Ibrahim
Ulkar Aliyeva
Ulviyya Iman



Aliya the Mushroom

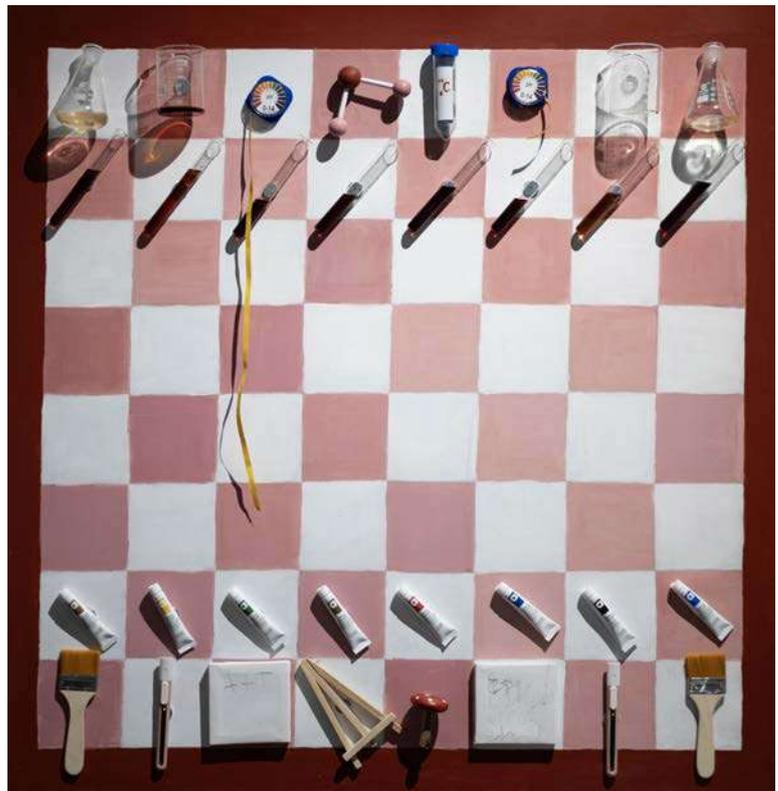
Chess for one, 2025

Acrylics, mixed media on canvas,
interactive
100 x 100 cm

What I dream of is a woman finding her inner presence. This presence can only be found by controlling the strings of her brain and turning the situation into a game. The objects in this work are somehow from my inner world or the inner world of the daughter of Eve. This work depicts a utopian chessboard.

The pieces on the chessboard are far from familiar.

The white pieces are replaced by art/painting supplies, representing the right hemisphere of the brain, and the black pieces are replaced by chemicals and chemical lab supplies, representing the left hemisphere. Here, art and chemistry can be thought of as dualities, like day and night, right and left, yin and yang.



To create art inspired by chemistry and to study chemistry to create art is the greatest game my inner self plays with me and society. The viewer will also discover that this game is inside them. This game takes place within the viewer. They take the strings of the turmoil into their hands. Science and art are interpretations of things that each viewer has to manage within themselves. This game reminds women viewing the work of how powerful a being she is, possessing the power of all the pieces of the solitaire chess game in front of her. Every woman has situations like this, where she has to manage, more than once, what society expects of her. But she can turn this situation into a game and reach inner peace.

There are no opponents in this chess game, only you and yourself. As you change the place of each piece, the woman breaks her silence and finds an answer to her inner turmoil. This game means that a woman goes through her labyrinth, replaces her inner chaos with harmony, takes the rope into her own hands, and becomes the master of the chess of fate. This work stands as a mirror for a woman to see her limitless power. It reminds her that every delicate touch and every smart move makes a woman the queen of her reality.



Arzu Jabrayilova

Liberum Vinculum (Free bonds), 2025

Paper, black ink, gold leaf
50 x 70 cm

Philosophical thinking in this work revolves around the themes of inner freedom and the transcendental search for meaning, where each image is filled with ancient symbols and references to the world's cultural heritage. The painting delves into the depths of the human soul by establishing a dialogue between mythology, theology, and artistic traditions. The bird depicted in Budakt, with its posture, evokes the image of the "thinking traveler" often seen in Romantic painting.



Yet, its gaze is fixed on the unknown, as if peering beyond the limits of the visible world. This motif resonates with the myth of Prometheus, whose vision was metaphorically portrayed as suffering transformed into a quest for knowledge and freedom, even as he was chained to a mountain. In this context, the bird symbolizes the soul, caught between heaven and earth, striving to comprehend the universe, yet constrained by the limitations of physical existence.

The twisted tree branches are a reference to the Tree of Life in Sumerian and Norse mythology, where each branch represents destinies intertwined in an inescapable knot. At the same time, these branches recall the images of hell from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the branches of sinners reflect their spiritual struggles and misdeeds. The tree's leaves symbolize the cycle of life. Among them, the gold leaves stand out as a nod to ancient traditions, where gold was seen as the embodiment of the divine. These golden leaves echo the laurel wreath of Apollo, patron of the arts, underscoring that creative freedom is the highest form of inner freedom.

The flower, still in bud, contrasts with the gold accents through its modest appearance. It resembles a flora that has sprung from the blood of Adonis and turned into an anemone—symbolizing both the fleeting nature of life and its inherent beauty. This flower illustrates that true freedom demands sacrifice and inner transformation.

Inspired by the spirit of medieval engravings and Renaissance iconography, this work visually and conceptually bridges the past and present, the external and internal worlds. Here, the bird, tree, leaves, and flower emerge as the protagonists of an ancient myth, and each viewer is invited to complete this myth through their own reflections on freedom, dreams, and eternity.



Fidan Nazimgizi



Aygun Bakhshiyeva

**Crow is passing between us,
2024**

Mixed media, animatio

Seeing the city through the eyes of a crow, we witness it navigating various situations. The city is mostly gray, but as the crow moves, colors begin to emerge—just as our desires bring color to the thoughts that trouble us. In the fast-paced life of the metropolis, the crow's flight symbolizes the pursuit of dreams and a return to one's true nature. Moving beyond the colorless cityscape, the crow, on its journey toward its dreams, is more than just a bird - it embodies a person's dreams, hopes, and inner freedom. If a crow can fly to the places it desires, then a person, too, can achieve any aspiration.

The essence of this mixed-media animation reflects the human struggle to break free from limiting thoughts and reconnect with their true nature, much like the crow escaping the metropolis. This work combines 2D frame-by-frame animation with the alternative printing method cyanotype, creating a retro, analog atmosphere. The sound design blends the noises of the metropolis with the echoes of our inner world, reinforcing the film's introspective and emotional depth.





Ayten Abdullayeva

**Triptych – Hopes wandering the city,
2016 – 2022**

Watercolor

Series, 30 x 40 cm, 40 x 50 cm, 30 x 40 cm



Before being internally displaced, Nargiz worked as a clerk at the regional water supply junction and later at the hotline department. Now, her main concern is ensuring that brooms and other cleaning supplies are delivered on time each week.

The lemons are cultivated and transported to the 8th km market by the villager. Zambag knows the alleys and passages of the central streets better than most locals, thanks to her firsthand knowledge of where to buy the best lemons. She often regrets leaving her technical school behind.

The heroes of my works are not fictional characters; they are real people we may encounter on the streets of our city. The women depicted in the paintings (conventionally named Nargiz, Lala, and Zambag) have come to the city from the regions, hoping to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

Lala sews bath mitt and sets out every day to sell them, placing them in various parts of the city. She never imagined that she might sell her bath mitts in front of shopping centers or malls, let alone inside them.





