The Aural Sea: Uzbekistan National Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia explores myth and imagination

The exhibition reimagines the Aral Sea through myth, storytelling and collective imagination



Installation view, *The Aural Sea*, Uzbekistan National Pavilion, 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2026. (Background) A.A.Murakami, *The Sun Sets in a Shell*, 2026. Produced with the support of Mandarin Knitting Technology and Zegna Baruffa Lane Borgosesia.
(Foreground) Zi Kakhramonova's *Archive of Lost Forms* (2026)

6 May 2026, Venice, Italy – The Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) presents *The Aural Sea* at the Uzbekistan National Pavilion in the Arsenale at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Commissioned by Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of ACDF, *The Aural Sea* explores how mythology can begin to reframe one of the most profound environmental transformations of the modern era, unfolding as a sensory, immersive environment.

The Pavilion is curated by **Kamila Mukhitdinova**, **Sophie Mayuko Arni**, **Nico Sun**, **Thái Hà** and **Aziza Izamova**, a collective formed through the first cohort of the Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School - an ACDF initiative commissioned by Gayane Umerova, convened by Diana Campbell, and developed in partnership with Aaron Cezar and Delfina Foundation. Bringing together perspectives from across Central and East Asia,

the curators position myths and fiction not as escape, but as a response to ecological crisis, foregrounding imagination as a tool for rethinking reality.

The exhibition features newly commissioned and recent works by **Jahongir Bobokulov** (Uzbekistan), **Zi Kakhramonova** (Uzbekistan), **Aygul Sarsen** (Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan), **Zulfiya Spowart** (Uzbekistan), **Xin Liu** (China), **A.A.Murakami** (UK and Japan), and **Nguyen Phuong Linh** (Vietnam).

Stretching across northwestern Uzbekistan, the Aral Sea was once one of the world's largest inland lakes, before large-scale diversion of the region's rivers for agricultural irrigation turned it into a desert in the 1960s. Yet for the local population of Karakalpakstan, south of the Sea, the region remains not simply a story of disappearance, but a place where hope and imagination persist, held in memory, story, and everyday life.

Reflecting this outlook, the Pavilion turns to the creation of new myths to imagine futures beyond loss. It takes inspiration from the work of the young Karakalpak author Allyar Darmenov, who began writing about the Aral Sea in 2015, drawing upon realms of mythmaking to imagine possible futures rather than chronicling environmental devastation, embracing fiction as a way to shift perspective and open new ways of seeing.

Gayane Umerova, commissioner and chairperson of the ACDF says: “In this pavilion, we are challenging the artists to imagine - to ask the question of what this region might yet become. Through initiatives like this pavilion, the Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School, and Aral School, we are building not a series of isolated programmes but an ecosystem where creativity can thrive in the Aral Region and across Uzbekistan.”

The Aural Sea forms part of ACDF’s long-term cultural investment in the Aral region, alongside the Aral Culture Summit and the Aral School in Nukus. These initiatives contribute to a ten-year vision by the Government of Uzbekistan to support the region’s social, economic and cultural revitalisation, initiated under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and aligned with national priorities around sustainable development and ecological restoration in the Aral Sea region.

Across installation, sculpture, painting, textile, sound, and immersive environments, each artist engages with the Aral Sea not as a singular historic event but as a place of renewal and creativity, approaching it as a living, evolving entity.

In her installation *Qi*, **Nguyen Phuong Linh** into the flows of energy that circulate around the seabed, the remnant waters, and the atmosphere. Composed of three works, each with motorized components that rise and fall like lungs, or contract like a heart, *Qi* imagines the landscape as a body whose organs are evolving, in real time, to live in a changing Aral. Colour-graded photographs of the Aral landscape are printed on PVC sheets, resembling translucent skins that reveal the body's interior. The

installation extends Linh's long-term inquiries into the connections between bodies and geographies, and in particular her field research on salt farms.

Xin Liu's *The Permanent and the Insatiable: Born to Sea* (2026) are made from hand woven post-consumer plastic (PET bottles) and submerged in tanks containing an enzymatic solution. Activated by heat, the reaction gradually breaks down the material over the course of the biennale. Liu's sculptures resemble both industrial and organic forms: the substructure of machinery or the skeleton of a disappeared organism. Examining the afterlives of materials and infrastructures left in the wake of the vanished sea, Liu's work offers a speculative and practical model to think through impossible scenarios.

