

Slavs and Tatars encourages art that you're allowed to reach out and sit on

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After just a few minutes in Payam Sharifi's company, it becomes clear why he employs a full-time academic researcher, rather than a more traditional artist's technician, to assist him in his work.

Sharifi is one of the founders of the international artists' collective Slavs and Tatars, and his conversation is as kaleidoscopic as it is eloquent, skipping effortlessly from the finer points of Turkish linguistics and histories of Azeri satire to the ritual significance of grooming, the accuracy of the Persian Jalali calendar and the leadership secrets of Attila the Hun.

All of these seemingly unrelated topics, and more, are the subject of *Mirrors for Princes*, Slavs and Tatars's latest offering, which opens today at New York University Abu Dhabi's Art Gallery. A specially commissioned book of the same name has been published to accompany the show.

Mirrors for Princes takes its name from a genre of political writing for rulers throughout the Middle Ages and was shared by Christian and Muslim cultures alike.

It's a genre whose most widely known example is probably Machiavelli's *The Prince*, but it also includes the *Liber Manualis*, a ninth-century Christian text written by a Frankish noblewoman for her son, and Yusuf Khass Hajib's 11th-century Kharakhanid text, *Kutadgu Bilig*, whose translation sits at the heart of both the exhibition and the book.

If the subject seems willfully obscure, Slavs and Tatars insists that the effort made in texts such as *Kutadgu Bilig* to balance statecraft (*dawla*) with faith or religion (*din*) could not be more relevant.

"Our work tries to push back against the consensus, especially among westerners and among intellectuals in general, that we are now some kind of new human being that doesn't need faith," Sharifi explains. "But we are not different people from the people we were 2,000 years ago or 500 or even 300 years ago. Faith has to play a role and a progressive one, not a regressive one."

Part sound installation, part majlis and part tea room, *Mirrors for Princes* offers an insight into the specifically Central Asian thought of a group that describes itself as "a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia".

A frequently surreal place of translation, wordplay and transmutation, *Mirrors for Princes* has three very different environments where sounds and thoughts become solid, stools suddenly sprout hair and sofas and hatstands invite visitors to relax and enjoy themselves while asking the age-old question: "Is this art?"

"In Zurich people just came in and put their coats on this," says Sharifi, pointing to

The Squares and Circles of Justice, a long rail mounted with turbans and students' caps from Uzbekistan. "Because a row of mullahs' hats is the last thing you expect to see when you walk into an art space."

Nose Twister is another case in point. Part sculpture and part sofa, it takes the shape of an Arabic letter, *kaf*, and a nasal sound, *ng*, which were excised from Turkish during Kemal Ataturk's westernising language reforms of 1928. In many ways, Nose Twister is a classic Slavs and Tatars piece, relying on research to uncover forgotten traces of the past while using wordplay to transmute an abstract idea into a sculptural form.

"We always imagine Turkish as being this bridge between Europe and Asia, but Turkish is a language that basically comes from China," Sharifi explains. "Nose Twister looks at the two extremes of the language, at its eastern extreme in Xianjiang with the Uighurs, and at the western extreme in Turkey itself. It's a nose that's trying to hit those two points, to hit both ends by doing the splits."

Nose Twister also wrong-foots the viewer, a technique that Slavs and Tatars has worked hard to perfect.

"Recently, one of the curators [at] Berlin Biennale said to us: 'The strength of your work at the moment ... is that people don't know what to do with it. They don't know if it's a piss-take, if it's real or not. Is it something you touch, is it something precious, is it religious or antireligious, is it political or is it a joke?' So much art today is clearly marked from a distance as 'art' and that means several things: it's solemn, it's expensive and you're not allowed to touch it," Sharifi explains.

"So part of our challenge today as artists working within a 'glut' of art and in this age where art is very much a part of the zeitgeist, is to make work that has a disruptive function without using those codes that have become ossified over time. We have to keep shifting them while using that same energy or reaction but, of course," the artist laughs, "we only succeed part of the time."

Slavs and Tatars: *Mirrors for Princes* runs from February 28 to May 30 at the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Saadiyat Island. See www.nyuad-artgallery.org for more details

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