Fidan Abilova

Rebirth, 2025

Mixed media on canvas
80 x 110 cm

In this work, the artist depicts the inner world and struggles we encounter as we each seek our own path on our life journey towards achieving our dreams. Once a person is born into the world, life puts them through various difficulties to help them develop themselves and discover their inner potential. Over time, a person not only understands themselves but also gains a deeper understanding of the world around them. This path, full of trials, serves to help a person understand life and grow. While this journey is one of choices, obstacles, and struggle, it is only by going through this process that one can find themselves, learn life's lessons, and gain a deeper sense of meaning.

When looking at the sky with the blacklight, matrix codes are visible, marked with the binary coding system 1 and 0. This suggests that the universe operates with a certain program; 1 and 0 also represent the game of existence and non-existence. Between the numbers, the phrase "We bring the dead to life, we record what they have done and the traces they leave" (from the Holy Quran) is written. It signifies that everything we do affects the soul, the world, and future lives.





Fidan Humbatli

Wholeness in absence, 2023 and 2024

Etchings, 50 x 60 cm

Digital prints, 21 x 29.7 cm

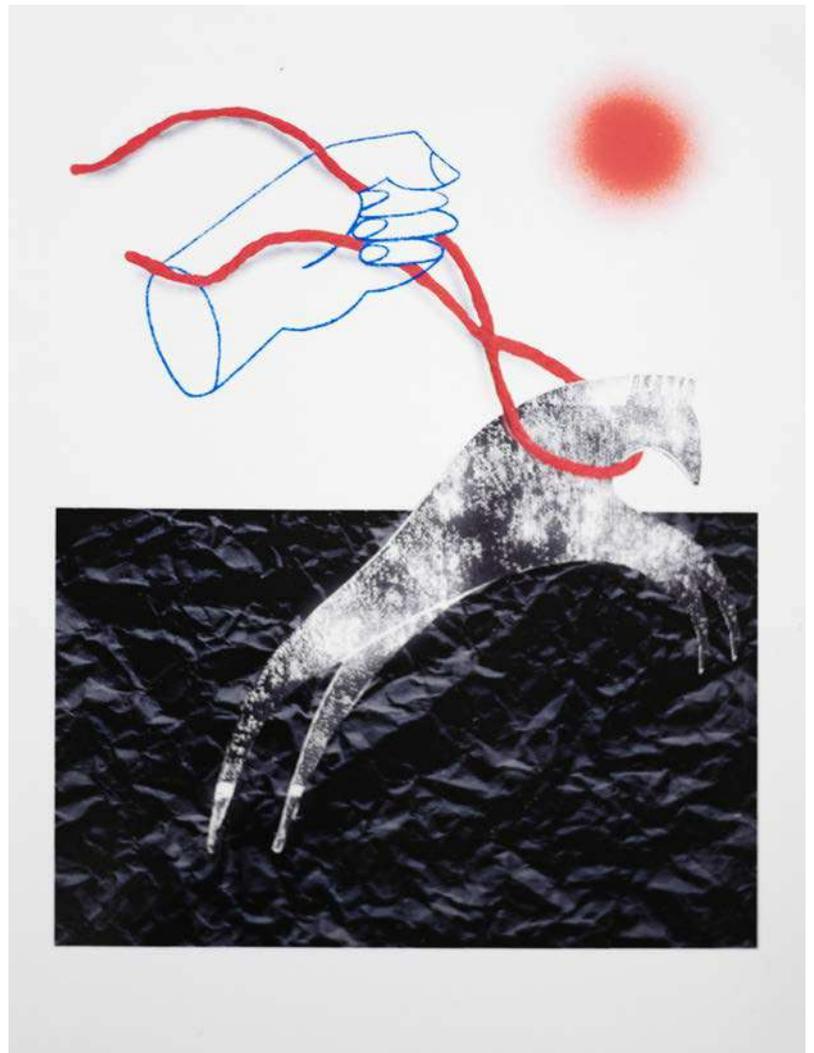
This series of works explores emotional trauma and its influence on self-perception. The fragmented limbs represent physical losses experienced on an emotional level—trust, confidence, and a sense of wholeness.

This series of works explores emotional trauma and its influence on self-perception. The fragmented limbs represent physical losses experienced on an emotional level—trust, confidence, and a sense of wholeness.

Trauma, endured at different stages of life, leaves behind a feeling of “absence,” as if parts of the body were physically lost.

However, this series is not just about pain - it also highlights the human ability to adapt and find new ways of existing despite these losses.

The series reflects the idea that even with emotional losses, we can continue to move forward. Losing something significant doesn't mean losing the ability to live, create, or grow. Each fragment in the work represents strength, resilience, and the pursuit of wholeness within incompleteness. It's a story of acceptance, recovery, and the will to keep living.





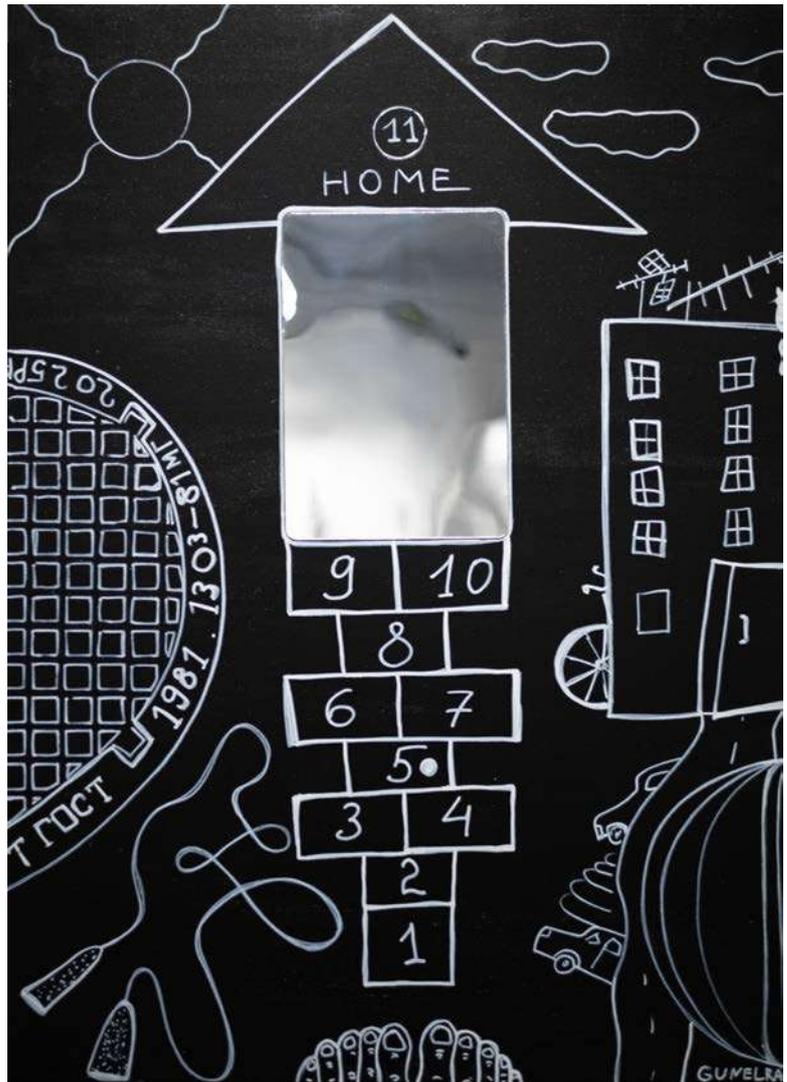
Gunel Ravirova

Returning to childhood, 2024

Canvas/acrylic oil marker, mirror
100 x 70 cm

Returning to childhood features a rectangular mirror in the shape of a house, surrounded by elements resembling streets and children's belongings. The work symbolizes a person's journey from a carefree childhood to adulthood. The mirror located in the center reflects the viewer, recalling how childhood memories and our roots shape us. Elements such as the hopscotch game, children's toys, and an antenna on the roof of the house create an atmosphere of nostalgia, and the presence of clouds and other details add a sense of ephemerality to memories.

