

NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery presents:

SLAVS AND TATARS



Mirrors for Princes

BOTH SIDES OF
THE TONGUE

SLAVS AND TATARS is an art collective whose creative process cycles from research to art production, performances, and lectures. Each new “cycle” culminates in a book.

The exhibition on view in the NYUAD Art Gallery belongs to their newest cycle, *Mirrors for Princes*, and the related book launches alongside this exhibition.

“Mirrors for Princes” refers to a medieval genre of literature. Considered an early form of secular (as opposed to religious) scholarship, it raised state craft to a level of religious jurisprudence or theology. This type of text existed in both Christian and Muslim lands, with Machiavelli’s *The Prince* being the most famous example. Both praising and advising, these books were written to groom princes for leadership.

The artists consider the genre a precursor to modern self-help books, in addition to its more conventional understanding as a form of political commentary. For this exhibition, the artists have focused on a particularly literary Muslim mirror, *Kutadgu Bilig* (“Wisdom of Royal Glory”). A foundational text of Turkic literature, *Kutadgu Bilig* was written in the eleventh century for the prince of Kashgar by Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib.

The sounds of *Kutadgu Bilig* can be heard even from the gallery entrance, but its source is mysterious. First, a hatrack invites the visitor into the exhibition. Departing from typical museum formality, the hospitality of a hatrack suggests a threshold between the public and the private spheres, where we leave our hats at the door. The turbans and hats themselves further connote religious, scholarly activity by those who have already entered and removed their hats.

Entering the bright, welcoming space of the first gallery, the visitor encounters the *Lektor* installation: a series of mirrored speakers shaped like book-stands. These play excerpts of *Kutadgu Bilig* simultaneously in Uighur (its original language of composition), as well as Turkish, Polish, German, and finally Arabic. Every region where this work is shown the artists add the language of the exhibition site. The artists recorded the Arabic portion here in Abu Dhabi, working with a young scholar trained in *tajwid* and Arabic recitation practices. The audio excerpts make frequent reference to grooming the tongue and the heart, as in the following passage:

Two organs—the tongue and the heart—distinguish man’s body; and He created both for the sake of speech that is straight and true. If a man’s words are straight, he will reap great profit from them; if they are bent, he will be cursed in this life and burned in the next. So let your tongue bring forth your words if they are straight; but if they are crooked, then keep them hidden.

A series of sculptures explores this tongue-heart image in visual form. In *Stongue* the “straight and true” tongue emerges from an anatomically correct heart, while in *Hung and Tart*, the two organs merge seamlessly into a new form.

Throughout the current cycle of work, the artists highlight the text’s underlying tensions with respect to language. To control the tongue is to control one’s speech, to curb language, and to recognize that words are themselves actions, with consequences.

The tongue is interpreter to intellect and wisdom. Know that an eloquent tongue causes a man to shine. It is the tongue that brings a man esteem, so that he finds fortune, and it is the tongue that brings a man dishonour, so that he loses his head. The tongue is a lion crouching on the threshold—householder, take care, or it will bite off your head!

A deep concern with linguistics runs through much of Slavs and Tatars work. Artworks from previous cycles re-appear in this exhibition, implicitly linking *Kutadgu Bilig*'s concern with the tongue to regional linguistic history.

The couch-sculpture *Nose Twister* playfully renders the ك (or Kêf-î Nûni), from the Turkish language, a letter and sound that ceased to exist after changes in the alphabet. *Love Letters No. 2* depicts a tongue literally behind bars, which can be understood to represent the limits an alphabet puts on sounds—and thus meanings—that the tongue can make.

The artists are interested in looking at the genre of mirrors for princes as a precursor to modern-day “self help” books. In that spirit, they pair words of warning, as in *Mystical Protest*, with acts of grooming and self-betterment, represented throughout the exhibition.

The political advice found in *Kutadgu Bilig* thus complements the spiritual counsel of the clergy or mullahs. Self-presentation in this genre becomes a form of self-governing, whether sacred or secular. The artists poetically link grooming with religious practice, a link with historical precedent. Religious ephemera appears alongside

tools and techniques for hair grooming, as with *Bandari String Fingerling (Cloud)*, where fingers holding prayer beads make a gesture used to pluck facial hair with thread.

