Protective Spirits

"An ancient ritual for women", "a longing for true love", "a journey into a cave", Rula Khoury reflects on Saodat Ismailova's work *Chilltan* (2022), an immersive work in the basement of the Fridericianum, part of Documenta 15

Essay / Rula Khoury December 31, 2022

The Creator is the beginning,
The Creator is the end,
The Creator is the visible,
The Creator is the invisible.

The forty-one chilltans
The sixty protectors
The seven saints,
The three guides,
Soothers of pain, healers of traumas.

Forty bodies are one body
Forty bodies are three hundred and sixty bodies.1

Reading the opening text before entering the exhibition space, the visitor becomes part of Saodat Ismailova ritual without any warning. This text is from a Shamanic ritual for women that comes from the Fergana valley, Uzbekistan. The forty bodies in the text refer to the forty spirits, forty female spirits (*Chilltan*). They protect the world in a time of crisis, and when the rational cannot help anymore, they come with their presence and energy, those creative women from central Asia.2

Uzbek filmmaker Saodat Ismailova, who lives and works between Paris and Tashkent, presents *Chilltan* (2022), a multi-room immersive work in the basement of the Fridericianum building in Kassel. It was shown as part of Documenta 15.

1-1.jpg



[1]Saodat Ismailova, Chilltan, 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel (Entrance Hall)
Photo by Rula Khoury

Ismailova combines film, performance, and installation. Her installation is spread through three large and three small rooms in the basement. All the artworks are connected as reproductions of ideas and scenes from the movie that is shown in the main hall. The entrance hall faces the audience with 40 ropes, hanging in intensively different lengths from a plank of wood, with the chilling sense of something old and even ancient. When the audience walks, in the dark, into the second hall on the right, a figure of a woman sleeping peacefully on several mattresses is reminiscent of the story of the Princess and the Pea. The artist involved 18 other artists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all working as one research group called DAVRA, founded by Ismailova. The materials chosen for this hall and the others are fabrics related to that geographic region.

