



Contemporary Visual Art in Azerbaijan: Soviet Legacies, Nonconformist Continuities, and Post Independence Transformations

Azərbaycan'da Çağdaş Görsel Sanat: Sovyet Mirasları, Konformist Süreklilikler ve Bağımsızlık Sonrası Dönüşümler

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the development of contemporary visual art in Azerbaijan from the late Soviet period to the present, foregrounding the reciprocal entanglement of official aesthetics, nonconformist practices, and post-independence transformations. Drawing on cultural-historical methods and close readings of emblematic artists and projects, the study traces how Soviet cultural policy standardized visual languages under the rubric of socialist realism while simultaneously enabling specific local articulations—notably the “severe style” associated with Tair Salakhov. The article highlights the emergence of nonconformist strategies in the 1960s–70s (Mirjavad Javad, Ashraf Murad, Gorkhmaz Effendiyev, Kamal Akhmed, Rasim Babayev, Muslim Abbasov) and the subsequent turn, in the late 1980s and 1990s, toward conceptual, installation, and performance-based practices among a new generation (Sabina Shikhinskaya, Chingiz Babayev, Babi Badalov, Teymur Daimi). Particular attention is paid to the consolidation of a contemporary art infrastructure in the 2000s—through curatorial initiatives such as “Zamanın Ganadları” (“Wings of Time”) and the participation of young artists in the Azerbaijani pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale—along with case studies that exemplify the reconfiguration of national tradition in a global idiom (Faig Ahmed, Rashad Alekperov/Alakbarov, Farid Rasulov, Orkhan Huseynov, Jeyhun Ojadov). Rather than framing the Soviet past through nostalgia or negation, the article proposes an analytic model of cultural memory wherein inherited visual grammars are critically reworked to produce forward-looking forms. The Azerbaijani case thus contributes to broader debates about how post-Soviet visual cultures negotiate between local legacies and the demands of global contemporaneity.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; contemporary art; Soviet legacy; socialist realism; severe style; nonconformism; post-Soviet transformation; installation art; performance; video art; cultural

ÖZET

Bu makale; geç Sovyet döneminden günümüze Azerbaycan'da çağdaş görsel sanatın gelişimini, resmî estetik anlayışı, konformist olmayan (aykırı) pratikler ve bağımsızlık sonrası dönüşümlerin birbirleriyle olan girift ilişkisini merkeze alarak analiz etmektedir. Kültürel-tarihsel yöntemlerden ve sembolik sanatçılar ile projelerin yakından okumalarından yararlanılan çalışma; Sovyet kültür politikasının görsel dilleri "sosyalist realizm" başlığı altında nasıl standartlaştırdığını ve aynı zamanda —özellikle Tahir Salahov ile bağdaştırılan "sert üslup" (severe style) örneğinde olduğu gibi— yerel eklemlenmelere nasıl imkân tanıdığını izlemektedir.

Makale, 1960'lı ve 70'li yıllarda konformist olmayan stratejilerin ortaya çıkışını (Mircevad Cevadov, Eşref Murad, Korkmaz Efendiyev, Kemal Ahmed, Rasim Babayev, Müslim Abbasov) ve ardından 1980'lerin sonu ile 90'larda yeni bir nesil arasında (Sabina Şihlinskaya, Cengiz Babayev, Babi Badalov, Teymur Daimi) kavramsal, enstalasyon ve performans odaklı pratiklere yöneliş vurgulamaktadır. Özellikle 2000'li yıllarda; "Zamanın Kanatları" gibi küratöryel girişimler ve genç sanatçıların 2007 Venedik Bienali Azerbaycan pavyonuna katılımı aracılığıyla çağdaş sanat altyapısının sağlanmasına odaklanılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, ulusal geleneğin küresel bir ifade biçimiyle yeniden yapılandırılmasını örneklendiren vaka çalışmalarına (Faik Ahmed, Reşad Elekberov, Ferid Resulov, Orhan Hüseyinov, Ceyhun Ocadov) yer verilmektedir. Makale, Sovyet geçmişini nostalji veya inkâr üzerinden kurgulamak yerine; miras kalan görsel gramerlerin ileriye dönük formlar üretmek amacıyla eleştirel bir biçimde yeniden işlendiği bir kültürel bellek analitik modeli önermektedir. Böylece Azerbaycan örneği, post-Sovyet görsel kültürlerinin yerel miras ile küresel çağdaşlığın talepleri arasında nasıl bir denge kurduğuna dair daha geniş çaplı tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan; çağdaş sanat; Sovyet mirası; sosyalist gerçekçilik; sert tarz; uyumsuzluk; Sovyet sonrası dönüşüm; enstalasyon sanatı; performans; video sanatı; Kültürel