Aygul Sarsen grew up a few hundred kilometres from the former Aral shoreline. Never having seen the water herself, Sarsen turns to portraiture to imagine the Aral as a feminine deity. Her sketches, in quick lines and expressive brushstrokes, capture various Karakalpak imaginaries of the water, personified as hybrid beings with wings, fins, or tree branches for hair.

Zulfiya Spowart's *Beshik (The Cradle)* (2026) is a sculptural meditation on motherhood, fragility, and adaptation centred on the traditional Central Asian cradle. The installation uses wood, textiles, sound and movement to reflect on the cradle as a "first home," where tenderness and instability coexist, mirroring the disorientation and redirection caused by the disappearance of the Aral Sea.

Turning to the lost and changing marine life of the Aral Sea, Zi Kakhramonova's *Archive of Lost Forms* (2026) is a salt-based participatory installation where viewers physically recreate lost marine life through touch and play. Nearby, A.A.Murakami's *The Sun Sets in a Shell* (2026), produced with the support of Mandarin Knitting Technology and Zegna Baruffa Lane Borgosesia, is a large-scale tapestry, capturing environmental transformation through the coded patterns of the zebra mussels—a

species native to the Aral Sea—to explore how nature transforms disorder into pattern. These natural mutations in the shell's pattern, caused by changes in temperature, salinity, acidity, and calcium levels, turn the mussels into time capsules of different points in the sea's history.

Jahongir Bobokulov's *Aura* (2025) is a contemplative work that engages the unseen atmospheres of the Aral region - its emotional residue, spiritual presence, and the invisible forces that continue to shape memory and landscape long after physical disappearance. Using a custom technique of airbrush painting onto polyurethane foam, the composition appears like a source of light that seems to vibrate with energy.

Uniting all the artworks is a new myth written by young Karakalpak writer Allayar Darmenov in the exhibition catalogue. Titled *The Labyrinth*, it tells the story of the Aral

Sea through the voices of salt, sun, shells, breath, creatures, and the Aral Goddess herself. Creating a shared universe through which the exhibition unfolds, each chapter corresponds to an artwork, forming a constellation of interconnected narratives.

The Pavilion's scenography has been developed by GRACE (Ekaterina Golovatyuk, Giacomo Cantoni, Ksenia Bisti) together with emerging architects from the Tashkent Institute of Architecture and Civil Engineering. Rather than echoing the Aral exactly, the design creates a space for listening and reflection - engaging with the proximity to the canals of the Arsenale itself.

In resonance with the 2026 Biennale theme *In Minor Keys*, conceived by the late curator Koyo Kouoh as an "archipelago of oases," Uzbekistan's Pavilion offers an invitation to listen to the stories held in salt, wind, and inherited memory, and to consider how these voices shape possible futures.

***The Aural Sea*, The Uzbekistan National Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, commissioned by Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF)**

Curated by the inaugural cohort of the Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School, convened by Diana Campbell in partnership with Delfina Foundation.

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Notes to editors:

Preview days: 5-8 May**, Exhibition dates:** 9 May – 22 November 2026

Uzbekistan National Pavilion inauguration: 11.30 AM Thursday 7 May

Location: Quarta Tesa, Arsenale, Castello, Venice, Italy.

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Press kit, including imagery, is available here.

Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation: website / Instagram

Uzbekistan National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Instagram

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About the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation

The Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) preserves, promotes and nurtures Uzbekistan's heritage, arts and culture. Positioned at the forefront of Uzbekistan's cultural development, ACDF is committed to fostering the cultural ecosystem of the country, driving the creative economy, and providing opportunities for practitioners on a local, regional and global stage. ACDF believes that culture and heritage are vital in shaping society, uniting communities, bridging generations, and facilitating cross-cultural conversations.

ACDF is overseeing the Centre for Contemporary Arts Tashkent (CCA Tashkent), which is poised to become a new cultural hub for the region, and is driving the construction of the new National Museum of Uzbekistan, designed by Tadao Ando, set to become an architectural and symbolic landmark in the heart of Tashkent. It also commissioned the inaugural Bukhara Biennial in 2025, which welcomed more than one and a half million visitors to the city, connecting the world with the local community of Bukhara, its artists and artisans. ACDF spearheaded the first Aral Culture Summit in 2025, bringing together global experts to work towards ecological and cultural renewal for the region. The second edition is planned for September 2026. In Samarkand, ACDF hosted the 43rd session of the UNESCO General Conference (30 October - 13 November 2025), a landmark decision for UNESCO. ACDF has also launched "Tashkent Modernism XX/XXI", an ongoing research project documenting and protecting the city's modernist architecture, highlighted by two significant publications in collaboration with Rizzoli New York and Lars Müller Publishers.

