

Aziza Kadyri Soft Data

with a text by Dr Vivek Gupta

Aziza Kadyri harnesses technologies such as AI and extended reality to unlock new potentials of premodern craft, textiles, and ornament from Central Asia. Her first major exhibition, *Don't Miss the Cue*, staged in the National Pavilion of Uzbekistan at the Venice Biennale (2024) demonstrated the power of such tools by creating immersive installations that enable critical reflection on one's agency in today's hyper-digital world. Trained in fashion design and performance, Kadyri often takes the frames of Uzbek men's sashes known as belbogs and suzani embroideries as a space for innovation. In these soft cloths, Kadyri finds opportunities to manipulate ornaments that meld into figural motifs salient to her biography or major socio-political pressures of today's world. Beginning with an archival suzani fragment or portraits of herself, she trains AI to respond to and adapt images. Symmetrical botchs (paisley) hang like breasts; vegetal sprigs transform into the heart; a face is comprised of fragments of suzani forms. Kadyri's decision to capture moments of transformation in embroidery complements the malleability of her materials.



[*Būqalamūn, Wonders of Creation* of Qazwini (Persian), Southern Iran, ca. 1470, 26 x 17.5 cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Suppl. Persan 2051, f. 179a. In public domain.]

Kadyri's practice contributes to trans-Eurasian movements that reconsider one's relationship with the artisanal past and question how premodern *techne* can expand the possibilities of contemporary practices.¹ For several centuries, makers have created textile designs that shapeshift. In thirteenth-century Iraq, the medieval scholar Zakariyya' al-Qazwini (d. 1283) described a kind of textile known as *buqalamun* in his *Wonders of Creation and Marvels of Existence*. In his section on the art of weaving he writes: "On wondrous things: In Byzantium they weave a textile called *buqalamun*. The Christians invented it. Every moment it appears in a different color. Sometimes green, sometimes yellow, sometimes red, sometimes blue. The warp thread is purple, compounded of black and red. The weft thread is green, compounded of blue and yellow. When all these colors are combined and put against the sun, they shine a different color at every instant."² This chameleon-like textile cuts close to the kinds of transformations that Kadyri produces in her conversations with AI revealing

¹ See also the transdisciplinary work of Moreshin Allahyari (b. 1985).

² From Vivek Gupta, *Worldshaping Wonders: Books and Visual Knowledge in Hindustan*, forthcoming.

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the transhistorical resonances of her project. By employing the *techne* of today Kadyri moves the ephemeral performance of *buqalamun* into the future.³

Born in Russia and currently based between London and Uzbekistan, Kadyri also demonstrates a critical self-awareness of the stakes of working with materials connected to her Uzbek heritage. Can audiences see beyond her face? An earlier generation of female artists working in diaspora ranging from Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) to Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) have addressed this issue through a range of strategies. In “Self-exoticisation archives” Kadyri plays with images of herself by making her likeness in suzani. Before a viewer even has the chance to project an identity upon her, she takes up the task herself and lifts the veil on long-held cultural biases with irony and confidence. She takes it a step further by allowing an algorithm to play with both her likeness and a similarly exoticised set of ornamental motifs. This reifies the arbitrariness of forming one’s identity in the first place and challenges the myth of origins.

As textile weaving and embroidery requires the hands of many individuals—often women—collaboration has been at the heart of Kadyri’s practice.⁴ This ranges from working with Qizlar collective, a Tashkent-based female artists group, to providing a platform for textile artisans in Uzbekistan such as the suzani masters Madina Kasimbaeva and Yulduz Mukhiddinova. Such relationships enable Kadyri to make interventions where the collective experiences of women are at the very forefront. Here, Kadyri also comes into dialogue with emerging practitioners of her own generation such as Sara Ouhaddou (b. 1986) who collaborates with artisanal communities working in Morocco. By expanding her practice beyond herself, reminds us that the notion of individual authorship is nothing more than a Eurocentric construction of “genius.” By foregrounding collective authorship, she taps into a premodern ethics of belonging and solidarity.

CREATIVE TEAM

Suzani embroidery master: Yulduz Mukhiddinova

Sound designer: Fanis Sakellariou

Digital support: AVA Research

Choreography expert, performer: Shirin Jalilova

Studio interns: Margarita Makhanova, Talbia Nasir, Noor-Ul-Ayn Tanveer

³ For more on *techne* in the premodern world see Lamia Balafrej, “Automated Slaves, Ambivalent Images, and Noneffective Machines in al-Jazari’s Compendium of Mechanical Arts, 1206,” *21 Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 4 (2022): 737-774, and Elly Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁴ Cf. Melia Belli Bose, ed., *Threads of globalization: Fashion, textiles and gender in Asia in the long twentieth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024).