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Guzel Zakirova

b. 1985, Almaty, Kazakhstan

"I began looking at my past through a decolonial lens and realised it had touched me too. For a long time, I didn't know who I was. Now I feel I can be a voice for the Uyghur diaspora of Central Asia. It matters to me to show that beyond the titular nations, there are other peoples who have lived through the same experience".

Guzel Zakirova is a multidisciplinary artist working with painting, textile, installation, video, and archival research, exploring themes of identity, migration, collective memory, and the role of women within Eastern societies. An ethnic Uyghur, born and raised in Kazakhstan, she navigates the psychological and cultural conditions informed by postcolonial perspective, and examines the fragile transmission of cultural memory across generations. Through personal and regional histories, Zakirova constructs a visual language where individual experience gradually transforms into a narrative shared across geographies.

Born in Almaty to a Uyghur family that migrated to Kazakhstan during the mid-twentieth century, Guzel Zakirova grew up within a traditional household while simultaneously socializing inside a predominantly Russian-speaking environment. This early experience of being "different", which she began sensing as early as kindergarten, became foundational to her understanding of self. As the artist recalls, she grew up with the socially imposed feeling of being "third-class", as if she belonged to a people without a country: a profound experience that later informed her reflections on internalized colonialism, cultural suppression, and belonging. Although no one in her family was professionally connected to art, her earliest fascination with image-making emerged through childhood memories of her father quickly sketching recognizable portraits whenever she felt vulnerable – an impression that left a lasting mark on her understanding of communication and intimacy.

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Zakirova graduated from the Academy of Arts of Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, and later continued her studies in Chinese painting at Xinjiang Arts University. Yet despite her academic formation, the artist describes the years following graduation as a period of stagnation, alienation, and creative standstill. Entering the local art environment in the early 2000s, she felt unable to fully situate herself within dominant national, cultural, or geographic narratives. This internal conflict ultimately drew her toward Xinjiang, where she believed her artistic language and cultural background could find relevance.

Her years in China became a decisive turning point in her practice. Arriving in Xinjiang in 2016, just as new restrictions targeting Uyghur communities began intensifying, Zakirova experienced an acute confrontation with questions of identity and belonging. Living under increasing political limitations imposed on Uyghurs, she began to reconsider her relationship to her own heritage, developing what she describes as an “inner pride” and solidarity with her people. It was during this period that she began examining her personal history through a postcolonial lens, recognizing that colonization extends beyond physical borders and runs far deeper, into the subconscious. These reflections built the conceptual foundation of her work after 2020.

At the center of Zakirova’s imagery stands the “Red Woman”, a recurring figure constructed through family legacy, oral histories she has been collecting, and conversations with women from her community. Initially emerging through the women closest to her – her mother and three sisters – these figures gradually expanded into embodiments of ritual and ancestral knowledge for the artist. Working through interviews and ongoing dialogue with women across Uyghur communities, Zakirova investigates traditions whose origins often extend far beyond contemporary understanding, surviving through gesture, material, and everyday practice.

Research forms an essential component of her methodology. She often describes the process as intuitive, as recognition of symbolic patterns in what she finds and observes precedes explanation. For the artist, the final image conceals an extensive process of shared exchange and conceptual inquiry.

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Textile is central to the artist's material framework. Rejecting the rigidity of traditional stretched canvas, Zakirova works primarily on soft linen and fabric surfaces that can be folded, carried, and transported. This shift emerged through her research into Uyghur migration across Central Asia, as women repeatedly described textile – scarves, carpets, clothing, embroidered fabrics – as the primary objects preserved during displacement. The artist thus began reflecting on this mobility, connecting the material condition of the artwork to histories of exile and impermanence. For Zakirova, the ability to physically roll and carry a painting becomes a metaphor for survival itself.

Likewise, the color red holds a powerful presence in her practice. Inspired by the ancient Uyghur Buddhist murals known as the “Red Caves” of Xinjiang, Zakirova employs red as a carrier of identity, belonging, and resistance. Although red was traditionally considered “too provocative” within her upbringing, the artist gradually embraced it as one of the defining elements of her visual language. Through the emergence of the “Red Woman,” the color became inseparable from her exploration of Uyghur inheritance.

Her female figures rarely meet the viewer’s gaze directly. Instead, they look slightly away, embodying what the artist describes as an inherited condition of restraint, shaped by patriarchal and social structures present within shared regional traditions. Yet this averted gaze does not signify passivity. Rather, Zakirova places her women in states of peripheral awareness, as they see more than a direct look can reveal. In collective compositions, this creates an atmosphere of communal witnessing and knowledge.

Her women have long, dark, strong hair – another recurring symbol in her practice. For the artist, hair operates as a vessel of reflection, intimacy, and care. Referencing both Eastern traditions and contemporary political gestures of resistance under suppressive regimes across neighboring geographies, she treats hair as a site of touch and cross-generational exchange. This understanding culminated in works such as ‘Hair Louder Than Voice’, where hair itself becomes a statement.

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Visually, Zakirova's work is informed by both Chinese ink painting traditions and the flattened symbolic aesthetics of Uyghur mural art. During her studies in China, she became deeply influenced by the expressive contrast of black ink on white paper and the potential of a minimalist gesture.

Alongside painting, the artist's practice extends into ceramics, metal, weaving, embroidery, archival installation, and video. In recent years, she has studied traditional Uyghur carpet weaving with women artisans in the southern regions of Kazakhstan. In parallel, she has developed an ongoing video practice, including a cycle of films dedicated to collecting and documenting Uyghur migration histories.

Not positioning herself as an external observer, Guzel Zakirova understands her practice as a continuous act of connecting with her people and the shared narratives behind their living today, suspended between inherited traditions and contemporary experience. The stories within her works emerge through dynamic dialogues with the women surrounding her. For Zakirova, this relationship is deeply intimate and inseparable from the geography of Central Asia. She has come to see herself as someone entrusted with carrying fragments of Uyghur memory, archives, and cultural knowledge into the future.

EDUCATION

2016–2020	Xinjiang Arts Institute, Xinjiang, China
2007–2008	MFA, Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
2004–2007	Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

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EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 "Qizil Tan: From Histories of Uyghur Writing to Visual Languages of the Future" / Print House Deluxe, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2024 ART021 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair / Gaotai Gallery, Shanghai, China
- 2024 B. Bubikanova Art Prize, Finalists Group Show / Aspan Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2024 "QASH, Sacred Dance" / Astana Ballet Theatre, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2023 Asia Now. Paris Art Fair / Monnaie de Paris, Paris, France
- 2023 "Clouds, Power and Ornament — Roving Central Asia" / Slavs and Tatars, Hong Kong
- 2022 "Let Her Dance" / Gaotai Gallery, Urumqi, China
- 2022 "Monobrow" / Matti Silvio Gallery, Muscat, Oman
- 2022 "News from Central Asia" / New York Jewelry Week, New York, USA
- 2022 "News from Central Asia" / Washington D.C., USA

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