

SLAVS AND TATARS

MAYATEPEK

Galerie Nordenhake Mexico City presents MAYATEPEK, an exhibition by the Eurasian collective Slavs and Tatars, founded in 2006. Their work explores literary and political geographies of Eurasia that challenge our understanding of language, ritual, and identity through publications, installations, and lecture performances.

Slavs and Tatars is an art collective devoted to an area East of the former Berlin Wall and West of the Great Wall of China, termed Eurasia. Their practice is primarily based on three activities: exhibitions, books and lecture-performances. With a heady mix of high and low brow humor, the artists turn to sculptures, installations, and text to excavate and explore a geography that is equally imagined as it is political.

Employing an archeological spirit, Slavs and Tatars uncover layers of language, politics, tradition and ritual; opening new paths of contemporary discourse, the artists consider the hybridization of a region, shared cultures and poignant questions of identity in the present day. Since 2006, the collective's work has been exhibited at major museums and biennials internationally, including Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 58th Venice Biennale, 10th Sharjah Biennial, 8th Berlin Biennial, 3rd Thessaloniki Biennial, and 9th Gwangju Biennial.

MAYATEPEK takes its name from the Turkish ambassador to Mexico, Hasan Tahsin Mayatepek, who held the post between 1935 and 1938. While in Mexico, Mayatepek studied the linguistic similarities between Turkish and Mayan, based on words such as tepe (Turkish) and tepek (Mayan), both of which translate into Spanish as "hill". Based on these connections, he postulated the idea of a common ancestor between the two cultures.

For MAYATEPEK, Slavs & Tatars conceived works that explore the common heritage - speculative or real - between the indigenous peoples of Central America and the Turkic peoples. The exhibition brings together six bodies of work: *False Friends* (ceramics and mirrors) - both made in Mexico - along with *Alphabet Abdal*, *Bazm u Razm*, *Bandari String Fingerling*, *Who Are You?*, *Alphabet (Uighur)* and *Saturday*, previously exhibited works.

False Friends (Ceramics) revisits the ceramic tradition that originated with the Yoruba people of Nigeria and was later adopted by rural white communities in the southern United States. The series explores representation, beauty, and identity through ceramics. Inspired by Hurufism¹, the collective attempts to represent Turkish words in their original Arabic spelling, using strokes that evoke facial hair such as eyebrows, eyelashes, moustaches, or beards, seeking visual and sonic resonances with indigenous Mesoamerican languages.

The works *False Friends* (Mirrors) also explore the possible linguistic heritage between Mayans and Turks, using a technique of reverse painting on glass used in both Catholic religious art and the Shiite tradition. The words KAAN in Mayan and KHAN in Turkish, both related to "sky" or "open space above the head," become symbolic of this transcontinental connection.

Alphabet Abdal alters the traditional associations with the Arabic language. Although

¹ A mystical current within Islam that emerged in the 14th century, which attributes spiritual and mystical meanings to the letters of the alphabet, associating them with physical and cosmic aspects.

it is often considered exclusively as the sacred language of Islam, Arabic was also the liturgical language of Middle Eastern Christians. The work proposes an "exodus of letters" that celebrates the Levantine² and Hijazi³ origins of Christianity and reminds us that language can be a shared territory beyond religious divisions. The text that unfolds the piece - "Jesus, Son of Mary, He is Love" - written in Arabic characters, emphasizes this shared memory.

The act of combing or taming hair, especially curly hair, has historically been associated with social control and civilization. In *Bazm u Razm* ("Feast or Battle"), Slavs and Tatars explores the everyday ritual of combing by using glass combs as dual symbols of hospitality and violence. Inspired by both the afro combs of hip-hop culture and the talismanic seals of the Uighur⁴ tombs of Xinjiang, China, the works reference the Turkic peoples known for their military prowess as well as their generosity and hospitality. In *Bandari String Fingerling*, the collective addresses facial hair removal as a gendered gesture of penance: a practice deemed obligatory for women, yet disregarded for men. Both works reflect on the body and its care as spaces of tension between the biological and the cultural.

Who Are You?, *Alphabet (Uighur)*, and *Saturday* are part of a series begun in 2009 and made using thermoforming techniques. In *Who Are You?* the collective takes as its starting point the Arabic word *hu*, which is used in Islam, especially Sufism⁵, to refer to the divine. Although it functions as a mantra in Zikr⁶ rituals, *hu* literally means "he," highlighting the gender bias in the representation of the absolute.

Slavs and Tatars revisits Marcel Broodthaers' *Poèmes industriels* in *Alphabet (Uighur)*, replacing the Latin alphabet with a Cyrillic Uighur version. The exclamation "Vale!" remains unchanged, showing how certain meanings manage to resist changes in the linguistic and cultural system.

Finally, in the *Saturday* work, two intertwined numbers 6 form a Star of David, a symbol

2 Related to the Eastern Mediterranean region, which includes countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel. Historically, it was a crossroads of Semitic, Greek, Roman, and Arab cultures.

3 Originating from the Hejaz, a region in western Saudi Arabia, birthplace of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

4 A population of Turkic origin that mainly inhabits the Xinjiang region in western China. Their culture blends Central Asian and Islamic traditions.

5 A mystical branch of Islam that emphasizes direct experience of the divine through rituals such as *dhikr* (recitation of the names of God).

6 A devotional practice in Sufism that involves the repetition of the names of God or sacred phrases as a form of meditation and spiritual embodiment.

reinterpreted to allude to the six-year cycle of servitude prescribed in the Hebrew Bible. On the sides, the word *manumissio* is inscribed in Greek and Hebrew, linking the Jewish, Hellenic and Latin traditions around the notion of freedom. According to the Mosaic Law, slaves were to be freed in the seventh year - the Sabbatical year - presenting a cyclical and spiritual vision of emancipation that was progressive for its time compared to contemporary Christian and Muslim systems. The work thus proposes a transversal reading of history in which sacred languages, geometry, and archaeology intertwine to rethink forms of domination and salvation.

For Slavs and Tatars, translation, and especially transliteration⁷, becomes a space for reflection on how languages, like cultures, are mixed, transformed, and sometimes lost in the political process of trying to cross borders.

⁷ The process of converting words from one writing system to another letter by letter, aiming to represent the sounds of the original language without translating the meaning.