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Back Into Her Arms

Texas Tech alumna Aziza Abdevia is using her master's of fine arts in photography to create healing experiences for those who need a mother's embrace.

Aziza's Abdevia's earliest memories are of her mother singing to the mountains.

Rising before anyone else, her mother would begin the day with a sacred ritual. Gathering her drum and adorning herself in shawls, Aziza's mother would step outside and pray.

Sometimes, if Aziza woke early enough, she would tip-toe out and join her mother, embraced in her arms and in her songs.

"She prayed to Allah and the earth," Aziza recalls. "I always thought that was normal, to pray to both." It wasn't until later Aziza realized Islam, being a monotheistic religion, only recognized Allah. However, her mother was a bit unconventional.

These early memories transport Aziza back home. She can almost smell the juniper and white smoke.

"My mother had a spiritual connection with nature," Aziza said. "She prayed to Allah, but also to Tengri, the god of the mountains."

Which makes sense, because when Aziza stepped outside her childhood home in Kyrgyzstan, she was surrounded by unconstrained ridgelines soaring to the sky. The landscape was green-pastured mountain passes where her mother had worked as a shepherdess in her youth.

"My mother was an only child," Aziza said. "My grandparents had no boys, so she worked as though she was one. My mother is the strongest woman I know."

While those years of pasture-keeping were the happiest of her mother's life, she wanted more for her daughter. When Aziza was 7 years old, her mother started traveling for work to provide her daughter with a good education. Aziza attended an all-girls high school where she prepared for university.

And while her opportunities began to grow, so did the distance between Aziza and her mother.

A Starving Artist

After graduating from high school, Aziza left Kyrgyzstan and moved to Ankara, Turkey, where she studied communication and design at Bilkent University. However, she spent her first two years studying tourism and hospitality.

“The tourism industry in Turkey is really lucrative,” she said. “It would have been a good career, but after a few years, I felt my heart leading elsewhere.”

Aziza would spend most of her classes drawing and sketching in her notebooks, which wasn’t a new hobby. Since she was young, Aziza enjoyed drawing, crafts, music and any kind of artistic expression. In high school, her mother surprised her with a digital camera. Aziza would spend hours experimenting with framing and lighting, a pastime she carried into college.

Realizing that Bilkent had a design program, Aziza dreamed of enrolling. However, the idea didn’t go over well with her mother.

“My mom made significant financial sacrifices to provide me with a high school education, let alone a college one,” she said. “Parents in my culture want their children to become lawyers or accountants or doctors – not artists.”

Aziza explains while there is a romance to the stereotype of a starving artist in the U.S., no such illusions exist in Kyrgyz culture.

When she told her mother she was going to study design, it created conflict between the two strong-willed women. Aziza knew the concern came from a place of care, but she also knew she could not sacrifice her dreams.

“I felt bad putting my mother through that,” she said.

Her mother was not interested in financing an art degree, so Aziza had to apply for scholarships.

“Fortunately, I got a full scholarship to continue to study at Bilkent,” she said.

The design program allowed Aziza to merge her experience of drawing and photography with filmmaking and editing and bring it all into the digital space in a comprehensive manner.

In her last year at Bilkent, Aziza was presenting an exhibition called “Faux Skins.” The project was inspired by interviewing individuals about their biggest insecurities. Aziza then crafted masks for the interviewees to wear in photo shoots – masks that represented those insecurities.

One day at the exhibit, two men lingered for some time over the masks. Aziza knew they were American but couldn’t quite place their accents.

They were from West Texas.

[Mark Charney](#) and [Cory Norman](#) of [Texas Tech University's School of Theatre & Dance](#) were in Ankara for a theater festival and happened to have a free afternoon. They saw the art exhibit advertised and decided to go.

"We were instantly captivated by Aziza's work," said Charney, director of the School of Theatre & Dance. "I called up one of my friends at the Texas Tech [School of Art](#) and told them I was sending some pictures they needed to look at right away."

Aziza was humbled by their interest and surprised when they told her they wanted to collaborate.

Charney and Norman were so intrigued by the masks that they ended up writing a play based on the work. "Empty Roads with Cars" was performed as part of the International Theatre Institute's summer festival the following year in Ankara. Texas Tech students and international students alike formed the cast and crew, bringing the story to life.

