

INSPIRATION

ART &amp; CULTURE

# Weaving Identities: Artist-artisan collaboration at Uzbekistan's biggest creative undertaking

Bukhara, a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts & Folk Art, brings together international artists and local artisans for phenomenal one-off projects. What happens when design thinking, visual storytelling and centuries-old craft traditions meet?

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Navat Uy, 2024-2025 by Laila Gohar in collaboration with Ilkhom Shoyimkulov.  
Photo by Felix Odell courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.

**T**he scope and ambition of Recipes for Broken Hearts, the first Bukhara Biennial, curated by Artistic Director Diana Campbell, cannot be overplayed.

The ancient Silk Road city, renowned for being a centre of learning and trade, a hub of architecture and crafts, has built upon the proud heritage of the country, its textiles, ceramics, and copper, and reframed the relationship and hierarchy of maker and ideator.

The biennial has been conceived by Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of the Uzbekistan Art & Culture Development Fund (ACDF), as an opportunity to pair international contemporary artists with local artisans, master craftspeople, and traditional makers and specialists to expand notions of authorship. Attribution ensures

The exhibition champions heritage and confronts the international art world head-on, despite or perhaps because of the limited infrastructure and support for this field of creativity in recent decades. The ACDF has a huge remit. It is restoring historic sites as much as it is building new galleries and art spaces – but in welcoming the world to Bukhara, it demonstrates how it is achieving both of these lofty aims in front of a global audience.

Amidst the contextual embedding and site-specific installations, material and technique exchanges, and shared decision-making, the blurring of fine and applied arts is evident. The following four key examples are shared below. Like the sometimes fraught relationships between creative directors and production partners, illustrators and printers, even between words and fonts, these symbiotic achievements say nothing of the long conversations and complex challenges overcome in bringing them successfully into existence.





CLOSE, 2024-2025 by Antony Gormley in collaboration with Temur Jumaev, in front of The Earth's Shadow, 2024-2025 by Delcy Morelos in collaboration with Baxtiyor Akhmedov. Photo by Adrien Dirand courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.





Navat Uy, 2024-2025 by Laila Gohar in collaboration with Ilkhom Shoyimkulov.  
Photo by Felix Odell courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.

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ingredients to heart, this piece is a beautiful metal-framed, sheer-scaled form, entirely covered in amber-like, crystallised rock sugar. The long supporting beams of the structure each embody strands of dense, glassy sweetness, slowly dripping caramel in the hot afternoon sun onto the Earth below.

Suggesting ideas of loss, memory, fragility, and temporality, the piece also demonstrates an incredible labour of craft. Material as metaphor need not require an artisan to help an artist to fulfil their vision, but in this case, the Central Asian use of navat – a slow crystallisation of grape syrup on thread requiring time and care before the mass-industrial use of cane sugar – is key to the collaboration.

Elsewhere on site and around the country, you could be offered tea with a small navat stick, whereby the sugar slowly melts and sweetens the drink.





CLOSE, 2024-2025 by Antony Gormley in collaboration with Temur Jumaev, in front of A Thousand Prayers, 2025 by Jazgul Madazimova in collaboration with the women of Bukhara. Photo by Felix Odell courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.

CLOSE, 2024 – 2025, Antony Gormley (UK) and Temur Jumaev and a team of Uzbek brickmakers. Much of the old city is built from adobe, the mix of mud and straw rather than Californian-based software. In the ruins of the sixteenth-century Khoja Kalon Mosque, thousands of mudbricks have been sundried, not fired, and used to create a library from which elements could be selected and stacked to suggest the human form in one hundred different poses.

Walking through the figures, each twice human in size, feels somewhat like passing through a cemetery, a field of human presences. But as the artist has been keen to point out, this is incredibly sustainable as a practice. Echoing the architecture of traditional local buildings, the material has been dug from under your feet, right there in Bukhara.

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Close – both nearby and shut off. Another consideration of the artist is that these bodies are pixelated, albeit with the original building blocks of handmade bricks as the pixels. There are layers upon layers of meditations in these figures and their placement, and multiple viewpoints suggest more inquiries than answers. As a vessel, isn't everybody unknown?





The Earth's Shadow, 2024-2025 by Delcy Morelos in collaboration with Baxtiyor Akhmedov. Photo by Adrien Dirand courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.

yellow pyramid, even more striking for its scent than its shape.

The entire structure is a pungent temple to turmeric. In fact, fourth-generation Bukharian spice merchants have concocted a heady mix of Earth, sand, clay, cinnamon, cloves and turmeric to slather the wicker-wooden building, creating a memorable piece of sensory architecture. It stands sufficiently high to accommodate several upright adults after stooping to enter. It offers a beautiful interplay of light and shadow, as well as much sought-after shade on the hottest days.

As an artist, Morelos often uses spices and fibres, but her collaborator here was a particular expert in local weaving techniques, and the sanctuary's successful execution is very much down to Akhmedov.





