Cross-Cultural Portraits of International Students

Indiana University School of Journalism student Zilola Murotovna Saidova doesn't own a camera. Yet she has taken a set of remarkable portraits of her fellow international students, some of which are featured here. Saidova is a third-year journalism student who is attending IU Bloomington on a UMID Foundation scholarship from Uzbekistan. With a background in philological and language studies from Bukhara State University, where she first studied, she chose journalism at IU because it was one of the few academic fields—the others being business, chemistry, economics, and law—supported by the scholarship program.

Before taking the fall 1999 photo-journalism course, her only previous experience with photography was a course on visual communication, which touched on still photography as a medium. "I had so little experience and felt so intimidated by others in the [photo-journalism] class," she recalls, almost giving in to her first instinct to drop the class. But when her instructor, Tyagan Miller, a professional photographer who teaches at the school as a visiting lecturer, assured her that everyone was starting at the same level, she decided to give it a try. She had to work very hard to learn the basics of the camera itself, the principles of light, and all the darkroom techniques necessary to develop and print her photos.

One of the assignments in Miller's course was a semester-long project in which depicting a human interest perspective was a possibility. Living in Eigenmann Hall with its predominantly international student population, Saidova decided on a series of comparative, cross-cultural portraits, one set depicting these students as members of their respective cultures, and another set as "normal" IU students. The result was a set of black and white diptychs of students in traditional dress and in contemporary clothing. The students were from 10 different countries, pursuing studies at IU ranging from business to psychology to music. All portraits were shot in natural light, either in the students' rooms or around the residence hall. Clothing, body postures, gestures, facial expressions, and a few cultural props combined to compose the visual language of these portraits.

Saidova simply asked her subjects to reflect on how they felt, what thoughts or sentiments came to mind, and how they might typically conduct themselves when dressed in their respective sets of clothing. Like most subjects, they took some time to settle into a pose, but Saidova seemed to know intuitively just when to shoot. For example, the Saudi man first tried a couple of stiff poses in a chair, then instinctively sat on the floor, assuming a natural, timeless posture and look as he might have done back home. Yet his "Western personality" at the billiards table is a portrait in concentration. The woman from Uzbekistan sits demurely amid cushions, looking down into a characteristically Uzbek teacup, holding it in the manner appropriate for a Uzbek woman. Her contemporary portrait shows her in jeans, elbows on knees, a bit disgruntled at the gray weather outside, just like any other IU student in midwinter. Yet she admitted later to Saidova that, being ethnically Korean, she never realized how much she belonged to Uzbekistan until she came to the United States.

Miller was extremely supportive of Saidova's progress throughout his course, but he expressed amazement at her final results. "What she accomplished was remarkable," he said. "She had no photography experience to speak of and had never used a professional camera, yet her images are simply beautiful, a mature body of work."

A number of offices on the Bloomington campus have expressed interest in exhibiting Saidova's portraits in different venues and have encouraged her to continue with photography projects. Her ultimate goal, she says, is to obtain a master's degree in international relations and to work for a nongovernmental organization back home in Uzbekistan, while still being involved with photography. In the meantime, she confesses to really missing those long hours working in the darkroom.

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—Tyagan Miller
School of Journalism

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