

TAUS MAKHACHEVA



Portrait of Taus Makhacheva. Photo by Shamil Gadzhidadaev.

TAUS MAKHACHEVA, *Endeavour*, 2010,
still from HD video: 9 min. Courtesy the artist.

Her Dagestan

BY STEPHANIE BAILEY

Profiles

In Taus Makhacheva's three-minute video *Walk* (2010), a jagged cliff zigzags across the frame producing a line of perspective. Three points demarcate the division between the other earth and a brilliant blue sky, and a figure in black comes into view walking at a steady pace, bisecting the landscape. This same dark figure features in another work, *Endeavour* (2010), which was filmed on the same day. In this piece, the performing body throws its weight against a boulder that has been hanging over the Dagestani village of Tsada for centuries. It is a romantic, existentialist work, executed with precision by an artist with a steady eye on her native country and the changes that have been taking place there over the past decade.

Yet, beyond Dagestan's literal highs and lows—its mountains, plateaus and crevasses—Makhacheva's examinations also look at the very structure of Caucasian society. In both aforementioned works, she draws upon a compositional trope long associated with the Caucasus region—the lone figure in the mountains, representative of humanity's coexistence with the forces of nature. But, despite the focus on landscape in much of her work, Makhacheva explains that her videos hint more at “the way we don't relate to the landscape anymore.” And this is where Makhacheva's subtle agitation lies. As an artist whose intentions are to illuminate things we often overlook, her aim is to uncover the historical, cultural and, above all, personal layers that constitute the world around her.

That Makhacheva's grandfather was Rasul Gamzatov, the most famous poet of Dagestan and son of Gamzat Tsadasa, the eminent Soviet Avar poet, has inevitably had an impact on her work. Also feeding into her practice is her dual Russian-Dagestani identity and her Western education. Makhacheva graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College in 2007 and studied at Moscow's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2009. Recently, she completed her Master's degree at the Royal College of Art, London. This background has no doubt inspired an approach that attempts to reconcile the contemporary with the nostalgic, the local with the global. “I do have this romantic notion that I have to work with my context, geographical or cultural,” she admits.

Of her forebears she observes: “They had a humorous criticality to everyday life, and that's how they helped society to change itself and maybe look at itself.” Then she adds: “Hopefully I'm doing the same thing but in a different medium.” In fact, Makhacheva does share this sense of humor and criticality, as evidenced in

her video-performance *A Space of Celebration* (2009), in which a figure dressed as a “giant deconstructed napkin” (in Makhacheva's words) enters a banquet hall, popping up from between chairs and behind tables, and rolling about on the floor like a turtle tipped on its back. In this piece, the artist gently probes at the ways in which society's rituals become strange and curious spectacles.

Yet, despite the critique, there is palpable warmth to Makhacheva's work, which invokes her grandfather's celebrated book of prose, *My Dagestan* (1968). Makhacheva's work acts as a love letter to her cultural roots. “The theme I work with, I define as Dagestan, basically,” she says. “I embody the place where I'm from.” This is illustrated in one video work in particular, *Carpet* (2006), in which Makhacheva rolls herself up in a traditional Dagestani carpet, literally becoming one with the fabric of her surroundings.

Through such an embodiment, Makhacheva encapsulates the tension between tradition and progress. In *Rekhen* (2009), filmed between the mountain villages of Tsada and Akhalchi, a figure walks across a plain cloaked in a traditional sheepskin coat called a *timug* that is traditionally worn by shepherds. The form is hunched; it drags itself until it collapses amid a flock of sheep. It is a metaphor for the weight of contemporaneity on local culture and once more points out a disconnection between past and present as acted out over the landscape. But the highlighting of such disconnections is never the conclusion: much of Makhacheva's practice is about reinstating links that have been severed, forgotten or overlooked.

Makhacheva's video *Gamsutl* (2012) features an ancient and abandoned mountain village, which in the late 1950s was subject to redistribution whereby its residents were moved to collective farms. In the work, a man strikes various poses taken directly from soldiers depicted in paintings of the Caucasian War by Russian painter Franz Roubaud (1856–1928) that are hung in the PS Gamzatova Dagestan Museum of Fine Arts in Makhachkala. In addition, she borrowed steps from “The Dance of the Collective Farm Brigade Leader,” a 1930s dance from North Ossetia that fuses folk movements with Soviet socialist elements.

In all, themes are fluid in Makhacheva's practice. This is exemplified in the layered three-screen installation *Let Me Be Part of the Narrative* (2012). The first video is a Soviet documentary on Olympian Ali Aliev, a Dagestani wrestler, interpolated with images of classical forms—sculptures,

archaeological ruins, the Olympic torch ceremony. On the opposing screens, Makhacheva shows footage taken from the Dagestani Dog Fighting Championship. Interviews with owners reveal how contestants are chosen, trained and reared. The only female participating in the event is also interviewed, and she acknowledges the peculiarity of her position in a testosterone-fueled event. Within these overlapping narratives, Makhacheva touches on the themes of gender, competition and passive (or proxy) violence, not to mention the aggressive undertones of a global event like the Olympic Games. Thus, from a local context, universal truths emerge.

Makhacheva's most recent show, “Story Demands to Be Continued,” was an introduction of sorts. It was held at the Exhibition Hall of the Artists' Union in Makhachkala this past November, and marked an important moment for the artist when thinking about the legacy of her grandfather and great-grandfather. The works—which ranged from video to sculpture—illuminated the nuances of contemporary Dagestan's cultural and social landscape, against the backdrop of the very terrain that defines it: a reflection on Dagestan expressed to Dagestan. It was also an important moment in that it presented the language—and media—of contemporary art to a local scene that has not yet fully embraced such things as video as a viable art form. The show was a success—on the opening night, Makhacheva staged a performance titled *Exhibition!* (2013), in which fish-sellers Zaira Shakhbanova and Elmira Gasanova stood outside the show calling out “exhibition!” (rather than their usual call of “fresh fish!”), inciting all who passed to enter. The performance demonstrated an invitation that is present in much of Makhacheva's work: for viewers to enter the artist's world and negotiate their own subjective perspectives on her work and its subject matter.

Makhacheva hopes that her work can continue to have such a far-reaching impact in Dagestan. She is currently overseeing the establishment of an art school in Makhachkala. On her role as the school's director she notes: “The potentiality of change that comes when I make a work and people see it and think about certain things—it's the same with education. I see potential for growth.” From this, we can glean the essence of the artist's progressive vision—that something can always become something else.

See our website for Arabic and Chinese versions of this article.
يمكنكم قراءة ترجمة عربية للونق المقالة في موقعنا على الانترنت.
欲阅读此文章的中文版本请登陆我们的网站