

BAKU TO THE FUTURE

Last century, Azerbaijan's creative scene experienced a boom to rival that of its oil industry, with the capital, Baku, as its locus. Passionate about her nation's art, curator Leyla Aliyeva is about to launch a London show aimed at helping endangered species to follow the same trajectory

I love my country, as everyone loves their own country, but one of the things that I think makes Azerbaijan so special is that there is just so much that hasn't yet been discovered—so much culture, so much history that is unknown to so many around the world. Over the past few years this has begun to change, and my hope is that over time more and more people will uncover the hidden treasures that it has to offer. Right now Azerbaijan is so full of energy, which is what I think makes the art coming out of Azerbaijan particularly fascinating.

Art has been a passion all my life. When I was young and first came to London I used to spend my time walking along the South Bank, visiting exhibitions at Tate Modern. It inspired me to begin drawing and also to tell people about the art of my own country. The main goal of the work I do now is to give more people a flavour of that art and the culture of Azerbaijan, and to show people what Azerbaijani artists are creating.

Azerbaijan is an incredible mixture of cultures. Traditionally, we were a nation of fire-worshippers, because people saw fire springing up from the earth. Obviously we now know that it comes from natural gas underground, but it must have been an incredible sight. No wonder they worshipped the magical flames! Other religions followed, to create the diversity that we see today. It is hard to place their arrival exactly, but Christianity arrived in the fourth century, Judaism around the fifth, and Islam in the seventh. What is so precious is this mixture of cultures and religious traditions: around Baku you can see churches, mosques, synagogues—even the Zoroastrian fire-worshipping temples are still there.

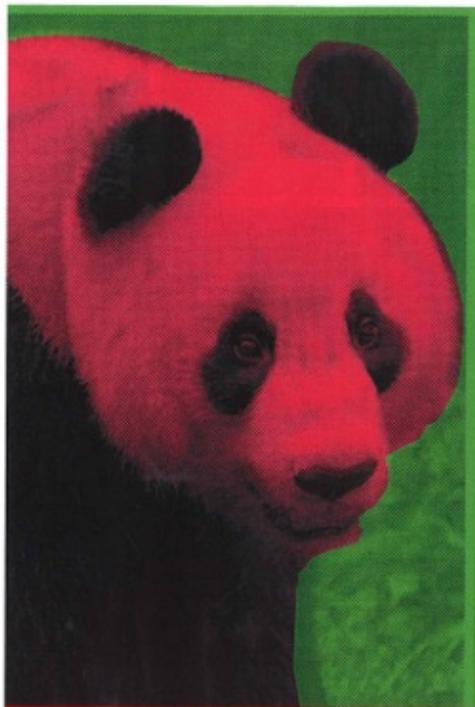
In 1918, we gained our independence. This coincided with an amazing oil boom in our country, and with the flourishing of our artistic and cultural scene. Women were, for the first time, allowed to work in Parliament, and the first school for Muslim

girls was opened; we had the first performances of opera and ballet in the Eastern Muslim world. This era was followed, of course, by the Soviet one, which added another layer to our already complex and fascinating cultural structure. The paradox of the Soviet period is that while the arts were strictly controlled, they were also accorded immense importance. Some sensational pieces of art from that time are now on display in Baku.

Post the Soviet era, when Azerbaijan once again became an independent country, a vibrant and exciting cultural identity has been created that is truly unique. Of course I extol our culture at every opportunity, but I think the only way for people to truly understand it is for them to experience it first-hand. I have long been interested in art, but it wasn't until we opened the museum of modern art in our country in 2009 that I realised that our artists were too good to remain unknown.

That is why I had the idea of taking the best of Azerbaijan's contemporary-art scene and bringing it to the rest of the world. For a long time it was just a dream; then I met an amazing curator, Hervé Mikaeloff, and together we set about developing a show, *Fly to Baku*, that featured Azerbaijani artists. We picked out 21 artists and more than 100 works that showed the amazing range of artistic expression in our country, from video installations to photographs to paintings to performance art. We

launched the exhibition in 2012 in London at the Phillips de Pury space in Howick Place, and it then travelled to Paris, Berlin, Rome, Vienna and Moscow over two years, sadly ending earlier this year. The last stop for the exhibition was Baku, where it was on display at the Heydar Aliyev Center, designed by one of the most charismatic and interesting architects of her generation, Zaha Hadid, and in itself an amazing work of art. It has been exciting to use this magnificent building to showcase some of the world's most famous artists, including



SAVING FACE

Gavin Turk's *Pandy Warhol*, 2014, on display at the *HERE TODAY*... exhibition, highlighting the plight of threatened species.

