

SLAVS AND TATARS

FRIENDSHIP OF NATIONS: POLISH SHI'ITE SHOWBIZ



Artist collective Slavs and Tatars are known for their highly researched, nimbly layered political and historical installations—“devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia,” as stated on their website—all achieved with a playful drollness just teetering on the precipice of irreverence. Recent examples include *Beyonsense* (2012)—a temporary reading room installed at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, named after a term attributed to early 20th-century Russian-Futurist experiments in language and poetry, which included references that varied from a Dan Flavin homage to the unavoidable but welcomed titular nod to pop icon Beyoncé. At the 2012 Gwangju Biennale, the artists installed a functioning kiddie ride in the form of a man riding backward on a donkey, entitled *Molla Nasreddin the Antimodern* (2012), after the famous Sufi folk character.

In their first exhibition in Los Angeles, at REDCAT gallery, Slavs and Tatars unleashed their aptitude for history and wry humor in “Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi’ite Showbiz” (2012), which was comprised of artworks, installations and publications informed by more than two years of research on the points of convergence between the unlikely pairing of Poland and Iran (not coincidentally the ethnic homelands of the two founding members of Slavs and Tatars).

The gallery at REDCAT was decorated with colorful, hanging tapestry banners inscribed and embroidered with a synthesis of jumbled slogans from the Polish Resistance Movement (1939–45) and the Iranian Revolution (1978–79), often with funny or confounding outcomes such as “Help the Militia! Beat Yourself Up!” and “Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist.” Amid these hanging banners, a hallowed-looking glass-and-gold vitrine contained an unlikely combination of objects in

Wheat Molla (2011): a *molla* (headwear worn by members of the radical Shia resistance) made out of wheat (a common Communist symbol) placed behind a brick, an object brandished as a weapon by workers of the 1980s Polish Labor Movement.

The collective’s clever wordplay was also evident in *Resist Resisting God* (2009), a mirrored mosaic referencing the interior ornamentation of Shi’ite temples. The Persians employed mirrors for their mosaics in an effort to distinguish themselves from their Arab neighbors, who typically used wood and ceramic. The mosaic work of *Resist* looks innocuous and merely decorative at the outset, but, when scrutinized at an angle, one can see that its beveled, mirrored surface spells out the message, “Resist Resisting God.”

A carpeted *takht* (the traditional seating in Persian tea salons) at the front of the exhibition space invited visitors to take a seat and seek reprieve from the steady, and perhaps overwhelming, stream of information, not just within this exhibition but also in today’s digital world. On the *takht* was a stack of the collective’s publication, *79.89.09* (2011)—“suggested reading material” for the exhibition, as well as an exploration of the dates 1979, 1989 and 2009, and how they relate to the Iranian Revolution, the 1980s Polish Solidarity Movement and the 2009 financial crisis, as well as to the fall of Communism. Page four of the publication reports on the birth of the 24-hour news cycle and its impact on journalistic standards and biased rhetoric. The informative and editorialized 44-page pamphlet proves the gravity of the group’s educational mission but at times reads like *The Onion*, the satirical American news publication. One entry reads: “Muslim Monobrows? Good. Gentile Monobrows? Bad”—a reference to heavy eyebrows being a virtuous and favorable feature in Iran, while elsewhere the feature is often disparaged or mocked.

In the back of the gallery, a small, plain fountain, elevated no more than half a meter off the ground, sputtered fluorescent crimson liquid—an ignoble allusion to a fountain in Tehran’s Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, the water of which was dyed red to commemorate those that gave their lives to the Iranian Revolution. In sum, these irreverent installations are not meant to be disrespectful or flippant, but are in fact an effort to defuse highly politicized or volatile international events and relationships. The wacky but factual combinations proffered by Slavs and Tatars aim to destabilize long-held truths that have created institutionalized hostilities in order to create more neutral territories in their place.

JENNIFER S. LI

Left

SUBODH GUPTA

Ab Bakri Ki Mimyane Ki Awaz Nahi Aati
(Now One Doesn’t Hear the Sound of the
Goat Bleating)

2004

Cast aluminum, dimensions variable.

Collection of Priya Paul.

Courtesy Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.

Right

SLAVS AND TATARS

Installation view of “Friendship of Nations:

Polish Shi’ite Showbiz” at REDCAT,

Los Angeles, 2013.

Photo by Scott Groller.

Courtesy the artists and REDCAT, Los Angeles.