

Wetterling Gallery

Tears of Sorrow, Tears of Joy

Born in 1964 in communist Moscow, Aidan Salakhova, known as Aidan, came of age when the USSR was dismantled, and rapidly established herself as one of the key protagonists in the development of the new contemporary art scene in post-Soviet Russia. In her role as the founder of Aidan Gallery she introduced western artists to Russia and helped to nurture a new generation of local practitioners. Her parallel career as an artist has spanned over thirty years and she has been described by art historian Maria Kravtsova as "one of the most provocative artists of her generation" in Russia. ⁱ

Aidan first rose to fame in 1988 with the exhibition of her painting, *Steel Orgasm on an Orange Background*, was shown at the Manègeⁱⁱ in Moscow. An explicit depiction of male and female genitalia, the work was intended as a critique of the hypocritical prudery of public discourse at the time following the assertion by a Russian woman in a Soviet era TV talk show: "There is no sex in the USSR." This controversial entrée into the contemporary art scene was followed by a series of mixed media installations addressing taboo issues concerning female biology, such as abortion, gynaecology and childbirth. It is important to note that Aidan was exploring feminist issues from within a cultural context set apart from the feminist revolution during the 1970s that was so influential on artists in the United States and Europe. Her vision of feminism is coloured by observations of the unique social conditions experienced by women in Russia, her own upbringing in a liberal, bohemian environment surrounded by strong, independent women and her Islamic cultural heritage.

Aidan's distinctive cultural background has been evident in her practice from the outset. The daughter of Tair Salakhov, an eminent Soviet artist of Azerbaijani origin and Vanzetta Hanoum, also an artist and the daughter of Uzbekistan's first female dancer to perform in public, Aidan grew up in a cultural environment poised between East and West. Early paintings and video pieces featuring eastern beauties clad in sumptuous silks recalled the exotic and erotic East imagined in the nineteenth century by writers and artists, including poet Gérard de Nerval, novelist Gustave Flaubert and artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. This ideological construct has been exposed as a form of colonial cultural denigration by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) and, at first, Aidan's elegant odalisques attracted criticism.

However, these early works merely draw on the myth of oriental eroticism to explore feminist ideas and the history of the female nude. They reveal the paradox inherent in the relationship between the odalisque and the (male) viewer; on the one hand the woman is the object of the man's sexualised gaze, but on the other, she is in a position to use his sexual desire to suit her own purposes and thus it is not entirely clear where the power lies in this encounter. Aidan's interpretation of feminism recognises the power

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of female sexuality and acknowledges it as one of the most important weapons available to women in the centuries old battle of the sexes. Moreover, these works use the notion of flirtation and sexual playfulness as a means of exposing patriarchal attitudes – an approach that Kravtsova has aptly called “radicalism in silks.”ⁱⁱⁱ Subsequently, during the 1990s, against a background of the rise of fanatical Islam and the tensions between East and West, Aidan began to look at a contemporary and equally controversial symbol of eastern femininity – the veiled Muslim woman. Initially, she situated her niqab-robed female protagonists in the harem, hinting at auto-eroticism and lesbianism, all the while toying with the fantasies of her imagined male viewers (*I Love Myself* series, 2005). Later, she began to critique patriarchal interpretations of Islam by countering with her own feminized iconography that celebrated female sexuality, feminine wisdom, fertility and motherhood. Stylised, black granite and white Carrara marble sculptures, as well as paintings and drawings, presented faceless veiled women with gentle hands that fondled a miniature minaret, opened a book or cupped a flower. Additionally, works in this series highlighted the notion of the feminine deity in Islamic Sufism and resurrected suppressed historical female narratives.

Recently, Aidan has moved away from her decade-long preoccupation with the veiled woman. In an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London during the spring of this year, her arguably iconic, life-size, granite and marble sculptures of faceless women cloaked in the full niqab were shown alongside new pieces produced in 2014 and 2015. Four sculptures formed the focus of this new body of work: *Duality*, in which a black granite standing nude woman stands on a plinth across from a seated, apparently cowed man; *Touch*, rendered in mottled grey bardiglio marble, which features a veiled female figure with her arms wrapped from behind around a seated nude man; *Stability*, a draped veil standing upright with no visible support – the corporeal, absent; and lastly, *Love*, a man, naked except for a veil wrapped loosely around his body, arms outstretched in a cruciform, carved from white marble.

