

Image [Front] Elena Mazzi, *Becoming and unbecoming with*, 2018–2023 (detail), series of 17 sculptures in silver and Murano glass, variable dimensions – Courtesy Artopia Gallery, Milan
[Back] Saodat Ismailova, *Stains of Oxus*, 2016, three-channel HD video system, 22', produced by Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains

Design In the shade of a tree
Impression Perfectmix-Photofset

of sculptures that consist of silver casts of cetacean vertebrae encased in glass bricks. These are presented here alongside a photograph of the artist's back and the scars left by her multiple operations, over which she wears a cetacean vertebra.

A dialogue emerges in the exhibition between the works of these two artists who, despite their geographically (and geologically) distant perspectives, develop similar feminist approaches to the environment and to humanity.

On the one hand, the river, flowing like a lifeblood through communities across different countries, languages and cultures who all end up identifying with it and becoming one with it: “choosing to be water”, to borrow the words of poet and artist Sinzo Aanza, in a poem dedicated to photographer Kiripi Katembo that refers to the Congo River. On the other hand, the sea, conceived here as an intimate and transform-ative element, a witness to both trauma and a metamorphosis, and an entity which allows us to find ourselves different “every time [we] emerge from the foam-crested brine”, as Robert Wyatt puts it in his famous *Sea Song*.

The ultimate goal of *Liquid Grounds* – the works it gathers together, the discourses that it deploys, and the curatorial gambit on which it turns – is to present a double story of transformation and mixing. Or rather, of the liquefaction of the individual into the collective, of the body into space, and of the self into the other-than-self.

Vittorio Parisi

practice lies at the crossroads between documentary and fiction. For *Liquid Grounds*, she presents the audiovisual installation *Stains of Oxus*, produced by Le Fresnoy in 2016.

This work tells the story of the relationship between the Amou-Daria river – one of the vital waterways of central Asia that was formally known as the Oxus – and the communities that live along its banks. Flowing from Lake Bulunkul in Tajikistan to the Aral Sea in Karakalpakistan, the river bears witness to the morning ritual shared by the inhabitants of the different villages that dot its course, who start each day by whispering their dreams to the water. The river thus becomes not only a living archive of histories, identities and resilience, but also a collective “body of water”: by revisiting their dreams and their destinies, the people who day in, day out go down to meet the Oxus become one with its flow.

The links between Central Asian communities and the lake and river environment form a recurring motif in Ismailova's work. Her first film, *Aral: Fishing in an Invisible Sea* (2004), co-directed with Carlos Casas, told the story of three generations of fishermen fighting for survival on the shores of the Aral Sea, an oceanic lake that has largely disappeared as it has been drained by irrigation projects for the cotton industry.

Ismailova's films often underscore the extent to which environmental preservation necessitates the involvement of women: “the world of the feminine in central Asia is linked to local forms of knowl-edge that have survived the region's successive religious and political transformations; it is a space where beliefs, rituals and traditions that are founded on a recognition of our profound link to the environment and where the animal and plant worlds are preserved by women.”³

Italian artist Elena Mazzi (1984–) has meanwhile made research into climatic and environmental transformations the focus of her creative practice. In particular, her work investigates the environmen-tal, social and geopolitical consequences of the so-called “Polar Silk Road”, a new trade route between Northern Europe and China that takes advantage of the Arctic's melting ice caps to avoid the Suez Canal and facilitate the extractive trade in minerals and rare earths with Greenland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland.

Europe's northern extremities are also a terrain for self-exploration, one in which she places her own body and lived experience in dialogue with the unfamiliar spaces and environments of the Arctic. For *Liquid Grounds*, Mazzi presents a selection of her sculptures entitled *Becoming and Unbecoming With* (2018-2020) alongside a photographic installa-tion *Self-portrait with a whale backpack* (2018).

These works stem from Mazzi's personal experience, in particular a cliff-diving accident that resulted in the rupture of several of her vertebrae and a period of forced sedentariness. Compelled to create a new connection between her body and the seascape, Mazzi made the long journey to Iceland to spend time living in a fjord.

