





# FROM CASPIAN TO PINK PLANET: I AM HERE













## FROM CASPIAN TO PINK PLANET: I AM HERE

at the 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia

Azerbaijan Pavilion

20 April – 24 November 2024





Cultural dialogue has, down the ages, always been an important element of a state's foreign policy; the acceptance of other peoples and their cultures is essential to political and social rapprochement. International cultural events provide a platform for the presentation of the state's cultural achievements and particularities, as well as for cultural dialogue. Such events are also a crucial venue for cultural reflection and response to challenges arising in everchanging political, economic and social contexts.

La Biennale di Venezia, a tradition of more than 120 years captures, as always, the *spirito del tempo*, the international pulse, by reflecting the main trends in international creativity, thus its reputation as the "mirror of the art world". The main reasons for La Biennale di Venezia's popularity within modern social development include not only the creative communication between artists and curators, but also the dialogue, and even integration, of different cultures and worldviews conducted on the themes and perspectives presented here. The social aspects of these themes do not inhibit demonstrations of cultural diversity, on the contrary, they underscore the fact that culture is integral to human life.

Standing at an intersection of routes and cultures, Azerbaijan was historically determined to be multicultural. Different peoples and religions have lived here for centuries, creating a unified, noble and colorful culture, and here the people of Azerbaijan have instructive experience in facilitating cultural dialogue. A happy participant in international art exchange, the country presents its rich culture to the world and has been a regular participant in La Biennale di Venezia since 2007.

The Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia is organized to the theme *From Caspian to Pink Planet: I Am Here*. Contact between different forms of art is clearly visible in the single artistic space here; represented by three artists it provides viewers, too, with an opportunity to discover new names. Ideas of how relative, but also how strong, are ties between people and the places they inhabit are presented metaphorically. All the artworks shown in the pavilion, as well as the new technologies used to convey an artistic idea, respond to *Stranieri Ovunque/Foreigners Everywhere*, the Biennale's overall theme as proposed by curator Adriano Pedrosa. At the same time, they illustrate those particularities of Azerbaijani society.

Communicating on processes taking place in the world in the language of art, conducting dialogue between peoples via the contact of cultures, is the most reliable path towards interaction, trust and friendship.



### **Rashad Aslanov**

Commissioner

Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Italy,
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Italy, Malta and San Marino,
Permanent Representative to the Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations and all Rome-based UN Agencies.
Formerly Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to, concurrently,
Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay.
Ambassador Aslanov is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philosophical Sciences.

The notion of culture requires an understanding not only of language differences, but also of differences in knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Culture generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and recognition. Culture can be defined as all the ways of life, including arts and beliefs, that are passed down from generation to generation.

Culture is a universal and unique instrument that allows people and nations to perceive and understand each other more deeply. A vivid example of this is the La Biennale di Venezia, the "great mother" of all Biennale events, which since 1895 has served the noble goals of harmony, a correlative enrichment of cultures and a strengthening of ties between countless creatives from all over the world. Its prestige is retained today thanks to the Biennale's ability to anticipate new trends in art while also presenting works and artists from each period from new perspectives.

Despite the current global challenges, finding a way to live together in a multicultural environment is essential to sustaining our world in Peace. Hence, Art has an incredibly unequivocal impact, assisting us to focus on the key issues and tough decisions that may at times seem overwhelming.

Effective ideas and promising projects that enrich relations between countries and peoples are born in the atmosphere of amiable dialogue that prevails at every exhibition in La Biennale di Venezia which, itself, is a history of art contributing to the emergence and development of a "plurality of voices".

The unwavering success of La Biennale di Venezia and the expanding geography of its participants prove that culture knows no borders. Its magnificent exposition attracts the interest of a wide audience from all over the world, including from my country, Azerbaijan. This testifies to people's desire to expand humanitarian cooperation and promote intercultural dialogue.

The topic of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale *Stranieri Ovunque* – *Foreigners Everywhere* – echoes the multinational spirit of Azerbaijan that has long been the homeland of the most diverse peoples and cultures. Our country has long been a bridge for the transition of Eastern culture to the world. Indeed, Azerbaijan is a unique geographical, geopolitical and cultural space inhabited by peoples of the most diverse national and ethnic groups.

Inspired by the title of the 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, the artists of the Azerbaijan Pavilion have created site-specific works – *From Caspian To Pink Planet: I Am Here* – that reflect on the expression *Foreigners Everywhere*, regarding it as a fundamental cultural urgency of our time.