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary visual art of Azerbaijan is often described as a field of negotiation. That formulation is not merely rhetorical. It points to the concrete historical pressures that shaped local practices—from institutionally

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enforced realism in the mid-twentieth century to the experimental turn of the post-independence era—and to the conceptual labor that artists perform when they translate inherited forms into new visual grammars. Even thirty-plus years after the restoration of state independence (1991), traces of the Soviet cultural paradigm persist in the country's artistic ecosystem in the form of pedagogical routines, museum protocols, and public expectations about what counts as “real art.” (Akhundzade, 2011). At the same time, Azerbaijani artists have entered—and, in multiple cases, helped to redefine—the global conversation on contemporary art by adopting installation, performance, video, and other nontraditional media, and by critically reworking local motifs such as the miniature, the carpet, urban oil landscapes, and mythopoetic narratives (Bishop, 2005).

This article offers an analytical account of that double movement. It reconstructs the historical trajectories that produced a dual discourse—one oriented toward canonical painting and the other toward contemporary practices—and it tests the hypothesis that the most productive Azerbaijani works since the late Soviet decades have been those able to hold local tradition and global contemporaneity in a single visual frame (Ranciere, 2004). Methodologically, the article combines cultural-historical analysis with focused case studies; it situates Azerbaijani art within comparative post-Soviet and West Asian perspectives while retaining attention to the specificity of local institutions, archives, and publics.

The argument unfolds in six steps. First, it sketches the Soviet institutional matrix that both delimited and, paradoxically, enabled artistic agency. Second, it revisits the nonconformist inflection of the 1960s–70s, identifying the formal and conceptual strategies that opened a space for alternative practices. Third, it tracks the transition of the late 1980s and 1990s, when independence coincided with war and economic turmoil, prompting artists to assume curatorial and organizational roles. Fourth, it analyzes the consolidation of a contemporary art infrastructure in the 2000s. Fifth, it presents case studies of artists whose works exemplify the transmutation of tradition into experimental forms. Finally, it theorizes the current landscape as a practice of critical memory—neither nostalgic nor iconoclastic—aimed at building conditions for future invention.

METHODOLOGICAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK

A scholarly account of Azerbaijani contemporary art must begin by problematizing the categories through which the field is typically described. The binary “Soviet versus contemporary” risks naturalizing a periodization that emerged from Cold War discourses rather than from the works themselves. A more nuanced approach regards the Soviet period not as a monolith but as a heterogeneous apparatus in which official styles were negotiated by artists with differing degrees of compliance, ambivalence, and resistance (Groys, 1992). Likewise, “contemporary art” is not synonymous with novelty; instead, it names a set of institutional forms—biennials, independent project spaces, curatorial programs, residencies—and a repertoire of media and strategies (installation, performance, video, social practice) that stabilize a transnational conversation (Bishop, 2005).