In addition to studying the text itself, the artists travelled to the region of its origin: Kashgar, located in the region now known as Xinjiang, in western China. *Bazm u Razm* integrates especially dense layers of iconography found there into a sculptural branch, whereby a series of glass “combs” sprout from wood. Each comb carries a distinct visual reference: some seem to be silhouettes of a mosque, while others have wilder, organic shapes. In fact, the artists created these “combs” in response to discovering the forms on Uighur Muslim tombs, where the shapes, attached to the shrubbery of the steppe, operate as a family seal. Here, the artists have grafted that reference to combs, connecting grooming of hair with ceremonial iconography.

After the *Lektor* installation, a dark gallery holds a series of works related to the struggle to groom one's self, and grooming of future rulers. The centerpiece, *Sheikha*, can be seen as an abstract meditation on the role of women as teachers, mirrors for princes of a different kind, preparing the next generation of society.

Nearby, *Sharp Eye* looks back at the viewer, and embodies *Kutadgu Bilig*'s exhortation to watch “with a sharp eye.” This vigilance and tension is mirrored in the *Zulf* book stand, which evokes humankind's historical efforts to tame the wildness of human nature via the civilizing capacity of books, whether sacred or secular. Opposite *Zulf*, the *Love Letters* tongue tries to escape the “prison” of language, much like *Zulf*'s hair fights the taming force of literature.

***Zulf* stands guard next to vitrines holding small sculptures that further explore this notion of grooming as a sacred practice—both of hair, and of the heart, and the tongue.**

Alongside the exhibition, the Art Gallery has commissioned a book, also titled *Mirrors for Princes*. In it, scholars and artists address the topics of this genre in greater depth, while the artists respond to the discussion visually, in the design of the book.

We invite you to peruse a copy of the book in the final room of the exhibition, itself a library and teahouse.

Maya Allison
Director and Chief Curator
NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery

***The Squares and Circurls of Justice*, 2014**
steel, cotton turbans, polyester hats
170 × 600 × 40 cm



Lektor (*Speculum Linguarum*), 2014-present
5 channel audio work, plexiglass, speakers

