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Saule Suleimenova

b. 1970, Almaty, Kazakhstan

“When people ask me if I have a political stance on something, I say: I have feelings, I have a deep, terrible pain, and I want to convey it, to share it, because I think I am not the only one who feels this pain”.

Saule Suleimenova is a contemporary multidisciplinary Kazakh artist based in Almaty. Her practice operates through image-making as a form of visual archiving and retrospective reconceptualizations. Working with archival photography, found imagery, and polyethylene (referred to as “cellophane painting” in her implementation), she has developed a material language that reconsiders representations of Kazakhstan and its people. Avoiding the reproduction of polished storylines or official aesthetic frameworks, the artist locates her perspective outside the binaries of heroic idealization and reductive victimization.

A defining body of Suleimenova’s practice is her ‘Cellophane painting’ series, where the careful extraction of each fragment of plastic unfolds as a ritual. Shredded and reassembled, the created surfaces cohere into layered, luminous landscapes where the key through-lines of her narrative, such as collective memory and trauma, register more plainly through the poetics of the everyday. Within this symbolism, what is discarded emerges as a bearer of identity. Plastic, inseparable from contemporary life, becomes in her process an index of time, economy, and cultural geography, while the work’s slow, manual construction reflects the artist’s commitment to independent creation, positioning authorship as sustained, personal responsibility across every stage of production.

Born in 1970 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Saule Suleimenova graduated from the Kazakh Leading Academy of Architecture and Civil Engineering in 1996 with a degree in architectural environment design, a formation that established her enduring sensitivity to structure, spatial logic, and compositional order. During the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, she was actively engaged in the local underground art scene, participating between 1988 and 1990 in gatherings and exhibitions of the ‘Green Triangle’ group and later joining the Association of Young Artists of Kazakhstan.

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Her academic training was recognized early on, with her diploma project awarded first prize at the International Graduation Projects Competition in Yekaterinburg in 1996, followed by further specialization in book design through professional training in London in 1998.

The artist's long-term engagement with the archives begins with 'Kazakh Chronicle' (initiated in 2004), first developed through graphic works and later expanded into painting, photography, and later collage. Emerging in the wake of Kazakhstan's independence, the series was shaped by a clear ambition: to articulate a national image that would not inherit the complimentary aesthetics of socialist realism. For Suleimenova, archival photographs are documents of their time, records that "do not lie." They allow her to present people as they are, and to locate beauty without embellishment.

This trajectory of work later deepens in the 'Residual Memory' series, where Suleimenova turns to traumatic episodes from Kazakhstan's recent and historical past. Working through image-sources that are often anonymous, incomplete, or marked by neglect, she fixes moments of suppression beyond official records. Crucially, her engagement with the archive privileges the unheroic and the unnamed: women, families, and ordinary lives historically marginalized within patriarchal and state-centered regimes become central carriers of presence in her work. Suleimenova articulates her position in a register of shared affect, where love and loss emerge as parallel forces shaping social bonds and their fracture. Trauma, in this sense, is understood as something that persists precisely because it is shared, transmitted across generations and folded into the lingering echoes of the past.

Suleimenova's process is defined by duration, repetition, and sustained physical engagement with image and surface. The artist consistently adapts her methods to respond to shifting social and political contexts. Her processual commitment extends beyond the studio into public space through large-scale installations and participatory projects, where making becomes a shared act. Her work has been presented widely in solo and group exhibitions across Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America, including presentations within major international frameworks such as biennials, museum exhibitions, and public art programs. Through these contexts, Suleimenova's practice remains responsive, shaped by immediacy, observation, and an ongoing dialogue with lived reality.

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Her works are held in numerous public and private collections, reflecting the sustained institutional recognition of her practice. These include major cultural institutions such as the National Museum of Kazakhstan, the State Museum of Arts named after A. Kasteev, Sharjah Art Foundation, and the Zimmerli Museum of Fine Arts, as well as international foundations and private collections across Europe, the United States, and Central Asia. Her presence within both museum collections and private holdings underscores the dual nature of her work: at once socially engaged and formally rigorous, rooted in local experience while resonating within broader global conversations on memory, identity, and representation.

EDUCATION

- 1998 Publishing Training Center, London, U.K.
- 1996 Almaty State Academy of Architecture & Construction, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 1990 MFA, Kazakh National University of Arts, Astana, Kazakhstan

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 "Far East, Near West" / Kyiv Biennial, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland
- 2025 Bukhara Biennial / Bukhara, Uzbekistan
- 2025 "Ancient Futures: Exploring Ancestry, Crafts and Ecology" / moc hub, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
- 2025 "Ancient Futures: Exploring Ancestry, Crafts and Ecology" / Egin Art Space, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2024 "Caravan Along the Roads of Memory" / Esimde Platform, Ololo Planet, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- 2024 "Fog of the War" / Goethe-Institut, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 2024 "Hunger Artist" / Zwetajewa Zentrum, University of Freiburg, Germany
- 2023 "Of Their Time (7): A Look at Private Collections" / Frac Grand Large, Hauts-de-France, France