Aziza excitedly waited to see the play that had been inspired by her masks.

She told her mother about the show, expressing what a big deal it was for her budding career. But of course, her family lived more than 3,000 miles away. So, on opening night, when Aziza realized her mother had made the journey to see the show, she was overwhelmed with emotion.

"My mother and I always had a strong connection," she said. "As I got older and found my own path, our relationship suffered. My mother had given up a lot for me and had an idea of what my life would be like. But she made sacrifices to give me choices, choices she never had. It took her time to become OK with the decisions I made with my freedom."

Aziza struggled to balance her career with the respect she felt was due her mother. So, when her family showed up to see the performance in 2018, Aziza knew she and her mother were on the way to closing the chasm that had grown between them.

"I knew she wished I had gotten another degree, but it was a start."

A Change of Heart

"Throughout the year's collaboration, Professors Charney and Norman kept telling me I'd be a good fit for Texas Tech's School of Art," Aziza said. "They encouraged me to apply to the graduate program."

At first, Aziza kept busy with her own creative work in Turkey, but as the theatre collaboration grew to a close, her curiosity about Texas Tech was stronger than ever.

She applied and interviewed with the School of Art and was accepted with a full scholarship.

In her excitement though, Aziza realized she had no money to fund travel to the U.S.

“My family was going through an intensely difficult financial time and I didn’t want to be an added burden,” she said. “I started a fundraiser instead. When I only raised \$54, I was crushed. I could see my dreams slipping away.”

Aziza told her mother that Texas Tech wasn’t going to work out at that time, but maybe she’d try another year.

A few days later, her mother sent a large check.

“My mother sold our ancestral home, where she grew up, to help get me to Texas,” Aziza said. “It was at that moment I realized how much she believed in me.”

A New Landscape

The art faculty at Texas Tech didn’t quite know where to put Aziza at first. While some artists focus narrowly on a specific medium, she had rich experience in photography, drawing, sculpting and design. Aziza eventually declared a concentration in [photography](#) after faculty encouraged her to follow her instincts.

“That’s one of the things that was so different about Texas Tech,” Aziza said. “The freedom to explore and find my own topics of study. My education up until that point consisted of very black and white curriculum. There was always a clear objective and instructors wanted me to meet objectives within the parameters they gave.

“At Texas Tech, all that went away.”

This initially frightened Aziza.

It was the first time in her life she encountered a completely different system of education, and it took time for her to adjust. But after some time and with the guidance from her faculty adviser [Aaron Hegert](#), Aziza began to find her way.

“Aziza started the program as an artist who already had a very developed aesthetic,” said Hegert, an assistant professor of art at Texas Tech. “She had ideas about her motivations and drive, but when she started here, those concepts were based on gut feeling. Over time, she evolved as an artist when she began to see her own experiences as a starting point for her research, not the end itself.”

During her time at Texas Tech, she was challenged to ask bigger questions.

“Being in a place like Lubbock gave me so much culture shock,” she said. “There were times I felt lonely and full of doubt. But I think I had to go through that. That doubt at the

beginning sent me on an emotional journey that made me a better human and a better artist.”

Aziza faced doubt about her art, but she even doubted herself grocery shopping.

“Going to Walmart was a very odd experience when I first moved here,” she said. “We don’t have that level of choice or materialism in Kyrgyzstan. The most basic tasks were really draining at first.”

But in time, she found her stride.

Connecting with the local artist community and finding mentors started to shape her experience at Texas Tech into a positive force. She even fell in love.

“My husband Josh was earning his doctorate in psychology at Texas Tech when we first met,” she said. “He wholeheartedly supported me and we collaborated through cross-disciplinary work at times.”

The couple married before graduation.

Daughters of Kyrgyzstan

Aziza’s graduate work explored fundamental questions as she found her place in the world. She explored what it means to be human in a cross-cultural framework – challenging her own assumptions and observations as she found herself in a new culture.

As she continued to create, Aziza realized there were more cultural similarities than differences. Her exhibits took on topics such as agency, stress, change, materialism, connection and how the human body reacts and responds to these experiences.

Phenomena that people of every culture feel.