To date, ACDF has reached over 5 million visitors through landmark exhibitions across 17 countries: from the Louvre and Arab World Institute in Paris to the Uffizi in Florence, the British Museum in London, and the Palace Museum in Beijing. With projects presented across Europe, Asia, and the Gulf, and collaborations with over 40 international museums and cultural institutions, the Foundation is amplifying Uzbek voices and stories in the world's most influential cultural arenas.

About Gayane Umerova

Gayane Umerova is dedicated to developing the culture sector in Uzbekistan.

Driven by a deep passion for arts and culture, and the belief in their power to enrich society, she is at the forefront of building Uzbekistan's cultural infrastructure. Gayane Umerova is Head of the Department of Creative Economy and Tourism of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Chairperson of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) and Chairperson of the 25th session of the UNESCO General Assembly.

Currently, she is overseeing the restoration and development of the Centre for Contemporary Arts Tashkent (CCA Tashkent) opening in September 2026, which is poised to become a new cultural hub for the region, and is driving the construction of the new National Museum of Uzbekistan designed by Tadao Ando, set to become an architectural and symbolic landmark in the heart of Tashkent.

Gayane Umerova commissioned the inaugural Bukhara Biennial in 2025, which welcomed over a million visitors to the city, connecting the world with the local community of Bukhara, its artists and artisans. She also spearheaded the inaugural Aral Culture Summit in 2025, the second edition of which will be held in September 2026, bringing together global experts to work towards ecological and cultural renewal for the region. Committed to boosting Uzbekistan's prominence on the international culture scene, Gayane Umerova was central in encouraging UNESCO to make the landmark decision to host its 43rd session of the UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand on 30 October - 13 November 2025. She serves as the Chairperson of the National Commission of Uzbekistan on UNESCO Affairs under the Cabinet

of Ministers and in April 2025 has been awarded France's Order of Arts and Literature. Gayane Umerova is also a LACMA Global Ambassador and in May 2026 was made an honouree of AWITA's Honours Leaders in Culture.

About the Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School

The Bukhara Biennial Curatorial School took place in Bukhara during the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, bringing together five curators from Uzbekistan and Asia, to experiment with new approaches to commissioning and exhibition-making. The programme will culminate in a major exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia 2026, co-curated by the participants. Commissioned by Gayane Umerova and convened by Bukhara Biennial Artistic Director Diana Campbell in collaboration with Aaron Cezar of the Delfina Foundation, the BBBB Curatorial School is a collaborative and peer-driven platform designed to foster shared learning, critical reflection, and long-term professional relationships. Participants gained unique access to the workings of a major biennial while exploring how exhibitions can respond meaningfully to their cultural and historical contexts, with an international faculty of visiting curators.

About the Aral School

The Aral School is an ecological education program in Nukus, Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, representing a key phase in the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation's (ACDF) commitment to the social, ecological, and cultural regeneration of the Aral Sea region. Reframing environmental challenges through education, local community engagement, and global expertise, the Aral School will develop new solutions for the region and wider world facing broken ecosystems and the impact of climate change.

Founded by ACDF Chairperson Gayane Umerova and with the inaugural edition directed by bioregional designer Jan Boelen, the first pilot course runs from January to June 2026. It features 22 post-graduates (11 regional and 11 international from across disciplines) selected from an open call. The 2026 program includes guest lecturers and mentors like Eugenia Morpurgo, Fernando Laposse, Justin McGuirk, Maria Lisogorskaya, Mae-Ling Lokko, and John Thackara. The inaugural course culminates with an exhibition of research and prototypes to be presented at the 2nd Aral Culture Summit in Autumn 2026 in Nukus.

Website: aralschool.uz | LinkedIn: Aral School | Instagram: @aral.school

About the Aral Culture Summit

Aral Culture Summit is an emergent initiative led by the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), dedicated to social and environmental transformation of the Aral Sea region through art, culture, design and science.

Through initiatives including residencies, laboratories, workshops, exhibitions, and festivals, the Summit endeavors to bring about innovation and positive change in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan. The inaugural Summit took place in April 2025 in Nukus, Uzbekistan. The second edition will be held in September 2026.

Aral Culture Summit aims to regenerate, restore, and revitalise the environment of the region, while attracting new businesses that align with the principles of circular economy, creating sustainable economic growth. The project was officially announced in March 2023 during the

UNWater Conference held in New York. This announcement was a significant step in drawing the attention of the world community to the environmental and cultural challenges of the Aral Sea region.

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