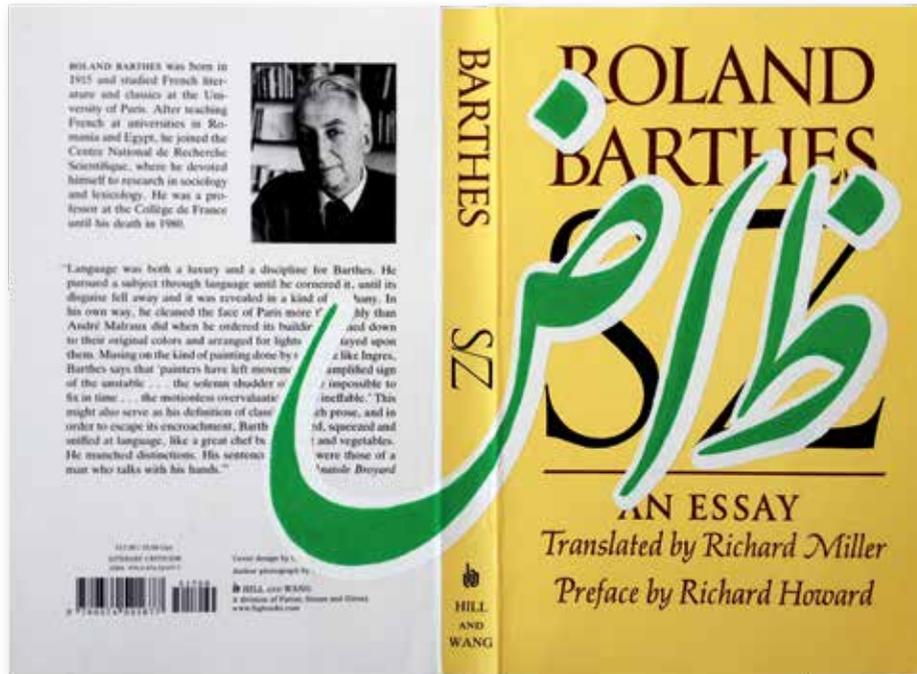


Hung and Tart (full cyan), 2014
handblown glass
12 × 34 × 16 cm

Both Sides of the Tongue, 2015

book, acrylic paint

21 × 30 × 5 cm

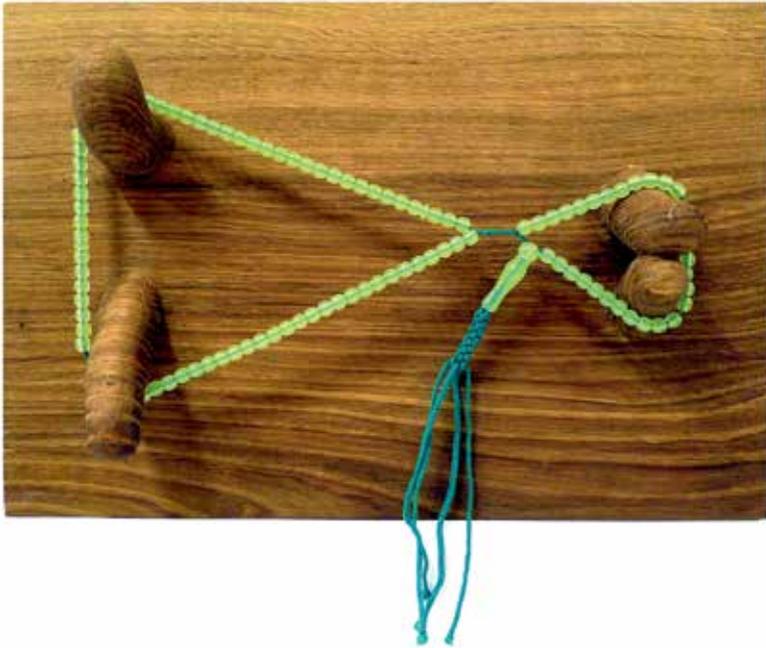


Nose Twister, 2014

veneer, faux leather, foam, paint

100 × 235 × 235 cm

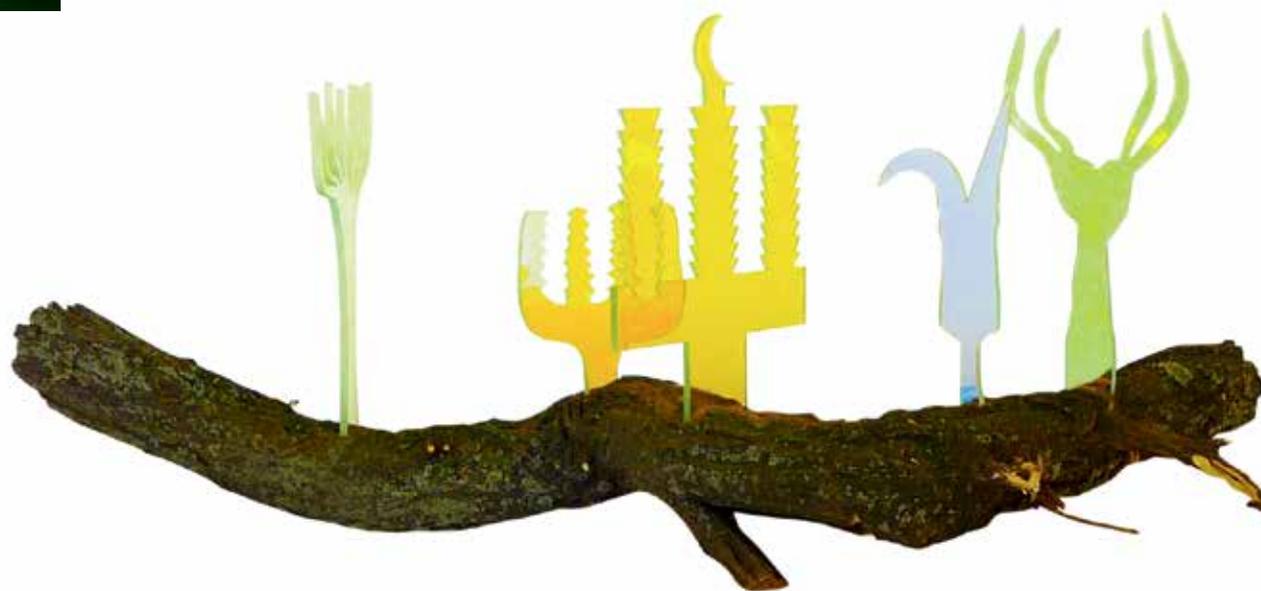
Bandari String Fingerling (cloud), 2014
oak wood, prayer beads
20 × 30 × 7.5 cm