Vusala Agharaziyeva, Rashad Alakbarov and Irina Eldarova are exponents of unique talent, each cultivating their own distinguished artistic practice.

Here, too, we must acknowledge the exceptional role of the *Heydar Aliyev Foundation*, and the personal dedication of its President, Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva, in carrying out the noble mission of regularly supporting Azerbaijan's participation in the Biennale, thus promoting Azerbaijani culture and protecting cultural heritage across the world.

I am confident that this cultural festival, renowned for its exhibitions of the highest standard, will once again enchant audiences, and art lovers will have the chance to familiarize themselves with the spirited portfolio of these Azerbaijani artists.





### **LUCA BEATRICE**

Curator

Art critic, curator, journalist, and lecturer at Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti and IED – Istituto Europeo di Design in Turin, IULM – Libera Università di lingue e comunicazione in Milan. He curated the Italy Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia in 2009.

He has published several essays on contemporary art, the most recent *Le vite. Racconto provinciale dell'arte italiana* (Marsilio, 2023). He is President of the Quadriennale di Roma.



Heydar Aliyev Center. Baku, Azerbaijan

The invitation to curate the Azerbaijan Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia came as an unexpected and welcome surprise. Since curating the Italy pavilion in 2009 I have not accepted other offers to work on collateral events – until now. But it was with great pleasure that I accepted curatorship of the Azerbaijan Pavilion.

The opportunity extended was so exceptional, promising truly remarkable stimuli for an art curator. First of these was the possibility of learning about the art and culture of an emerging state, a republic new to me but whose history – in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone – has been through such complex phases. Then, of course was the challenge of coming to terms with *Foreigners Everywhere*, the theme of the 60<sup>th</sup> edition of La Biennale di Venezia, as selected by its director Adriano Pedrosa. This would be from a perspective extending beyond the centrality of the western world to further investigate the sensation of "otherness" that we all carry within us, in spite of the need for strong roots and communities. For artists, this tension seems to be a necessity, their pivotal stance often triggering an explosion of free creativity.

A visit to Azerbaijan certainly provides a context for the creativity of the country's artists. The capital, Baku, is itself a contemporary metropolis, historically arisen out of a city on the Absheron peninsula. Its architecture alone presents a futuristic skyline surrounding a fascinatingly well-preserved and UNESCO-listed medieval inner city. The futuristic gem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is surely the Heydar Aliyev Center, where I met the three artists presented here. Designed by Zaha Hadid and brought to life from 2007, it is probably one of the most impressive cultural centers on the planet, although even this claim doesn't quite do it justice, because the space has a versatile, multiple character that incorporates art in brilliantly sweeping architectural solutions. Its visual impact alone delivers an alternative to the canons of contemporary architecture, and a new concept in design for modern cultural venues.

It was within this Center that I met Amina Melikova, co-curator of this exhibition and the three artists selected to represent Azerbaijan at the La Biennale di Venezia, all with different backgrounds and experiences. Their works have been grouped here for their diversity in representing their country's material culture, in various media from modernist painting to an installation featuring both advanced technology and traditional craft.







Rashad Alakbarov Luca Beatrice and Irina Eldarova

The exhibition has an intriguing title: From Caspian To Pink Planet: I Am Here – a compendium of the titles of the works presented by the three artists. Here is the local sea sourcing oil, a philosophical view of the planet, even Hollywood, as East meets West, but on reflection, and in response to Foreigners Everywhere, the definitive statement I Am Here.

Vusala Agharaziyeva, the youngest of these artists, lives some three hours by car from the capital, in a place she has transformed into a community for artists, offering residencies. She draws inspiration from her own personal experience to explore the theme of extraneousness, which is pertinent to Azerbaijan with a history shaped by the dynamics of migration, whether enforced or for trade. In her large painting *Pink Planet*, the artist imagines a science fiction scenario, referencing illustrations from futuristic literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Interpreted through a variety of media, including painting, sculpture and digital installations, the journeys that have shaped her background are a constant in the narration, echoing the sensation of feeling like an outsider within one's own existence, glimpsed here in the act of disembarking in surreal extraterrestrial landscapes steeped in vivid shades of pink.

