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Bukhara Biennial 2025: 13 Must-See Installations

In its first edition, the Uzbek city's new biennial blends contemporary art with ancient craft, reimagined heritage sites and a theme rooted in folklore and heartbreak

By Maghie Ghali

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Safar (Journey), 2025 by Kamruzzaman Shadhin collaboration with Zavkiddin Yodgorov. Image courtesy of Uzbekistan Art and Cultural Development Foundation (ACDF)

Bukhara Biennial 2025 has taken over the historic Uzbek city with its debut edition, bringing together artists, performers and makers from across the globe. From poetry readings to site-specific installations and culinary happenings, the event unfolds across restored landmarks, offering a new way to experience one of Central Asia's oldest cultural crossroads.

Organised by the Uzbekistan Art and Cultural Development Foundation (ACDF), the first edition features an impressive roster of visual art, architecture-inspired installations, performances, poetry and culinary experiences, all connected by the theme "Recipes for Broken Hearts," curated by Artistic Director Diana Campbell.

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The concept is rooted in the Uzbek national dish of Plov, a rice and meat pilaf that holds much symbolism. Over 70 site-specific projects now offer unique interpretations of the theme, spanning culinary traditions, myths and folktales, ways of healing and breaking down borders both tangible and metaphorical, through multisensory experiences.

“There's a myth that Ibn Sina, who is known as the father of modern medicine and is from Bukhara, invented this rice dish to cure the broken heart of a prince who couldn't marry the daughter of a craftsman,” Campbell says. “Everything I needed was in the story. There's someone with creative gifts making something to cure someone else, but also the problems of this story: the craftsman's daughter is only described by the profession of her father. She probably wasn't allowed to eat Plov.

“So the theme is really about how art cannot heal the many heartbreaks of the world – and I think we're living in very heartbreaking times – but maybe it can help heal certain problems in the art system, such as the unfair crediting of makers versus ideators,”

To ensure the artworks were embedded in the cultural fabric of Bukhara, the participating artists – hailing from 39 countries across six continents – were each paired with a local Uzbek artisan or crafter, exchanging knowledge and expertise to produce the works, as named collaborators.



Colorful sunset twilight over the famous old town in the City of Bukhara with the iconic Kalyan Minaret and Mir-i-Arab Madressa. Aerial Drone Point of View. Itchan Kala, Bukhara, Khorezm Region, Uzbekistan, Central Asia. Mlenny

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The biennial sites transform newly restored historic landmarks around the historic centre of Bukhara, reintegrated into the city in collaboration with award-winning UAE-based architect Wael Al Awar.

As the biennial's Creative Director of Architecture, he has also renovated the city's public spaces – adding walkable pathways and removing unauthentic décor – to create a city-wide master-plan that is in keeping with the local vernacular.

“It was really important for me to return these buildings to the public realm. Some of these sites, like the Caravanserai, had been closed off for years,” Al Awar tells *AD*. “Some parts were falling apart, so we had to go back to the archives, look at photos and rebuild them based on the knowledge we had.

“We also wanted to create pedestrian trails, so people can walk around these areas and explore them,” he adds. “Bukhara, in the past, was always a melting pot of different cultures, because it was on the Silk Road, so it was important to create a platform for the local creatives too.”

The sites for the first edition include a number of madrasas, a mosque, and four interconnected caravanserais that now form the largest hub of installations. Future editions will see new derelict monuments resurrected and further improvements made, seeking to create an environment that the local community can benefit from long after the biennial comes and goes.

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The Ultimate Guide to Bukhara Biennial 2025

Check out *AD*'s selection of the best Bukhara Biennial installations, spread across the city's historic district. The biennial will conclude on November 20.