Mystical Protest, 2011
luminous paint on silk-screened fabric
fluorescent lights, 240 × 620 × 15 cm



Bazm u Razm (joint 1), 2014
dichroic glass, wood
50 × 90 × 45 cm



Sheikha, 2014
steel, textile, fans
125 × 80 × 130 cm



Zulf (brunette), 2014
oak wood, hair
82 × 50 × 30 cm



Sharp Eye (hazel), 2014
fibreglass, acrylic paint,
polyester resin
125 × 100 × 100 cm



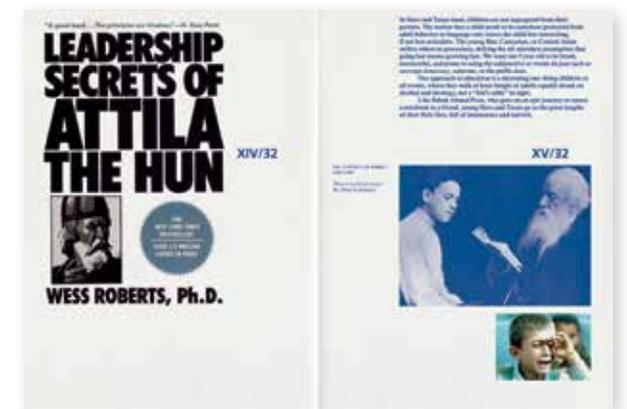


Love Letters No. 2, 2013
 woolen yarn
 ~250 × 250 cm

Irokez, 2014
 dichroic glass, tinned copper
 17 × 30 × 10 cm



**A Thirteenth Month
 Against Time**, 2008
 mimeograph print, offset
 hand-pasted color stickers,
 stitched binding, in black
 case with white foiled print
 21 × 28 × 1 cm