Rashad Alakbarov, concentrates on sculpture and installations. Renowned in Azerbaijan for his works in light and shadow, he also has previous experience of La Biennale di Venezia; in exhibiting here several times.

At first glance, the site-specific installation *I Am Here* appears as a labyrinthine group of walls, but when observed from a different perspective, in a mirror placed high on the front wall, the title becomes clearly visible. This confirms what in Rashad is almost a cultural debt to the theories of perception at the heart of the Kinetic Art of the 1970s. Each letter of the phrase *I Am Here*, formed from sections of traditional Azerbaijani carpets, forcefully asserts its own existence; the here and now. His work refers to mirrors and walls as elements of architecture and as metaphors of the individual, accentuating the bond between people and the places they inhabit.

Irina Eldarova, born in Moscow, works on drawing and painting. A cinephile, she has, above all, many stories to tell, in a lightly ironic approach that is never banal., she has been creating, for a number of years now, a kind of work in progress, producing new episodes, quite like a television series. The paintings of *Girls Prefer Oilmen* combine her own personal history, as one who has often changed her place of residence across countries, cultures and habits, with the imagery of American movies and the phenomenon of star worship that forced its way across the boundaries erected during the Cold War between two global superpowers. Raised in Russia and attracted by dialogue between different cultures and traditions, Irina identifies the move to Azerbaijan as a crucial point in her life. In her witty and colorful paintings, in a rather more European than American Pop style, she tells an imagined love story – that of a worker on a Caspian Sea oil rig and Marilyn Monroe. It is a perceptively painted story that captures the various stereotypes of popular fiction.



### **AMINA MELIKOVA**

Curator

Director of the Department of Exhibitions and Events, Heydar Aliyev Center. PhD in Art Studies, Honoured Culture Worker of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017).

Art curator of exhibitions of modern and traditional arts, and specialist with over 25 years' experience in the museum sector, founder of several national brands in the creative industries, board member of the ICOM National Committee of Azerbaijan, member of the Artists' Union of Azerbaijan since 2011.

Author of several books and scientific publications, including: *Oil and Art* (2013); The *Art of the Kelaghayi* (2018); The *Shirvanshahs' Heritage in the World's Museums* (2018); *Gurama (The Art of Patchwork)*, 2022; *Dmitriy Yermakov, Journey to the Land of Fires* (2024) etc.

In 2024, La Biennale di Venezia, the world's most important exhibition of contemporary art, will open for the 60<sup>th</sup> time. First mounted in 1895, this event invariably attracts worldwide attention – from both professionals and general public. La Biennale di Venezia is an event that has historically become an indisputable marker of new trends on the global art scene and the artists who present in their works an image of modernity. Every two years, this huge festival of contemporary art offers the public a programme of exhibitions, presenting, in addition to the main curatorial project, national pavilions from many different countries.

This year La Biennale di Venezia will take place from 20<sup>th</sup> April to 24<sup>th</sup> November. The title of the main project – *Stranieri Ovunque (Foreigners Everywhere)* was taken by Adriano Pedrosa, the event's principal curator, from the title of a series of works by the Claire Fontaine creative collective, which struggled against racism and xenophobia in Italy in the early 2000s. The famous Brazilian curator justifies his choice as follows: "The backdrop to this Biennale is a world replete with numerous crises related to peoples' movement and life across countries, nations, territories and borders. This is reflected in the dangers and pitfalls of language, translation and ethnicity, expressed in differences and inconsistencies in identity, nationality, race, gender, wealth and freedom. In this landscape, the phrase *Foreigners Everywhere* has (at least) double meaning. Firstly, wherever you go, wherever you are, you will always encounter foreigners – they/we are everywhere. Secondly, no matter where you find yourself, you are always foreigners."

From Caspian to Pink Planet: I Am Here, the exhibition in the Azerbaijan Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia, represents a unique response to this theme. Its optimism lies in its thesis that a person can be present everywhere – physically and/or mentally. Even as a stranger, the power of imagination and empathy enables one to master (or settle) in an unfamiliar environment and take root there.

It is a great pleasure for me to curate the Azerbaijan Pavilion this year with Luca Beatrice, curator and critic of contemporary art, professor of art history at the Albertina Academy and the Institute of Applied Arts and Design (IAAD) in Turin. Azerbaijan has presented its national pavilion every two years since 2007 and this year, at the 60<sup>th</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, the Azerbaijan Pavilion is in Campo della Tana, a house built in 1579 in the Arsenale district, one of the two main areas traditionally housing national pavilions. The three artists represented in the Azerbaijan Pavilion this year are from different generations and use different means of expression and technique. However, their works selected for display at the Biennale touch, in one way or another, upon situations intertwining reality and fantasy in which an individual must overcome alienation and achieve a sense of belonging within the observed/imagined space.