Locations

- Khoja Kalon Mosque
- Gavkushon Madrasa
- Caravanserai
- Rashid Madrasa
- General public spaces around Bukhara Old Town

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Artists from the MENA region

'Al-Jabr and Al-Jazr: The Algorithm of Healing' by Ahmad Angawi, in collaboration with Ilyor Jumaev

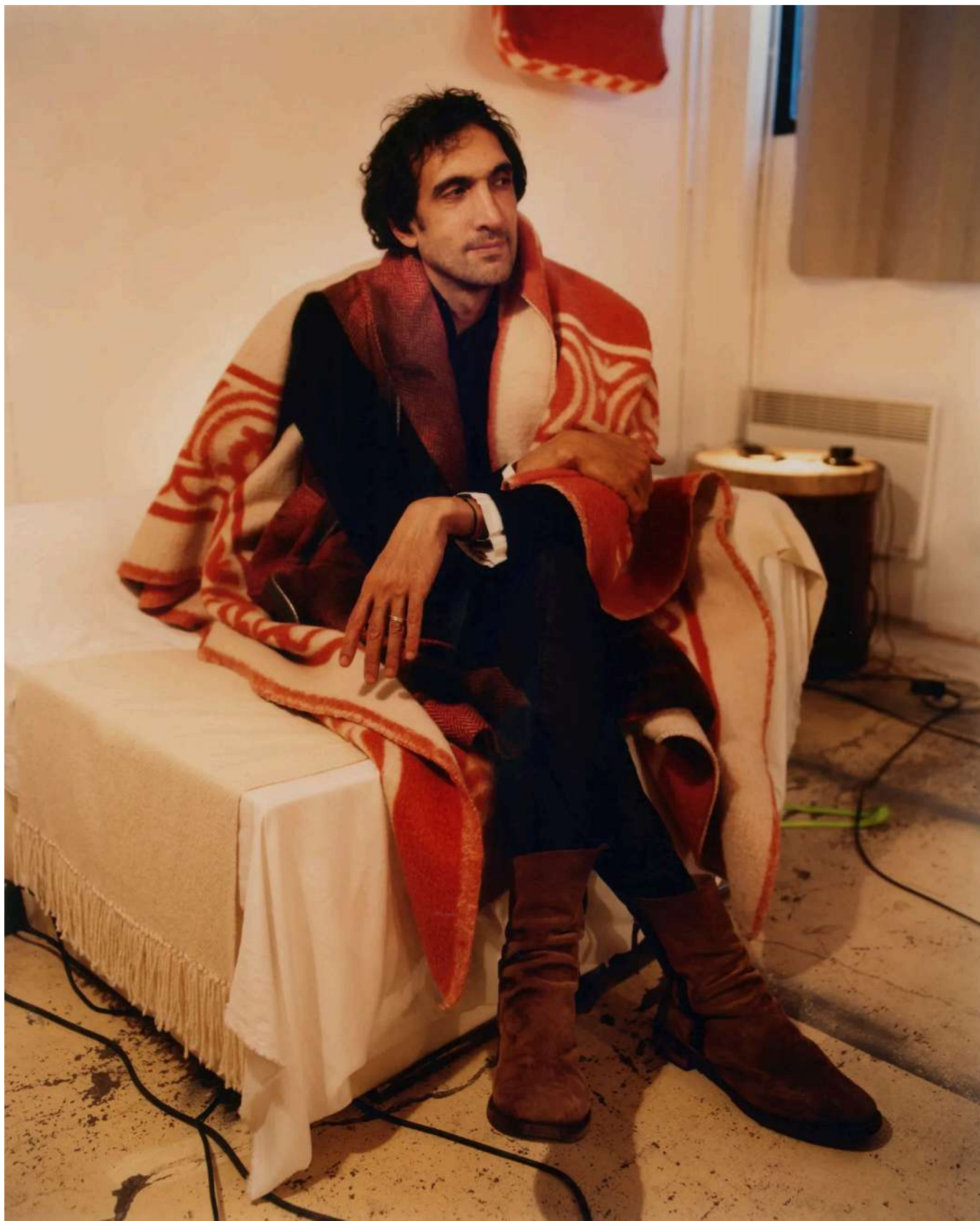


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Found just outside the Caravansarai, Saudi artist Ahmad Angawi merges the intellectual legacies of two ancient philosophers from the region – Al-Khwarizmi and Ibn Sina – to create a wooden panjara-style screen inspired by algebra and algorithms. Angawi explores the etymology of the Arabic terms *Al-Jabr* (restoration) and *Al-Jazr* (root extraction), illustrating how brokenness in numbers, geometry, or the human heart can be rebalanced through knowledge. Crafted by second-generation Uzbek woodcarver Ilyor Jumaev, the screen remains fixed like algebraic equations, but layered colours behind it move in an algorithmic rhythm. The chosen hues are inspired by Ibn Sina's colour therapy: red for vitality, yellow for clarity, and blue for calm.

