

From the Catalogue of Javad's exhibition in Herning Art Museum

Modern Russian Art

Djavad Mirdjavadov belongs to the generation of Russian artists who were forced to live a life in the shadow of Soviet rule, constantly struggling with the authorities. In his works, Djavad deals with fundamental questions like religion and sexuality, often strongly infringing on the viewer's private space. He paints the good and the evil, the humane and the bestial in a way which sucks the viewer into a no man's land where one is forced to face questions concerning one's very personal existence. These highly emotional motifs are matched by Djavad's very expressionistic style of painting and his fervent interest in primitive indigenous cultures. He examines icons and handicrafts from his home country Azerbaijan and also ethnographic remains from tribal cultures in Latin America and Africa.

In Spring 1999, Herning Kunstmuseum has chosen to exhibit a selection of Djavad's paintings from the 70s and 80s, as a follow-up to the museum's previous international exhibition of Djavad's fellow countryman Maxim Kantor who represented Russia at the Biennial in Venice, 1997. It should also be regarded as a counterpart to the works of the Cobra group who have been richly represented in the past year. Like Djavad, the members of the Cobra group were inspired by indigenous art, though in a more abstract, less

As the great political upheaval took place in Russia at the end of the 1980s, Djavad had the opportunity of exhibiting in the West. From the outset, his works were met with considerable interest from international art collectors. Among these were the Danes Jytte and Arne Groes and Michael Bay, without whose kind co-operation and support it would not have been possible to undertake this exhibition at Herning Art Museum.

Together with our warm thanks to these obliging art collectors, we would like to extend our thanks to the committed authors of our catalogue; Prof. Emeritus Teddy Brunius, Vladimir Aituganov and Finn L. Falkersby. In addition, Herning Kunstmuseum expresses its appreciation for the support of the Augustinus Fonden and BG Fonden which has provided economic support for the exhibition and the publication of this catalogue.

Torben Thuesen
Art Director

The Shaman of Modern Art

When Djavad Mirdjavadov had his great exhibition in Moscow in December 1988, he walked around pensively regarding the large canvasses hung in room after room, large paintings forming a comprehensive whole. The artist had the air of a gentleman with his aristocratic profile and wolf-like, grey-streaked white hair. He was wearing a Phrygian style cap. A hat which is not unlike those worn by the Three Wise Men in early Christian art, The Magoi, from which our word "magic" derives. Suddenly he looked like a guru. Djavad Mirdjavadov as an artist is not unlike the magicians of earlier times.

Djavad Mirdjavadov experienced the old traditions and incorporated them into his paintings. The nomads traveled to Baku and mixed with the peasants and various religions intermingled and succeeded each other. The oldest religion is Shamanism, the Word religion of the hunters. The worship of fire came here from Afghanistan and Persia and with it came the dualistic belief in the struggle between good and evil. The single combat of Ormus against Ariman.

In his allegorical paintings Djavad Mirdjavadov reproduces death invocations, apotropaic gestures, worshipping as well as harmoniously identifying with the powers of goodness. For example, one can observe figures around a table as in the Last Super and Holy. Communion, in addition to the Star of David from the Cult of Moses which the Chazans of the thirteenth tribe used in their synagogues and one can also observe the Byzantine icons shining in the twilight of the sanctuary. The concentrating paintings he has produced over the years contain immense multiplicity and complexity. The monumental works are one formidable series with evocative powers.

Mirdjavadov's style development can, of course, be compared to the unacademic schools in the west like "Les Fauves", the exultant Roualt and Soutine, the German group "Die Brucke" and in the Post War Period, the Cobra group. Bengt Lindstrom, "The Young Wild Ones" in Germany, in addition to Kiefer and Baselitz who also belong to this tradition. The broad brushstrokes, the impasto colours, the glazing which is painted over and shines through like a Medieval palimpsest - handwriting which is partially scraped away and covered by a new layer, so that a kind of double exposure emerges. Compositions may have an undulating play of line or rigid outlines around various coloured patches which gleam like a glass mosaic from the Middle Ages.