Irina Eldarova asserts that women are initially foreigners... Getting married... Moving from their parents' home... Sometimes even their country....

And she herself, born in Moscow, met her husband at studies in St. Petersburg. She moved to his homeland, from northern classical to southern eclecticism, with its uniquely sunny intoxication, sea-salt flavour wind... and 'aroma' of oil....

The latter, Azerbaijan's 'flesh and blood', once made this fringe of tsarist Russia a world centre for the extraction of 'black gold'. Much later it would acquire additional colour – an eclectic romance, attractive to the many who laboured to build Oil Rocks. A city on stilts... And no less a foreigner surrounded by the Caspian Sea...

Oil changed both Irina Eldarova's professional development and her destiny, becoming the basis of one of the artist's extensive series: *Girls Prefer Oilmen*, its leading image the world's most famous blonde – Marilyn Monroe.

This series tells of a non-realist, fictitious meeting and love between two heroes mythologized in the mass media. East and West, of the 1960s and 70s – a typical male worker from the offshore oil fields in the Caspian Sea and the Hollywood idol Marilyn Monroe. The appearance of a foreigner in the scenography of already romanticized industrial everyday life creates a special semantic intrigue.

Irina once more experiences the young Muscovite's process of adaptation as a foreigner to a different culture. One in which she has to write a new story for herself...

In this story, the most unlikely scenario of pop symbol meeting ordinary Baku oilman can happen. The ephemeral feminine and the brute force of hard labour. Two foreigners from two worlds far apart... Enchanting colours. So much humour. So many associations. A combination of two myths, daring in concept and implementation – the bright ideals of communism and the American dream – the air of unreality. As experienced by those who find themselves in an unknown environment. Where only kindness and attention give one the strength to become oneself in a new place that one day becomes home...

Vusala Agharaziyeva deliberately chose for herself the challenge of being a foreigner; leaving Baku and travelling to a place that is a direct illustration of the theme, *Foreigners Everywhere...* The history of Ivanovka, where the artist now lives and works, is of a community's mass resettlement to preserve its religious identity, creating a village unique but integral to multi-confessional Azerbaijan. And two centuries later it is difficult to give an unequivocal answer as to who and what are the "foreigners" here... Even whether they are such...



The Azerbaijan Pavilion Team Heydar Aliyev Center. Baku, February 2024

The cacophony of the capital city, expressed in monumental murals on its buildings, brought Vusala Agharaziyeva's art to a conceptual awareness of the uniqueness of surrounding space. Working through changing styles and forms, materials and applied surfaces, the artist resolved her search for her own creative "noise". The appeal of mural art urged her to rise above the earth's surface, reproduce her own worlds, and here she consistently develops the detail of her imaginary space, acquiring the contours of her *Pink Planet*.

This is reformatted by the artist into rose-tinted glasses, presented to those who are ready to create their own vision of an alluring utopia.

"...Only beautiful souls can live in a pink world. These souls preserve the tenderness of the whole planet and the sincerity of creativity. Wear your glasses as your visual centre... people may laugh at you. They are drowning in their fears and the opinions of others, while you sail on a magical ship on a beautiful *Pink Planet*, writing the history of the world in words, colours, sounds and actions."

In addition to Vusala Agharaziyeva's illusory and childlike, idealized *Pink Planet*, the exhibition includes replica-variations on a given theme, presented in a variety of media by artists both professional and amateur – and aged from 5 to 50 years.

Rashad Alakbarov's work is dualistic in content, as confirmed by his many years of research into the play of shadow and light, symbol and text, word and meaning. And so, within the framework of *Foreigners Everywhere*, the artist has embodied a personal rethink – what is it to be a foreigner? Because Rashad never considers himself to be such anywhere... being free regardless of location...

His large-scale installation *I Am Here!* with all the power of thought invested in precise turns, conveys the artist's main message – that the world around us will always be assigned the role of foreigner. The artist recreates the oppressive atmosphere of our movement in a labyrinthine city of cramped and predetermined trajectories that are set by the rhythm of the structures into which we are forced to fit and which are imposed on us from the outside.