Untitled performance by Tarek Atoui, in collaboration with Sharif Ostanov (21–24 Sept.)



Tarek Atoui at his studio in Paris, November, 2024. © Alexandre Guirkingier

At Gavkushon Madrasa, Lebanese multidisciplinary artist Tarek Atoui will give two performances and a series of musical workshops that engage Uzbek musicians and instrument-makers, exploring how knowledge and culture is transmitted through sound. A continuation of his long-term investigation into music traditions across Asia and the Middle East, the project invites musicians, children, and the general public to experiment with sound.

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A 16th-century public square surrounding a hauz pool, located near the historic canal system that once supplied Bukhara with water, will host the first performance. The second will be held in the shop of a fifth-generation carpet maker and merchant, located across from the iconic Kalon Minaret.

'Standing by the Ruins IV' by Dana Awartani, in collaboration with Behzod Turdiyev



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This series of ceramic mosaics by Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Awartani at Rashid Madrasa is inspired by architectural remains of cultural heritage sites endangered by war and armed conflict, creating awareness about the loss of craftsmanship and knowledge. The title references a pre-Islamic poetic form that meditates on love, loss, destruction, and the passage of time through the lens of abandoned or ruined places. The three biennale pieces are styled after the floor patterns of the historic Hamam al-Sammara in Gaza, destroyed in 2023. Made using clay sourced from Palestine, Awartani has replicated its lost geometric motifs, now preserved in her artwork.

Untitled by Wael Shawky, in collaboration with Jurabek Siddikov





Egyptian artist Wael Shawky, known for his work on mythology, history and culture, here unpacks Bukhara's historic fame as 'The Copper City' or *Madinat al-sufriya* in Arabic. In two pieces at the Caravanserai, Shawky presents intricately engraved copper panels, etched by Uzbek master artisan Jurabek Siddikov, and styled as iconic Persian and Central Asian illuminated manuscripts. The works draw on Uzbek beliefs that copper is a folk material of

healing and spiritual rituals, revered for its perceived ability to transmit energy, balance the body, and even ward off negativity. The shimmering works – one set above an entryway – act as a form of miniatures, capturing the story of Bukhara's love of copper in a single image.

'Navat Uy' by Laila Gohar, in collaboration with Ilkhom Shoyimkulov



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Egyptian artist Laila Gohar is known for her work with food culture, drawing on nostalgia and how food acts as a force of love, community and generosity. For the biennial, Gohar has created a stunning structure from local *navat* rock sugar, constructing a pavilion from its threads of the sugar crystal – a symbol of thousands of years of Central Asian hospitality. The labour-intensive process of slow crystallisation using grape syrup on threads requires time, care, and a transmission of knowledge that is becoming increasingly rare in our modernising world. Industrial cane sugar has replaced the artisanal craft of handmade *navat*, and younger generations rarely know the difference. Located just in front of Gavkushon Madrasa, the pavilion allows both locals and visitors to connect with its traditional material and with each other.

'Kinships and Cosmologies' by Samah Hijawi, in collaboration with Ahmad Arabov



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This intricate 15-meter textile work in the Caravanseraï by Jordanian artist and cook Samah Hijawi explores the profound connection between food, science, and spirituality along the ancient Silk Road. Created in collaboration with Uzbek embroiderer Ahmad Arabov, the piece is inspired by the scientific and spiritual traditions of Uzbekistan, drawing on the legacies of thinkers like Al-Biruni and Ulugbek. It interprets the philosophy "as above, so below," linking earthly life to the cosmos, and revives the old Zardozi embroidery style from Bukhara, weaving a tapestry that maps the spiritual, the edible, and the cosmological.