This work is part of a larger project, which includes works with mirrors on a black canvas, exploring the theme of reflections as a metaphor for self-discovery and identity. Mirrors here are not just objects; they serve as the key to understanding how we perceive ourselves, the people around us, and how others perceive us.



The mirror becomes a tool for exploring internal conflicts, desired ideals, and real expectations. The work invites the viewer to a dialogue with themselves and the world around them, and makes them think about how the past and future are connected in our perception of the present.



Jala Azizova

Loaded emotions, 2025

Textile installation
50 x 70 cm (1 pillow)

Loaded emotions is a visual representation of the emotions and burdens that accumulate within a person's inner world. The stacked pillows symbolize the mounting pressures of daily life. Each pillow embodies a different emotion, experience, or memory. This highlights not only the weight of these accumulated feelings but also the strength required to endure and overcome them.



Jamila Ahmadova

The other half, 2024

Digital illustration
21 x 29.7 cm

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Lali Binyatova

My mom's dowry, 2024

Mixed media on digital print
30 x 37.5 cm, 40 x 50 cm

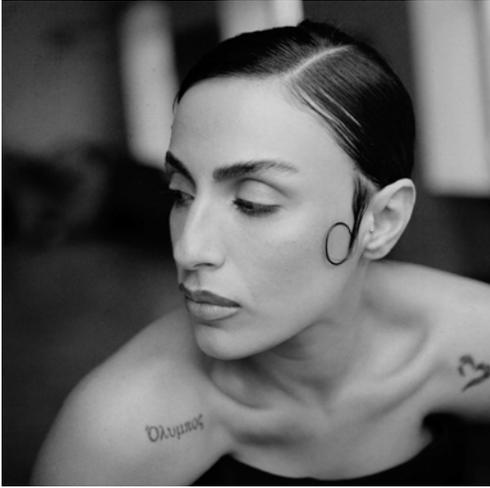
I've been asked, "When are you getting married?" since I was 16, yet I still don't feel ready. At first, I thought this was just a cultural expectation, but after talking to people here, I realized it's a common question in this country too. It's just that everyone's timing is different.

In Azerbaijan, patriarchal norms dictate that marriage is essential for a woman. She is expected to "have a man behind her," "bear children," and "continue the lineage." Many women are pressured into marriage because it is so highly valued, and under these societal expectations, some make hasty decisions without truly having a choice. In the worst cases, young girls are forced into marriage at an early age.



From childhood, girls face countless restrictions: "Come home before dark," "You're a girl, you can't travel alone," "You can't stay overnight at a friend's house," "You can't meet a boy before marriage," and so on. For many, marriage becomes the only escape from these limitations. Meanwhile, boys and men are free to do as they please. Today, however, many women are breaking free from these norms, choosing to live on their terms—and they are happy.





Minira

I know my place, 2025

Performance

In this performance, my goal is for women to have the opportunity to truly live their womanhood, free from the constraints and expectations imposed by patriarchal society.

Five individuals represent the societal community, pressing in on me from all sides. They affect me with physical pressure, their voices, and even direct contact. This pressure symbolizes the weight of their expectations and dominance. As the embodiment of an Azerbaijani woman, I am fighting to break free from this oppression, to step out of the shadows, and to assert my existence and womanhood.

It is a challenging battle, both physically and emotionally. With all my inner strength and voice, after a long and intense struggle, I begin to break free. I overcome the societal barriers created to confine me and step into the light.

The performance is enhanced with special choreography, professional stage lighting, and sound compositions that amplify the emotional impact.

In the finale, I overcome all obstacles and stand triumphantly on the bodies symbolizing these societal figures. In this moment of victory, I experienced both freedom and the powerful realization that change is possible through freedom itself.





Kafiya Eyvazova

It's nothing to worry about, girls develop quickly anyway, 2024

Bride, I want seven sons, but only one daughter, 2024

I want a daughter-in-law who will take care of my son just like I do, 2025

You can only return in a shroud, 2025

It's nothing to worry about, girls develop quickly anyway, 2024

Whenever I voice my opposition to early marriages, I often encounter the same familiar justifications:

“Girls mature quickly—does she even look like a child?”

“It's better for a girl to marry young; at least she won't sit idle at home.”

“A boy can get married late, but a girl should get married early, she grows up quickly”

Hearing these absurd, rehearsed arguments repeatedly pushed me to explore this issue through my work. This painting is the second piece of the “Bride” series, and its title is drawn directly from the rigid stereotypes ingrained in our society. The artwork visualizes the tragic realities and consequences of these beliefs through symbolic imagery.

At its core, the painting depicts the marriage of an adult man and a young girl, their figures merging into the shape of a coffin. This imagery represents both the physical and emotional deaths caused by early marriages. Some girls bleed to death due to childbirth complications, while others suffer the loss of their dreams, childhood, and youth. The coffin symbolizes futures stolen too soon—of lives overshadowed by a fate they never chose.