To make sense of the flat landscape she was in, Aziza found her mind often wandering back to the mountains of Kyrgyzstan. There were many issues she thought she’d left behind when coming to the U.S., but she found they were still there, under the surface.

“It’s hard to be female in Kyrgyzstan,” she said. “There is a rampant crisis of bride kidnappings, which is essentially what it sounds like.”

Aziza explains the issue stems back to a tradition in the Kyrgyz culture.

“A few hundred years ago, if two people from different caste systems were in love and the man knew the girl’s father would not give permission, he might skirt her away in the night so they could marry in secret,” she explained.

In the last 50 years, this tradition has taken a dark turn.

“Now, it’s not uncommon for a man to just grab a woman on the street,” she said, dismally. “There was one case I saw on the news in 2021 where a woman was kidnapped in broad daylight. After refusing to marry her captor, he killed her.”

Aziza was used to living with this fear. She wasn’t allowed to walk to the store alone or play outside without a parent nearby. The urge to check over her shoulder was engrained in her from a young age.

When she came to the U.S., she hoped to leave those shadows behind.

“I still look over my shoulder,” she said. “Women encounter similar battles in different cultures; the shadows just take different forms.

“As a woman, it’s easy to feel helpless or powerless, to feel like you have no power over your own body or your own life. This made me think: are we still human beings when we are not in control of our body? What happens when that basic right is taken away?”

These questions led to Aziza’s exhibition “Daughters of Kyrgyzstan” which depicted life for women in her homeland but challenged feminist issues in every culture.

“Being raised by such a powerful woman, I think these topics are ones I’m drawn to,” she said. “My mother changed things she didn’t like and I think I inherited some of that.”

Healing Through Art

While Aziza saw more similarities than differences in the cultures she experienced firsthand, there was one difference that stood out.

“Kyrgyzstan is a collectivist culture,” Aziza said. “If something isn’t good for the larger group, we don’t do it. But in America, it’s an individualistic culture. I think there are good things about that, but there are also dangers.”

As an artist, Aziza will be the first to say how empowering individualism can be to the creative process.

“There are freedoms I’ve had here I probably would have felt self-conscious about back home,” she said. “At Texas Tech, I could explore my own aesthetic and it wasn’t seen as self-centered.”

At the same time, a lack of connectedness affected Aziza’s process. She made many great friendships at Texas Tech, but it was not the same as the community at home.

“The more art I make, the more I am drawn back to those memories of my mother in the mornings,” she said. “There was something so comforting and safe about those moments.”

As Aziza reflected on this memory, her thesis project started to take life.

“I put together an installation called ‘Umbilical Cord,’ Aziza said. “It’s two life-like hands connected by a 60-foot cord made of pearls wrapped in silicone. The piece represents the long-distance relationship between me and my mother.”

That relationship is one that’s evolved as technology has advanced.

“There is an auditory component to the installation,” Aziza said. “As visitors walked along the umbilical cord, they could hear audio of my mother’s voice messages. I took them from my phone and distorted them. It sounds like you’re listening to her from underwater.”

You can’t make out the words, but you can hear her mother’s inflection and tone.

“Focusing on the love in her voice helped me through the times when we had a lot of disagreements,” Aziza said. “I looked back and understood that she truly loved me.”

It was a healing experience for Aziza. So healing in fact, she decided to make additional installations that could provide similar experiences for others.

Aziza now lives in the American Midwest and hosts “The Womb” at different locations. The immersive experience centers around a tent that reminded Aziza of Kyrgyz *booz ui* (a yurt) found in her home country.

“The yurt represents the family, the earth and the universe,” she said. “In the same way Kyrgyz yurts travel with nomads, this installation travels with me.”

Aziza’s focus since graduation has been creating art installations that bring healing.

“My mother heals people through her calling as a shaman,” she said. “I heal people through my art. We both seek transformation but have different approaches. When people go through ‘The Womb,’ they often say how much lighter they feel or as though they feel reborn; that means so much to me.

“Creating this yurt is a way of honoring the home my mother gave up. I don’t feel as though we’ve lost that ancestral connection though. Rather, we’ve strengthened it by taking it out into the world and sharing it with people who need that embrace.”