It is precisely this that a person discovers and learns; as soon as they turn the next symbolic corner, they find themself in an unfamiliar place... Because that person, with all their depth of individual perception, retains their self... Only the perspective, circumstances and duration of the journey taken change...

And, again, an allegorical rethink to address...

This forces them to seek their place again, testing their readiness to discover themself... Surmounting the fear of the unknown around the corner... Thus the foreigner...

Rashad Alakbarov, experiments once more with form, his economy of line seeming to urge all those making their way in confined space to look for the way out, not under their feet, but by lifting their eyes. Only there can they find a symbolic mirror indicating the true direction through a foreign world.

This comes only from recognising themself as the single dynamic constant at any point on the planet. As the artist confidently and pragmatically asserts, a person is indigenous everywhere, endowed with the right to deal with the next turn, adapting it to themself, to prove to the world what is inevitable: *I Am Here!...* 

It is only necessary to want to recognise the challenge...

Regardless of where a person happens to be – from the actual, harsh, everyday life in the oil fields of the Caspian Sea to the illusory, childlike and idealized Pink Planet, they always have the right to declare, *I Am Here!...* 



# **VUSALA AGHARAZIYEVA**

Pink Planet

Vusala (b.1990) completed her master's degree in Decorative and Applied Arts at the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Arts in 2014. Since 2017 she has been the creative driving force behind multiple projects involving three-dimensional mural art in various locations of Baku such as in *Icherisheher* (the Old City), the central streets of Baku, Azerbaijan's regions, and in Istanbul.

While earning recognition for her murals, sculptural works and conceptual videos, and stretching further into graphics and product design, painting remains central to Vusala's creative pursuits. She is also an active contributor to charitable endeavors, working as an educator with teenagers, including those with limited physical abilities or from underprivileged families and shelters. She is currently involved in advancing regional cultural development by establishing a space and platform for creatives in one of Azerbaijan's regions.



Vusala Agharaziyeva, *Pink Planet*, 2023-2024. Acrylic on canvas, 176x176 cm



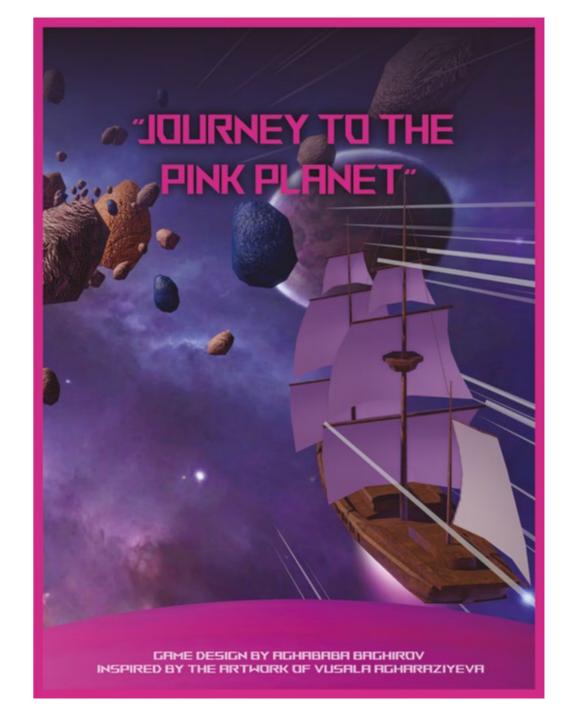
Vusala Agharaziyeva, *The Way In*, 2024. Acrylic on wood and metal, diameter 150 cm



Vusala Agharaziyeva, *Pink Planet: Fantastic Reality*, 2024. Animated film, 1 minute.