This startling re-introduction of the nude human form and, in particular, the renewed engagement with the male nude, signals an important shift in Aidan’s oeuvre. The previous body of work had been concerned with reclaiming and asserting feminine sovereignty in a patriarchal world and was thus confrontational and separatist (although the presence of the male audience was always implied). In contrast, the artist’s latest pieces are gentler; they seek physical and emotional closeness – touch, embrace, love.

Détente.

The current exhibition *Wailing Wall* at Wetterling Gallery captures the new mood in Aidan’s practice. The entire installation is composed of sculptural works made from white statuary marble, the purest grade of stone, almost entirely free of streaks and blemishes. This quality of marble is hand-selected by experts from the Nicoli Sculpture Studios in Carrara and is mined from the same quarry used by the Romans for their classical statuary. It is capable of reflecting light so that it appears to glow, giving the works an ethereal lightness that belies the actual physical weight

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of the material. The stark drama created by the contrast between black granite and white marble in the previous series is absent, replaced by a subtle, seductive harmony.

The sculpture *Love* (first shown at the Saatchi Gallery) is here, the sole human form in this exhibition. Modelled from Aidan's partner, the work is a realistic representation rendered using classical methods. His head rests on a veil or cloth that drapes over his shoulder, across his pelvis and around his legs, recalling (with the cruciform pose), the removal of Christ from the cross, a classical subject in the history of western art. The man appears to be asleep and entirely at peace, all energy drained from his body. This work raises questions about love, sacrifice, submission - the giving of oneself entirely to another, the obliteration of duality, unity. As ever with Aidan, sex is suggested here: could this be a lover, asleep amidst the bedsheets after making love?

There are two further veils in the exhibition - like *Stability* mentioned earlier, they are standing upright, as if held aloft by an invisible hand, with soft narrow folds that fall straight and pool on the floor. Aidan has said that in her work the white veil represents "the soul of woman" and, indeed, there is something distinctly elegant and feminine about these suspended folds of fabric. The absence of the body and the emphasis on the innermost being of a woman suggests transcendence - an escape from the burden of the female body, which has been problematized in both the cover-it-up East and the bare-it-all West.

Installed on the white walls of the gallery surrounding these floor based works is the titular piece *Wailing Wall*, composed of eighty pristine, individually carved tears arranged in a random order. Tears have a number of associations, for example the expression "vale of tears", a Christian idea that suggests that life is a journey of suffering that ends only with death and salvation. In both Christianity and Sufism tears accompany spiritual ecstasy and revelation. Also, the Catholic Church has in the past received reports of miracles in which sculptures representing the Virgin Mary have been seen to shed tears (deemed to be hoaxes, they nevertheless grip the imagination). Given Aidan's frequent references in her work to religious tradition, often as manifested in western art history, it is possible that *Wailing Wall* alludes to all of these ideas. The artist has indicated that the tears in this work also represent the emotions of women (indeed the stylized teardrop sculptures are reminiscent of vulvas); not only sadness, but also the many other feelings experienced throughout life, in particular as a result of relationships with men. Women experience great suffering - physical and psychological - at the hands of men, but also great joy. *Wailing Wall* is a testament to these extremes.

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ⁱ Maria Kravtsova in her essay for *Destination*, the catalogue published by XL Gallery for Aidan's exhibition at the Azerbaijan pavilion on the occasion of the 54th International Art Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia, 2011, p.6.

ⁱⁱ In Soviet times, the Manège Central Hall of Exhibitions was one of the most prestigious arts venues in Moscow, located right beside the Kremlin.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Radicalism in Silks" is the title given by Kravtsova to her essay in *Revelations*, the catalogue published to accompany Aidan's solo exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in 2016.