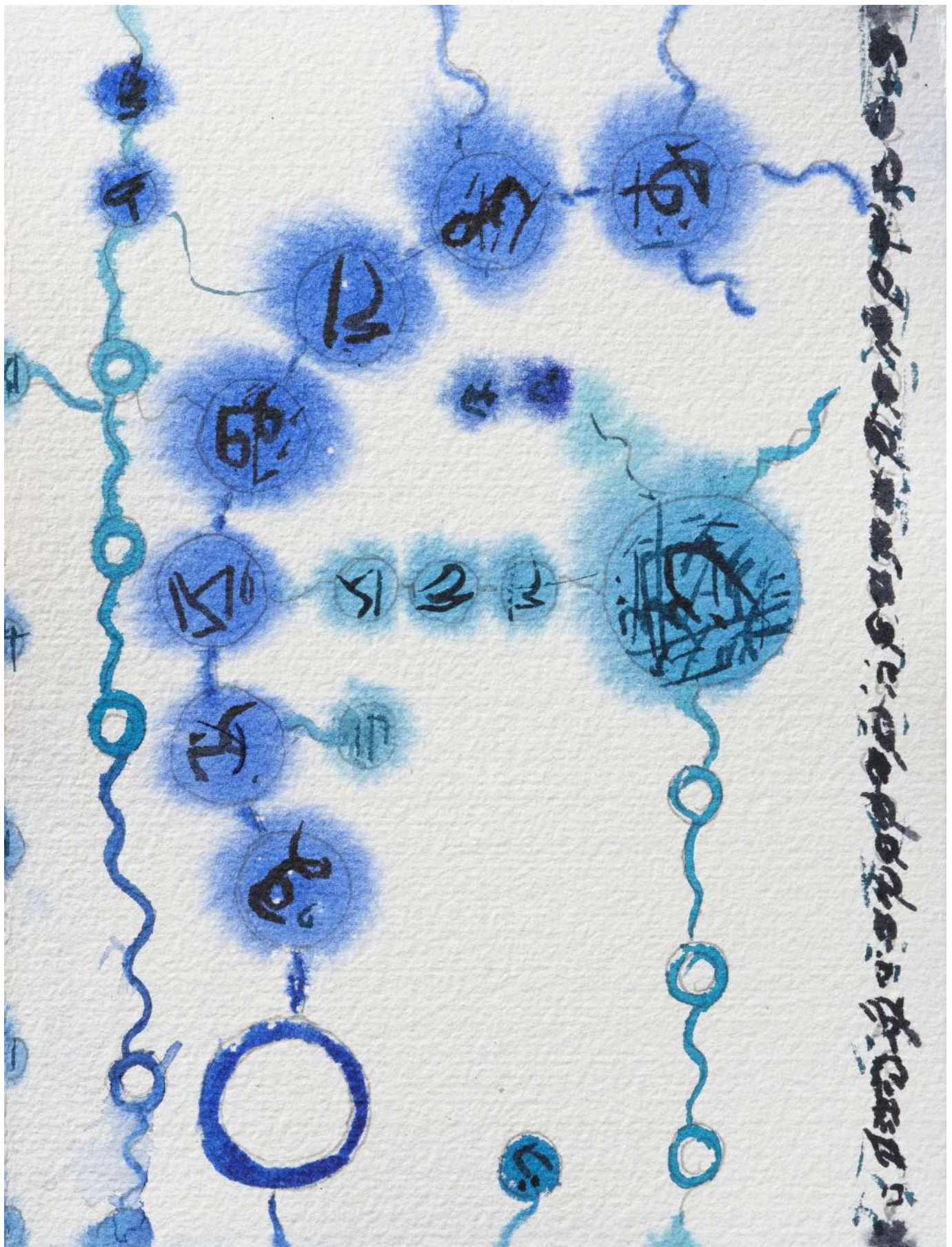
'Inverted Fruits' Taus Makhacheva, in collaboration with Oydin Nur Centre



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Comprising several pieces from her Inverted Fruits series, Russian UAE-based artist Taus Makhacheva's project explores different forms of women's transformation and empowerment. Developed in collaboration with the Oydin Nur women's shelter, the metal sculptures resembling large tinfoil-covered fruit sit floating in the *hauz* pond and around Gavkushon Madrasa. The metal objects float across the water's surface, inscribed with words of agency and care, symbolising resilience and the strength of women. After the biennial, the sculptures will be donated to the centre, allowing the afterlife of the artwork to support ongoing empowerment.