In historiographic terms, this article interacts with three lines of scholarship. The first examines socialist realism as an aesthetic-political doctrine that sought to produce the socialist subject via figurative representation, a doctrine that nevertheless generated local variants and critical counter-readings (Clark, 1981). The second concerns nonconformist and unofficial art in the late Soviet era; here, scholars have stressed how unofficial practices drew upon both the repressed avant-gardes of the 1910s–20s and on global postwar currents (Tupitsyn, 2017). The third line focuses on post-Soviet transformations, including the emergence of curatorial labor, the privatization (or lack thereof) of cultural institutions, and the appearance of new funding channels and media ecologies. The Azerbaijani case contributes to each of these conversations, offering a distinctive configuration shaped by the oil economy, the symbolic capital of Baku as a historically cosmopolitan city, and the complex geopolitics of the South Caucasus (Rogers, 2015).

Two methodological commitments guide the analysis. The first is attention to medium specificity: rather than invoking “innovation” generically, the discussion tracks how particular materials, scales, and modes of display—in painting, sculpture, installation, and video—mediate content. The second is an expanded notion of context: artists are read alongside their curators, institutions, and publics, so that individual works are understood as nodes within networks of production and reception.

THE SOVIET CULTURAL MATRIX: SOCIALIST REALISM AND ITS LOCAL INFLECTIONS

The codification of socialist realism in the 1930s established a normative horizon for visual art across the Soviet republics. In practical terms, this meant that artists were trained within academies that prioritized anatomy, perspective, and narrative composition, and that exhibition committees evaluated works for ideological clarity, optimistic tonality, and accessibility to a mass audience (Clark, 1981). In Azerbaijan, this matrix intersected with a distinct urban and industrial landscape—oil derricks, shipyards, and refineries—that lent itself to heroic figuration.

The prevailing iconography—from builders and geologists to engineers and oilmen—mapped the local economy onto the visual rhetoric of socialist production (Rogers, 2015).

Yet homology with the center never meant a perfect copy. The Azerbaijani school incorporated chromatic intensities and monumental diagonals that resonated with regional light and urban rhythms. The “severe style” that crystallized in the late 1950s and 1960s around figures like Tair Salakhov exemplified this negotiation. Formally, severe-style canvases replaced saccharine optimism with austere geometries and compressed color fields; ideologically, they sustained the official subject matter while introducing a tone of stoic dignity and psychological interiority. Salakhov’s oilmen, for example, are not idealized automata; they are modern protagonists whose labor inscribes them into the tectonics of the city, an urban space that the painting turns into a stage for ethical presence.

It is crucial to emphasize that the endurance of painting as the dominant medium during this period should not be mistaken for an absence of thought. Within the limits of the permissible, Azerbaijani painters experimented with composition, facture, and light in ways that recalibrated the relation between narrative and surface. While the doctrine of accessibility tethered art to nineteenth-century academic realism, the best works achieved a material intelligence that keeps them relevant in contemporary readings.

NONCONFORMIST CURRENTS: STRATEGIES OF DIFFERENCE IN THE 1960s–1970s

By the early 1960s, a number of Azerbaijani artists began to test the edges of the permissible. Some did so in studio practice while continuing to submit conventional works to official exhibitions; others sought alternative circuits of display, forming circles of exchange that connected Baku with Moscow, Tbilisi, and beyond (Tupitsyn, 2017). Among the emblematic figures are Mirjavad Javad, Ashraf Murad, Gorkhmaz Effendiyev, Kamal Akhmed, Rasim Babayev, and Muslim Abbasov. Although their styles differ, a set of common strategies is visible.

First, many nonconformists reactivated pre-modern sources—folklore, myth, miniature aesthetics, and pre-Islamic iconography—treating them not as motifs for ornamentation but as epistemic tools. Their use of condensed, emblematic figures and flattened spatial relations echoed aspects of the miniature while also intersecting with postwar European explorations of sign and symbol. Second, they pursued facture as a site of resistance: heavy impasto, distressed surfaces, and deliberately “unfinished” passages asserted material autonomy against the smooth legibility favored by academic realism (Stites, 1992). Third, they developed allegorical narratives that could sustain double readings—one legible within the official vocabulary of humanism and labor, another that opened onto existential, metaphysical, or historical concerns.