Rose-colored World, a story by Nigar Rzayeva;

*Voyage*, a soundtrack to exhibition by Osman Eyublu and Saša Predovan, Multi-track recording playback, 7'



Vusala Agharaziyeva, *Journey To The Pink Planet*, 2024. Video game, design: Aghababa Baghirov



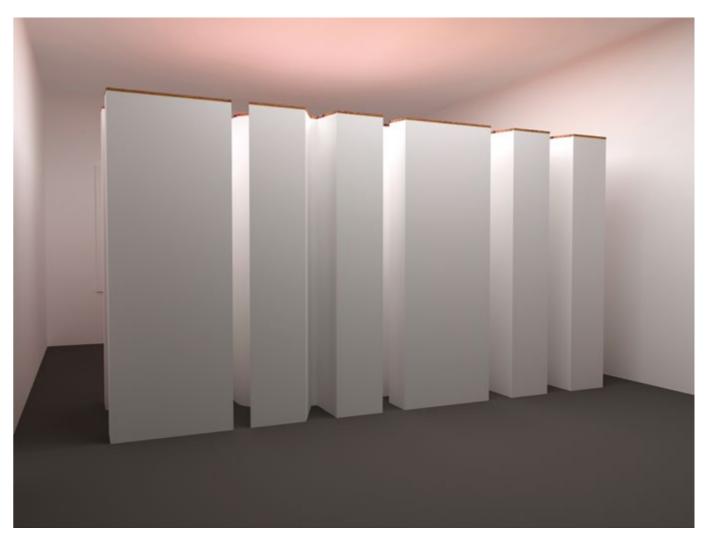
# **RASHAD ALAKBAROV**

I Am Here

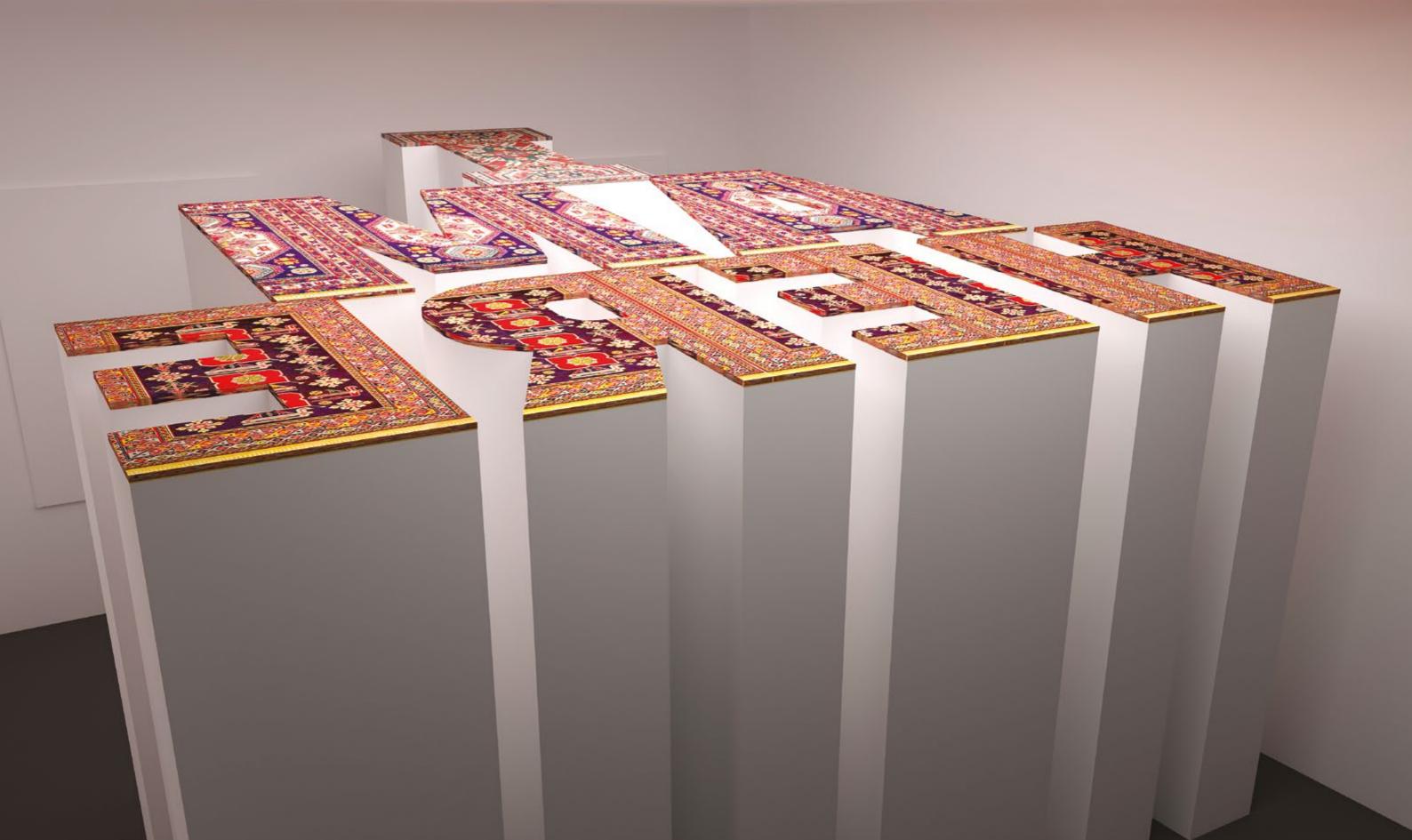
Renowned contemporary artist Rashad Alakbarov (b.1979) has garnered international recognition for his captivating installations of light and shadow that are celebrated for their intricate design and imaginative approach. His works incorporate less conventional materials like found objects, plastic bottles, welded steel and plexiglas lettering. Such materials are skillfully arranged to craft images or messages that appear when illumination casts the artwork onto surrounding walls. For Rashad, art is his platform to address topics such as consumerism, sensationalism, climate change and other global concerns.

