



Saodat Ismailova
Amanat
January 21 – April 12, 2026

Swiss Institute (SI) is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in the United States by Uzbek artist and filmmaker Saodat Ismailova. Ismailova's films and installations unfold along the fault lines of Central Asian landscapes steeped in ritual and myth, shifting borders and migration, and the invisible forces of empire shaping the psycho-material terrains of the present. The exhibition revolves around the world premiere of the first iteration of Ismailova's newly commissioned film *Amanat* (2026), whose title references that which is entrusted in one's care, and denotes a sacred responsibility that demands to be honored, protected, and passed on. The film marks the concluding chapter of Ismailova's long-term engagement with Arslanbob, a vast walnut forest in present-day Kyrgyzstan, revered for centuries as a spiritual site. Through the prism of its cosmologies and ecologies, *Amanat* considers how memory is metabolized in moments of profound cultural and political change, asking what becomes (un)speakable when the very conditions of belief come under pressure.

On the ground floor, *Amanat* revisits a foundational Central Asian tale about the birth of the mystical forest of Arslanbob, filmed at a site whose name translates to "the place where you get lost." According to local legend, the forest grew from a date seed entrusted by an elder to a young boy with a warning not to fall asleep under its canopy. From the date grew walnuts, whose tannins induce hallucinatory states causing haunting visions. The figure of Arslanbob is said to appear to dreamers in the shape of a tiger, traversing human, animal, and spirit worlds.

In Ismailova's practice, the forest is considered as a site of geopolitical importance. During Alexander the Great's campaign to East Asia, a group of wounded soldiers were believed to be healed by the walnuts, compelling him to bring the seeds back and plant them across Europe. Following the formation of the Soviet Union, ethnogenesis projects reconfigured cultural identities in the region, contributing to enduring tensions between nomadic Kyrgyz and sedentary Uzbeks. Ismailova's cinematic protagonist was born just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, into a new moment of renegotiated cultural belonging. Today, access to venerated sites like caves and waterfalls is blocked off as unfamiliar forces vie for power in the region.

The work's narrative follows the protagonist as he collects walnuts and eventually falls asleep under the trees. In this oneiric sphere, themes of loss, betrayal, and fractured truths arise from the transmuting connection between myth and place, asking how we metabolize reality when the ground beneath our feet is shifting.

Accompanying the film are three sculptural objects that distill its temporal and metaphysical dimensions: a date pit cast in gold, a walnut gathered from the forest, and a hybrid, imagined seed made from gold, gesturing towards the possibility of myth to create new realities. In the gallery nearby, an immersive sound installation composed with Paris-based field recordist Mélia Roger engulfs audiences in the sensorial presence of Arslanbob.

On the second floor in the reading room, a complementary sound work, recorded in the forest at night, attunes listeners to a hallucinatory drifting state. In the adjacent gallery space, the two-channel film installation *Swan Lake* brings together archival footage from Central Asian cinema. The title references the consistent broadcasts of Tchaikovsky's ballet on state television following the passing of political leaders and during moments of turmoil and transition, such as when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. The footage further includes shots of Anatoly Kashpirovsky, whose televised hypnosis sessions in the late 1980s during the regime's final years attempted to proselytize audiences through regime-aligned messages. Among those hypnotized was Ismailova's grandmother, evoking transhistorical and technological

parallels with the hallucinatory properties of the walnuts. Traditional kurpacha mattresses invite viewers to drift into this liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, denial and transformation.

In the exhibition, reality is processed somatically, foregrounding how we sense and articulate truth under complex political conditions. When cultural and ecological landscapes shift – or come under assault – do we stay bound or leave, hold on to past certainties or change? Probing the role of myth, dreams, and the sensorium in shaping our sense of self, *Amanat* explores what can be sensed and spoken, what is transplanted across space and transmuted across time, and what eventually fades away.

In connection with the exhibition, a screening at MoMA on April 6, 2026 will present a selection of Ismailova's films.

Amanat is presented in partnership with the LUMA Foundation and Kunsthalle Bern. The exhibition at SI is made possible through additional support from Sarah Arison. Following the presentation at SI, the exhibition will travel in an expanded form to LUMA Arles and conclude at Kunsthalle Bern.

The exhibition is curated by Stefanie Hessler, Director of SI.

About Saodat Ismailova

Saodat Ismailova is an Uzbek filmmaker and artist living and working between Paris and Tashkent. She graduated from the Tashkent State Art Institute and Le Fresnoy – National Studio of Contemporary Arts in France. In 2021, she initiated *Davra*, a research collective dedicated to developing the Central Asian art scene. Ismailova participated in both the 59th Venice Biennale and documenta fifteen in 2022. The same year, she received The Eye Art & Film Prize (Amsterdam). In 2025, she received Foundation Pernod Ricard's Nouveau Programme Award, was named an Art Basel Golden Awardee, and received the Han Nefkens Award for a new commission together with the Reina Sofía Museum (Madrid), Walker Center (USA), and the Singapore Museum of Arts. Her works are included in the collections of Tate Modern, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Centre Pompidou, Paris; TBA21; FRAC Corsica; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; and the Almaty Museum of Arts, Kazakhstan; among others.

About Swiss Institute

Founded in 1986, Swiss Institute (SI) is an independent nonprofit contemporary art institution dedicated to promoting forward-thinking and experimental artmaking through innovative exhibitions, education, and programs. Committed to the highest standards of curatorial and educational excellence, SI serves as a platform for emerging artists, catalyzes new perspectives on celebrated work, and fosters appreciation for under-recognized positions. SI is committed to being an organization that is diverse, equitable, accessible, and environmentally conscious in its work, structure, and programming. Open to the public free of charge, SI seeks to explore how a Swiss context can be the starting point for international conversations in the fields of visual and performing arts, design, and architecture.

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