Formally, the range spans from stylized archaism and primitivism (evoking a universal, pre-industrial human condition) to abstract neo-expressionism that harnessed gesture as an index of subjective presence. The resonances with artists such as Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, Günther Uecker, or Yves Klein should be understood not as direct influences—given the limited access to images—but as elective affinities that disclose a shared search for a non-naturalist image capable of bearing metaphysical weight. In this sense, Azerbaijani nonconformism was both local and transnational.

Importantly, the nonconformists remained largely within traditional media—painting, drawing, and sculpture. With the partial exception of land- and environment-oriented experiments attributed to Gorkhmaz Effendiyev, the specific forms that would later come to define international contemporary art—installation, performance, video—played a minor role. Nevertheless, the period established a conceptual groundwork: an insistence on artistic autonomy, a belief in the legitimacy of formal experiment, and a readiness to mine tradition for contemporary purposes.

TRANSITION, INDEPENDENCE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW MEDIA (LATE 1980s–1990s)

The late 1980s and early 1990s combined political liberalization with profound social rupture. For Azerbaijani artists, this meant both the lifting of ideological constraints and the loss of infrastructural supports. Independence in 1991 unfolded alongside war, internal political instability, and an economic crisis that imperiled cultural institutions (Etkind, 2013). Yet it was precisely in this precarious climate that a new generation of practitioners pursued installation, performance, conceptual photography, and video as the default vocabulary of contemporaneity.

Names associated with this turn include Sabina Shikhinskaya, Chingiz Babayev, Babi Badalov, and Teymur Daimi. Their practices were marked by three features. First, a reorientation from studio-bound production toward site-specific and time-based work; many projects unfolded in urban spaces, industrial sites, or provisional exhibition venues, foregrounding context as medium (Daimi, 2023). Second, an expanded notion of authorship that included curatorial and organizational labor; artists curated each other’s exhibitions, produced catalogues, and built

ad hoc networks that could substitute for absent institutions. Third, a conceptual attention to the politics of representation itself: the Soviet archive, post-industrial landscapes, and the changing social fabric became objects of analysis rather than neutral backdrops.

Public reception during this decade remained limited: society's urgencies left little room for avant-garde experimentation, and the media ecology that would eventually amplify contemporary art—independent galleries, philanthropic foundations, residency circuits—was still embryonic. Nonetheless, the groundwork for a contemporary art scene had been laid.

CONSOLIDATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE 2000s

Relative stabilization in the late 1990s and early 2000s facilitated a phase of consolidation. A decisive role was played by art critic and curator Leyla Akhundzade, whose initiative “Zamanyn Ganadlary” (“Wings of Time”) fostered collaboration among emerging artists and served as a platform for experimentation (Akhundzade, 2011). Within and around this framework, artists such as Rashad Alekperov (also known internationally as Rashad Alakbarov), Faig Ahmed, Jeyhun Ojadov, Farid Rasulov, and Orkhan Huseynov came to prominence.

The shift was not merely generational; it was infrastructural and medial. Installation, video, and interactive forms ceased to be exotic exceptions and became routine instruments of practice (Bishop, 2005). Exhibitions adopted curatorial narratives rather than thematic lists; artists engaged with international residencies and biennial circuits; and the Azerbaijani pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale signaled a symbolic entry into the global forum. The reception of new media was eased by a technological milieu—mobile communications, digital imaging, online platforms—that normalized interactivity and participation as part of everyday life.

From an analytic perspective, the 2000s witnessed the maturation of a double competency. Artists both appropriated global formats and redeployed local materials, parsing tradition not as a reservoir of identity markers but as a dynamic archive to be rewritten. This competency is especially evident in the case studies that follow.

CASE STUDIES: REWRITING TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY FORMS

Although often read exclusively within the framework of socialist realism, Salakhov's oeuvre provides a crucial hinge between official art and contemporary readings. His calibrated geometry—architectonic figures aligned with industrial diagonals—models an ethics of attention. In contemporary terms, one can say that Salakhov extracted from official themes a grammar of embodiment that resists sentimentality (Clark, 1981). The continued relevance of these works lies less in iconography than in the way composition organizes ethical space: bodies are not subsumed by ideology but stand within it, marked by tension and resolve.