On a surface without perspective figures which look like roughly hewn masks can be seen. The outer edge is decorated with ornamental patterns which have the appearance of textile appliqué or sequin patterns. A free brushstroke produces a border of whirls and spirals, zigzags and uneven wavy lines.

In this multiplicity of expression one can find a bestiary of monsters, humans and gods. His art conjures up ancient myths with voodoo-images and potlatch offerings. It is as if the artist has dug up old treasure chests in the countryside and spread their contents before us. One glimpses ancient images of saints, the circum-polar religion of Shamanism - dark shining halos, ritual processions, birds as soul-bearers and riders pounding past on horseback. Here can be found facial expressions and gestures showing fear, sorrow, pain, anger and joy. This art reflects the fear and trembling of human beings and its surfaces indicate a shining halos, ritual processions, birds as soul-bearers and riders pounding past on horseback. Here can be found facial expressions and gestures showing fear, sorrow, pain, anger and joy. This art reflects the fear and trembling of human beings and its surfaces indicate a fear of emptiness "horror vacui". There are no empty spaces. It is a totality of outlined grimacing creatures with gaping mouths and alarming teeth.

Yet, in his art, there is also a harmonious and peaceful contrast, a joyful artistic dance. Everything suddenly changes, shifts focus and gains importance, as in our dreams.

This light in the dark is Atavism, a glimpse of a previous world order most of which we have forgotten, but which still exists in this vast Asian continent.

For Djavad Mirdjavadov it was his life's work to create a monument to the religion of magical folklore and its compelling form of expression. Not only does he identify with these cult rites, he is also an active participant.

He is the shaman of modern art.

Teddy Brunius
Professor Emeritu

Djavad Mirdjavadov

His name is well known to collectors and art experts of the former Soviet Union. The State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow, Mirdjavadov Foundation in Denmark, Djavad Foundation in the United States, Art Foundation of Azerbaijan, private collectors. There are several famous names among the private collectors: Noble Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marques, Norton Dodge, owner of the largest and the most famous collection of Soviet non-conformist art in the USA; Pulitzer Prize winner Arthur Miller, Tonino Guerra, poet and playwright, who have actively collected his paintings in recent years. Power of his talent was obvious and needed neither proof nor explanation.

The way to be an artist was chosen by Djavad in his early childhood. A picture by Djavad when he was only 8-9 years-old boy is still above the door of his parents house in Baku, although the house was confiscated by communist authorities a long time ago and changed hands many times. But all owners solicitously preserved, during the renovations, the picture of a fanciful stallion, painted by an artist whom they did not even know.

At the age of 16 when Djavad was working as a poster-artist for a local movie theater, he was imprisoned for half a year. It was in 1939 when he went to jail for coming late to work. He was in a cell with criminals, thieves, murderers, but even they considered Djavad as a man out of this world with a crystal-clear soul. He was highly respected for his talent: his master sketches of tigers, horses, fantastic birds were very popular for tattoos.

An endless devotion to art and maximalism originating from it, distinguished young Djavad from his friends of the same age, made-him strange and, misunderstandable for other people. Admirer of Zoroaster and ancient philosopher Mani, Djavad, like his grandfather, exposed vice and evil irrespective of the place or time. In 1945 he has discovered for himself books by the German writer and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Right on the streets of Baku he proclaimed the greatness-of spirit and power of Super-man. They started talking about him as a mad artist, who painted rocks with different colors and threw them in the sea.

The years of studying in Azimzade Art College in Baku gave Djavad very little and he decided to move to Leningrad in 1949. There he made copies of pictures of old masters in the Hermitage for nine years. Djavad felt the limited nature of easel painting, he wanted to express himself in a different way. In 1957 he settled on a shore of Caspian Sea and began to create monumental compositions.

Apsheron peninsula is the eastern extremity of Caucasian Mountains, going as far as 60 kilometers deep into the Caspian Sea. Baku with its oil rigs is on the southern part of the peninsula, but central and eastern parts are really wild and deserted. This ancient land is known as Ghobustan.

Zoroaster composed his verses in these places almost fifteen hundred years ago. The sites of primitive people, their drawings on the rocks were still in a good shape when Djavad moved there.

