

Turquoise Dreams of a Butterfly

By Indira Dyussebayeva – Ziyabek

Looking at a butterfly, one could easily go back to the childhood memory of running after one to glance the beauty of the wings. Philosophers and writers are often seduced by the metaphor of a butterfly. Thinking about butterflies and moths, a scholar Vlad Ionescu very interestingly reflects on the figural conception of the image from an art historical perspective:

Their irregular fluttering around points to an inherent indeterminacy specific to images whose latency of sense remains to be discovered. No authentic image is fixed and framed, dated, and situated in history once and for all. On the contrary, the erratic image has a dynamic relation to other images, and thus it establishes a connection between past and present ¹

In this solo exhibition, Aziza Shadenova plays with space and time. The mirrored room allows the artist to create an unbounded space where she opens a portal between past and present, as well as conscious and unconscious. Shadenova's artworks mirror her dreams and memories, highlighting the fluidity of time, exposing the past, whilst keeping the latency. The viewer is invited to follow the 'irregular fluttering' and delve into turquoise dreams.



Detail of the front window/vitrine of Exposed Arts Projects. Photo credit: Phoebe Bradley-White

¹ Vlad Ionescu, "On Moths and Butterflies, or How to Orient Oneself through Images. Georges-Didi Huberman's Art Criticism in Context," *Journal of art historiography* 16, no. 16 (2017): 7.

A feminine figure of a butterfly, crouched as if still in the chrysalis, adorns the gallery window, conveying the message to the viewer:

My cocoon tightens - colours tease -
I'm feeling for the air;
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear...

This passage from the Emily Dickinson poem, *From the Chrysalis*, was chosen by the artist, Aziza Shadenova, to title and encapsulate her new body of work and solo exhibition. Within the life cycle of a butterfly the cocoon or pupa stage is the last before the adult butterfly is ready to emerge. Waiting for the change, in a half dormant state of in-between-ness, it seems like Shadenova's butterfly dreams the turquoise dreams from her earlier life. In fact, a butterfly can remember its life from within its different bodies, such as when it was a caterpillar.

From the solid form of the caterpillar to the liquid form while in the cocoon, and finally into the solid form of the butterfly, the process of metamorphosis is a traumatic transformation. A caterpillar almost fully self dissolves and stops its existence in a form of a caterpillar, in order to be reborn into an adult butterfly. In his treatises, *The History of Animals*, Greek Philosopher Aristotle first records the word 'psyche' as a soul or spirit, in reference to a butterfly; while in Christian art, later, butterflies symbolised resurrection of Jesus.²

The meaning of butterflies varies throughout different cultures. Aziza Shadenova spent half of her life in Central Asia and the other half in Europe, in the UK. Shadenova has Kazakh roots, was born in Uzbekistan and lived for a while in Kyrgyzstan. Looking at these 'turquoise dreams', the prevalent colour at the exhibition, and geometrical elements in the artworks would carry away one to the architectural landscapes of Uzbekistan, where the artist spent her first 15 years. Shadenova does not imitate or copy the image of a butterfly, she rather visually connects to one through the form, title, or both, like in her *Three Butterflies* triptych.

² Matthew Wilson, "Butterflies: The Ultimate Icon of Our Fragility," BBC, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210915-butterflies-the-ultimate-icon-of-our-fragility>.

This might not be noticed straightaway but, in *Three Butterflies*, the frontal appearance of these feminine creatures/butterflies resemble the lines of the façades of madrassahs (image 1). The artist appropriates Zoroastrian butterfly tiles that embellish these historical buildings into the hair or clothes of the girls/butterflies. Zoroastrianism is one of the world’s oldest monotheistic religions, originated in ancient Persia, and practiced in Uzbekistan in pre-Islamic period.³ Zoroastrian butterflies symbolise a whole and balanced life: ‘The two inward-pointing triangles represent good thoughts and good words while the narrow strip in the middle represents good deeds.’⁴



Image 1. Madrassahs on Registan Square, Samarkand. © Andrey Vishin / Alamy Stock Photo⁵



Aziza Shadenova, *Three Butterflies*, 2022

³ The definition of Zoroastrianism is taken from Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zoroastrianism>.
⁴ Javad Shekari Niri, “Review of the City of Khiva: Manifestation of Iranian Culture and Civilization in the Region of Khwarezm,” accessed June 13, 2022, <http://www.ikiu.ac.ir/public-files/profiles/items/0a6d4a3f3021b21a9235640f429dc689.pdf>.
⁵ <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/uzbekistan/articles/exploring-the-architectural-treasures-of-samarkand/>.



