

## **Shuffled Histories of Tato Akhalkatsishvili** *by Levan Mindiashvili*

*“Then I fell asleep, woke up, but fell asleep again...”*  
*Kobo Abe, The Box Man*

A room is silent and slightly lit. A large canvas hangs on the wall -depicting a skeleton of a dinosaur on the colorful plinth- from the distance looks like a digitally modified print, but upon closer examination turns out to be a skillfully rendered oil painting. There is a wooden box beneath the painting, painted in black and filled with the black soil, repeating the size and shape of the canvas. Radiant red wooden stool placed on the soil serves as a pedestal for a sculpture of a little -vintage looking- schoolgirl completely painted over in deep blue. This is the latest installation of Tato Akhalkatsishvili entitled “Tomorrow Will Be Yesterday” at The Georgian National Museum. At first glance everything seems clear, silent, even inert a bit, but at the same time its silence feels very tense and disconcerting. Colorful elements start to oppose to each other, creating a painful atmosphere of despair, fatal attraction and fear. This piece sums up artist’s recent preoccupations with the play of power, the residues of totalitarian regime and with the oppressive nature of archetypes. Growing up in a late phase of communist era and having spent formative teenage years in post-soviet transitional period, Akhalkatsishvili had to deal with continuous clashes of value systems and socio-cultural structures. As his native Georgia was attempting to re-define and re-gain its historical identity throughout the 90’s and early 2000’s, relying heavily on religion and mythical past, Akhalkatsishvili himself is following that self-revealing process, attempting to find links between personal and communal, between real and imaginative, between ephemeral and eternal. Though his concerns are not focused only on specific historical events; soviet past appears only sometimes merely as an unconscious flashback either in the form of smeared portrait of “The Leader” (Stalin), stains of red dots (blood?!) or abandoned, brutalist swimming pools; Akhalkatsishvili is more engaged with the act of remembering, as Zdenek Felix puts it in his catalogue essay for “Remote Memories,” “remembering means to imagine something distant, something no longer present, and in that sense, something that can only be understood conditionally. However, a person can also have a memory of an experience that is not his own, something he is only vicariously aware of. Finally, one can also recollect the act of remembering, by having a vague sense of attunement to something that can no longer really be verified, even in one’s memory.”<sup>i</sup> This condition seems particularly precise for today’s “liquid” society, which is in constant attempts to re-think and re-organize itself around constantly changing paradigms.

Tato Akhalkatsishvili belongs to the generation of young Georgian artists that emerged in the middle of the first decade of 2000’s, exhibiting first in Europe (mainly in Germany) and only afterwards in his native Tbilisi. Unlike the vast majority of his peer artists trying to embrace and catch up with the ‘ultimate’ advances of socially and politically charged

conceptual forms of expression, Akhalkatsishvili -with a very small group of artist friends- deliberately chose an alternative way to develop his practice over historically “proved” one. His interest in traditional, skillful painting and deep investment in romanticist exploration of the landscape lead him to an utopian idea to create an alternative history of the painting. Imaginary misty fields with subtle, shifting horizons became his major subject and the instrument to deliberately oppose to prevailing urge of socially and politically charged works, so typical of the post-soviet countries. “Only after understanding and fully embracing tradition of European painting I was driven by, after finding myself deeply grounded on that legacy, I could start looking back to my own past and to start analyzing where I’m coming from“ the artist once mentioned in a private conversation.

Painful process of realization and acceptance of the ambivalence of the world is the subject that occupies Akhalkatsishvili since 2013. An extensive body of work grouped under the title “Childhood” is the first attempt in which the memories of his own childhood are merged with sensitive imaginations in a dream-like, surreal scenes. Mostly relying on found materials and appropriated images from the internet, Akhalkatsishvili attempts to separate, distance himself from his childhood traumas by using the images of the persons unknown to him. A landscape -the major component of his early paintings and a metaphoric depiction of “the place” - remains the only sign of Akhalkatsishvili’s own identity, creating a setting for childhood imaginations to be exposed and hopefully understood. The artist develops his works always in series, each group of works exploring different aspects of the main subject. Among the cut-outs of depictions of different kids, there is one image that is often repeated from work to work: a little boy with soft curly hair and a naive -a bit forced- smile driving a vintage, mechanical car. That’s the artist himself, the only image he uses from his own archives. Mainly placed in emptied abandoned swimming pools, the kid is always either left by himself, or leaded by the hand without any sings to whom it might belong to. The very act of encounter with the world of “grown-ups”, with the “real” reality becomes the main subject of these pieces. Avoiding personal narratives and by using the image of “every possible person” Akhalkatsishvili tries to engage the viewer with their own memories and interpretations.

Participatory role of the viewer as a creator of the meaning becomes more important and accentuated in his series “Psilocybin Mushrooms” (2014). Consisting of several small scale square pieces (40x40 cm each) and some larger paintings they are based on infamous and widely circulated images of the nuclear testings at Bikini Atoll. If the smaller pieces lack any moralistic or ethic approaches and just by being “beautiful” objects they place the viewer against the double standards of today’s world, on the other hand the large paintings of emptied dark theaters screening the movies of explosions and almost completely smeared mirrors in which the viewers can still catch a glimpse of themselves, are outlining our perverse addiction to the spectacle.

Manipulation with the power, traditions and with prevailing archetypes regains importance in the series entitled “Playing with the Fire” (2015 - ongoing). Vintage wooden toys in precarious states or positions in relation to their surroundings, placed

against dark, almost theatrical backgrounds, outline a contrasting nature of fragile, imaginative conscious of a child against the “real” world. Mostly inspired by the settings created by his own son, Akhalkatsishvili revisits connections between generations and his own past; between a cyclical nature of the world and attempts of retrograde society to engage every new generation in the worshipping of the false archetypes.

If throughout above mentioned series, the landscape assumed a role of the setting for the communal traumas to be developed, in the later works -all of them carrying the same title “Then I Fell Asleep, Woke Up, But Fell Asleep Again (after Kobo Abe),” (2016 - ongoing)- it regains its initial function: to mark a terrain for self-reflection, for distancing from the “temporary” currents of the “real” world and to focus on what is more important and a-temporal. As the artist have mentioned in his e-mail interview: “From the early childhood, Japan for me symbolized everything related to eternal, mystical, refine, self-analytic... and by paying homage to my favorite Japanese writer Kobo Abe, I want to link my most precious childhood memories with the current state of my mind.”<sup>ii</sup> These new works are only enriched with the previous experiences, containing elements that had already become a significant part of the artist’s visual vocabulary: empty pools, colored dots, floating abstract objects, white horse, or the tree branch upside down. They’re contemplative and meditative, erasing the borders between inside and outside, between imaginative and real. Anxiety triggered by the uncertainty and duality of the previous works is replaced with a peaceful acceptance of the world as a container of all possible contradictions. These works, more than any other ones, transmit emotional states rather than tell stories; they are the most genuine representations of the very fact of being aware of the arbitrary nature of “the truth” and the endless possibilities of its interpretation.

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<sup>i</sup> “Remote Memories”, exhibition catalogue published by KAI 10 Raum Für Kunst, Arthema Foundation, Düsseldorf, 2009. pg.48

<sup>ii</sup> e-mail interview, November 10, 2016