'To The Guardians' by Sara Ouhaddou, in collaboration with the Hunarmand Artisan Association of the Republic of Uzbekistan



Bukhara has long been known as a centre of Sufism, scholarship, and craft throughout history, and it is this that inspires French-Moroccan artist Sara Ouhammadou. Drawing on the Sufi concept of the *silsila* – a document mapping spiritual lineage, similar to a family tree, but tracing knowledge lines rather than bloodlines – the artist has created a visual archive of embodied knowledge. Through abstract compositions reinterpreted as embroidered and woven works, co-created with artisans in Uzbekistan, she traces connections between artisans and oral traditions. Over the course of the biennial, the artist will interview artisans living in Bukhara, contributing to an increase in the number

and complexity of the *silsilas*. Inscribing the importance of artisanal knowledge is a way to address the heartbreak of erasure

More works of note to check out

'Longing' by Hylozoic/Desires (Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappeser), in collaboration with Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov



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Spread across the entire city's canals, British/Indian artistic duo Hylozoic/Desires have created a series of stunning ikat tapestries that float atop the waterways of Bukhara. The ikat designs trace the disappearance of the Aral Sea, whose heart-shaped body is now an echo of the once life-giving saltwater lake, the presence of an absence. The design's shifting palette, drawn from satellite imagery over the last 100 years, transitions from deep blue to hues of light blue and lilac, derived from toxins, salt, moss, and fungal bloom. Every full moon, a musical ritual will be performed at the biennial, calling for rain and hoping for the Aral Sea to be replenished. It also acts as a healing ceremony, as for many Uzbek's the Aral was the closest they would ever get to a sea, and so its loss goes beyond merely ecological.

'Salt Carried by The Wind' by Subodh Gupta, in collaboration with Baxtiyor Nazirov



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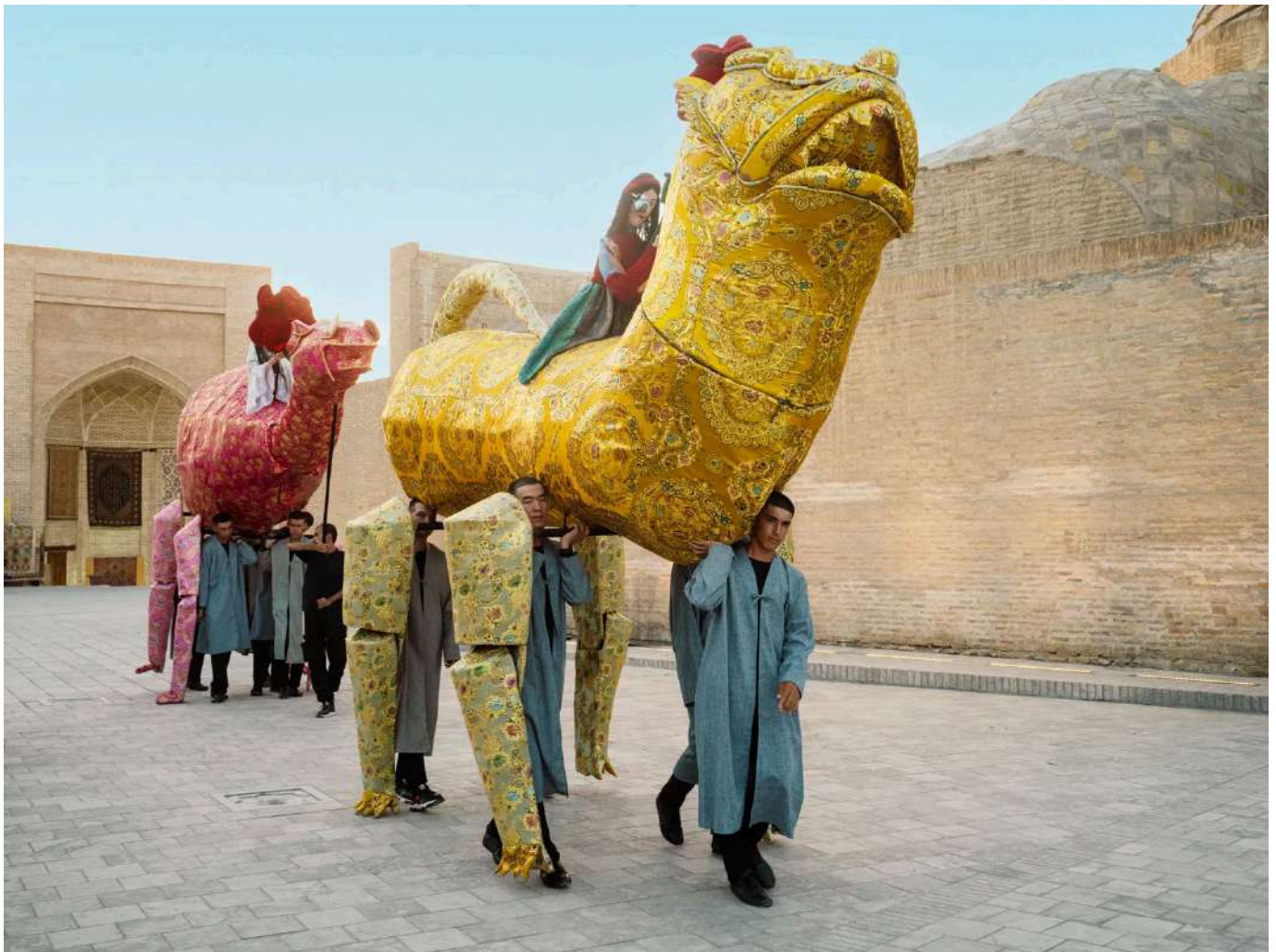
Indian artist Subodh Gupta finds poetry in the act of sharing meals and the experience of gatherings that unite people whilst honouring their differences. His installation outside the Caravanserai echoes the architectural form of Magoki Attori, the oldest standing mosque in Central Asia, which was previously a Zoroastrian temple, synagogue, and carpet museum. Constructed from mass-produced Soviet-style enamelware commonly found in Uzbek homes, the inside of the structure contrasts with ceramic tableware, created in collaboration with master ceramicist Baxtiyor Nazirov. The pavilion will be activated at different moments in the biennial, with Gupta cooking and serving the food himself, transforming the act of cooking into a performative ritual that connects people.