In this isolated place where the presence of humans is barely perceptible, the bones of dead cetaceans float on the water for months until they are collected by locals who use them as decorative elements. Echoing this custom, Mazzi created a series

I once dreamed that I was a sea creature. I couldn't tell you which one. Fish, dolphin, jellyfish, seaweed or mermaid: my memory is vague, but I remember from the dream the extraordinary sensation of being able to breathe underwater. Of my lungs being filled with water, yet without this causing me to asphyxiate, without it causing me pain, as if the limits of my body and its functions were one with the water that surrounded me and filled me up. As if there was a strange continuity between the water, my skin, and my organs.

My memory of this dream is still one that is full of a sensation of liberty, of freeing myself from the somewhat traumatic childhood memory of my first swimming lessons.

Since I was born and grew up close to the sea, I always felt – for better or for worse – at home in the water. For me, water is a familiar thing which forever threatens to shift into its opposite, the uncanny. In my dream, these two categories were abolished: neither familiar nor uncanny, the water and I were one sole entity. Perhaps it's thanks to this dream that I was able to feel – maybe for the first time – the desire to swim. The joy of swimming, even.

This exhibition also deals with dreams and transformations, in metamorphoses, in profound connections both existing and recreated between the human, the living, and the water. It is through the voices of two artists, Saodat Ismailova and Elena Mazzi, that these dreams and transformations are narrated and brought into being.

And it's from this encounter with their practices and their works that I have been able, once again, to forget myself as in my dream, and to take the risk of immersing myself in a universe of experiences, sensibilities and discourses other than the ones I know and which belong to me.

Working from a feminist perspective that intertwines the geological and the political, the collec-tive and the individual – the deeply personal, even – this exhibition examines “liquid ground”. This is a concept dear to the philosopher Luce Irigaray, who set out its terms in her 1980 essay, *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche*¹, a text dense with both theory and poetry.

A declaration of love to the German philosopher, the text is full of exhortations, including the one that gives the exhibition its title: “So, remember the liquid ground.” Observing the patent absence in Nietzsche's work of water, and by symbolic extension, the absence of the feminine, Irigaray attempts to reconcile the philosopher with this element by proposing that we recall our distant past as aquatic creatures and “bodies of water”, an essential condition shared by humans and all living beings on the planet.

A term belonging to the vocabulary of geology that designates every aqueous entity from an ocean to a lake, from a river to a puddle, theorist Astrida Neimanis advanced “bodies of water” as a pivotal concept in her 2019 “hydrofeminist” essay, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*². In this text, Neimanis invites us to consider the human body as an inseparable element of the natural world, one that exists in continuity with all other living things by virtue of its watery composition.

This continuity between the human, the living and water is particularly present in the work of Uzbek artist and film-maker Saodat Ismailova (1981–), whose

So remember the liquid ground.
And taste the saliva in your
mouth also – notice her familiar
presence during your silence,
how she is forgotten when you
speak. Or again: how you stop
speaking when you drink. And
how necessary all of that is for you!
These fluids softly mark the time.
And there is no need to knock,
just listen to hear the music. With
very small ears.

Luce Irigaray, *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1980

You look different every time you
come from the foam-crested brine

Robert Wyatt, *Sea Song*, 1974

Par-delà la rivière,
tu as choisi d'être l'eau.

Sinzo Aanza, *Ngwaki pour Kiripi*, 2016



1 Luce Irigaray, *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Minuit, 1980.

2 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Bloomsbury, 2019.

3 “How I became an artist: Saodat Ismailova”, interview with Skye Sherwin for Art Basel, 4 September 2024 (online: <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/how-i-became-an-artist-saodat-ismailova-pirelli-hangarbicocca-uzbekistani-filmmaker>)

Liquid grounds

08.05 –
24.08.25



Elena Mazzi

Elena Mazzi (b. 1984 in Reggio Emilia, Italy) is an artist who works with specific geographic and sociopolitical contexts.

