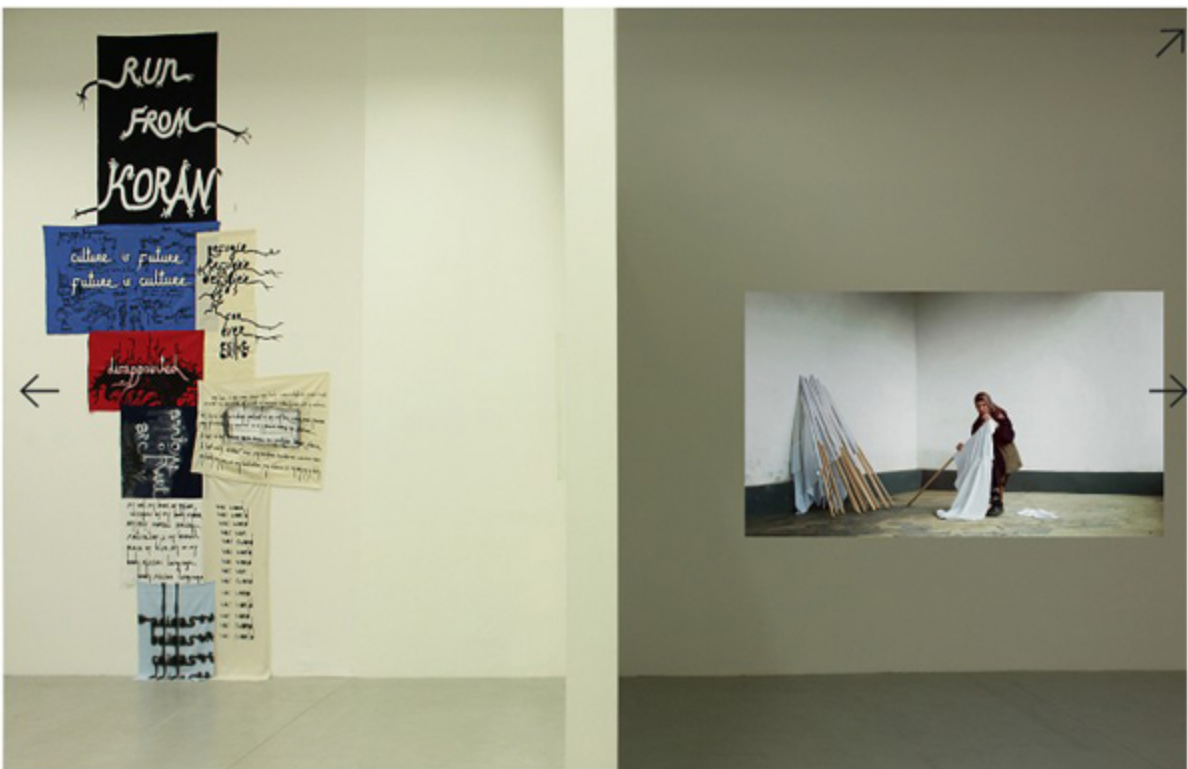


REVIEWS

“Life from My Window” at Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan

by Ilaria Bombelli

Roofs of houses and an indistinct landscape in the distance. This is what one sees in what is considered the first photograph of history: *View from the Window at Le Gras* (*Point de vue du Gras*, 1826-1827). The view elevated by Nicéphore Niépce to a universal image, the first that was permanently affixed to a plate and handed down over time, is a simple scene, every day reinstated at the window of his home in Saint-Loup-de-Varennes in France. The long exposure makes shadows more dense in the photograph, and light beats unnaturally on the buildings that frame it.



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“Life from My Window” at Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan, 2017-2018
Courtesy: Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan

Like Niépce, Georgian artist Koka Ramishvili (1959) approaches the window of his home in Tbilisi with a camera—it is December 1991, around Christmastime—and photographs what he sees. The result is twelve black-and-white photographs, at first glance not necessarily spectacular (*War from my Window*, 1991-92), but dense with the long shadow of a civil war being fought on the city streets, after the violent military coup against President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the country’s proclamation of independence. A “landscape of war,” as defined by Ramishvili, who for each of the twelve days of conflict is found at the window, always in the same place, moving his lens a few centimeters from one photo to another, and taking a picture of what he sees from there: a forest in the foreground and, at the bottom, roofs of houses. To suggest that we are out of the ordinary, an ephemeral column of smoke rises and cuts through the winter sky: a war devoid of drama, without ruins, without casualties.

This work opens, and in some way inspires, the group show entitled *Life from My Window*, curated by Andrey Misiano, on view through January 26 at Laura Bulian Gallery in Milan. Through the course of the exhibition in which clear affinities are expressed (the initial image is a window, the final is a door), the show brings together the work of six artists from different generations (the youngest is twenty-six, the oldest sixty-one), all from the Caucasus. Some reflect upon a period of national life, Soviet socialism, never known by others, who search for its memories; others testify to current experiences, of refugees and the disempowered. They all achieve this with little means, with concern for creative synthesis, and well-centered allusions that are not always immediately legible to Western audiences.

