



# Mimosa House x Ainalaiyn Space

## *Öliara: The Dark Moon*

**Gulnur Mukazhanova**  
**Mimosa House x Ainalaiyn Space**  
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**Curator: Indira Dyussebayeva – Ziyabek**  
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*Öliara*, in translation from Kazakh language, describes the moment of the last lunar phase, termed the “dark moon”.<sup>1</sup> The period of the dark moon lasts between two to three days and, during its midpoint, sees the birth of the new moon. Nomads used to believe in the powers of the Sky, Sun, and Moon. As the moon is hardly noticeable during the dark moon period, Kazakhs used to associate moonless sky with a dead moment. It was believed to be a time when evil was set free, causing people to stay in and shelter. The etymology of the word reflects this meaning. It is comprised of two words, *öli* – meaning dead and *ara* – meaning inbetween. This word was used by Kazakh writers as a metaphor for the

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<sup>1</sup> I extend my thanks to Tilek Yrysbek for introducing me to this word.

hardest and darkest periods in history. For example, in Tolen Abdikov's 1985 historical novel, *Öliara*, he describes the nightmare of the collectivization period.

*Öliara: The Dark Moon*, is a new body of work that Gulnur Mukazhanova has created for Mimosa House. This installation is a continuation of the major research themes that the artist has explored over the last decade. Mukazhanova looks back into history of her home country, Kazakhstan and the period of Soviet Union and Russian Empire's colonisation, reflecting on the cultural trauma that wounded the contemporary society, but also succeeding generations, and their consequential loss of identity. Working with the history, she also reflects on our present time and current politics.

Much like many others who have lost their family members to the virus that engulfed and traumatised the world, Mukazhanova has been in a state of mourning over the past two years. Whilst anticipating when the 'normal' or the 'new normal' state would return, the artist's emotional state was shattered further when the nationwide unrest took place in Kazakhstan, in the beginning of January 2022, now remembered as *Qandy qantar* (Bloody January). According to the official data, 227 people died, and hundreds were arrested. The internet heavily documents the information that those arrested were subjected to physical torture, yet the state officials continue to deny this.

The end of February and March 2022 became even bloodier when the war broke out in Ukraine, as though the whole world is experiencing the 'dark moon' phase. As Mukazhanova grieves the lives lost and thinks about the transience of being and the fragility of life and the body, *Öliara* is painfully relevant today. In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, American philosopher Judith Butler, raises important questions: "Who counts as human?", "Whose lives count as lives?", "What makes for a grievable life?". It's been 18 years since the book was published, but all these questions seem more than timely. Butler appeals to all people, despite any differences, and highlights the social vulnerability of our bodies:

'Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

...perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004) 20, 22. 3 Ibid, 22.

Butler highlights that in these global tragedies, the grief should not be solitary and private, and so depoliticised. Instead, this grief should be considered political and experienced within the complexities of our communities, relationally tied by fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Thinking about who we are, the author brings attention to the sometimes inexplicable ‘thrall in which our relations with others hold ‘us’” challenging our autonomous and in control state.<sup>4</sup> Among many other important factors, the human psychical state is constituted of relations, both direct and abstract.



The phenomena of mourning, loss and fragility are brilliantly explained and discussed in the papers of Sigmund Freud. In his paper, *On Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud describes mourning as: ‘...regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.’<sup>5</sup> This reaction evident in Öliara; in this installation of many physical and psychic layers. It is a space of mourning that Mukazhanova creates for herself and the viewer. Speaking about her work, the artist comments: ‘The horizon line that we see, is not the horizon of the future, it is rather a reflection of the present time, the time of mourning, loss and fragility of life’.<sup>6</sup> Besides from mourning and melancholia, Freud shares his thoughts in *The Disillusionment of the War*, emphasizing war as the highest level of human destruction and the peak of our precarity.<sup>7</sup> In *Our Attitude towards Death*, he discusses the attempt of humans to deprive ‘death of its meaning as a termination of life’ and the loss of a loved one, who is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Mourning and Melancholia*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV, (London: Vintage, 2001) 243.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication with the artist.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, 275.

alien at the same time.<sup>8</sup> In his writing *On Transience*, continuing on from his thoughts on war, Freud stresses how: '[War] robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless.'<sup>9</sup> To the shame of humanity, we have again found ourselves caught up in the tragedy of war.

A horizon enables a range of perceptions or experiences. The perception one might experience while looking at the horizon of *Öliara* echoes the precariousness of holding. This horizon of vibrantly coloured fabrics which embraces the internal walls of the space is a long looping line that does not want to end but continues to hold. Even in its uninstalled state and folded by the artist into a spiral, on the floor, it still creates an experience of continuity.

