

[WM homepage](#) > [Cities](#) > [whitehot London](#)

## **whitehot | April 2011, Interview with Beral Madra Curator of the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 54th International Art exhibition la Biennale di Venezia**



Interview with Beral Madra

Beral Madra, a critic and curator. Madra directed Gallery BM (1984-1990) and has been Director of BM Contemporary Art Centre since 1990. She lives and works in Istanbul, and coordinated the 1st (1987) and the 2nd (1989) Istanbul Biennale. Madra curated exhibitions of Turkish artists in the 43rd, 45th, 49th, 50th and 51st Venice Biennale, and co-curated the exhibition *Modernities and Memories - Recent Works from the Islamic World* at the 47th Venice Biennale. Since 1984 she has organized more than 250 local and international artists in her art centre and in other official art spaces in Istanbul.

She is Curator of the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 54th International Art exhibition la Biennale di Venezia. I talked to her recently about the curatorial concept of the Azerbaijan Pavilion, and the artists involved.

*Lee Sharrock: The 54th International Art exhibition la Biennale di Venezia, is titled Illuminations. Did you approach the curating of the Azerbaijan Pavilion with the overall theme of the Venice Biennale in mind?*

Beral Madra: In general curators follow the “theoretical trends” in the international art scene and decide about their exhibition concepts according to the production of the artists, which usually is in tune with these trends. Today, one cannot create a “new concept”, because “new” is not a valid content any more. One can conceive a concept that reveals the socio-political, cultural realities which effects people and artists. “Illumi-nations” on one side is a very optimistic concept and incorporates notions such as humanity, enlightenment, horizon etc... It also incorporates the most crucial problem in our age, namely nations, nationality, nationalisms which are being either dissolved or resist in neo-capitalism and globalism... The title invites artists and curators to deal with these subjects. I appreciate this positive approach, but I have also to look to the realities that influence the art work in our regions and combine these realities with the title. The “society of spectacle” needs attractive titles to be interested in! 12th Istanbul Biennale curators have entitled their biennale as *Untitled*. This might be the next trend!



*Sharrock: Paolo Baratta, President of la Biennale di Venezia, commented, "The Biennale is a great pilgrimage, where in the works of artists and in the work of curators the voices of the world meet, to talk about their own and our future". Do you agree with this statement, and do you feel that la Biennale di Venezia is one of the best platforms for a meeting of minds of the most outstanding international artists and curators?*

*Madra: Venice Biennale is "one of the many" platforms where artists and art experts meet; it has no priority. Considering that the mainstream art is getting more and more sophisticated and market oriented, these meetings are really re-designed for the privileged rather than for the emerging artists and art experts. There is no modesty at all! The down to earth meetings happen in smaller events and in local workshops and residencies. Yet, the society of spectacle is enchanted with big events, with glamorous appearances of the art stars. We know that Venice Biennale in general are an economic reality for the Veneto region. And the only mega international event for Italy.*

*Sharrock: How did you become involved as the Advisory Curator of the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 54th International Art exhibition la Biennale di Venezia?*

*Madra: I am not a foreigner for Azerbaijan art scene; I have been collaborating with artists and curators for ten years. At the beginning I encouraged them to participate in Venice Biennale. In the 53rd Biennale I curated the Central Asia Pavilion; which was a quite satisfactory presentation. I was invited by Mr. Farzaliev, after recommendation of good friends in Baku.*

*Sharrock: What is the working relationship with Cinghiz Farzaliev, the curator and comissar of the Pavilion, and with co-commissioner Vittorio Urbani, and assistant curator Amina Melikova, during the curatorial process for the Azerbaijan Pavilion?*

*Madra: We all have one goal: to present an interesting exhibition and promote the artists. Around this goal we work as a team, with different functions. Our meeting in Venice in December was like a workshop, thinking, creating and planning a good exhibition.*

*Sharrock: How important is it that the Azerbaijan Pavilion team, including coordinators Mila Askarova and Suad Garayeva, photographer/ designer Farhad Farzaliev and exhibition designer Vincenzo Casali, work together to produce an exhibition, which showcases some of the most outstanding Azerbaijani artists?*

*Madra: Venice Biennale exhibitions are major productions with many details to be fulfilled in a very professional way. I found a professional and determined team and I am contributing to their commitment with my experience in international platforms.*