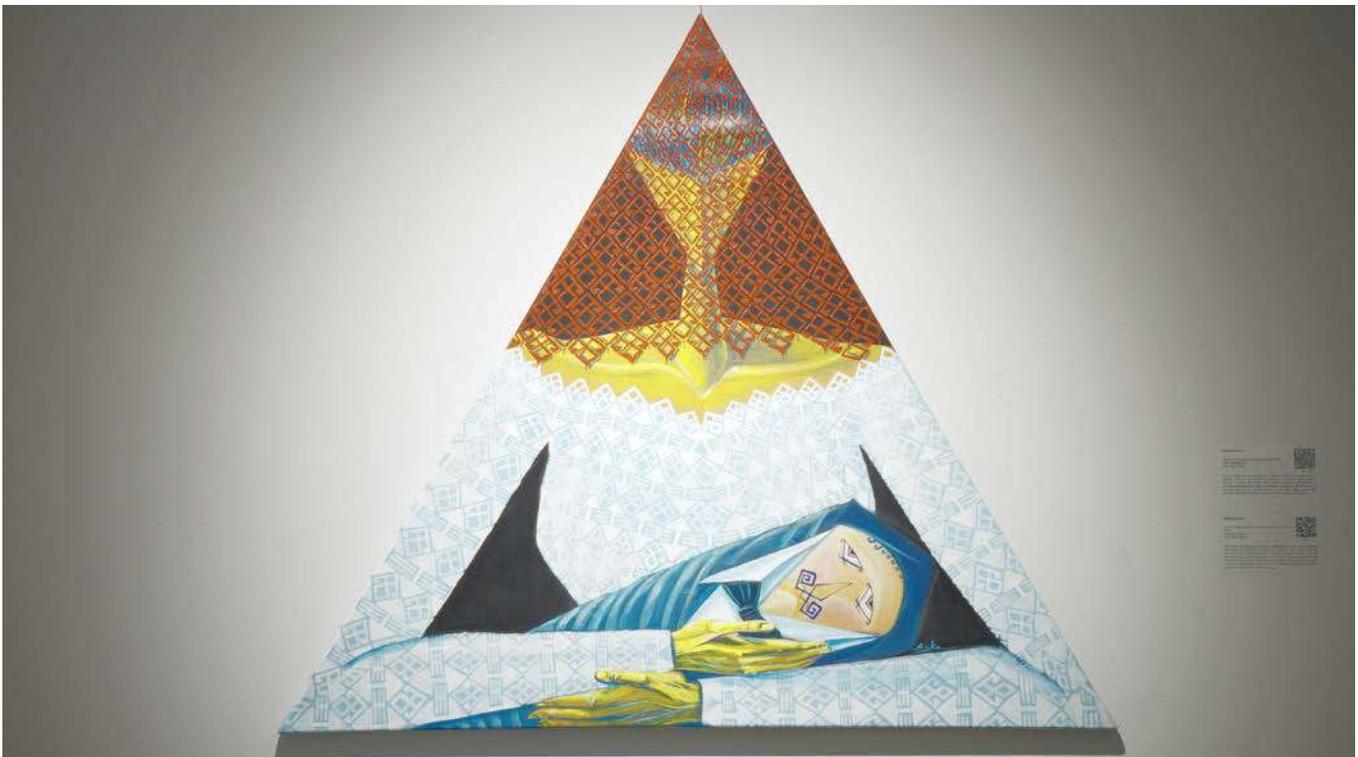


Bride, I want seven sons, but only one daughter, 2024

Mixed media on canvas / 76 x 120 cm

This work is the first piece in the “Bride” series, critically examining contemporary wedding customs. It delves deeply into society’s ingrained hatred of women and the stereotypes that perpetuate these harmful beliefs. As with other works in the series, each symbol is carefully chosen and intricately connected to the subject matter.

At first glance, the painting resembles an hourglass, but upon closer inspection, it also reflects the proportions of the female body. The hourglass here not only symbolizes the passage of time but also serves as a critique of the Westernized wedding dress, which is often deemed “modern.” At the top and bottom of the hourglass, the stylized letters “XY” are depicted, representing the male chromosomes. Inside the hourglass, the two prominent “X” symbols stand for the female chromosomes (XX). The artist highlights these motifs, underscoring the absurdity of holding women accountable for the gender of a child, especially when they possess only the “XX” chromosome.



I want a daughter-in-law who will take care of my son just like I do, 2025

Acrylics on canvas / 120 x 120 x 120 cm

The image depicts a triangular composition of a bride holding a baby in her arms, with the child’s face resembling an adult man. Adorning the bride’s wedding dress and veil are symbols associated with motherhood and fertility. Notably, the bride’s face is absent—her identity and emotions are completely erased within the constraints of her role. Her face is entirely veiled by red fabric, which forms the “Əli belində” (Hands on Hips) ornament, a traditional symbol of motherhood and fertility. This emphasizes how a woman’s individuality is often overshadowed by the societal expectation of motherhood.

The bride’s dress symbolizes the societal expectations and stereotypical roles placed upon her. The baby she holds, dressed as a groom with the face of a mustached man, serves as a humorous critique of the stereotypical thinking embedded within the culture from which the work derives its title.



Nazrin Mammadova

Earth to Ether, 2024

Digitally manipulated botanical drawings / 21.0 x 29.7 cm

Reverie, 2024

oil & acrylic paint on canvas / 200 x 200 cm

Unfolding Frequencies, 2025

mixed media on canvas, triptych / 150 x 150 cm x 3

Reverie, 2024

This painting is my exploration of the intricate interplay between dreams, fears, and desires. As I worked on it, I found myself delving deep into the subconscious—a space where light and shadow constantly shift, creating a vivid, dreamlike reverie. The forms and colors emerged intuitively, almost as if they were guiding me, each stroke revealing fragments of emotions I couldn't fully articulate.

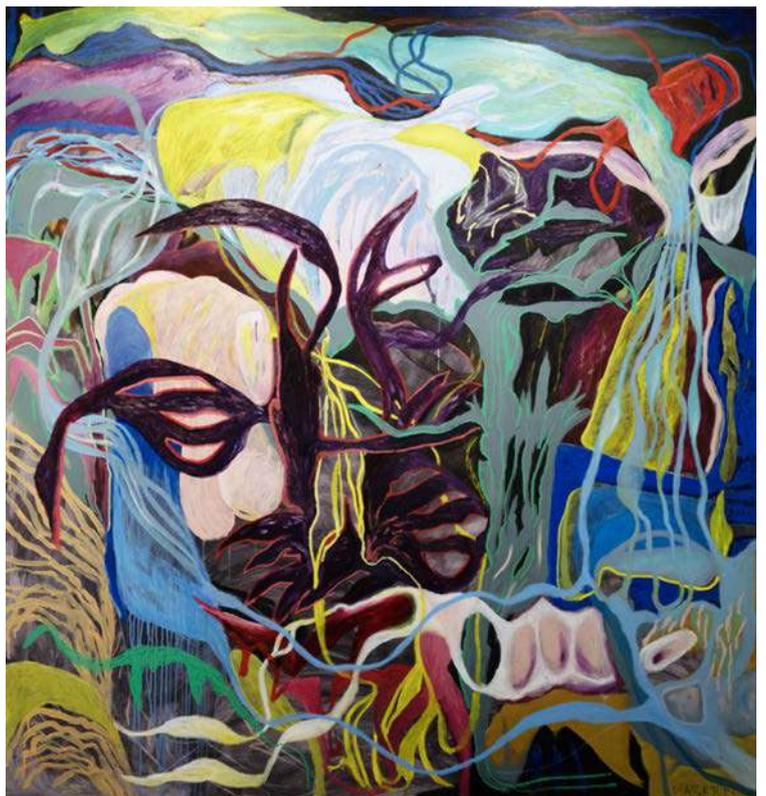
The darker tones in the piece represent those shadowy corners of the mind where fears linger—unspoken but always present. In contrast, the bursts of vibrant color embody desire, passion, and the limitless potential of imagination. It's about that constant push and pull: the dreams that propel us forward and the fears that make us hesitate. Together, they create a balance that feels both chaotic and harmonious.

For me, "Reverie" is deeply personal, yet I hope it resonates universally. It's a reflection of those moments when we're caught between what we long for and what we're afraid of when the lines between dream and reality blur. Through this piece, I wanted to create a space where viewers could lose themselves and perhaps confront their hidden emotions—a space that feels enchanting, unsettling, and deeply human.

Earth to Ether, 2024

In *Earth to Ether*, I delve into nature's metamorphosis, focusing on the endangered plant species from Azerbaijan's Red Book. For me, this project represents the delicate balance between life and disappearance, where nature's energy finds new forms even when faced with extinction.

I use botanical illustrations as a foundation, exploring how these organic forms lose their physicality and transition into something beyond. Through intentional distortions, I reveal this passage—a transformation from earth to ether—where familiar shapes dissolve into the unknown. *Earth to Ether* is my meditation on nature's resilience, on how life continually transcends its own limits, evolving into an abstract, almost cosmic presence that binds the earthly with the ethereal.





Nigar Rahmanova

Spirals of Thought, 2024

Mixed media, digital print
29.7 x 42 cm

My works are born out of reflections on routine, its inevitability, and the loss of a certain naivety in perceiving the world. It's a constant confrontation with the thought that one must fit into a system, working a "regular" job. Paradoxically, it is this very routine that has become the source of inspiration for my art.

The red thread present in my works symbolizes the endless connection to art — a connection that persists even in moments when it seems there's no time for it. It serves as a reminder that art remains a part of me, despite exhaustion, doubt, and the weight of everyday concerns.