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'Safar (Journey)' by Kamruzzaman Shadhin, in collaboration with Zavkiddin Yodgorov



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Reimagining ancient Sufi journeys for a divided world, Bangladeshi artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin and theatre artist Zavkiddin Yodgorov of the Bukhara Puppet Theatre have created a magical performative procession. Throughout the biennial, a series of large-scale puppets will take to the streets of Bukhara each morning and evening. Inspired by symbolic animals from Sufi lore – such as a turtle, horse, camel and tiger - these puppets evoke tales of love, unity, and resistance to physical and ideological borders. In Sufi tales, these animals are said to have carried mystics across vast and difficult terrains of Asia, seeking spiritual union.

'Cut from the Same Cloth' by Aziza Kadyri, in collaboration with Yulduz Mukhiddinova and Mathieu Bissonnette



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This monumental installation in the Caravanserai by British-Uzbek artist Aziza Kadyri draws on her grandfather's 1969 journey to study cotton-refining machinery in the United States as a Soviet-Uzbek researcher. Blending oral history, archival imagery, her grandfather's patent blueprints, and AI-generated motifs based on Central Asian textiles, the work explores the entangled histories of industry, ecology, and diaspora. Emerging almost organically from the stone walls, the large-scale mechanism styled after cotton gins, is adorned with traditional Uzbek suzani embroidery by master Yulduz Mukhiddinova, merging ancient heritage with industrial-era technology. Another section, developed with Canadian artist Mathieu Bissonnette, transforms her grandfather's archive into a multisensory, interactive experience.

'Blue Room' by Abdulvahid Bukhoriy, in collaboration with Jurabek Siddikov



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This captivating, immersive ceramic installation by ceramic artist Abdulvahid Bukhoriy takes over the entire former prayer room of Gavkushon Madrasa. Fully covered in handcrafted blue tiles, the room almost gives the effect of being underwater. A large chandelier-like sculpture made of brass and copper is suspended from the ceiling, produced in collaboration with master coppersmith Jurabek Siddikov, inspired by fish forms found in Central Asian

ceramic traditions. The installation draws on ancient healing rituals in which fish become a vessel for absorbing human illness, suggesting spiritual and ecological restoration. Made using traditional materials and blue glaze extracted from a plant harvested during the biennial's season, the ceramic tiles feature Uzbek textile motifs and patterns representing algae, fish, and flowing water.

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