Being originally from Kazakhstan, Gulnur Mukazhanova has nomadic heritage. There is also a colonial layer of history to examine, that involves immense cultural trauma and the loss of identity and the nomadic philosophy of dwelling. I thoroughly discuss this history in *The Mother Yurt*, where I consider the series of Mukazhanova's works made of felt. 'Looking at the works of Mukazhanova, the idea of 'perpetual presentness' and 'permanent absence' cannot go unnoticed.'<sup>10</sup> All of these ideas are again present in the new installation; the long looping line of the horizon and the durable synthetic fabrics that are layered one on top of the other, disguising or showing the fragments of the layers underneath. This horizon line creates a space, and the layers might make one think of layers of memories, particularly those that seem to be long gone and forgotten yet remain always there. Some parts of the line are very busy and overwhelming while other parts are minimal, recalling the landscapes of the steppes from Mukazhanova's home country.

In the horizon the viewer can see the abstract line assembled from different pieces of fabrics. Mukazhanova uses the patterns of the fabric, mixing, cutting, blending, and melting the colours together, much like in painting. It is so visually rich that it is as though she wants to bring life into them. The artist's hands here become brushes and the readymade fabrics become colour pallets. The fabrics that are used in her works were acquired at bazars (markets) in Kazakhstan which are overflooded with cheap synthetic Chinese fabrics that imitate the noble organic silk. There is another point that the artist is touching on here, the one of the geo and economical position of



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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 307.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished work of Indira Ziyabek, 'The Mother Yurt', p. 47.

Kazakhstan. Recently, she started buying fabrics from different post-Soviet countries that share this common history.

Apart from the horizon line, the installation also consists of a sound that was created by German musician and producer, Brozzy, whom the artist met in Berlin and collaborated with to create the soundscape.<sup>11</sup> The sound fills in the whole space of the room. The artist and the musician agreed that there should be one continuous line present in the sound throughout the entire composition. Sounds of wailing sirens and the industrial sound of a working machine may get the viewer into an anxious state. One can also notice some minor dreary notes of the Kazakh national instrument, Kobyz. The abstract assemblage in the horizon line resonates with the abstract assemblage of the sound.



While the horizon occupies the walls and the rooms are filled with the sound, the floor of the main room is covered with a white fabric that recalls a shroud which is used in many cultures as a cover for the dead body. This shroud serves as a surface, almost like a skin, that captures the indexical signs of bodies through the footprints that were left by those who visited. Those prints will stay like an echo of memories; of the presence and the passage of time. In the middle of this white surface there is a mound of soil, the top part of which is coronated with the form that evokes flowers. They are again precariously attached with pins. These are the contours of flowers that are missing their internal part, which makes one think of loss. Looking at the mound one might have questions: what is this mound? Is it empty or is there something inside? The soil mound then becomes another site of mourning.

In the pre-Islamic period of Tengism, nomads believed in the earth-mother goddess, Umai. Mother earth gives birth to and feeds humanity, but she also takes the bodies back home within the burial site. In Christianity and many other religions, life was created from clay and clay is soil. In her book, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* art historian Jane M. Blocker, describes earth in the works of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> Brozzy plays in a ten-piece funk and soul band Footprint Project and he likes producing dark and intense techno as well as creating atmosphere and soundscapes.

‘It is a womb, both sexual and maternal, the fundamental source of life, a homeland, a prehistoric origin, nation, nature, a landscape, a link to ancestry, a burial site, and a sentient being. ...through its symbolic imbrication with the female, the earth is as culturally constructed, ideologically determined, and hegemonically controlled a concept as femininity itself... idea of the earth as a semiotic field uniquely suited to representing the process of identity formation.’<sup>12</sup>

The description of earth within the works of Ana Mendieta closely resembles the use of soil within Mukazhanova’s works, highlighting the most important ideas at work within the artist’s most recent works.

In this new installation, *Öliara: The Dark Moon*, Gulnur Mukazhanova so evocatively illustrates the fragile moment, a moment that the artist wants to grasp, capture, and hold. The viewer can notice the precariousness of touch in almost all elements of the installation. This is particularly visible when the artist, instead of permanently attaching the fragments of fabrics, pierces them with pins, which intensifies its state of fragility and impermanence. Also, soil, as an organic and ephemeral medium, connects to the fragility and volatility of time and space. Overall, this installation reflects the present moment yet keeps the layers of the past within it.



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<sup>12</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 46.