Javanfemme, 2014
handblown glass, string
25 × 10 × 8 cm

Hirsute Happily with Hairless, 2014
dichroic glass, tinned copper
10 × 25 × 8 cm



Stongue, 2015
resin, 10 × 27 × 9 cm



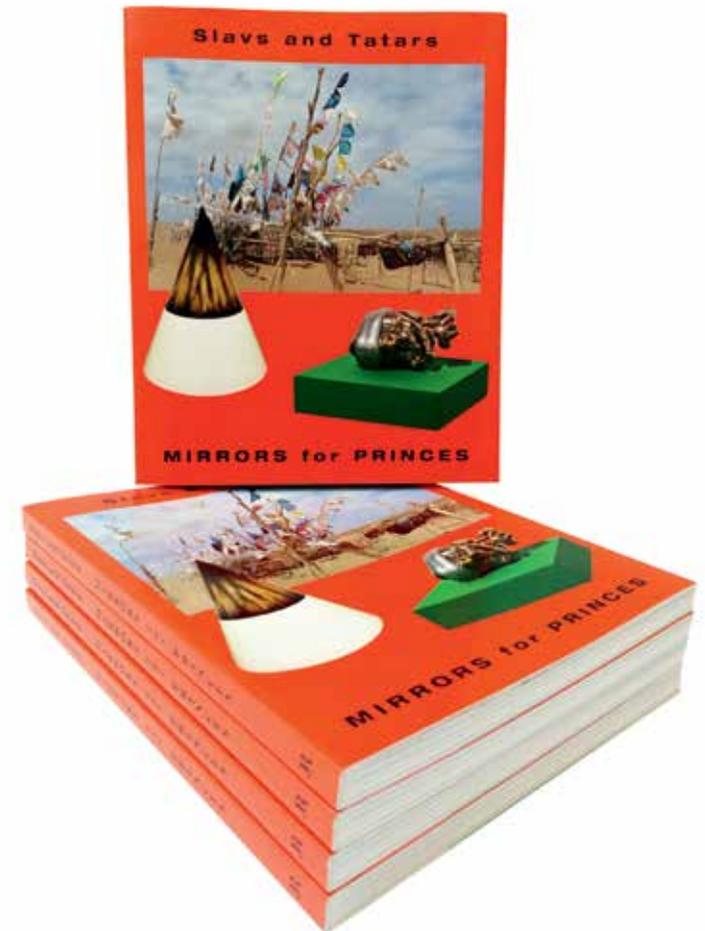
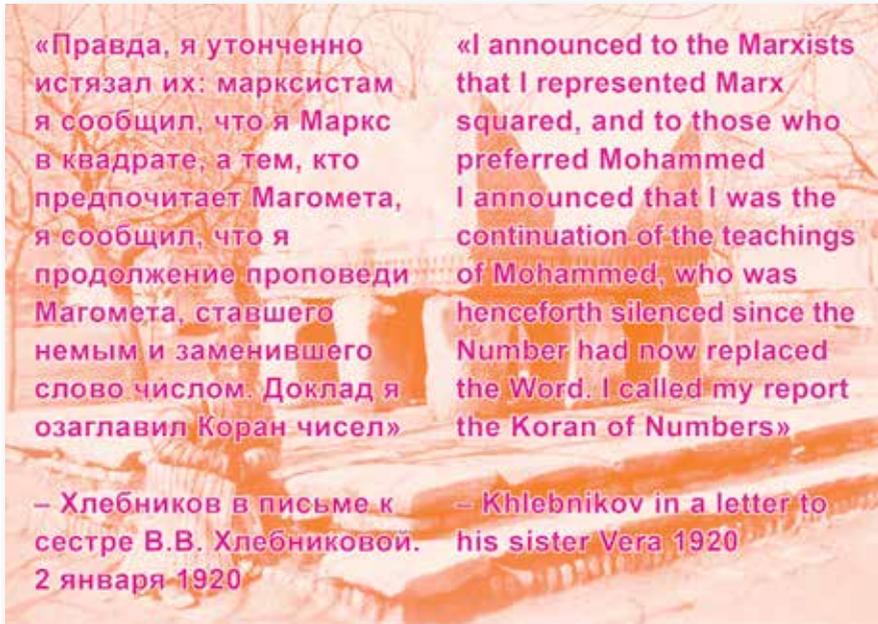
Dil be Del, 2014
copper-plated brass, metallic acrylic paint
10 × 12 × 9 cm



5 o'clock shadow, 2014
linden wood, mirror, shaved
copper ore, 31 × 48 × 18 cm

Mirrors for Princes, 2015

offset print, 192 pages, color throughout,
otabinding with gloss laminated dust jacket
20 × 25 cm



Behind Reason, 2012

mimeograph print
various dimensions

Kitab Kebab, 2013
books, metal kebab skewer
135 × 50 × 50 cm



The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery presents curated exhibitions of art and culture across historical and contemporary topics, with a special emphasis on subjects of both regional concern and international significance. Its curatorial platform supports scholarly and experimental installations, artists' projects, and landmark exhibitions.

Thank you

Gallery Team:

Laura Latman, Registrar
Sam Faix, Head of Installations
Bana Kattan, Assistant Curator
Amanda Smith, Producer
Alaa Edris, Programs Officer
Naudia Williams, GAF

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NYUAD:

Jawaad Butt, Praveen Kumar,
Hilary Ballon, Lorraine Adkins,
Jamal Alshehhi, Mark Swislocki,
Justin Stearns, Ryan Rappa, Kate
Chandler and Bailey Curzadd

Exhibitions hours

Mon-Thu: 11am-5pm

Sat: 2pm-5pm

Fri & Sun: Closed

Admission

The NYUAD Art Gallery is free and open to all.

Contact

T +971 2 628 8000
nyuad.artgallery@nyu.edu
www.nyuad-artgallery.org

New York University Abu Dhabi
Saadiyat Island, Building A4
Art Gallery Offices
PO Box 129188
Abu Dhabi, UAE

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