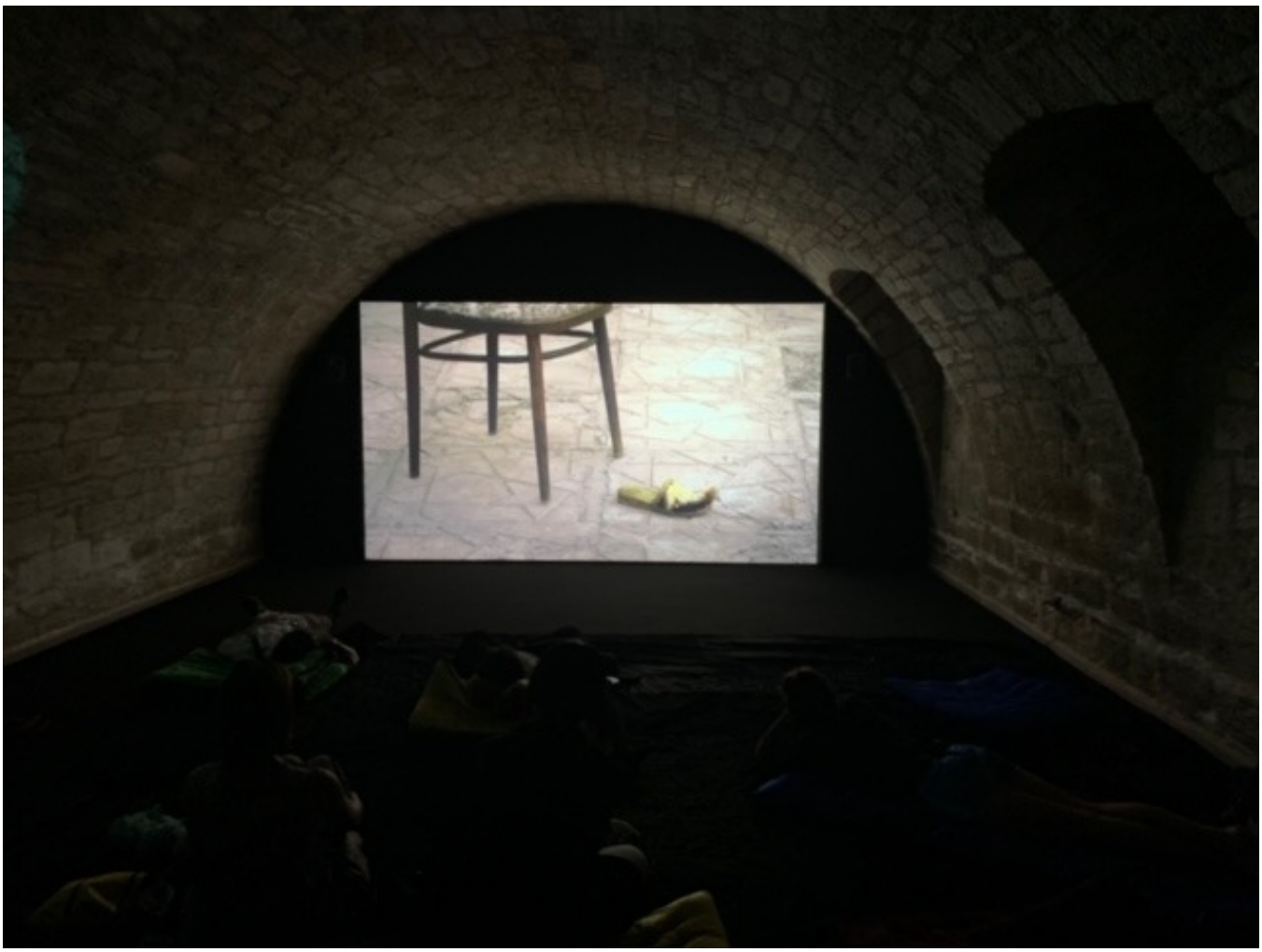
In general, the film is about the tradition and spells of a young girl who wants to get married, and what she is expected to do. It sounds like a fairy tale. It is a representation of the elusive place between two dimensions, echoing some elements from stories about princesses. The elements Ismailova focuses on are the girl's shoes and the multiple mattresses, as she prepares for the ritual to make her wish come true. The images show long, foggy shots where the young girl blends into the landscape, between the region's history and its Islamic past. The visitors are taken along on the protagonist’s journey into the cave, following her as she goes underground to perform the ritual. Their physical bodies go through an actual journey underground, as part of an active collective or the community taking part in the ritual. Ismailova smartly engages the visitors as part of her work and simply and gently turns them into active viewers. She affirms this dark experience in her explanation: “It’s a very physical experience to enter into it, to be under the earth, to go through the feeling of darkness, to discover how your body and eye adapt to light, sound, and temperature.”3

2.jpg **[2]**



[3]Saodat Ismailova, Chilltan, 2022, performance by the artist in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

3.jpg **[4]**



[5]Saodat Ismailova, Bibi Seshanbe (film), 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

The region's spiritual treasure is protected by the Chilltans. They take on the form of and interact with both physical and immaterial creatures, such as spirits, and also with animals and plants. Invoking the chilltan is a common focus of healing rituals in Central Asia, since only in their presence may rituals of healing and protection be achieved, those simple rituals that will protect you and attract what is best for you, rituals to manifest dreams, rituals to find love.

Ismailova reveals to us an ancient ritualistic text from Bukhara, a longing for true love. On a small screen in the tunnel where the film was screened, the following text was visible:

“*There is a belief in noble Bukhara*
that if you are searching for happiness
by finding your own true love,
by giving birth to a child or
by attaining peace in this life
and the next, you should worship
Bibi Sashanbe Ona - The Lady Tuesday,

You should offer up the flames
of forty handmade candles
and platters of ritualistic food,

and your wish will be granted,

A woman who wants her wish
to be granted must ask for flour
from seven houses or
put four bowls of flour
into the four corners of a room
and prepare a porridge
made with fresh milk,
She should bake three rotis, one bread
and share them together
with widows and orphans,