In my works, I explore themes of loneliness, the cyclical nature of daily life, and the spiraling of thoughts that sometimes grow into big anxieties. I delve into memories that have slipped away forever and the effect of growing up — or the illusion of it.

These creations are an attempt to understand how we turn small things into overwhelming experiences, how anxieties grow within us, yet ultimately lead us nowhere. It is a dialogue between inner fears and the effort to find balance when everything seems to be spinning out of control.



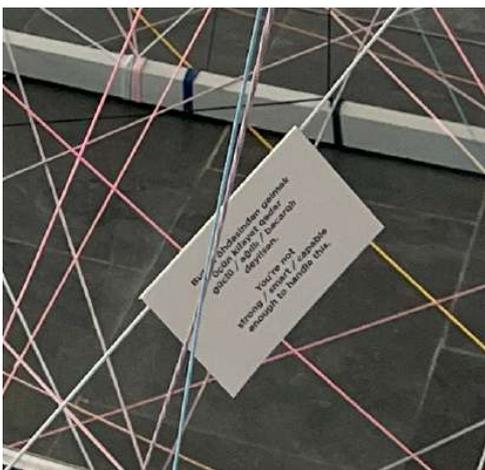


Sabina Mukhudinova

Reflection, 2025 Installation

This installation explores the invisible barriers that shape our perception of what is possible. Between us and our dreams, there are only words—echoes of past voices telling us who we are, what we can or cannot do. They come from those who raised us, taught us, tried to protect us. But they are not us.

Through a maze of words and tangled lines, Reflection invites the viewer to question these inherited beliefs. Are they real obstacles, or just shadows in the mind? And then - there is the mirror. On the other side, you see yourself, but without the weight of these words. The version of you that is free, capable, limitless. The question is: which reflection do you choose to believe?





Sabina Shikhlinskaya

Everything will be ok, 2025

Multimedia installation

My work is not only a tribute to memory, it is my protest against terror. Against those who kill innocent people. These people are punished and will be punished. Our task is to remember. The most important thing that people have is memory. It is stronger than time and stronger than death.

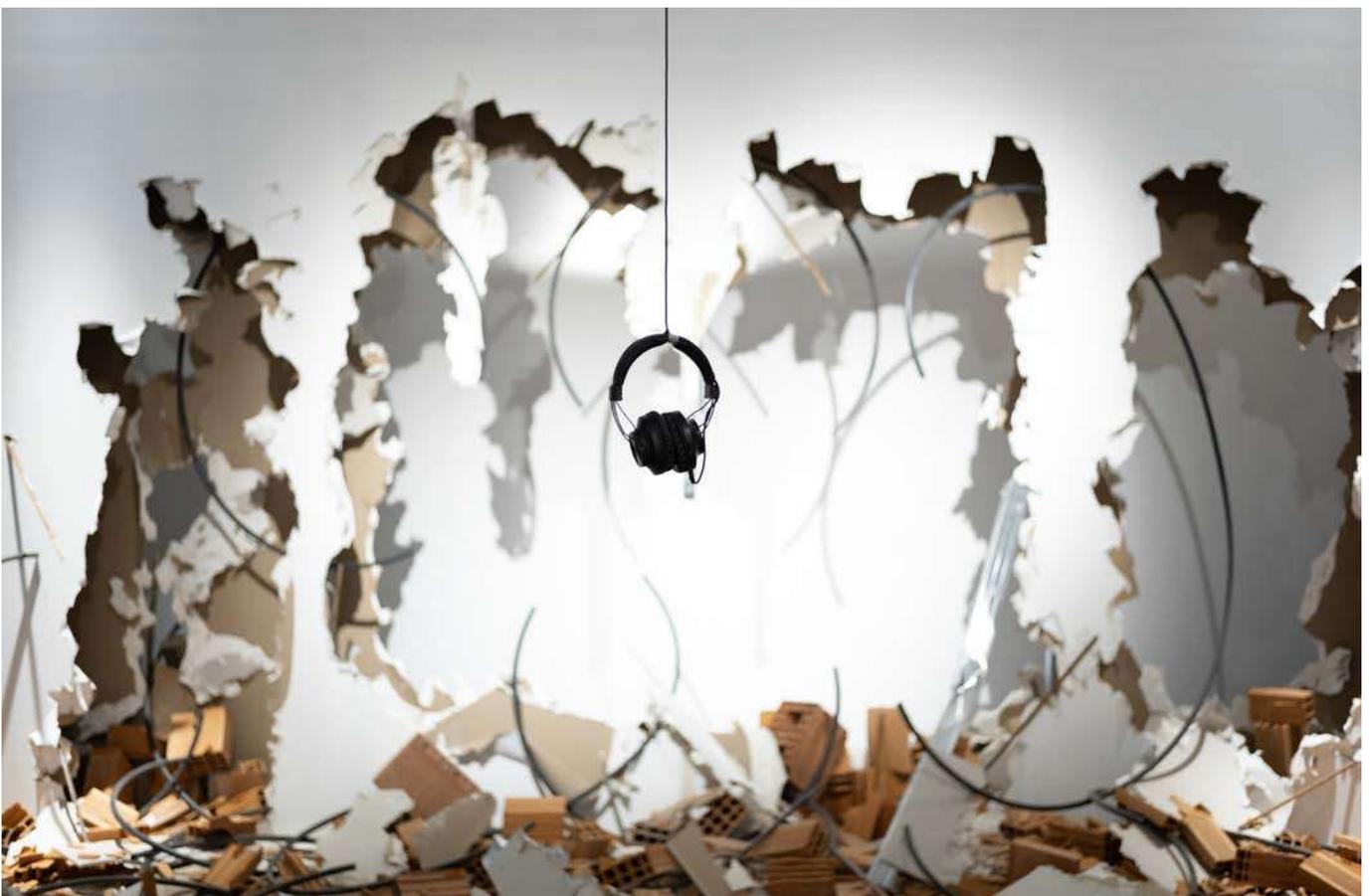
Memory is where new life is.

On December 25, 2024, an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane flying from Baku to Grozny was shot down by the Russian “Pantsir” air defense system, which was used that day to repel a drone attack on Grozny, was damaged and lost control.

Exclusively due to the professionalism of the crew, the plane was able to make an emergency landing and save many lives. If it were not for the dedication and heroism of the pilots, there would have been no survivors in this disaster. The crew members – two pilots and a flight attendant were awarded the title “National Hero” posthumously.

Senior flight attendant Hokuma Aliyeva, knowing that the chances of survival were negligible, until the last second of her life, behaved like a real hero – she supported the passengers, did not allow chaos, and instilled hope in them.

Her last words before the crash were – EVERYTHING WILL BE OK.





Saida Mirzayeva

Yalli: Digital Pattern, 2025
Animation / Motion design

Carpet weaving is like a game of Tetris – both are based on arranging parts step by step to create a whole design.

In this artwork, the Yalli dance is formed on the digital screen like a Tetris game, but instead of the usual Tetris blocks, the elements of the Yalli sketch fall into place to form a complete image. Combining tradition with modern technology shows that cultural heritage can be digitally reimaged. It also reflects the spirit of Yalli—just as the dancers come together to create harmony, in this piece, each part becomes a part of the whole. This work places the ancient and symbolic dance Yalli at the center of the idea of equality.

Yalli is not just a dance; it is a cultural heritage where people move together, holding hands, creating harmony with rhythm. In this artwork, “Yalli” reflects the unity of humanity and a collective power that can contribute to social, economic, and gender equality in the world.