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- 2023 "Fog of the War" / Goethe-Institut Almaty, Dom 36, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2023 "Hunger Artist" / Goethe-Institut Baku, Baku, Azerbaijan
- 2023 "Kuzeu Displaced Identity" / Delphi Space, Freiburg, Germany
- 2023 "Kazakhstan All the Time" / Jeonbuk Museum of Art, Jeonju, South Korea
- 2022 "Life of Things" / Republican Palace, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2022 "Life of Things" / Nur Alem Museum of Future Energy, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2022 "Into the Revolution" / Morrow Collective, DIFC, Dubai, UAE
- 2022 "Unsettled Objects" / Sharjah Art Foundation, The Flying Saucer, Sharjah, UAE
- 2020 "Between the Sun and the Moon" / Lahore Biennale, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2019 "Planet Art: Festival of Nature" / Kühlhaus Berlin, Germany
- 2019 "Re-Membering. Dialogues of Memories" / Astana Art Show, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2019 Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalists Exhibition / Sotheby's Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2018 "Postnomadic Mind" / Wapping Project, London, UK
- 2018 "Bread and Roses. Four Generations of Kazakh Women Artists" / Bethanien, Berlin, Germany
- 2017 "Somewhere in the Great Steppe" / Erarta Museum of Contemporary Art, St. Petersburg, Russia
- 2017 Astana ArtFest / Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2017 Culture Summit / Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 2016 "Dis/Possessed. A Question of Spirit and Money" / Manifesta 10, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2016 "One Belt One Road" / Sotheby's Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2015 Topographica / American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- 2015 Astana Art Fest / Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2015 "Why Self: Adventures of Social Identities" / Venice Biennale Collateral Program, Venice, Italy

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SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 "Unofficial Urban Chronicles" / Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2023 "MILESTONE" / Pygmalion Gallery × Qazart × ECA, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2022 "BIZ QARAPAIYM HALIQPIZ" / Dom 36, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2021 "Plastic, the Last Hero of the Great Steppe. The Art of Saule Suleimenova" / Andakulova Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2020 "Ultimate Love" / Art Korobka Space, Bagratuni Gallery, Moscow, Russia
- 2020 "Sky Above Astana" (Public Art Project) / Zhetysu Park, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2019 "Residual Memory" / Artpoint Space, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2017 "Skyline" / National Museum of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2017 "Somewhere in the Great Steppe" / Aurora Space, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2015 "Steppe Pastoral" (Public Art Project) / American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- 2015 "Kelin (Bride)" / ARTBAT FEST 6, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2015 "How Big is Big?" / TEDx Astana, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2015 "45.." / Art Samal Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2014 "Cellophane Painting" / Artspace Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2014 "Cultural Value...?" / B2A Project, Esentai Mall, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2013 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI" / Eastern Kazakhstan State Museum of Arts, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan
- 2012 "I'm Kazakh" / Kazakh Embassy, Zagreb, Croatia
- 2012 "Wax-Engraving" / Has Sanat Gallery, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2012 "Kazakh Bet" / L.E.S. Space, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2011 "I'm Kazakh" / Russkiy Mir Gallery, Paris, France
- 2011 "Kazakh Chronicle" / Ark Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan

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- 2011 "Kazakh Chronicle" / Has Sanat Gallery, Astana, Kazakhstan
- 2010 Central Exhibition Hall / Direction of Art Exhibitions and Auctions, Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2007 "Buses and Bus Stops" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2006 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI-5" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2005 Asia Alive Program / Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA
- 2005 "Kazakh: Paintings by Saule Suleimenova" / Townsend Center, University of California, Berkeley, USA
- 2005 "Kazakh Chronicle" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2004 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI-4" / Central Exhibition Hall, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2003 "About Love" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2002 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI-3" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2002 "My Way" / Capital Real Estate, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2001 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI" / Capital Real Estate, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 2000 "KUANYSHTYN SAULESI" / Tengri Umay Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 1998 "Flowers" / ULAR Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 1997 "Love & Power" / ULAR Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- 1997 "Trip of the Three Angels" / Minoy Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Performances & Workshops

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2019 "Cellophane Painting" Workshop, "Children Drawing the World" / Almaty, Kazakhstan

1998 Performance "Spontaneous Cinema" / Eurasia Cinema Festival, Almaty, Kazakhstan

1998 Performance "Unswaddling" / Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Almaty, Kazakhstan

1997 Summer Workshop / Central Exhibition Hall, Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan

1997 "Fifth Continent" Workshop / ARK Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Museums and Collections

Sharjah Art Foundation / Sharjah, UAE

National Museum of Kazakhstan / Astana, Kazakhstan

State Museum of Arts named after A. Kasteev / Almaty, Kazakhstan

Foundation 107 / Turin, Italy

Zimmerli Museum of Fine Arts / New Jersey, USA

Richard Spooner Collection / USA

Servais Family Collection / Belgium, USA

Eurasian Cultural Alliance Collection / Kazakhstan

Almaty Museum of Arts Collection / Kazakhstan

Boranbayev Family Collection / Kazakhstan

TOVA Foundation / Switzerland

M HKA Collection / Antwerp, Belgium