

**ALMAGUL MENLIBAYEVA**



**Almagul Menlibayeva, *Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* (2024), HD digital video animation, 16:9, color, sound, 15'**

**Part of the project *Interweaving Climate, Water(s), and Communities, Balkahs, Kazakhstan.***

**Courtesy of the artist © Almagul Menlibayeva**

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**Price: € 2,900 Euro + VAT**

*Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* extends Almagul Menlibayeva's long-standing investigation into the environmental, social, and psychological aftermath of global geopolitics. Here Menlibayeva returns to the terrain that has long defined her practice - the post-Soviet landscapes of Central Asia, scarred by the legacies of empire, extraction, and environmental collapse. The work, a 15-minute AI-generated digital video, continues the artist's sustained engagement with ecological devastation as both symptom and mirror of global geopolitics. Like her earlier project *Transoxiana Dreams* (2011), which traced the environmental and psychological aftermath of the catastrophic desertification of the Aral Sea, *Mother Water* reveals how the exploitation of natural resources serves as a quiet form of warfare - one waged through neglect, policy, and greed.

*Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* is dedicated to the cross-border water conflict between China and Kazakhstan, where the diversion of the Ili River has triggered the slow death of Lake Balkhash. Where earlier works approached issues of ecological devastation through the poetics of myth and memory, *Mother Water* adopts the visual language of the present - rapid, strident, hyper-saturated. Blurring the aesthetic codes of music video, video game, and propaganda, Menlibayeva harnesses the very tools of mass culture and digital spectacle to confront the catastrophic desiccation of Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan.

At the center of the work is a merging of bodies: the artist's mother—whose life was bound to the lake—and the shrinking body of water itself. This emotional superposition transforms environmental collapse into an intimate allegory of inheritance, erasure, and the entanglement of human and planetary fragility. Yet Menlibayeva resists elegy. Instead, *Mother Water* is loud, fast, and deliberately fractured, an audiovisual torrent that refuses the consolations of beauty or nostalgia. The glitches and technical seams that lace the video are left exposed, undermining the illusion of smooth digital perfection. AI serves here as both medium and metaphor - a technology of reanimation and distortion that mirrors the mechanisms of power it critiques.

At a time when AI imagery increasingly masquerades as truth, Menlibayeva uses artificial intelligence not to fabricate reality, but to *reveal* it. The visible ruptures in the image - the errors, repetitions, and pixelated distortions - make evident both the constructedness of the medium and the artifice underlying geopolitical narratives. In *Mother Water*, AI becomes a double agent: the very technology implicated in disinformation and the acceleration of ecological catastrophe is redeployed as a means of critique, a mirror turned back on the systems that produced it - to witness, to accuse.

Within the conceptual framework of *Art from Elsewhere: DEEP THROAT*, the work functions as a devastating allegory for the perversions of geopolitics — where resource control, territorial dominance, and capitalist ambition deform not only landscapes but the psychic fabric of entire societies. The drying lake stands as a monument to this obscene legacy of mismanaged power, its shrinking waters echoing the wider desiccation of empathy in an age of spectacle and commodified catastrophe. The drying lake becomes a site of confrontation rather than mourning—its surface a screen upon which the failures of modernity flicker and distort. Menlibayeva's deliberately overcharged aesthetic mirrors the chaos of an age in which truth, image, and ethics have collapsed into each other. By weaponizing the visual vocabulary of AI against itself, *Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* becomes both revelation and warning: a hyper-real memorial that insists on seeing, even when the truth itself has been digitally eroded.

In Malta - an island country whose own history is defined by conquest, survival, and the politics of water - *Mother Water* resonates with particular force. It mirrors the exhibition's exploration of how the intimate and the geopolitical, the bodily and the planetary, are entangled within the same circuits of power and control. By transforming a dying lake into a living, digital memorial, Menlibayeva offers not redemption but reckoning: a vision of flawed beauty inseparable from ruin, of technology haunted by the very nature it seeks to replace.