Since completing his education at the Faculty of Decorative Arts within the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Art, Rashad has dabbled in different artistic forms: painting and sculpture as well as video art, but his installations embody the full impact of his work. His artistic training is truly reflected(!) in the creative manipulation of space, volume and proportion, always in playful manner.





Rashad Alakbarov, *I Am Here*, 2024. Installation, mixed technique: white walls, carpets, mirror, 370x270x270 cm



The Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the IDEA Public Association, in partnership with the Swiss Association of Women & Empowerment, are delighted to introduce the installation *Pangea*. This project was inspired by a visionary concept from Madame Tatyana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations (UN Geneva), and realized by Azerbaijani artist Rashad Alakbarov. The installation *Pangea* emerged from the initiative '17 Faces of Action', an international art project supported by the Director-General of UN Geneva in partnership with 17 countries, each representing 17 women engaged in Environmental Action and promoting 17 sustainable goals.

The project began in 2022 in Azerbaijan, was actively involved in COP 28 in the UAE, and will continue through COP 29 from November 11-24, 2024 in Baku.

The concept behind the installation centers on a portrayal entirely in metal of Pangea, the primeval supercontinent. This monumental artwork symbolizes the interconnectedness of all life on Earth and the importance of sustainability.

To Rashad Alakbarov's intricate design, the sculpture represents Pangea's geographical features, including its land masses, mountain ranges and coastlines. The use of metal as the medium evokes a sense of strength, durability and timelessness, highlighting the enduring legacy of Pangea in Earth's geological history.

Distinctive in this installation is its integration of 17 distinct colors, each one representing one of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

These vibrant hues are integrated into the metalwork, highlighting the interconnection between environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Alakbarov's rods symbolize growth, resembling a plant reaching up towards the singular goal of Earth's preservation. Each color serves as a visual reminder of the specific SDG it represents, fostering awareness and conversation about the global goals of a better and more sustainable future.

Rashad Alakbarov, *Pangea*, 2024. Installation, paint on metal on cut stone, height: 190 cm, diameter 130 cm



# **IRINA ELDAROVA**

Girls Prefer Oilmen

Irina Eldarova (b.1955), Honored Artist of Azerbaijan, illustrator and designer, was born in Moscow and educated at the Saint-Petersburg Academy of Arts and Moscow State Academic Art Institute. With their vivid imagery, her paintings are a distinct contribution to modern Azerbaijani art. Irina's dynamically figurative paintings captivate with their vibrant coloring, while often incorporating a subtle humor. She conveys her imaginative associations and narratives to the viewer in a variety of media. Her unique storytelling explores themes of good and evil, of dreams, as well as of life's complexities and intrigues. Brimful with the realism of experience, there is still room for intricately interwoven reflections on life. Beyond her paintings, she has also designed extensive marble reliefs for the *Halglar Dostlugu* metro station in Baku. Irina Eldarova has shown her work in more than twenty solo exhibitions, at home in Azerbaijan and abroad.



Irina Eldarova, *White Dance*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 152x152 cm



Irina Eldarova, *Time To Have Lunch*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 152x152 cm



Irina Eldarova, *Offer*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 152x152 cm



Irina Eldarova, *Swan Lake*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 140x140 cm



Irina Eldarova, *Oil Tango*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 152x152 cm



Irina Eldarova, *Blonde At The Hairdresser's*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 120x120 cm



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