A



B

Symbol of Zoroastrian Butterfly ⁶

In this solo exhibition, Aziza Shadenova explores the state of formation and in-between-ness. This state of in-between-ness might remind and send the viewer back to the recent state of the unknown when the world became paralyzed and isolated. Within that moment, the whole and balanced life was something one would long for. Fragmented pieces had to be assembled into one again. This is exactly what Shadenova does in *Korpe/Quilt*, which was created during the pandemic in 2021. Korpes would be common objects in Central Asian households, mostly created by the women of the house. Seeing the layers of korpes installed one on top of the other, at the house of her grandmother, Shadenova remembers the fragments of ornaments that would create a kaleidoscopic composition. Nurturing every fragment of memories, the artist weaves a mosaic composition that would comfort her being, as a blanket does for a body or the cocoon for a butterfly.

During the time of nomads, apart from being a useful object at home, serving as a carpet, mattresses or in its direct purpose as a blanket, korpe was also used as a medium of communication. According to specialists, after marriage, when a woman would move away with the new family, she could still send a korpe as a 'letter' to her family with a message in the form of ornaments. The message could be decoded/read by her family, and they would know if she lived a happy life or if she was struggling. Ornaments in the nomadic culture were not merely decorative, but used to be writing and had a meaning, most of which has been lost with the start of the soviet period.

⁶ Image A and B are taken from <http://samarkand-athina.blogspot.com/2012/09/zoroastrian-butterfly.html>.

Shadenova writes in her statement: “I’ve created my own quilt depicting different objects from my life... I use my memories as my protection”. This coded message that the artist has weaved into the ‘quilt’ creates a space for viewers to read it, connecting it to their own memories and associations, and wrapping themselves in a *korpe* of their own.



Aziza Shadenova, *Kørpe (Quilt)*, 2022

Another weaving of the canvas can be seen in the *Water lilies* work that Shadenova literary weaves from her old canvases. Again, the viewer can observe metamorphosis, when the form of old works is destroyed in its former state and resurrect into a new body. In her comments about the work, the artist refers to Monet’s *Water Lilies* that she saw when she arrived to Europe. While contemplating the impressions or the state of the French artist, Shadenova would travel back to her childhood, when she spent her summer holidays by the river.⁷ Looking at the weaved canvas that isn’t flat anymore makes the water look more real and one can almost hear the murmur of running water and the buzzing of dragonflies depicted in the tiles all over the gallery space.

Appropriating Monet’s *Water Lilies*, the artist captures the constant flux of the episodes of her life as well as her perception of time and space. The artist’s *Water Lilies* expresses the

⁷ From the personal communication with the artist

synthesis, the complex process of emotional and conceptual combination of separate things, moments, and ideas from the data that is engraved in the former artworks, into a new whole. In the oeuvre of Shadenova there is always a thread that would connect the past and present; she reflects on her current reality through the lens of her earlier memories.



