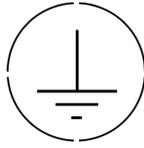


GROUND
NINETY-NINE



SENGLIA
L-ISLA

ALMAGUL MENLIBAYEVA



Within GROUND 99, the films of Almagul Menlibayeva function as a connective tissue between environmental devastation, cultural memory, and folkloric mythology as a form of resistance. Rather than treating ecology as a purely scientific or political problem, Menlibayeva situates it within belief systems, ancestral narratives, and embodied ritual - addressing how damage is inherited, remembered, and normalised over time. Her works cut through the language of policy and progress to reveal landscapes as living archives - sites where ideology, extraction, and spirituality collide.

In the context of GROUND 99, Menlibayeva's films propose folklore not as nostalgia but as a critical strategy. By collapsing documentary traces with performative and symbolic gestures, her films expose how environmental collapse is inseparable from the erosion of cultural and ethical frameworks. This approach resonates with the Malta Biennale's call to *clean, clear, cut*: Menlibayeva clears away linear historical narratives to foreground cyclical time, recurring sacrifice, and the persistence of belief under conditions of abandonment. Her images resist closure, instead suspending the viewer within a space where past and present, human and non-human, care and violence remain entangled.

Positioned alongside works that address saturation, visibility, and bodily pressure, Menlibayeva's films expand GROUND 99's scope from the urban and the immediate to the planetary and the

ancestral. They insist that ecological catastrophe is never only a matter of landscape, but of cosmology - of how humans imagine their place within the world. In doing so, her works invite viewers to consider whether contemporary crises stem not only from excess and exploitation, but from a profound rupture in relational knowledge: a forgetting of how land, myth, and responsibility were once inseparable.



Almagul Menlibayeva, *Transoxiana Dreams* (2011), HD video, 16:9, color, sound, 23'

Courtesy of the MOMENTUM Collection

Almagul Menlibayeva's film *Transoxiana Dreams* tells a tale of ecological devastation in the guise of a mythological narrative staged in the vast landscape of her native Kazakhstan, ravaged by 60 years of Soviet occupation. *Transoxiana Dreams* is filmed in the brutally changed region of the Aral Sea, where its indigenous people live in the Aralkum, the desert of a once thriving region now entirely devoid of water due to radical Soviet irrigation policies. The region of Transoxiana (Greek for 'across the Oxus') in southwestern Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, once the eastern part of the Hellenistic regime under Alexander the Great and the former homeland of the nomadic tribes of Persia and Turan at the banks of the Oxus River, remained an important trade region along the Northern Silk Road with flourishing civilizations and fertile plains for many centuries. Afflicted by former Soviet policies and abandoned by commercial and cultural interests, today, Transoxiana lies bare and stripped in a surreal state of existence with discarded fishing fleets on dusty terrain, ravaged by metal scavengers while its inhabitants look on as the sea keeps receding into a far and unreachable distance of a seemingly better world.

Menlibayeva tells the tale of a young fisherman's daughter who observes the dramatic changes to the landscape of the Aral region and its population through a child's eyes in a dreamlike mélange of documentary and fantasy. Menlibayeva visually walks the viewer through a vacant landscape and a symbolic dream wherein the girl's father searches for the remaining sea and new fishing grounds while encountering strange and seductive four-legged female creatures (Centaur) on his way through the hostile desert. Drawing on the image of the Greek mythological figure of the Centaur, Menlibayeva creates alluring hybrid beings, both sexually charged and bizarre. According to the legend, when the ancient Greeks first encountered the nomads of the Transoxianian Steppes on their horses, they initially believed them to be mythological quadrupeds, part person part animal, fearing their savage and magical powers. In *Transoxania Dreams*, Menlibayeva, a pictorial sorceress herself, breeds an eccentric storyline and fantastical imagery extracted from her own atavistic repertoire; leading us visually through an existing, yet unimaginable, landscape in a distant and hypnagogic world.



Almagul Menlibayeva, *Milk for Lambs* (2010), HD video, 16:9, color, sound, 11'

In the Steppes of her native Kazakhstan, Menlibayeva stages and films complex mythological narratives, with reference to her own nomadic heritage and the Tengri traditions of the cultures of Central Asia. *Milk for Lambs* explores the emotional and spiritual residues of an ancient belief system as well as a historic conflict, still resonating among the peoples of Central Asia today, between the Zoroastrian ideology of former Persia, spreading widely across Eurasia and influencing Western politicians and philosophers and the mysterious Tengriism (sky religion) reaching as far as the Pacific Ocean. The nurturing earth goddess Umai and favorite wife of Tengri, the god of the sky, much like Gaia in the Greek mythology, created life on earth out of

herself. This figure of the ‘Earth Mother’ symbolizes the close relationship of the people to the land and its given riches, through symbolic rituals of animals and humans feeding off of her body and drinking her milk. Often described as “punk-shamanism,” Menlibayeva’s videos are embedded in theatricality that leads them through a complex set of references — from tribal symbolism to images of the communist industrial past. *Milk for Lambs* begins as the story of the artist’s grandfather, merging documentation of an annual ritual of the formerly nomadic peoples with a stylised fantasy of their myths and legends.

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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 *Mother Water. Gulbibi Balkhash* (2024) (exhibited in *Art from Elsewhere: Deep Throat*, MOMENTUM at Valletta Contemporary, 2025), 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), and many others.