*Altai Sadighzadeh  
Courtesy, the artist*

*Sharrock: You coordinated the 1st and 2nd Istanbul Biennale, and you co-curated the exhibition Modernities and Memories - Recent Works from the Islamic World at the 47th Venice Biennale. How do these experiences compare with your most recent experience as advisory curator of the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale?*

Madra: When the Rockefeller Foundation funded the exhibition of Islamic countries at the Venice Biennale it was the first presentation ever! We were a group of curators from Islamic countries; it was a team effort. After that exhibition I continued to work with the Middle East and South Caucasus and I invited many artists and curators to make presentations in Istanbul. I will say that I am very pleased that I could contribute to the networking and communication between Turkey and all the countries east of Vienna. The sustainability is my reward.

*Sharrock: The title of the Azerbaijan Pavilion exhibition is Relational, of Baku. How did you arrive at this title, and was it vital to feature two generations of Azerbaijani artists?*

Madra: The diversity in the concept, form and aesthetics of the works and the interest of the artists to journey into the depths of language, knowledge, traditions and memory of their origins and their present existence as well as the origins of the other cultures. And this positive ambition of the artists to contribute to democracy, wisdom, critical thinking is the point of reference for interpreting the works of these artists and many others. As a curator I have to display their intentions and messages to a very diverse public. I tried to be faithful to the meaning of the works and to the intentions of the artists. Four of them are living and working in other metropolises, two of them in Baku. In all the works we realise the devotion to Baku, but at the same time a look from a distance. The artists' roots may not so be visible within the high aesthetic and technical masterful, but the way they have combined their tradition, memory with the new techniques and aesthetics of contemporary art making is remarkable.

*Sharrock: Could you give a brief explanation of how you selected the artist, and what they will exhibit?*

Madra: Selecting artists is the most responsible issue in our profession. In this task we have to collaborate with our colleagues. Mr. Chingiz Farzaliev and me, we looked through a list of artists and by discussing our position in the Venice Biennale we decided about the artists. He had the local knowledge and I had the Venice Biennale experience; it was a good combination.

*Sharrock: Are the artists exhibiting existing work at the Venice Biennale, or creating new work in response to your curatorial brief?*

Madra: The artists are creating new works for the Biennale; but they are loyal to their ongoing concepts and forms. At the very beginning I have sent a draft text, explaining my point of view in relation to today's the art production and art making and its presentation to vast audiences in the biennale. I knew the work of some artists before and I know under what circumstances these artists are producing.

*Sharrock: The work exhibited will be multi-disciplinary, featuring painting, sculpture, installation and video art. Would you say that different media express the curatorial theme in different ways?*

Madra: I have envisioned the curatorial theme according to the works of artists and not vice versa! I looked to the common concerns and approaches and to contradictory positions and negotiations and built the theme. The diversity of the techniques is a bonus for the exhibition in consideration to the interests of the international public in Venice Biennale.

*Sharrock: In what way will the art exhibited relate to the socio-political and cultural environments in which the artists live?*

Madra: There are two dimensions in the works of these artists: An essential one is their memory, their state of belonging to a culture (a significant soviet modernism) that has dominated two continents in the second half of the twentieth century and that had to transform itself in two decades into a post-modern capitalist culture. Another strong element is their identity as dissident artists in a more or less conservative society, challenging the status quo with their critical works. Four of them have experience as immigrants and could come forward with their production and performance. In all the works there are critical and transgressive messages and interpretations that reveal the socio-political and cultural problems in the countries they live as well as in Azerbaijan.