Forty candles made from sticks of
peganum harmala plant rolled in cotton
and smeared with sesame oil
should be prepared,

The food should not be shared with a man
The light of the flame shouldn't be seen by a man"[4]

4.jpg **[6]**



[7]Saodat Ismailova, Bibi Seshanbe (film), 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

5.jpg **[8]**



[9]Saodat Ismailova, Bibi Seshanbe (film), 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

With the narratives and traditions of ancient tribes or nations, Ismailova brings us back to the origins of ancient beliefs and beauty. As to the old concept of Love, the act before you are in a relationship is to long for true love, the protection in finding true love. By exploring the venues, she succeeded in bringing us into the womb, a place of rebirth. It’s not an end but a rebirth, and maybe it’s a cycle. “Rituals for when the planet loses its rhythm, and how to bring back the flow.”5

6.jpg **[10]**



[11]Saodat Ismailova, Bibi Seshanbe (film), 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

7.jpg **[12]**



[13]Saodat Ismailova, Chilltan, 2022, installation comprising multiple video works. documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

The artist's body was present in the installation and her presence was felt. In one of the passages connecting two spaces, the audience faced the image of a woman’s head, projected on a wavy curtain like a ghost, while at the same time, they saw another woman in the other room, lying on the mattress, not moving. In my visit, it was the artist herself. It was a real performance that echoes her presence as ripples in a pond.

As the visitors roam among the rooms, the four elements of life are manifested: Fire, Air, Water, Earth. In the last room, there is a screen on the floor, in which a series of texts is projected on silk mattresses, in a loop that seems like affirmative sentences.

For this installation, Ismaliova planned to organize forty days of public events with an ancient feminine ritual called Bibi Seshanbe - for the transmission of knowledge, remembrance of ancestors, healing, and being in harmony.6 She brings women together for an invisible collective of forty gender-fluid, shape-shifting entities that create a mysterious circle of beings with supernatural powers and traditional knowledge.

The performance is adapted from a shamanic ritual for women from the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan. The real existence that infuses the roots and beliefs of an ancient ritual is far from being perceived by modern Western human beings. While some still preserve the traditions, others are in a new awakening, and some are far away from any relations to their origin.

8.jpg **[14]**



[15]Saodat Ismailova, Chilltan, 2022, installation view in documenta fifteen at Fridericianum Kassel
Photo by Rula Khoury

Rituals became present in the origins of the ancients' beliefs and beauty.

They take us on a sensory journey different then our reality but feels much like returning home; they affirm the narrative of our relation to the universe.

Earth, I witness your medicine. I witness your ancient and evolutionary wisdom, and your deep reserves of Love. Ismailova succeeds in making us believe again in the power of ceremonies.

- 1. Saodat Ismailova, wall text, Documenta 15, Fridericianum basement building, Kassel
- 2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1xQSZQhXzE&t=45s [16]

- 3. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/saodat-ismailova-andrea-lissoni-2022/ [17]
- 4. The text is copied from the small screen where the film was projected
- 5. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/saodat-ismailova-andrea-lissoni-2022/ [17]
- 6. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/saodat-ismailova-andrea-lissoni-2022/ [17]

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/protective-spirits

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1-1.jpg
[2] https://tohumagazine.com/file/2jpg-5
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/2_4.jpg
[4] https://tohumagazine.com/file/3jpg-3
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/3_4.jpg
[6] https://tohumagazine.com/file/4jpg-2
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/4_4.jpg
[8] https://tohumagazine.com/file/5jpg-1
[9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/5_4.jpg
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/file/6jpg
[11] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/6_2.jpg
[12] https://tohumagazine.com/file/7jpg-0
[13] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/7_3.jpg
[14] https://tohumagazine.com/file/8jpg-0
[15] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/8_2.jpg
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1xQSZQhXzE&t=45s
[17] https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/saodat-ismailova-andrea-lissoni-2022/