The circular structure of the dance symbolizes the equal distribution of differences and an order in which no individual is superior to the others. On the other hand, the joining of hands shows the belief that human society, different cultures, and genders can come together for common goals. Just as each person contributes their own harmony to this dance, so too must societies act together to ensure justice and balance.

This work is an imaginary depiction of a more just and harmonious world, where differences merge without hindering each other, and balance and equality are achieved. This presentation of the Yalli dance not only emphasizes the value of our national culture, but also highlights the importance of acting together to solve global problems.



Sitara Ibrahimbayli

Hasir, 2025

Photography, video

I was deeply inspired by 12 women I met in Masalli, the last guardians of their community's traditional craft – hasir. Hasir is a structure woven out of reeds used to protect the home from the natural elements – it is a physical manifestation of care given by women to their families. These women represent centuries of skill passed from generation to generation. Despite their dedication, they face significant challenges - even lacking proper clothing while collecting reeds from marshy waters. This highlights the fragility of their craft, which is on the verge of extinction in our country.



I documented their process, from harvesting reeds in the water to drying them in the sun and weaving them into mats. However, beyond their physical labor, I encountered another issue: their lack of representation in society. These women were shy, unfamiliar with social media, and hesitant to showcase their work, fearing judgment from men. They didn't realize that their craft is not just a means of survival but a vital part of their community's cultural heritage.





Sura Madatova

Royal's place, 2024

Installation
200 x 200 cm

Royal's Place reflects children's imagination and material boundaries reflect its absence. As a child, any place could become a magical place - a simple pillow would turn into a wooden one, and a bed into a royal palace, and dreams into all of reality would remove its limitations. This work is about the place of our childhood dreams and how it shapes our own "place".

Where does reality end and fantasy begin? The great woman was a child. Can she maintain her freedom of imagination? We create infinite possibilities within ourselves, regardless of circumstances presented.





Tamira Ibrahim

Maternity Leave, 2024 Sound installation

Maternity Leave was created in order to demonstrate to society how much work and responsibility motherhood is, and how difficult the period called “leave” is. About three years of leave is given to a woman after the birth of her child, so that she can rest and take care of her child. Even if every woman does not take three years of leave, she has to say goodbye to her professional life for a while. This is a factor that can be a big blow to her career. Actually, if we look at the meaning of the word “leave”, or “məzuniyyət”*, it means “rest”. But this so-called “rest” part is actually a 24/7 schedule that requires a lot of patience, perseverance and strength because a woman who stays at home does housework in addition to child care. Therefore, the society “at home I urge you to stop belittling women by saying “you are sitting”, “you are not working, you are having fun” and not to hesitate to ask someone for help with housework or child care if necessary. I became a mother one year ago and chose not to return to my working life temporarily. As I spent more of this last year at home, I wanted to capture the sounds around me, because these sounds are changing and growing so fast.

The audio includes both my daughter’s voice (eating, laughing, crying, toys she uses, first words, etc.) and the sounds of the appliances I use in my household (kettle, washing machine, gas stove, etc.). Sounds and voices blend into each other on a daily basis and can be loud and annoying enough to disturb a person, but this is the reality. Even if you close your eyes, you can imagine a mother/woman feeling sleepless, tired, lonely and in the dark.

*məzuniyyət – (noun, a word of Arabic origin) – Rest, treatment, etc. for a working person, a certain time given for

Epilogue

It’s OK to miss your life before becoming a mom.

It’s OK to leave your baby with dad.

It’s OK to leave your baby with nny/grandpa/kindergarten.

It’s OK to feel “not enough”.

It’s OK to feel “guilty” towards your baby.

It’s OK to ask for help.

It’s OK to feel postpartum depression.

It’s OK to be lazy and do nothing.

It’s OK to cry.

It’s OK to say No.



Ulkar Aliyeva

Toward the Light, 2025

Installation, carpet loom, white fabric, weaving threads, scissors / 100 x 40 cm

The Braids of the Bald Girl, 2025

Installation, mannequin-sculpture, artificial hair / 170 x 50 cm

Toward the Light, 2025

On the loom's white vertical threads, I have woven a poem in black yarn. The poem portrays a character struggling with inner conflicts and searching for freedom, only to realize that true freedom can only be found by achieving inner peace. While the poem starts with a sombre tone, it ends with an optimistic message. To symbolize this progression, the last line of the poem, representing freedom, is woven in red thread, while the black sections convey internal struggles.

Why a Carpet-Weaving Loom?

Carpet weaving relies on a loom to hold the vertical threads, known as warps, in place. The word "əriş" (warp) comes from the root "ar," which conveys meanings such as "honour" and "purity." It is why the warps are white, symbolizing purity. The coloured threads woven through them, known as wefts (arğac in Azerbaijani), represent external influences. The word "arğac" is derived from "ər," which can mean "man" or "hero." As the weaving process progresses, these threads intertwine, eventually forming a finished carpet—symbolizing a girl's journey to maturity.

When the carpet is complete, the warp threads are trimmed to the desired length using a special carpet-cutting tool. I performed this process during the exhibition, cutting the woven poem carpet off the loom with scissors, symbolizing the freedom achieved through one's efforts. The finished carpet, with the poem woven into it, is then displayed.

Carpet weaving has been a vital part of Azerbaijani women's lives for centuries. Girls were taught this craft from a young age, and their carpets were often woven as part of their dowry. By adulthood, a girl's dowry, including her carpet, was expected to be ready. This cultural tradition inspired my decision to use a loom for this piece.

A Journey of Inner Struggles and Freedom

In this artwork, the poem represents a woman's inner struggles and her search for freedom. The white threads on the loom symbolize her pure yet burdensome role in life, while the poem woven in black threads expresses her inner thoughts, struggles, and pain. The transition from despair to optimism in the poem mirrors her journey toward finding inner freedom, with the final red words symbolizing hope, strength, and liberation.

The act of cutting the carpet from the loom during the exhibition represents breaking free from societal constraints and achieving personal freedom. This work highlights a woman's journey toward inner peace and the power to "weave her freedom."

Poem (A Translation with Possible Variations)

I am a refugee in my own land,
A stray who has lost its way for so long.
I have no answers to the questions asked,
Or maybe I'm just worn out and tired.

My soul has grown accustomed to restlessness,
Trapped in this cycle, endless loop.
The never-ending question inside me never ceases,
Only a little love does every heart need.

Is it a familiar love, or simply an old habit?
The cycle remains unchanged.
I belong nowhere, neither on the ground nor in the sky,
No sound from above, no journey to the heavens.

Sometimes, I lose hope even from the earth,
I am neither an inhabitant of a home nor a wanderer.
A fleeting hope is left hanging in the void,
whispering,
"You can't win if you give up too soon."

I listen to that passing hope,
I search for my existence, I ask,
My purpose is not to win,
The burning flame, the candle in my heart,
But only if my flame of freedom doesn't die out!