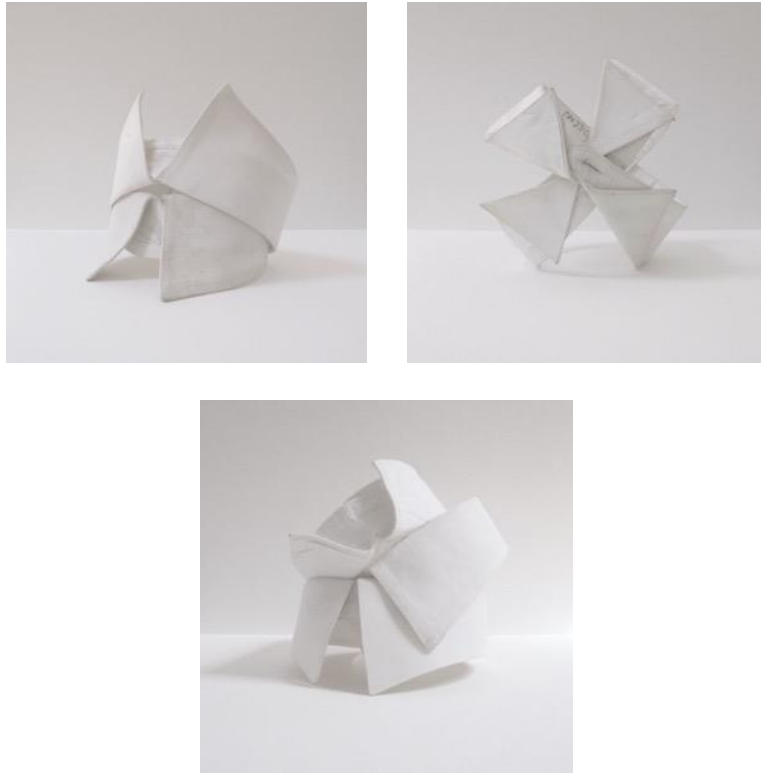
Aziza Shadenova, *Water Lilies*, 2022



Dragonflies, Butterflies tiles, 2022

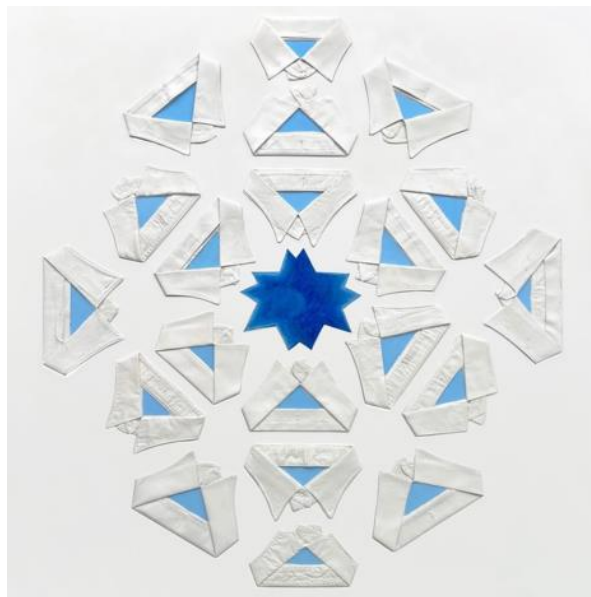
Apart from Zoroastrian butterfly symbols that are depicted on the *Water Lilies* work, one could also see white painted collars that would refer to a butterfly or vice versa. White collars are present in several works at the exhibition. For example, collars are suggested in the form of flying butterflies or are more literally depicted in the girl's clothing in *Girl with Two Hoops*. Collars are also recalled in a sculptural way within *Mosaic with a Star*, as well as within the individual miniatures or the flower buds in the *Vase with Flowers* installation.

Shadenova received a set of 1920's collars as a gift, from a friend who acquired them at an antique market in the UK. An interesting present for an artist with whom objects might acquire a new enigmatic form. The artist creates playful miniature objects when combining two or three collars together.



Aziza Shadenova, *Collars*, 2022

In *Mosaic with a Star*, the collars are assembled on the painting into the shape of a star that is frequently seen in Islamic art and the embellishments on the architecture that Shadenova observed in Uzbekistan. The artist keeps the sculptural form of collars, yet they merge with the canvas, now being part of it as a bar - reliefs.



Aziza Shadenova, *Mosaic with a Star*, 2022

Shadenova associates collars with the state of being organised, skilled and ready to work. Even though the common association with collars would probably be with a male figure, in the case of Shadenova, she brings in a female figure into it. Women in Uzbekistan, as well as many other countries in Central Asia, became more independent skilled workers during the Soviet period. The Soviet era accelerated the emancipation of women, but hardly for the sake of women and rather for the sake of extra hands to be used for communal work.

There is another source of inspiration for Shadenova's collars. Domenico Gnoli's art, that she admires. According to Gnoli, he was isolating and representing some details: 'I always employ simple, given elements, I don't want either to add or take anything away. I have never even wanted to deform'.⁸ However, in Shadenova's case, she is deforming objects from their initial physical functionality, recreating them into objects that have conceptual function and become artworks, space that holds the synthesis.



Domenico Gnoli, *Shirt Collar Size 14 ½*, 1969



Domenico Gnoli, *Girocollo 15 ½*, 1966

⁸ Valentina petrucci, "Domenico Gnoli's Wonderland," Domus, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/gallery/2021/11/10/domenico-gnolis-wonderland.html>.



Domenico Gnoli, *Striped Shirt Lapel*, 1969

Still there are some parallels that reflect in Aziza Shadenova's works. As international curator Cecilia Alemani highlights, the distinctive aspect of Gnoli's work is the textural surface of his paintings, when he mixes the acrylic pigments with sand and marble dust. 'In Gnoli's paintings, objects take an almost sculptural dimension, rising up out of the canvas or sinking back into it as if they were bas-relief'.⁹ In *Mosaic with a Star*, Shadenova instead of painting, literally uses the collars as three-dimensional objects to create a sculptural surface.

Another parallel is in the titles. Shadenova does not play with titles but leave them simple. She does not 'deform' it, exactly as Gnoli, when his titles correspond to the size of the shirt that is usually visible on the collar (Image ...).

