

Saodat Ismailova
Sep 12 — Nov 28, 2026



Other Light

Western Front is pleased to present a solo exhibition by artist and filmmaker Saodat Ismailova. Bringing together two films *Melted into the Sun* (2024) and *To the Throat of the Sun* (2026) in a site-specific installation, the exhibition explores light as a political and spiritual force through which history, memory, and myth are continually remade.

Rooted in the layered histories of Central Asia, Ismailova's films draw on oral traditions and cosmologies to trace ancestral knowledge that persists despite political and environmental upheavals. Raised in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, her engagement with the region's histories and cinematic traditions shapes a practice attuned to spiritual longing, ecological transformation, and fractured relationships to the land. Moving between past, present, and future, her works bring the forgotten, silenced, or erased into dialogue with the present, where memory is carried through ritual, landscape, and relations between the human, more-than-human, and mystical.

Installed alongside *kurpachas*—traditional Central Asian quilted mattresses that accompany life from birth to death—the films unfold around the enigmatic al-Muqanna' (The Veiled One), an eighth-century spiritual and political leader. After leading a revolutionary movement, al-Muqanna' became a mythical figure, and legend holds that he wore a veil to conceal a radiant light emanating from his face. Through his story, Ismailova explores tensions between revelation and concealment, spiritual knowledge and political authority, and how visions of collective emancipation remain entangled with violence and sacrifice.

Bringing together ancient Iranian and Islamic philosophies, archival material, and filmed landscapes, *Melted into the Sun* is guided by light as myth, revelation, and cinematic material, reflecting on the afterlives of revolution and the environmental legacy of Soviet nuclear testing in Central Asia. Rather than presenting the past as fixed or linear, Ismailova approaches it as cyclical, continually rewritten as memory moves through bodies, places, and systems of belief. The film traces the entanglement of revolution, cosmology, and land, suggesting each shapes the others.

To the Throat of the Sun extends these concerns through an abstract meditation on perception, transformation, and the thresholds between illumination and obscurity. Reintroducing figures, gestures, and landscapes from *Melted into the Sun*, the film shifts from historical reflection toward a more elemental experience of light, reconfiguring boundaries between vision, consciousness, and the world. In doing so, it opens onto questions of transformation and how imagined futures might take shape.

Melted into the Sun is thirty-six minutes and *To the Throat of the Sun* is twenty-five minutes in duration. The films screen consecutively every hour on the hour.

Curated by Suzy Halajian, the exhibition builds on her ongoing collaboration with Ismailova, following her first Los Angeles exhibition *Other Time* at JOAN in 2024.

SUNS FOR DAYS (SUNS FOR NIGHTS)

Quinn Latimer

“A sun of iron walks in a forest of guns,” Etel Adnan writes. “Overheated sun furnace voyage in petrolic gardens O slumber! A solar level a solar country a solar tribe.”¹ The solar tribe that Adnan describes is, perhaps, history: all its fervent need for submission and power posited against the ardent desire for liberation and its promise of justice and transcendence. But it might also be the solar tribe of prophets and devotees that fill Saodat Ismailova’s recent pair of sunstruck, sun-engraved films, *Melted into the Sun* (2024) and *To the Throat of the Sun* (2026). I watch them on my overheating laptop, heat waves circling my various countries. Each film follows a veiled figure roaming the glittery deserts and corridors of Central Asia, its mineral monuments and chemical sunsets, irradiating atomic tests and glinting nocturnal cities, ancient outcroppings and black waters. Suns rise and fall and burn and double behind this occluded figure and I wonder—not for the first time—why in times of immense political violence against peoples and lands, do our artists, often our most ardent political thinkers, continually reach for the sun? Its myths and its histories, I mean, its solar properties and protagonists and prophets.

Ismailova’s prophet-protagonist is “The Veiled One,” al-Muqanna, an eighth-century Islamic figure who supposedly led a revolt against the Abbasid Caliphate. His memory and meaning cross cultures and geographies, including Ismailova’s native Uzbekistan. Relation and revolution—of land and people—seem central to his myth. As does his covered face, said to emit a light so piercing it would blind its viewer. Al-Muqanna left no writings or records. Faceless, without language, he is at once some deep and fathomless vessel for desires of surrender, and a burning screen for the projection of resistance and liberation. He suggests the need for transcendence (of the body, of the mind) that drives both. A duality, like the sun and the darkness at the end of each day that gathers around it. Yet in Ismailova’s two films, it is not just the prophet who is veiled but also those who circle him, in time or teaching. Attendant figures dot the landscapes of her moving images, solemnly or playfully masking and unmasking their faces, with cloth or light or burning mirrors, dazzling semaphores for we know not what.