The Braids of the Bald Girl, 2025

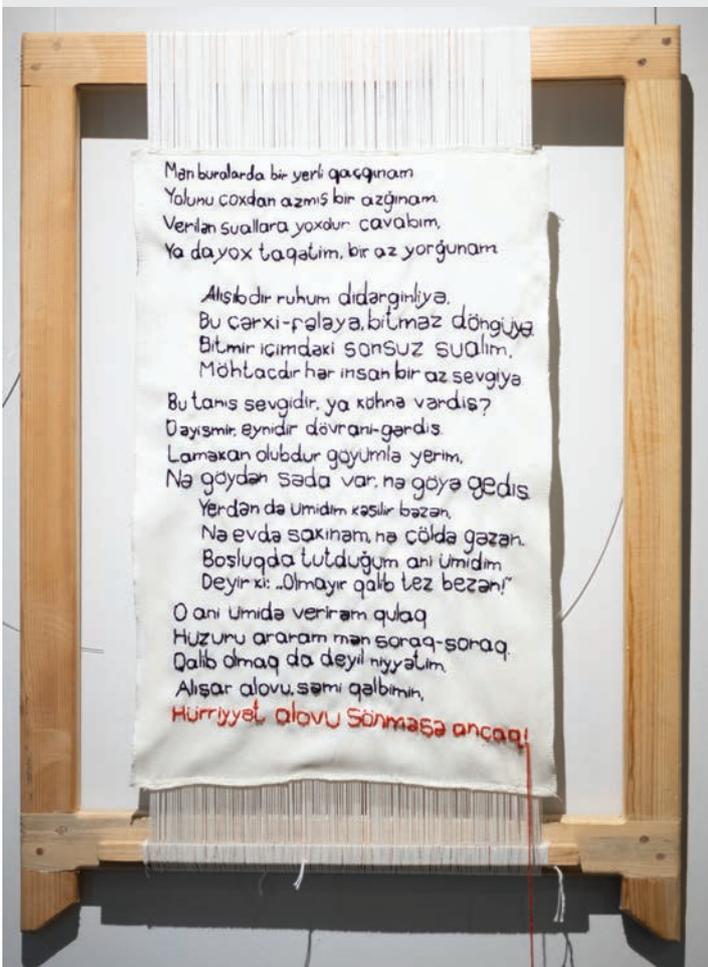
The phrase "Keçəl qızın hörükləri" (The Braids of the Bald Girl) is a longstanding expression in Azerbaijani, often carrying folkloric meaning. This phrase metaphorically refers to the idea of presenting something that doesn't truly exist or is artificially created. In my artwork, this expression is directly represented: a bald figure adorned with braids. The concept of the bald figure is a recurring theme in my work.

This piece aims to minimize the external similarities between people, focusing instead on the exploration of emotions and psychological states. By removing identifiers such as gender, religion, race, or other societal labels, I strive to depict the pure essence of humanity. Initially, I created these bald figures exclusively as women. This decision, in addition to my broader artistic ideas, challenges the traditional view of female beauty, which is often symbolized by hair, and questions beauty as a relative concept. By erasing such symbols, I reject the imposed standards of beauty.

As time passed, the idea of baldness extended to figures across all gender identities in my work. Now, I focus on shaping the emotional expression of the face, leaving the viewer to interpret the identity of the character.

In this particular artwork, the bald girl has braids. However, these braids are not naturally a part of her body—they are an artificial attachment, wrapped tightly around her head and body like a constricting rope. This "hair" represents the external pressures and artificial expectations that many societies impose on girls as they mature. The artwork is completed with an artificial braid secured with a red ribbon at the centre. The detail of the ribbon, which feels like it could be undone at any moment, symbolizes a collective effort to liberate the figure and fulfil her longing for freedom.

This piece reflects the stereotypes and pressures society places on women. The braid stands for beauty standards and societal expectations, while the bald girl represents a modern woman who rejects these limitations and seeks freedom. The tightly wrapped braid illustrates both physical and emotional oppression. The work encourages viewers to reflect on how we can break free from societal constraints. It raises the question: "How can we break free from the rules that confine us?"





Ulviyya Iman

Shellac 15 manat, 2025

Oil on canvas

129 x 40, 129 x 40, 129 x 40 cm

“Shellac 15 manat” shows a typical nail tech in Azerbaijan, working from home.

Nail appointments, for me and many other women, often feel deeply personal—almost like a therapy session. You share your thoughts and problems, and she listens, offering advice and insight. My nail tech is someone I’ve known for years. She once had many dreams and aspirations, both for her personal life and career, but I have watched them slowly fade as the weight of reality settles in. Though she finds a certain satisfaction in her work, she struggles to make ends meet and lives with a profound loneliness.

She works from a small, dimly lit room that serves as both her bedroom and workspace. It’s in a temporary apartment the government provided after demolishing her previous home. The orange curtains over her window bathe the room in a dim, suffocating light, creating an atmosphere that feels both oppressive and strangely haunting. I often wonder what it feels like to come to terms with your life as it is, to find contentment despite it falling short of what you once imagined as a little girl. Through the painting “Shellac 15 manat”, I wanted to convey the difference between a woman who has lost dreams and aspirations and has come to terms with her current situation and a woman who still dreams big.



Event / BOARDING SCHOOL

Throughout the month-long festival, adolescents from Boarding School No. 11 actively participated in various public activities and also attended a specially designed educational event led by our curator Ayna Moazzen.

Ayna delivered a lecture titled “Museums and Galleries: Origins, Development, and Visiting Ethics,” introducing students - many of whom are studying traditional crafts such as carpet weaving, mosaics, and qurama - to the world of contemporary art. For most of them, this was their first time visiting a gallery space with modern artworks. They were curious, asked thoughtful questions about the meaning of the works, and shared valuable feedback on their impressions and experiences.



Another important session was held by media and gender expert Vafa Ali, who conducted a discussion on gender stereotypes - how they form, how they influence artists and their work, and how these issues are being addressed globally in the art world today. At the end of their visits, each student selected a favorite artwork from the exhibition and discussed it with their teachers, sparking meaningful conversations. Engaging children of this age in critical discussions about social issues and contemporary art is essential for nurturing a generation that is thoughtful, open-minded, and culturally aware. It is equally important to expand their understanding of art beyond traditional forms and create space for dialogue, reflection, and growth.

Talk and Workshop

NATELA GRIGALASHVILI

11-12
MARCH

is the first female photojournalist in post-Soviet Georgia. She is widely recognized for her long-term documentary projects focused on rural communities across Georgia, capturing the daily lives, traditions, and struggles of people living in villages and provincial towns. This festival marks her first-ever presentation in Azerbaijan. As part of the program, Natela Grigalashvili gave a public talk attended by over 70 people, where she shared insights into her practice and the power of visual storytelling. She also led a dedicated workshop with 12 young local photographers, offering mentorship, critique, and inspiration to a new generation of image-makers.



Talk and Workshop

JUSTE JONUTYTE

15-16
MARCH

is a Vilnius-based curator, art historian, educator, and art advisor. She is the founder of @TEMAprojects, an independent curatorial platform established in 2018. Jonutytė is currently a board member of the Lithuanian Culture Institute, RUPERT, and ArtVilnius. As part of the program, Jonutytė gave a public talk attended by 80 guests, where she presented an insightful overview of the contemporary Lithuanian art scene, highlighting key artists, institutions, and curatorial strategies shaping the region's cultural landscape. In addition, she conducted a portfolio review session with 13 local artists, offering personalized feedback, critical guidance, and professional mentorship to support the development of their practices.



26
MARCH

Talk

SABINA SHIKHLINSKAYA

is a pioneer of conceptual art in Azerbaijan and holds the title of Honoured Artist. She gave a talk titled “Colonial Heritage and Contemporary Art in Azerbaijan”, attended by 80 guests, where she also spoke about her work with the independent art group Labyrinth, and the land art projects she led across the country between 1999 and 2005.

Shikhlienskaya continues to play a vital role in shaping critical discourse and contemporary art practices in Azerbaijan.



Talk

ZARRIN SANVAR

is a Tajik artist currently based in China.

Her talk, attended by 50 guests, offered a deeply personal narrative—reflecting on how the 1995 civil war in Tajikistan impacted her father’s artistic career, and how these experiences continue to shape her own practice.