Babayev's paintings mobilize a theater of masks, animals, and hybrid beings that activate deep layers of cultural memory. The mythopoetic is not escapist; it is diagnostic. His figures expose fractures in modern subjectivity, staging encounters between archaic energies and contemporary anxieties (Stites, 1992). Formally, Babayev's palette oscillates between earth tones and saturated primaries, while the drawing vacillates from calligraphic line to totemic silhouette. The result is a visual language in which Azerbaijan's folklore is neither ethnographic decoration nor nationalist emblem, but a heuristic to think modernity otherwise.

Effendiyev's reputation within local histories often hinges on stories of land- and environment-oriented works—fragile structures and interventions whose material traces seldom survive. Whether considered as realized projects or as conceptual proposals, this environmental thinking is significant. It foreshadows the later embrace of site-specificity and positions landscape as an interlocutor rather than a backdrop. In the absence of surviving objects, what remains are protocols, sketches, and testimonies that suggest a latent conceptualism rooted in place.

Shikhlinkaya has frequently coupled her artistic production with curatorial initiatives, especially in periods when institutional infrastructures were weak. This dual practice reframes authorship: exhibitions are construed as composite works that distribute agency across artists, sites, and publics. Her projects often intervene in urban or industrial contexts, using minimal gestures to recalibrate perception—marking a zone, framing a view, staging a temporary assembly. The curatorial here is not ancillary; it is the condition that makes certain forms of art possible.

Chingiz Babayev's contributions, located at the intersection of conceptual poetics and material experiment, interrogate how meaning attaches to objects and words. His work demonstrates that the post-Soviet turn to conceptualism was not a mere stylistic import but an indigenous unfolding of questions latent in unofficial art: how to make thought visible without recourse to narrative illustration; how to let context speak through sparse materials; how to build a public around acts of attention (Tupitsyn, 2017).

Badalov's practice mobilizes hand-lettered scripts, multilingual puns, and found materials to map the dislocations of migration and the excesses of global communication (Etkind, 2013). Language is treated as a material surface on which power inscribes itself and from which alternative solidarities can be composed. The resulting installations and assemblages convert the gallery into a palimpsest of transit, where personal biography intersects with geopolitical vectors.

Ahmed's deconstructions of the traditional carpet—melting borders, pixelated motifs, algorithmic distortions—do not merely “modernize” a national symbol. They expose the carpet as an embodied code, a programmable matrix of knots whose pattern can be rewritten. By translating that code into the idioms of glitch, pixel, and gradient, Ahmed reveals tradition as a living software rather than a museum relic. The works derive their force from technical precision and conceptual clarity: the viewer experiences both the seduction of craft and the shock of systemic alteration.

Alakbarov's well-known shadow installations assemble quotidian objects into seemingly chaotic piles that, when illuminated from a particular angle, resolve into precise silhouettes—cityscapes, calligraphic signs, portraits. The works literalize how meaning is a function of perspective and infrastructure: without a carefully positioned light, there is only detritus. Formally, the pieces are spatial drawings; conceptually, they are lessons in urban semantics, showing how cities are legible only through the interplay of illumination and obstruction.

Rasulov's installations often occupy entire rooms, covering surfaces with ornamental patterns or transplanting unexpected motifs into the white cube. By overwhelming the viewer's sensorium, these environments reverse the museum's disciplinary gaze: rather than standing apart to contemplate an object, the viewer is absorbed into a patterned field that forces a negotiation between decoration, concept, and bodily orientation (Ranciere, 2004). The effect is architectural as much as visual, positioning ornament as a structural intelligence.

Huseynov's projects frequently deploy irony to probe social conventions—bureaucratic rituals, consumer habits, the theater of public life—while Ojadov's works mobilize photographic and archival strategies to test how memory is organized. Both artists exemplify a turn toward micro-sociologies of the everyday, where the aesthetics of display is inseparable from documentary and performative tactics.