How are we to read the sun, its light, in Ismailova’s ravishing, irradiating images? Sun like a dial, turning and turning. Sun like a mouth, fire of its throat. The fire rushing upward like language. Like some atomic blast, the nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk. Sun tuning to some direction and directive. Sun as a prophet, cloaking his face. Sun tracing an ochre wall, mirroring the hands of the prophet, his fingers dipped in silver then gold. Sun as mother, as killer, as liberator, as victim, as lover, as the loved, as the unloved, as someone’s son. Sun as trope of the enlightenment, of imperialism, of the surveillance state bringing all to light. For expropriation, for death. Sun as giver of life, who watches, saves, burns, blinds, builds, loves, liberates. Sun as a technocratic politics of force. Sun as blind surrender. For what does the prophet always preach? Obedience to his teachings, his prophecies, the promise of transcendence comes from them. The dark and light of this. Is this dialectical? Yes and no and yes again.

Indeed, the question of desire—for submission, resistance, power, and belief above all—seems to drive these films. Where does this question lead us? Into the desert or out of it? Alongside it runs the question of time—that sun again—and how it forms and deforms our bodies, our minds, our lands, our lives, our illusions, our images. Ismailova’s two films suggest cycles, centuries, eras, millennia, days, nights. In *Melted into the Sun*, the prophet preaches via a kind of mystical dialogue. “What is time?” A student asks. The prophet answers: “Time? Close your ears tightly ... listen and don’t move. What did you hear?” “Sound.” “Did you hear endless movement?” “Yes.” “Everything came out of it, and everything will return there to this ‘shape,’ to put it simply. The shape that doesn’t move itself, but moves everything around, splitting, dividing and uniting again. Giving life and taking it back. We haven’t yet been able to name this force other than ‘time.’”

Elsewhere, the prophet, via some voiceover, that “acoustic mirror,” as Kaja Silverman might put it, notes: “The eternal becomes the temporary, and the temporary has become our heritage.” The accompanying images show Lenin’s enormous mineral visage carved into rock, looking out over the desert. Despite his prophecy, his repeated sunlike face, his system was temporary too. Deserts make mystics. The prophet is always walking through one. Ismailova’s prophet says: “Dreaming of freedom, we wallow in slavery.” He says: “Mirroring nature, why did we rise above it?” His disciples sit at his feet with the sunset behind them, his white veil blowing in the wind. The sun sinking, his hands turning, the wind blowing.

“Who determined what is truth and what is a lie? Who had plunged us into the vortex of endless repetition?”

If *Melted into the Sun* opens with an aerial view of a black, circular form, a kind of aperture, it closes with the sinking of the sun. In between are many slow pans of rocky walls. These are the filmmaker’s signature moves: aerial views of light-laden landscape, then the languid, even tracing of a marked mineral surface. Is Ismailova looking for evidence or scanning the face of a beloved? Maybe both. The images suggest the mirror of her looking, of her camera: her lens finds the circles and burning reflections in almost everything. Lacan said that what we see in the mirror was not just our other but our enemy. Ismailova’s prophet says: “There is no distance between me and the Sun.” He preaches:

O, you who are hiding from the Sun, I will lead you into the throat of the Sun, into the essence of the Sun. I will blind you with radiance ... I will empty you out to fill you with fire ... Look how insignificant we are in the piercing rays of the seething Sun.

To the Throat of the Sun, in turn, offers some spinning cosmological wheel of time, all mineral, animal, and gold. Shots of oil fields, gas fields, fire fields, atomic fields, the repeated mineral violence of Lenin’s face. The cloaked prophet crossing a river. Labour of its oars, his arms. Sunspot where his face should be. Not a black aperture but its opposite: a burning star. Images of veiled bodies sleeping on some hard ledge. Bodies blue as methane, solarized as film negatives, with white, blinded eyes. Hands on the forehead, blessing the face, lined as the landscape. Look away from the star, I think, light where the face should be, pale blue screen. *To the Throat of the Sun* ends with a white frame of postscript:

Darkness in nothing but light diminished.
There is no absolute darkness, just as there is no light without degree.
Between the most intense light, and the weakest glimmer,
there are ranks upon ranks, and darkness is but the furthest rank of light.
—After Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi,
The Philosophy of Illumination

As Ismailova’s suns rise and sink and streak across my screen, I think about other texts about suns, about light. Adnan’s *The Arab Apocalypse*, Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*, Erkin Vohidov’s epic

The Land of The Sun, Oybek’s *The Sun Does Not Darken*. I think of the so-called first landscape photograph, those lavender fields in France, famously made with a process called heliography. Sun-writing. A polished pewter plate covered with ancient asphalt, dissolved in lavender oil, then exposed to sunlight. Light hardens the exposed bitumen; unexposed parts remain soft. Petroleum washes away the unhardened areas, leaving the image. I thought about Ismailova’s own “petrolic” exposures, her own landscape images, moving and burning like oil. Their lands exposed and excavated, crossed by machinery and believers and their images, suns and their prophets.