Sanvar also spoke about the role of spiritual shamanism in her work, exploring how ancestral memory and healing traditions inform her creative process.



30
MARCH

Panel discussion

ART WITHOUT BOUNDARIES: WOMEN PIONEERING THE FUTURE OF VISUAL ARTS

With the participation of around 60-70 attendees, this panel discussion delved into the historical and contemporary challenges faced by women artists and their role in shaping the future of visual arts. The conversation explored the invisibility of women in art history, the persistence of anonymous creative labor, and the barriers within institutional art canons. Panelists also examined the expectation for women to express personal trauma in their work, the tension between political messaging and artistic form, and the need to imagine alternative, inclusive systems in the art world. The discussion served as a platform to highlight women's contributions to visual culture and question the structures that have long dictated their marginalization.



AYNA MOAZZEN

Ayna Moazzen is a curator and art historian based between Rome and Baku, originally from Tehran. Her work focuses on contemporary visual culture, feminist art, and cross-cultural dialogue between the Middle East and Europe. She curates exhibitions and panel discussions that explore the intersections of gender, identity, and visual language, working with institutions and artists to create inclusive spaces for underrepresented voices in contemporary art. Ayna holds a Master's degree in Art History from Tor Vergata University of Rome, with a focus on architecture and transnational artistic exchanges. Her research bridges classical traditions with contemporary expressions, especially in the context of Italian and Iranian visual cultures.



AFSANA TAHIROVA

Afsana Tahirova is an independent researcher educated in Azerbaijan, the United Kingdom and Australia. She researches collective, ancestral and individual trauma. Asana sees patriarchal norms from a collective trauma perspective and regularly takes part in activism projects against gender-based violence against women and girls. In addition, Asana explores art and culture in a trauma context as powerful means of human self-expression.



MANSURA MAMMADALIYEVA

Mansura Mammadaliyeva is an art critic and curator with over ten years of experience in art history and museum studies. She holds both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Art History from the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Arts. Her work focuses on the intersection of gender and art, particularly examining the marginalization of women in art history and advocating for the visibility of women artists and their legacies. In the concept of the exhibition "Shifting Identities," she draws on the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler to create space for the recognition and amplification of diverse gender identities.



TAYYIBA HEYDAROVA

Tayyiba Heydarova is an art historian and visual culture researcher from Azerbaijan. Her work includes educational seminars, creative projects, and digital storytelling aimed at making art history accessible in the Azerbaijani language. She is particularly interested in the representation of women in art history and contemporary visual culture, using her platform to question and rethink gender dynamics in the art world.

Tayyiba Heydarova is an art historian and visual culture researcher from Azerbaijan. Her work includes educational seminars, creative projects, and digital storytelling aimed at making art history accessible in the Azerbaijani language. She is particularly interested in the representation of women in art history and contemporary visual culture, using her platform to question and rethink gender dynamics in the art world.

Talk

DILYARA KAIPOVA

is an artist from Uzbekistan whose work focuses on reviving and recontextualizing the rich heritage of Uzbek textiles, particularly ikat weaving.

She gave a talk at the closing of the exhibition, titled “The History, Symbolism, and Modern Craft of Uzbek Ikat”, where she shared insights into the cultural depth and contemporary relevance of this centuries-old tradition.

Kaipova’s practice lies at the intersection of folk artisan techniques and contemporary expression. She creates original ikat patterns in collaboration with traditional masters and incorporates vintage Soviet-era fabrics and naïve, homemade embroideries into her work - addressing socio-cultural and ecological issues within the region’s post-Soviet landscape.





Curatorial Reflection by Ayna Moazzen Her Art in Action 2025: Free to Dream



Curating Her Art in Action 2025 has been a profoundly moving experience. This year's edition, Free to Dream, invited women artists to articulate their inner worlds, exploring how their dreams (intimate, ambitious, conflicted) intersect with the roles and expectations society places upon them. From the outset, our aim was to challenge the limits of visibility imposed on women's interior lives, and to foster a space where vulnerability, complexity, and resilience could be expressed unapologetically.

Each contribution to the exhibition revealed a distinct negotiation between aspiration and reality. Some works were quiet and meditative, others sharp and politically charged, but all were deeply rooted in personal truth. What struck me

most was how often these internal landscapes mirrored one another across borders, cultures, and generations. Whether through the tactile memory of fabric, the ghosts of war, or the rituals of care and survival, the participating artists gave shape to lives that often go unseen.

Highlights of this year's program included the extraordinary presence of artists and thinkers who not only presented their own work but also actively engaged with the local community. Natela Grigalashvili's workshop and public talk gave young photographers in Azerbaijan a unique opportunity to learn from one of Georgia's leading visual storytellers. Justė Jonutytė offered an expansive look at Lithuania's contemporary art scene while mentoring local talent. Sabina Shikhlinskaya's talk on postcolonial identity and Zarrin Sanvar's personal reflection on war, trauma, and healing enriched the exhibition's thematic depth. Meanwhile, Dilyara Kaipova's presentation on Uzbek ikat revealed how textile traditions can become a language of protest, preservation, and power.

This edition reaffirmed the need for spaces where women can reflect on their roles not only as artists, but also as daughters, mothers, citizens, and dreamers. It reminded me that dreaming is an act of resistance, especially for those whose voices have historically been dismissed. I am deeply grateful to all the artists, speakers, and guests who made this edition possible, and to my co-curator Dr. Lesley Gray for her vision and solidarity throughout.

May we continue to listen, reflect, and create room for women's dreams (in all their beauty and complexity) to be seen and heard.



Curatorial Reflection by Lesley Gray Her Art in Action 2025: Free to Dream



In the second edition of the Her Art in Action festival, we celebrate the 26 artists - 23 Azerbaijani and 3 international - who have shared their artistic vision with us on the topic Free to Dream: What Do You Dream? Picturing Our Inner Lives.

The curatorial vision for the exhibition was to examine how women inhabit the complex identities that society creates for them in light of their own dreams and aspirations. The artists responded with concepts that highlighted how women negotiate their inner and outer personas throughout their life, and the selected artworks were diverse in their approach and media, as well as their consideration of how these stories unfold across lifetimes.

The exhibition itself was organised as a non-linear journey through these thoughts and emotions - dreams realised and dreams that are left unfulfilled or cut short. From artworks celebrating women as holders and preservers of tradition as well as those who actively resist the constraints imposed upon them, and artworks that speak to the hope that dreaming offers and the sacrifices that are made in the pursuit of one's dream, the artists invited us to consider the diversity of the experience of women in the past, today, and for generations ahead.

As the exhibition was held at the Union of Artists of Azerbaijan, we understood our responsibility to honor the institutional legacy of the space and saw an opportunity to build upon it. The Union of Artists of Azerbaijan has nurtured and exhibited artists across generations, and Her Art in Action represents a fresh conceptual direction. With this in mind, we knew there would be myriad reactions to the artworks and the themes they explore. We are grateful for the dialogue that the exhibition inspired amongst the many visitors and proud of the artists for their introspective and courageous artworks.

Team:

- Project manager: **Sitara Ibrahimbayli**
- Curator: **Ayna Moazzen, Lesley Gray**
- Project Coordinator: **Tanzila Baghirova**
- Editor: **Mehinbanu Safikhanli**
- Designer: **Sally Al-Khuri**

- Fixer: **Tati Sattar**
- Filmmaker: **Azad Alizade**
- Video Editor: **Safura Mammadli**
- Filmmaker: **Kamran Balaoghlanli**
- Installator: **Aleksandr Statkevich**



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