The pinnacle of the show is reached in Misiano’s choice to stage a confrontation between Ramishvili’s photographs with postcards secretly collected by Chechen artist Aslan Gaisumov (1991), who rejects Russian nationalism, depicting his hometown, Grozny, disastrously struck during the First Chechen War in 1994-96 (*Postcards*, 2015). These surreal illustrations, lending to the index of the show with destroyed buildings and streets, were actually printed and put into circulation as postal correspondence by the separatist government during the short period of Džokhar Dudaev’s Republic of Ičkerija, dissolved at the end of the Second Chechen War (1999-2000). Of the nine postcards on display, only one shows the reverse side: it is addressed to Berlin, while the words below inform us that the photo on the back, which remains hidden from our eyes, is “The residence of the President of Georgia Z. Gamsakhurdia, being exiled”—the war is all here, in this kind of forced tourism—given free circulation, inverting the associations in Ramishvili’s photos of a Tbilisi made of fire and iron.

Gaisumov also presents *Flag* (2015-16), a video that is a few minutes long: in a bare environment, maybe a garage (from time to time, one hears the rumble of a car), we see a woman, the artist’s mother, sitting with a handkerchief wrapped around her head, laboriously threading scraps of white cloth on long sticks. The clarity of Gaisumov’s drama is in the raw realism of his direction: the white flag, symbol of the armistice, is returned here to the daily dimension of something accumulated and set aside, between one war and another; and of maternal love, where the mother is also the mother country.

Landscape—that of Ramishvili’s photographs and Gaisumov’s postcards—responds to landscape: here unfolds, on white pedestals of different heights, a multitude of wooden noses in the installation, entitled *Landscape* (2013-ongoing), of the Russian Taus Makhacheva (1983). The prominent noses from which these casts were taken belong to some inhabitants of the Northern Caucasus. In the Avar language, one is informed, the word *megier* means both “nose” and “mountain”—hence the reference to landscape. The work also refers to rites of initiation and demonstrations of virility around the allusive figure of the “tassel” practiced by some peoples of Dagestan. Makhacheva regards, another oriental custom, that of painting the body, in the performance work *Delinking* (held in 2011 in the first location of Laura Bulian Gallery, here remains the photographic documentation). The young artist’s face is covered with ornamental designs typical of some African, Indian, and Near Eastern peoples made with henna, thus becoming no longer the site of (easy) identification, but the territory of threshold and separation, and then of the fusion of diversity, when the dye, once removed, leaves a single dark green stain on the artist’s skin.

Babi Badalov (1959) and Lusine Djanyan (1981), both from Azerbaijan but living in Paris and Russia, respectively, approach the tragedy of exile and marginalization, transformed into a chronicle of events at the limit. Badalov is the author of poems embroidered on scraps of cloth, combining Cyrillic, Latin, and onomatopoeia in the linguistic multiplicity of a refugee (he was persecuted because of his sexual orientation and for criticizing the political regime in his country). His work is a reminder that the maturation and integration of identity can be malleable, never fully completed. Djanyan takes a traditional sheep’s wool blanket, hand-stitched with very large needles by the elder women of the family with a particular cut applied to the top (called */res*, which is also the title of this work, dated 2014). Upon it, she paints a large family portrait of her ancestors living together at different ages: “This child sitting on his mother’s lap is my grandfather,” says the artist pointing at a corner of the blanket. And then, moving her finger a little more to the side, she adds: “Here, however, he is already a man, standing, surrounded by his children.” She then tells the story of an Armenian woman, fleeing from Azerbaijan, who had gathered all her possessions, some savings, and a few photographs in a similar blanket, which she wrapped around her children one night so that they would not die of cold. Djanyan, who is also in exile, thus finds a way to unite her roots with the nomadic condition, with the need (or desire) to escape.

One gets the feeling that for these artists, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sense of being at home has not been fully reached. It is domestic elements (a door, a table, a glass of water) that are used for the mise-en-scène of *Exit* (2012), a nine-minute video by Musay Gaivoronskiy (1987), originally from Dagestan, the last work on display. We see the artist, hooded and with bound wrists, trying to open a door with no surrounding walls—only a handle, the door, and its frame—in a steppe expanse and a gray sky. He fumbles with a bunch of keys, which slip out of his hands and fall to the ground. He kneels to pick them up, stands, tries and tries again until the key enters the lock; he unlocks the door and opens it. But finally coming out of this imperceptible room without walls, or entering it (which is inside and outside is not understood here), always without being able to see, he bumps into a low, two-legged table near the door frame, as if with comic intent. The glass of water placed there quivers, and everything collapses. The umbilical cord is cut, the past is thinned by historical references, all around the landscape has changed, but, as Gaivoronskiy and all these artists of the Caucasus seem to say, the weight of ideas is still disproportionate to their own strength.

at Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan
until 26 January 2018