*“Art project dedicated to the transboundary water conflict, where the massive diversion of water from the Ili River in China (the Ili flows out of China) leads to the catastrophic desiccation and salinization of Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan.*

*The central concept is built on emotional superposition: the image of the artist's mother, whose life was intertwined with the lake, merges with the degrading water body. The ecological destruction of Balkhash is utilized as a powerful tool to transform personal loss into a universal marker of national vulnerability and a critique of global resource selfishness.*

*The project uses AI technologies to bridge the gap between cold geopolitics (water disputes) and the visceral experience of loss, creating an active, emotionally charged memorial. AI thus transforms the geopolitical conflict into a visually and emotionally resonant call for accountability, making Balkhash simultaneously a personal archive and an objective indicator of planetary vulnerability.”*

- Almagul Menlibayeva

**ARTIST BIO:** <https://www.almaty.art/what-is-on/exhibition-almagul>

**ALMAGUL MENLIBAYEVA (born 1969 in Almaty, Kazakh SSR. Lives and works in Almaty and Berlin.)**

Almagul Menlibayeva is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice spans video, performance, photography, and large-scale multimedia installations. Combining the visual languages of documentary, myth, and digital fantasy, her work explores the complex intersections of environmental devastation, post-Soviet transformation, and the politics of gender and belief across Central Asia. Rooted in the landscape and mythology of her homeland, yet deeply attuned to global discourses on environmental collapse, digital mediation, and decolonial thinking, Almagul Menlibayeva’s work gives poetic form to the ruptures and continuities that define our planetary condition.

Trained in painting and textile art at the Almaty State Theatre and Fine Arts Institute (graduated 1992), Menlibayeva emerged as one of the leading voices of a new generation of artists responding to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapid modernization of Kazakhstan. Her early works, rooted in performance and staged photography, reinterpreted Turkic and nomadic mythologies through a contemporary feminist lens, situating the female body as both a site of resilience and a vessel of cultural memory.

Over the past two decades, Menlibayeva has developed a distinctive cinematic language—hybridizing documentary realism with elements of surrealism, mysticism, and speculative fiction—to address themes of ecological and social crisis. Works such as *Transoxiana Dreams* (2011), *Milk for Lambs* (2013), and *Exodus* (2015) map the environmental degradation of the Aral Sea and Central Asian steppes as allegories for the psychic and political aftermath of empire. Her recent projects, including *Kosmogonia* (2019) and *Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* (2024), employ artificial intelligence and digital animation to confront ongoing ecological catastrophes and the human cost of global geopolitics.

Menlibayeva's works have been widely exhibited internationally, including at major institutions and biennials such as: the Venice Biennale, Sydney Biennale, Sharjah Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, Kyiv Biennial, Moscow Biennale, Bangkok Biennale, and many others; and in museums such as the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art (Helsinki), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Queens Museum (New York), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Astana), Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Pompidou and the Grand Palais (Paris), amongst numerous others. Menlibayeva's major solo retrospective formed the inaugural exhibition at the Almaty Museum of Arts (Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2025-26).

She participated in and co-curated the groundbreaking exhibition *Bread & Roses: Four Generations of Kazakh Women Artists* (MOMENTUM, Berlin, Germany, 2018). Her work has been featured in major survey exhibitions including *Eurasia: A Landscape of Mutability* (MOCAT, Tokyo), *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum), and *Post-Soviet Visions* (Calvert 22, London). She has been the recipient of numerous awards and residencies, among them the Taryn Simon Fellowship for Women Artists, Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development Award, and the Halle 14 Residency, Leipzig. In conjunction with her solo exhibition 'Transformation' at the Grand Palais in Paris (France, 2016-17), she was awarded the prestigious Chevalier Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister of Culture in 2017.

Menlibayeva's works are held in significant public and private collections worldwide, including the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Kiasma Museum (Helsinki), Art Jameel Collection (Dubai), National Museum of Kazakhstan (Astana), and the Tate Library and Archive (London).