Her poetics deal with the relationships between human beings and the environments in which they live and with which they have to work every day. She closely studies specific territories, reinterpreting their natural and cultural heritage and interweaving the stories, facts and fantasies of local communities to suggest possible solutions to the conflicts between humanity, nature and culture. Her working method, which draws inspiration from anthropology, favours a holistic approach aimed at repairing the fractures that run throughout society. She begins her projects with periods of sustained observation, subsequently adopting an approach that combines different fields of knowledge.

She has previously studied art history (Siena), visual art (IUAV, Venice) and fine arts (Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm).

Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions around the world, including: Luleå Biennale, Castello di Rivoli in Turin, der TANK in Basel, BIENALSUR in Buenos Aires, Whitechapel Gallery in London, BOZAR in Brussels, Sonje Art Center in Seoul, Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, the 16th Quadriennale in Rome and the 14th Istanbul Biennale.

She has taken part in a number of residency programmes, including ZK/U (Germany), Skaftfell Center for the Arts (Iceland), HIAP (inald), Fundación Botín (Spain), and Bevilacqua La Masa (Italy).

She has been awarded numerous prizes for her work, including the Cantica21, sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, the 7th and 12th editions of the Italian Council sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Culture, the XVII Ermanno Casoli Prize, the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation Prize and the Illy Prize.

Since 2015, she has organized workshops for young artists, teachers and the general public in collaboration with institutions, schools and art academies.

She is currently pursuing a practice-based doctorate at Villa Arson in Nice.

Vittorio Parisi

Vittorio Parisi holds a doctorate in aesthetics from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and is head of the visual arts programme at the Ecole de Design et Haute Ecole d'art du Valais in Switzerland. A curator, art critic, and a member of AICA France, between 2019 and 2025 he was director of studies and research at the Villa Arson in Nice.

Saodat Ismailova

Saodat Ismailova (b. 1981, Tashkent, Uzbekistan) is a filmmaker and artist who belongs to the first post-Soviet generation of her home country. Weaving together memories, myths, rituals and dreams into the tapestry of everyday life, her films explore the historically rich and complex culture of her region, which lies at the crossroads of several different realities, migration routes and colonial legacies. Drawing on her personal history, Ismailova explores the collective dimension of memory and global resistance to the impact of human activities on the environment. Her research focuses on forms of ancestral knowledge and on traditional practices, as well as examining more recent histories. For example, in some of her projects she incorporates archival footage with vernacular textiles that promote the continuity of craft practices threatened with extinction. In so doing, Ismailova reframes the colonial past and the attendant question of regional identity by combining myths and animist practices with the dreams of the land's contemporary inhabitants.

Ismailova has exhibited in a number of major institutions, including JOAN, Los Angeles (2024); Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2023); The Center for Contemporary Art Tashkent (2019); the Ilkhom Theatre, Tashkent (2018); Tromsø Kunstforening, Norway (2017).

Her films and video installations have also been presented in international group exhibitions such as the Diriyah Biennale of Contemporary Art and the Fondazione in Between Art and Film, Venice (2024), the Shanghai Art Biennale and the Sharjah Biennale (2023); the Venice Biennale and documenta 15, Kassel, (2022); Meet Factory, Prague (2021); Para Site, Hong Kong and Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2019); Lunds konsthall (2018); the Yinchuan Biennale (2018).

In 2013, Ismailova was one of the artists selected to represent Central Asia at the Venice Biennale, and in 2018, her live musical performance Qyrq Qyz premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. Her work has received wide recognition in the film industry and has been screened at festivals such as the Berlin International Film Festival (2014) and the Rotterdam International Film Festival (2005), among others. She has received numerous awards, including the Eye Art & Film Prize, Amsterdam (2022); Documenta Madrid (2018), the Golden Alhambra Award, Granada Cines del Sur Film Festival (2014), the Tashkent International Biennial of Contemporary Art (2014) and the Turin International Film Festival Prize for Best Documentary (2004). In 2021, she founded the Davra research group, dedicated to the study, documentation and dissemination of Central Asian culture and knowledge.