CULTURAL MEMORY, THE “USSR-REMIX,” AND THE DIGITAL TURN

One of the most striking features of Azerbaijani art since the late 2000s is its reflective engagement with the Soviet past. Projects that might be gathered under the rubric “USSR-remix” do not rehearse nostalgia; they parse the past as a set of visual grammars—architectural typologies, propaganda images, schoolbook diagrams—that still shape affect and perception (Etkind, 2013). By recoding these grammars through contemporary media, artists construct a critical distance that is neither denunciation nor embrace. The goal is analytic: to understand the operations of memory so as to retool them for future use.

This work of memory unfolds alongside a digital turn. The spread of affordable cameras, editing software, and networked platforms has expanded the field of video, animation, and interactive installation. Younger artists treat programming and electronics as extensions of the studio, while viewers encounter art as a hybrid of screen-based images and spatial environments. The digital does not erase tradition; it renders tradition legible in new scales and speeds. A carpet pattern becomes data; a miniature's flatness becomes an interface; a calligraphic stroke becomes a vector path. Such translations mark a broader shift from object-centered to system-oriented thinking (Daimi, 2023).

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES: AZERBAIJAN WITHIN POST-SOVIET AND WEST ASIAN CONSTELLATIONS

Comparisons with neighboring contexts clarify what is specific about Azerbaijan's trajectory. In the Baltic states, for example, strong links to European institutions accelerated the formation of contemporary art infrastructures in the 1990s; in Central Asia, biennial events and transnational collectives became vehicles for international visibility. Azerbaijan shares with these contexts the challenge of negotiating Soviet legacies (Groys, 1992), yet it possesses distinct assets: Baku's historical cosmopolitanism, the symbolic and economic presence of the oil industry, and a dense palimpsest of visual traditions that includes miniature painting, carpet weaving, and architectural ornament (Rogers, 2015). These assets structure the stakes of contemporaneity: the question is not whether to “preserve” or “reject” tradition, but how to deploy it as a methodological resource in new media and formats.

At the same time, Azerbaijan participates in West Asian discourses on modernity, heritage, and the politics of display. Regional exhibitions and cross-border collaborations have created channels through which artists test how national symbols circulate in a global market. The best projects refuse both essentialism and self-exoticization; they

translate local archives into forms that can think with—and sometimes against—the protocols of international contemporary art (Ranciere, 2004).

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PRACTICE OF CRITICAL INHERITANCE

The historical arc traced here suggests that the most compelling Azerbaijani art operates through a practice of critical inheritance. Rather than positioning the Soviet past as an obstacle to be overcome or the national tradition as a stable essence to be celebrated, artists treat both as toolkits: mutable sets of forms, materials, and protocols that can be recomposed. This practice is neither conservative nor iconoclastic; it is inventive. It asks which aspects of inherited grammars still enable thought and which must be discarded, which techniques can be reprogrammed and which institutions must be rebuilt.

The field today is characterized by multiplicity. Painters continue to produce work of substantial formal intelligence; installation and performance artists leverage curatorial and architectural knowledge; video and digital practitioners expand the temporalities and ecologies of viewing. Across these modes, a shared ethos has emerged: an insistence that “contemporaneity” is not a style but a relation—a way of placing local archives in dynamic encounter with global formats. If the twentieth century was dominated by the imperative to represent the socialist subject, the twenty-first in Azerbaijan is animated by the imperative to construct publics capable of complex attention.

Such a public is not given; it is built through exhibitions, texts, educational programs, and the labor of institutions. The episodes surveyed here—from nonconformist circles to post-independence initiatives, from curatorial experiments to international pavilions—form an infrastructure of sensibility. Their value is cumulative: they accustom viewers to works that do not immediately disclose their meanings, they deepen the archive of examples available to young artists, and they establish standards of critical discourse. In this sense, the clearest legacy of the last six decades is not a single style or medium but a durable capacity for reflection in and through images.

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