Alemanı also emphasizes the enigmatic side of Gnoli's works, referring to the French philosopher Bruno Latour, when thinking about the sentience of objects. 'Gnoli's paintings depict "quasi-objects," to use another term of Latour's: they are non-human, objective, artificial, but at the same time, social, collective, generated by the interaction of cultural forces and human desires.'¹⁰

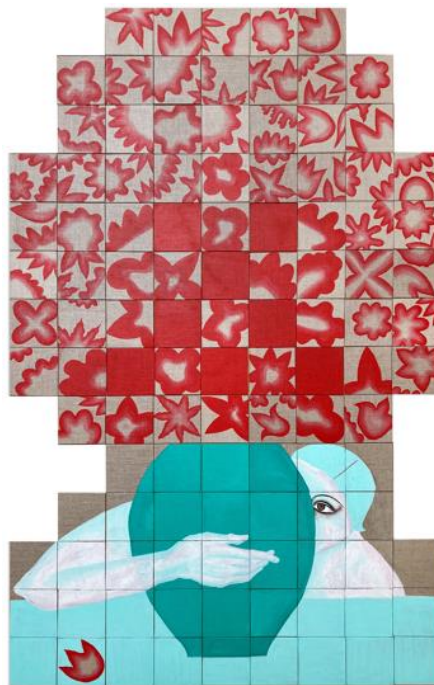
The theme of the social, personal, and collective is very much present in the oeuvre of Shadenova, as well as the enigmatic latency or secrets that her characters keep. It seems like the traumatic experience that the world went through during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021,

⁹ Cecilia Alemani, "Detail of a detail. Domenico Gnoli's portrayals of society through obscure objects and the absent human figure," *Kvadratinterwoven*, accessed on June 1, 2022, <http://kvadratinterwoven.com/detail-of-a-detail>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

this moment of in-between-ness, fostered metamorphosis for the artist. Looking at the exhibition, one can see how the personal is so much interwoven with the collective, the past is being rewound like a moving image and being reanalysed.¹¹ Shadenova highlight many of the social and cultural traumas that the region has undergone, including women's status and the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea which connects both of her countries of origin, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.¹²

Shadenova draws attention to the history of the Aral Sea in the installation *Vase with Flowers* and the finger drawing within the crystals of salt below it. The installation as a whole creates a waterfall of tears from protective evil eyes which flow onto the vase with flowers before becoming salt crystals. The salt itself imitates the remnants of the Aral Sea. The vase or the vessel looks like a body is formed by many overlapping and accumulating patches, expressing the idea of scars and scratched that people acquire during their lifetime. Wounds might heal, but the scars stay as a reminder. The idea of the vase derives from the *Girl Behind the Vase* panels painting that was created first, where the girl is peaking from behind as if she is hiding. This image might evoke the memory of hiding behinds one's mother, whilst being shy, within the viewer.



Aziza Shadenova, *Girl Behind the Vase*, 2022

¹¹ A subject that Shadenova studied at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in 2011, London.

¹² During the Soviet period the rivers were redirected from flowing into Aral Sea, to irrigate the cotton fields.

The question of the status of women is something Shadenova considered in almost every work within the exhibition. She starts from the *Girls Hovering*, where the viewer can only see the silhouettes of a young Shadenova. As the artist describes, she remembers herself as a child looking after guests, hovering like a butterfly around them, while pouring tea and seeing her shadow on the dastarkhan (table). Both *Three Butterflies* and *Girl with Two Hoops* are muted; they keep their secrets. While the faces of *Three Butterflies* are opaque, the viewer can still see their eyes, but in the *Girl with Two Hoops*, Shadenova leaves the face blank, and silences the mouth of the girl with a butterfly-collar. In *Three Dancing Heads* that are shown from the aerial view, dancing girls in tubitekas/doppas (traditional caps) with the plats captured in the air, are vividly expressed as being targeted. The artist leaves darts on the side, suggesting the middle of doppas as a target.

The artist's choice of appropriating the metaphor of a butterfly is beautiful. The butterfly is present and absent at the same time, it flutters around each work and leaves the lightest scales as a dust on each work, like a trail that is there but is not obvious. The idea of fragility comes with the contradiction of power also. Shadenova shows how the exposed body can be repaired and keep its form; its scars are there but are patched over. Shadenova goes back to her teenage period in Uzbekistan, to this period of in-between-ness, when one is not a child anymore but not yet an adult. This period of doubt, formation, struggles and the unknown. These personal memories go hand in hand with the social, cultural, and political contentions of the newly formed independent countries where she was growing up.

The metaphor of a butterfly as a transient being also expresses the creature's strength, as it undergoes a traumatic metamorphosis and is reborn into a new body that keeps its memories. Appropriating this, Shadenova does not show women from a fragile side, but illustrates metamorphosis and rebirth as processes of life. Her women are strong; all the struggles that they have endured do not seem to be presented as bad memories but rather as an accepted fact. The exhibition is full of symbols that are part of Shadenova's memory which, as mentioned earlier, she uses as a source of protection. Perhaps the artist wants to remember and to be reborn into a new body, recognising that there is no future without knowing one's past.