Longing, 2024-2025 by Hylozoic/Desires in collaboration with Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov (Margilan Crafts Development Centre). Photo by Felix Odell courtesy of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation.

Longing, 2024 – 2025, Hylozoic/Desires (Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappeser) (India/UK) and Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov. Uzbekistan is one of only two countries in the world that is double landlocked, meaning even its surrounding neighbours don't have



standing water often harboured disease.

More recently, the great Aral Sea, once the third-largest lake on Earth, has been drying up since the 1960s. Concern for water is a national issue, both emotionally and politically. This piece, long and lyrical, places ikat fabric, textiles created with yarns protected from dyeing before being woven (unlike tie-dye or batik, where dyeing occurs after weaving), above the Shah Rud canal, which runs through the old town centre and biennial sites. Transitions in the fabric's colours and designs relate to satellite imagery of the lost lake over time, reinforcing the dialogue between past and present, idea and maker.

As with most of the exhibits, the gestation and creation of these artworks have taken months, if not years, and involved multiple visits by international artists to their Uzbek partners and co-authors.

For those working in visual communications, inspiration flows, and the lessons are compelling. Collaboration with enough time can help create extraordinary projects. Democratisation of work can foster strong communities. Materials can tell their own story, clay whispers of weight and time, turmeric radiates warmth and colour. Impermanence need not be a restriction – temporality has its own qualities. Context is part of the message. In the ruins of a mosque, these works resonate with ideas of ritual, memory, and community.

Along a waterway, the rhythmic hanging of fabric is both a prayer for rain and a unique placemaker for visitors. Duality is omnipresent – anything and everything can mean more than one thing within your presentations.

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ideas need hands. people work with people. At the Bukhara Biennial, art is not only imagined but also created and shared together.

## Further Information

Bukhara Biennial is free and open every day from 10am to 10pm, until 20 November.

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[Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation](#) →

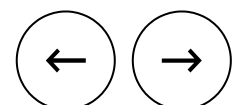
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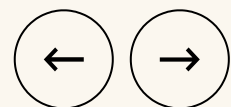
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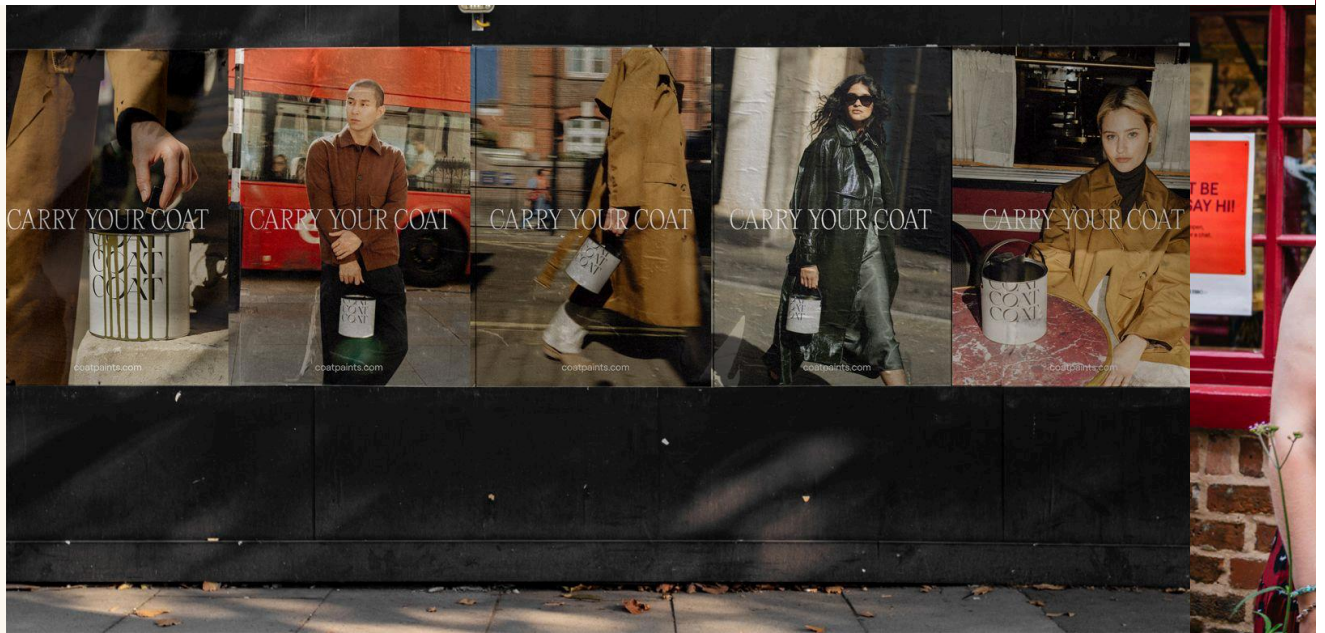
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