Nature of Ghobustan is severe- blinding heat at summer time and piercing cold winds from the sea at winter. Remains of ancient sanctuaries with relieves of animals and god-desses, weathered rocks, hardened lava, fossil fishes and mollusks, little salty-lakes, gages of heavy peasants' carriages in the ground - everything was experienced in Djavad's paintings.

He became more interested in abstract art and stopped to work on portraits, still-lives and landscapes. Sand, resin, asphalt, concrete, auto enamels, hills and trees, nature and sky were his materials at that time. Huge two-by-three meters 3-D panels, sculptures, relieves were done in the same way as pre-historic Ghobustan artist did - under the sky, turning his soul to the God-Nature.

Radiant sunlight, bright colors of flowers, deep black, violet and blue shadows, emerald color of the sea and the gold color of the sand have enriched Djavad's palette. Ancient land fired by the sun tied Djavad forever with his nation, its history and culture.

Foreign collectors began to buy Djavad's pictures a while ago, but only in the midseventies were his pictures permitted for exhibiting in republican art shows. In 1987 (at the age of 64) he was admitted to the Union of the artists of Azerbaijan. Usually young artists 2-3 years after Art College become the members of this Union. Finally, as if it was a joke, he was given a title of Honorary art worker of Azerbaijan.

This recognition of Djavad as officious artist was another attempt to integrate him in the System he was fighting all his life. Such tricks of Soviet power were sad and absurd; Djavad remembered all too well the isolation in which the KGB and the Azerbaijanian Communist leaders kept him in Baku. Many times he couldn't even leave the city to be under observation. Total blockade in far and provincial Baku didn't allow many pictures to meet their audience.

The wall of silence against Djavad's art has been broken in Moscow in 1986. His first not-so-large exhibition took place in the Central Writers Club. Professional exhibition halls were still closed for him.

Foreign collectors rushed to Moscow to buy the masterpieces of contemporary art at bargain prices. Moscow has opened the doors to non-conformist art. Unbelievable agiotage has happened around it. It was not until 1987 Djavad's paintings were exhibited abroad - in the USA, France, Japan, Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland.

Series of his one-man shows in Moscow (1987-1988-1991) made him a star. Numbers of articles have been published in prestigious magazines, catalogues and a documentary film "This is Djavad" were issued. The artist got a possibility to travel and live abroad for months. But Djavad's health was badly undermined. Heart attack and cerebral thrombosis changed the athlete to a handicap in a short time, and have deprived the artist of the ability to paint.

During all these difficult years, Liuba, Djavad's wife, remained his true friend. She was taking care of the family, while his pictures were not bought, she was the artist's permanent model, secretary and nurse. She was lucky to rescue his paintings from Baku burnt by civil war. She took them out of the country, considering they would be more safe in Europe and in the USA.

Among Djavad's collectors are people of different backgrounds, fates and nations: Russians, Americans, Azerbaijanians, Jews, Danish, Japanese and many others. They are united by love to his

art and clear understanding of the artist's genius. Not too many people tried to say it openly during Djavad's life time, Gut now it is undeniably true.

It's bitter when freedom is found by the end of life, and recognition comes after death. But it was the artist who finally won, not the totalitarian Soviet system, which crushed in front of Djavad's eyes. He was always spiritually free in his art. He breathed art, painting was his way of life. Djavad painted without asking fame or fortune for his effort, because he could not live otherwise.

Djavad was not afraid of Death. He died and was born again in his paintings a thousand times. He believed he lived in his pictures creating specific radiation of artistic flame around them. He speaks to the viewer with no words, and everybody, who has at least one of Djavad's pictures, can feel it.

By Vladimir Aituganov

From the catalogue of the Moscow exhibition that opened in January 1988

Visiting of museum of Modern fine arts abroad, in particular in London and Munich, somehow premised and anticipated my perception of pictures of pictures of Baku artist-Mirjavadov. Pictures of Mirjavadov were as an unexpected discovery for me. So far I have not met such tragic and demonic heat in painting. The canvases literally rivet one's attention.

Chingiz Aytmatov