“Yellow sun exterminated ancestor sun green spring purple sun quasar,” Adnan writes, as if notating Ismailova’s images. Is al-Muqanna Ismailova’s exterminated ancestor? Is he ours? “A purple sun in the purple heat of the wind,” Adnan notes. “A Zoroastrian sun a sun for catacombs.”² Al-Muqanna was said to be trained as a dyer, “someone used to handling and controlling colours,”³ as Ismailova has said. Is he controlling the chromatic register of her films, as much as she is? Like Adnan’s apocalyptic poem, Ismailova’s images—allegorical or elemental, solarized or vibrant—offer you nouns as narrative, colour as ethics: yellow fire, purple atomic blast, blue bodies, white eyes, dark river, ochre plain, red dust, black sun, pale devotees, silver fingers, gold fingers, rose-coloured stone. Some strange chromatic taxonomy of light and devotion. The rich stain it leaves. Ismailova’s prophet instructs: “Look closely at each other. We are the Sun’s testimony.” Soaked in colour and desire, striated by exposure and its violence, so we are.

Notes

1 Etel Adnan, “The Arab Apocalypse,” in *To Look at the Sea Is to Become What One Is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, vol. 1, ed. Thom Donovan and Brandon Shimoda (Nightboat Books, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 Saodat Ismailova, “I Have a Deep Faith in Human Beings,” interview, Pinault Collection, May 6, 2026, <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/en/boursecommerce/i-have-deep-faith-human-beings-saodat-ismailova>.

Biographies

Saodat Ismailova is a filmmaker and artist based between Paris, France and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Her work explores the relationships between memory, perception, mythology, and the moving image. Drawing on the intellectual and oral traditions of Central Asia, alongside dreams, rituals, and historical archives, she investigates how forms of knowledge survive erasure and political rupture, shaping individual and collective consciousness across generations. Working across film, installation, sculpture, and sound, Ismailova creates works in which documentary and myth, history and lived experience, the visible and the invisible converge, treating memory not as a record of the past but as a living force that continually reshapes reality. In 2021, she co-founded Davra, a collective dedicated to fostering artistic research and cultural exchange across Central Asia. In 2022, Ismailova participated in both the 59th Venice Biennale and documenta fifteen. She is the recipient of The Eye Art & Film Prize (2022), Foundation Pernod Ricard's Nouveau Programme Award (2025), and the Art Basel Golden Award (2025).

Suzy Halajian is a curator and writer based in Los Angeles, where she serves as the executive director and curator at JOAN. Her practice is invested in long-term collaborations with artists, and examines the intersections of art, politics, and social histories, with a particular focus on image-making, colonial histories, and contemporary surveillance. She has curated exhibitions and public programs at institutions including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, Kunstverein (Amsterdam), UKS (Oslo), Galerie Hubert Winter (Vienna), and the Sursock Museum (Beirut). Halajian's writing has appeared in BOMB, X-TRA, ArteEast, Ibraaz, and other publications. She holds an MA from Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and is currently a PhD candidate in film and digital media at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Quinn Latimer is a writer, editor, and occasional curator. She is the head of the master of arts program at the Institute Art Gender Nature, in Basel, Switzerland, where she cocurates symposia on artistic practice and society. Her work examines the imbrications of literary and moving-image technologies, documentary, and fiction, as they situate stories of political desire and the social. She is the author of *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings, Poems* (2017), *Sarah Lucas: Describe This Distance* (2013), and *Film as a Form of Writing: Quinn Latimer Talks to Akram Zaatari* (2013), among other books. Her curatorial projects include *SIREN (some poetics)* at Amant, New York, and *Perpetual Language: Patricia L. Boyd and Na Mira* at Croy Nielsen, Vienna. She was previously editor-in-chief of publications for documenta 14, and is coeditor of the book series *Basel Dialogues* from the Basel Academy of Art and Design. She is working on a book that considers image production as it relates to cinema, surveillance, dreams, autobiography, and political violence.

List of Works

All works by Saodat Ismailova, and courtesy of the artist.

1. *Melted into the Sun* (2024)

Single-channel video

35 min. 50 sec.

Commissioned and produced by Fondazione In Between Art Film and co-produced by Batalha Centro de Cinema Porto for the exhibition *Nebula* (2024).

2. *To the Throat of the Sun* (2026)

Single-channel video

25 min.

1.

2.

Project Team

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