*Mikayil Adburahmanov with some of his artwork  
Courtesy, the artist*



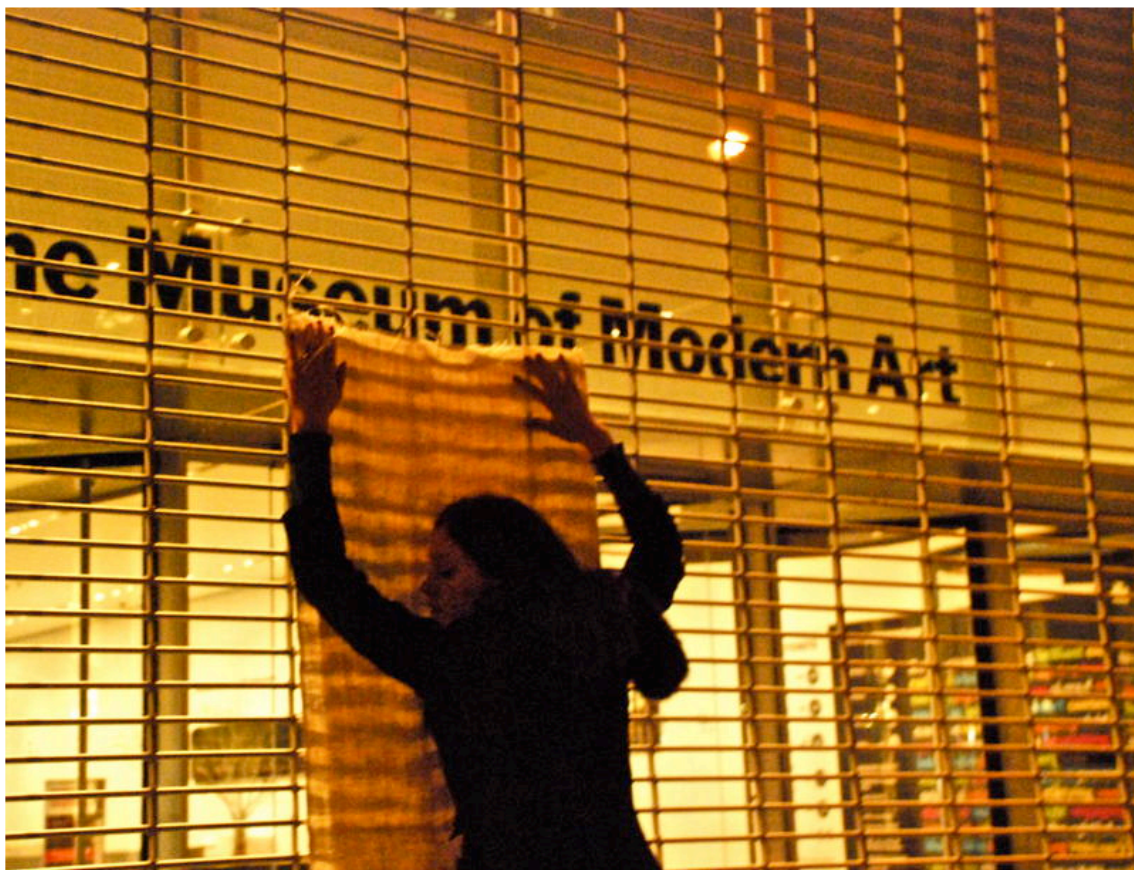
*Sharrock: We are living through a period of political upheaval in the Middle East, and worldwide economic uncertainty, do you think it is serendipitous that the artists exhibiting in the Azerbaijan Pavilion this year have all witnessed a political and economical transformation of their nations in the last four decades, and are responding to this experience in the exhibition Relational, of Baku?*

Madra: Yes, we are really going through a very confused and restless period, as if there have not been enough upheavals throughout the twentieth century and in this decade. The Mediterranean is not a peaceful touristic sea anymore! I am sure that the artists, during the process of creating their works, have been affected by these problematic actions and re-actions in the region. Yet, when we consider what they have experienced since the 1980s we can believe that they have tremendous experience in sorting out "the reality" out of this chaos. I think this will be the case for all other artists, participating in the Venice Biennale; these events will have its impact on the intellectual platform of Venice Biennale. Evidently, when Bice Curiger decided about her concept "Illuminations" the world around us was more quiet, she did not expect this kind of chaos. Here is a crucial problem with the chief curators of all biennale in general: most of the curators come from welfare countries of the EU and USA and they do not experience the socio-political upheavals and cultural transformations, as we do. Their concepts mostly relate to the production of the artists who live in "peaceful and welfare" countries. Therefore the political position of the curator becomes crucial in the moments of crisis.

