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Simurgh Self-Help: Slavs and Tatars' New Show Rethinks National Symbolism

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Installation View, Slavs and Tatars, Simurgh Self-Help, 2025, The Third Line. Photo Altamash Urooj

"It's interesting that in Western symbolism you never see a delicate female eagle," notes Payam, one-half of the artist collective Slavs and Tatars, from his studio in Berlin. "But the central-Asian Simurgh is gender-fluid, metaphysical. It doesn't belong to this world."

The mythological figure of the Simurgh is the focus of Slavs and Tatars' latest show at the gallery The Third Line in Dubai called "Simurgh Self-Help". The show speaks of the importance of reclaiming and reframing cultural memories in a fractured world, and an invitation to think beyond the artificial, top-down confines of nationalism, to find cultural unity.





Slavs and Tatars Samovar Vacuum-formed plastic, acrylic paint; Image: Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

The exhibition extends a lineage of conceptual inquiry, drawing upon the mystical bird Simurgh, ever-present in Persian and Central Asia mythologies, as a counterpoint to the ubiquitous, secularized eagle of Western heraldry.

A constant companion of Zeus in Greek mythology, the eagle is a recurring symbol in the Western world: “Everywhere you look in the West, you find eagles,” notes Payam. “It’s on the German flag, on American football teams, on the Albanian flag. It’s a tired, secularized symbol, heavy with the weight of imperial history.” In contrast, the Simurgh exists on a different plane, one that rejects hierarchies in favor of collective transformation.



Slavs and Tatars Samovar Vacuum-formed plastic, acrylic paint; Image: Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

Today the Simurgh is going through a similar secularization to the Western eagle, with Turkish SIM cards and Azerbaijani soccer teams called Simurgh. “It’s easy, in some sense, for as an artist to take something which is very high and important,

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let's say spiritual or religious, and make it make fun of it, bring it down in a caricatural way," says Payam. "What's very hard as an artist is to take something which has been debased and make it high again."

In the show, we see works that go in either direction, presenting an alternative mythology, one that shows that cultures are fluid and interconnected. "Simurgh Self-Help," which had previous iterations in Warsaw, Athens, and Baden-Baden, was originally started two years ago as a conceptual echo of Marcel Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne: Département des Aigles*. This was a conceptual museum/artistic project created by the Belgian artist in 1968, full of artworks referenced by Slavs and Tatars in their show.



Slavs and Tatars, *Soft Power_2023*, Woolen Yarn; Image: Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

The Simurgh, Payam explains, traverses territories from Kazakhstan to Ukraine, yet remains absent in Poland. "It's a question of defining a region not through imposed political structures but through the myths that bubble from the ground up," remarks Payam. The Simurgh becomes a cipher for alternative cartographies, a challenge to the top-down imposition of nationhood.

If the eagle stands for conquest and dominance, the Simurgh stands for the dissolution of categories and unity with the whole. The myth, present in Attar's poem *The Conference of the Birds*, speaks of a journey — a dissolution of the self in pursuit of the divine. "In the traditional story a number of birds seek the Simurgh," Payam reflects, "and when they arrive, they find a pond where they can see their own reflections. This a very Sufi concept, by which God is within. They are the Simurgh. It's an act of annihilating the ego, of merging with the infinite."

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Installation View, Slavs and Tatars, Simurgh Self-Help, 2025, The Third Line. Photo: Altamash Urooj

The exhibition unfolds through a number of glassworks, carpets, installations, and text-based works, in an interplay of languages that are both visual and textual. The craft element is very present, as the collective closely works with artisans with the idea of continuity: “We work with the same artisans repeatedly, ensuring quality and deepening relationships.”

Payam has recently come back to the cold temperatures of Berlin from the warmth of Jeddah to participate in the second edition of their Islamic Biennial. As Slavs and Tatars will also join the forthcoming first edition of the Bukhara Biennial, the artist is encouraged to reflect on how different versions of Islam enter the secular world and open up to the contemporary art public.



Installation View, Slavs and Tatars, Simurgh Self-Help, 2025, The Third Line. Photo: Altamash Urooj

“As artists, we have always been interested in religion as a repository of knowledge,” Payam asserts. “If you claim to be interested in knowledge, you cannot ignore the metaphysical.”

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We have so many different types of knowledge, the rational, the mystical, the analytic, the emotional, the digestive even. You can't say you are interested in one, and reject the others."

Well, what a Simurgh-like thing to say.



Naima Morelli



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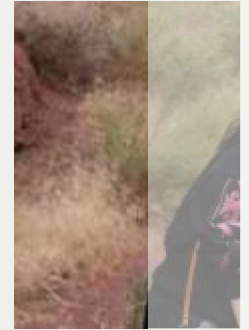
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