"ANDY WARHOL" LIMITED-EDITION PRINT BY GAVIN TURK, EXCLUSIVE FOR THE "HERE TODAY" EXHIBITION MARKING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE IUCN RED LIST OF THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES. WWW.HERETODAY.ORG



NEW WAVE

The Heydar Aliyev Center, a cultural complex in Baku, Azerbaijan, designed by Zaha Hadid and opened in 2012.

Andy Warhol, Tony Cragg and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and this autumn we will open a major retrospective there of the work of the Expressionist painter Bernard Buffet—one of my favourite artists.

I admire many more of the world's great artists, from Van Gogh to Matisse to Condo, but am also excited by a lot of the work by contemporary Azerbaijani artists such as Javad and Tofik Mirzavadov, Ashraf Murad, Rasim Babayev, Kamal Ahmad and Gorkhmad Efendiyev. Their work today is inspired by some of the older generation of artists that I also admire, including Rashad Alakbarov and Nikaz Najafov. All these are likely names that are less familiar to you. It has been really encouraging for me to see their work beginning to receive the international recognition they deserve; recently the work of two Azerbaijani artists, Farhad Farzaliyev and Nazrin Mammadova, was shown in the Saatchi Gallery, and another of our artists, Faig Ahmed, was presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of a lecture series. All of these artists are part of a collective called Yarat, which means Create in Azeri. Yarat was formed in 2011 as an organization dedicated to nurturing an understanding of contemporary art in Azerbaijan and to creating a platform for Azerbaijani art, both nationally and internationally. A number of these artists were also featured in the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale last year, which was brilliantly curated by Hervé Mikaeloff.

The Heydar Aliyev Centre is the culmination of the work of the Foundation that was created in 2004 in my grandfather's name. The Foundation works in a wide variety of spheres including health, education, culture and ecology, and the breadth of its projects makes it an amazing platform to develop ideas that combine the different aspects of its work. This led us three years ago to create IDEA—International Dialogue for Environmental Action—which works on conservation projects in Azerbaijan and around the world. The environment is something that connects

everybody and we wanted to create a campaign that engaged a younger audience in a more interesting way. That is where the idea of combining the environment and art came from. We're doing a lot of work to protect the endangered species that live in Azerbaijan, like the Caucasian leopard, the gazelle, the wolf and the bear, so we decided to create a sculpture of a gazelle and invited more than 20 artists from around the world to paint a gazelle each to raise awareness of this beautiful and rare animal. The painted gazelles popped up all around Baku. It was very cool.

Building on the theme of art and conservation, later this year in London we are launching *HERE TODAY*... an art exhibition to mark the 50th anniversary of the IUCN Red List of Threatened and Endangered Species (November 25–December 17). I am really excited about it, both because of the diversity of the artists involved and also because we are transforming the Old Sorting Office at 21–33 New Oxford Street into a series of rooms and installations that will take you on a journey of artworks featuring endangered species and highlighting issues of environmental concern. The range of artists being shown is incredible, from Andy Warhol to Gavin Turk, Peter Blake, United Visual Artists, Farid Rasulov, Stephanie Quayle, Rashad Alakbarov, Gordon Cheung, Oswaldo Maciá, Julian Opie and Mariko Mori.

Art and conservation are two of my passions. I truly believe timeless art is not about chasing today's trends, but about creating pieces with honesty and depth that also communicate a message to their audience. The art of Azerbaijan has certainly changed and evolved with the many influences that have seeped into our culture over the years. I think that the work of many of the Azerbaijani artists that I have mentioned has indeed stood the test of time, and with today's art scene so full of excitement and promise I believe that many more of the pieces being created will as well. I hope that you will get the chance to discover the magic of these artists as I have done. □