*Sharrock: The Azerbaijan Pavilion is in Palazzo Benzon, an 18th Century building on the Canale Grande, based on a gothic predecessor. Does the building in any way effect the display of the artwork or determine the nature of its installation?*

Madra: Certainly, it does. In both ways, positive and negative. It is difficult to make installations in a historical building. We are not allowed to touch the walls etc... On the other hand the charm of the building is challenging for the artists and the public. We have discussed with the artists about how to utilize these heavily decorated rooms and decided not to change/transform anything. We avoided making a "white cube". We will not fight with the space, but make peace. We are entering into the building surreptitiously and leaving the works to make an impact on the visitor.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is participating in the 54th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, from 4th June to 30th September in their [Pavilion](#), Palazzo Benzon.



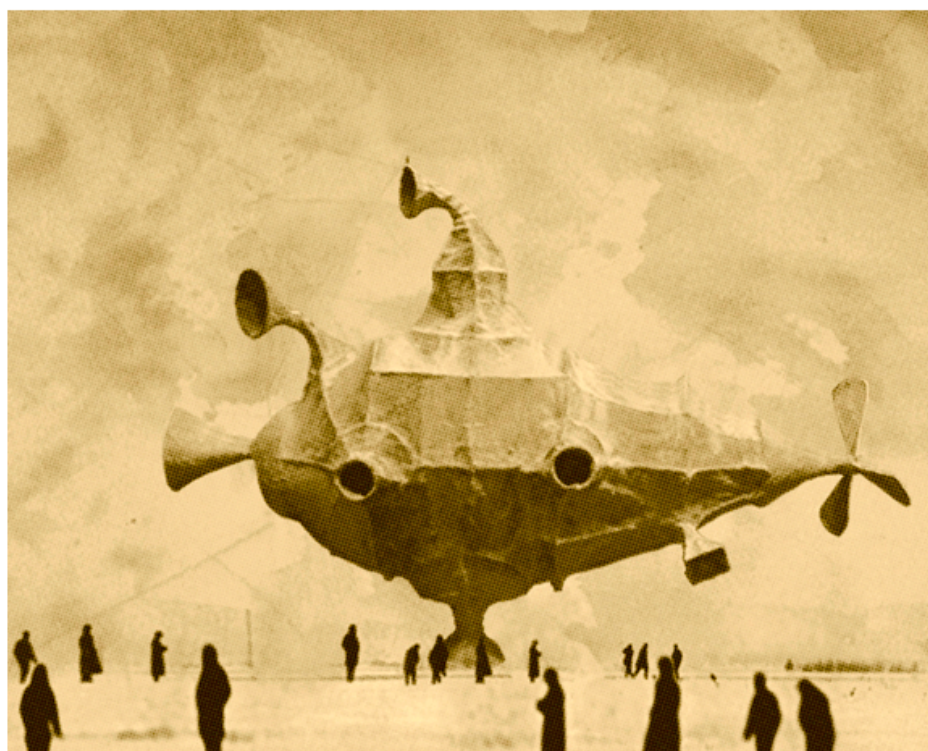
*"88 hours of poetry recited canvas applied to gates of the MOMA" by Khanlar Gasimov  
Courtesy, the artist*





...a world to science,  
a colony to the country...

*"A world to science" by Zeigam Azizov  
Courtesy, the artist*



*Aga Ousseinov 'Bucolic Landscape'  
Courtesy, the artist*



Lee Sharrock (formerly Lee Johnson) is the Global Creative PR for Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide (<http://www.saatchi.com/>), and PR Director of the Scream Gallery in London (<http://www.screamlondon.com/>). Lee runs a freelance PR consultancy working with galleries, institutions, artists, Curators and advertising agencies. Clients have included; Azerbaijan Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2011, Alison Jackson, Polish Cultural Institute, Nixon ART MOSH, Sacha Newley, Lee Jones, Flora Fairbairn, Trish Wylie, Al Braithwaite, Lee 'Scratch' Perry and Peter Harris, and Epoh Beech. She is also a writer and contributes to; 'Creative Mapping', 'Art India' (<http://www.artindiamag.com/>), Art Wednesday (<http://artwednesday.com/>), FAD Website (<http://www.fadwebsite.com/>), Kilimanjaro and Candy Magazines. She is co-founder of 'Watch This Space' with Bakul Patki ([www.watch-this-space.org](http://www.watch-this-space.org)), an organisation providing curatorial and promotional support for young and emerging artists. Lee is on the committee of the Macmillan De' Longhi Art Auction (<http://www.macmillan.org.uk>).