

THE AUSTRALIAN

Mirrors for Princes explores the lands time forgot

MIRIAM COSIC THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 19, 2015 12:00AM



The Mirrors for Princes exhibition at the Brisbane Institute of Modern Art. Picture: Carl Warner Source: Supplied

The central lands between the Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China may be the last unpenetrated region in our globalising, media-saturated world. Home to Slavs, Caucasians and Central Asians, many of them Turkic language speakers, it is the collision point between the great world religions: Islam in the south, Christianity in the north, and Buddhism and Confucianism (and now communism) in the east.

People there have come under the suzerainty of imperial Russians, Soviets and the Russian Federation, Achaemenids, Sasanians and Iranians, Ottomans and modern-day Turks, and more. They also have contributed a few irresistible overlords of their own: think Genghis Khan and his Golden Horde, and the Mughal Empire.

In this region, history sometimes seems to stand still, sometimes to turn in on itself.

In recent times, it has been a long blank swathe across the centre of Eurasia in the minds of the rest of the world, coming to life only when trouble looms — the war between Russia and Chechnya in the 1990s, China's ongoing problems with its Uighurs and so on — or when popular culture spoofs it, as in Borat's borderline-racist mockumentaries.

The region's history is not only long and complex but confusingly contradictory.

Take Azerbaijan. Last month Human Rights Watch wrote that it “has rapidly become one of the most oppressive countries in the post-Soviet space”.

Yet it was one of the first nation-states to give all women the vote in 1918: 10 years before Britain and 25 years before that bastion of liberty and equality, France.

These lands are the stamping ground of the art collective Slavs and Tatars, which started as a kind of book club in 2006. Writers of fascinating books that defy categorisation, its members increasingly have moved towards the visual arts and performance/lectures.

At the moment, an exhibition called *Mirrors for Princes: Both Sides of the Tongue* is at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane. And during a brief visit to Australia for the opening last month, Slavs and Tatars gave talks in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane with equally intriguing titles: *Molla Nasreddin: Embrace Your Antithesis* at Sydney's ArtSpace, for example, a reference to an earlier eye-opening book, and *The Tranny Tease* at GOMA in Brisbane, which is not about cross-dressing, despite the provocative title, but about translation and transliteration.

The lecturer, who agreed to be interviewed by *The Australian*, asked not to be named because that would defeat the collective's purpose: anonymity meant to uncouple its exploration of history from ethnic, religious, linguistic, gendered, even personal, preconceptions. Suffice to say that within the collective, multilingual currents flow from East and West, new worlds and old. Training in philology and book design are in the mix, as is Russophilia and its opposite, Western cultural assumptions and resistance to Orientalism. Let's call the person we spoke to “ST”.

“This part of the world falls between the cracks,” ST says. “It's not the Middle East, though it is Muslim. It's not Russia, though it is largely Russian-speaking. Despite our current amnesiac thinking, it's been at the centre of world history for the last 2000 years. Only in the last 100 years has it been forgotten.”

Dozens of indigenous languages are scattered across the region: Turkic, Caucasian, Indo-European and Semitic. The spillovers continue to affect the demographics and geopolitics of surrounding regions: Azerbaijanis living in Iran, for example, outnumber those living in neighbouring Azerbaijan.

In this multi-ethnic polyglot space, dissonances are inevitable. In the Brisbane lecture on transliteration, ST illustrated how alphabets accompanied imperialism. Geopolitics dictated that language in Russia's southern lands, traditionally written in Arabic, was Latinised in 1929 when it was thought that would fast-forward the speakers into modernity, then “Cyrillicised” under the Soviets, who were fearful of the influence of Latin writing in Turkey, then Latinised again after the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The result? “Three generations can speak the same language but can't read the same book,” ST says. “It has devastated the cultural heritage.”

At the Brisbane exhibition are a group of intriguing objects, all of which illustrate and undermine, soberly or fancifully, key tropes in the “mirrors for princes” genre of self-help book for rulers, which started with the ancient Greeks, flourished in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and reached its Western apogee in Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Slavs and Tatars' mirrors-for-princes text is the *Kutadgu Bilig*, or *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, written for Kashgar prince Yusuf Khass Hajib. Once a stop on the Silk Road, the city of Kashgar is now in Xinjiang in far west China.

The book — a kind of reverse catalogue, since the exhibition refers to it rather than vice versa — pastes straps of translation from the Kutadgu Bilig in English, Turkish, German, Polish, Arabic and Uighur around the edges of each page, which contain essays by experts in the field, as well as a long visually disrupted interviews with the collective.

Embedded pictures and quotes seem almost random yet, as you read, a deepening understanding begins to break through hazy, perhaps romanticised, notions of place and era and their connection to other places, eras, philosophies, theologies and arts, including today's.

Included in the exhibition are loudspeakers placed on stands in the shape of traditional supports for the Koran, broadcasting readings from the Kutadgu Bilig in the languages of places the show has visited, including German, Polish, Uighur and Scottish Gaelic; long-haired wigs placed on similar stands and decorated women's combs that extend into tongues; a piece of furniture resembling the seat from which a preacher might deliver the khutbah in a mosque, its wooden sides replaced by the filmy femininity of silk.

“For the artist the hardest thing is to combine metaphysics and humour,” ST says. Metaphysics elevates; humour deflates. But Slavs and Tatars aims for “a generous humour, not one that pokes fun at others”. Asked to define the style and substance of the collective's work, ST says archly that it is “more rearguard than avant-garde. Some people would say we are almost reactionary.”

Not quite. The point of combining metaphysics — and politics for that matter — with humour is to blow accepted wisdoms wide open and get to the heart of things. Perhaps the most illuminating Slavs and Tatars project in this regard is the book it edited and published from Moscow in 2011, Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've.

Molla Nasreddin was a satirical illustrated Azeri magazine published between 1906 and 1930. Slavs and Tatars has reprinted key cartoons from it, with English translations below.

Two political campaigns startlingly suffuse its pages: for women's rights and against religious — that is, Islamic — fundamentalism. Some of it is straightforward skewering of injustices and hypocrisies, such as the double image of a Muslim man beating his wife and being ordered about by his European lover, or a Muslim girl on her sleazy old husband's knee reaching out to a 12-year-old Jewish girl going to school. In other images, women's rights “often act as a prism through which most other issues are addressed”, as the Intro says.

Armenian themes are similarly used to undermine Islamic clerical fanaticism and the machismo of traditional Caucasian societies.

This book, like all of Slavs and Tatars' practice, bridges literature and visual art: drawn cartoons and written captions. The “bookness” of it remains paramount, however. “Art, performances, lectures,” ST says, “all are designed to bring people back to the book.”

Mirrors for Princes is at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art until December 20. Slavs and Tatars' books are part of Christopher Keller Editions, published by JRP in Zurich.

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