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Art Talk with Aman Mojadidi

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By Kelli Rogowski



Self-Portrait— Aman Mojadidi. Photo by Vincent Sannier

[Aman Mojadidi](#) has described himself as an “Afghan by blood and redneck by the grace of God.” It’s a great line — memorable and funny — and one that got us hooked on his [TED talk](#) . An American of Afghan descent, Mojadidi was born and raised in Florida and has lived in Afghanistan for the last decade, where he creates controversial, compelling art. Last month, Mojadidi was kind enough to talk with us over e-mail from Dubai, where’s he’s finishing up an artist residency at [Traffic](#) .

NEA: How would you describe yourself and your work to someone unfamiliar with it?

AMAN MOJADIDI: Well, I reckon I’d first say that I’m very much influenced by the environment within which I live, both the physical environment and the psychological environment. I use the expression “geography of self” to

communicate this concept. That said, I try to use art in a way that confronts hegemonic understandings of society, identity, politics by making works that are critical of, and challenging to, the stereotypes and mainstream attitudes held by people and their governments. My work is largely storytelling, and these stories can come from a variety of sources such as conversations I have with people, movements that people are a part of, historical facts. However, when telling my stories, I very often merge fact and fiction, history and imagination, in an attempt to disrupt the often misguided understandings people have about the world and the people who inhabit it and provide a different perspective through which one could view the world.

NEA: What does it mean in your day-to-day life to be an artist?

MOJADIDI: It means always trying to see and understand things from different angles, different perspectives. It means always questioning what I see, what I read, and what I hear, and researching things until I'm satisfied with the opinion I've formed about them. It also means working non-stop, and having to remember to take a break.

NEA: What do you remember as your earliest experience/engagement with the arts?

MOJADIDI: The earliest would be drawing the various fighter planes and other vehicles from *Star Wars* after I first saw the film in the cinemas. But what really pushed me towards seeing the possibility of artistic production to express one's thoughts was a retrospective exhibition I saw of Edward Kienholz. His installations and sculptures, largely critiques on contemporary society, simply blew my mind. And as I was always drawn to the beauty and potential of found objects, I began making assemblages and sculptures myself.



Untitled Table #1 by Aman Mojadidi. Photo by Lorenzo Tugnoli

NEA: What was your path to becoming an artist and deciding this was what you were going to do professionally?

MOJADIDI: It was a long one, and a confused one because I was not necessarily interested in studying art. So I pursued a more academic track for my education and ended up getting a BA and an MA in cultural anthropology. But I kept making art, and my socio-cultural studies began to feed into the work I was making. I also used my education, which focused in development anthropology and conflict culture, to work in Afghanistan in the development field, where I eventually was able to incorporate my development work with my creative work. It is some years now that I work with Afghan contemporary artists in workshops, seminars, exchange programs, and

exhibitions to provide support to contemporary artists and what is still a very small and little-known activity in Afghanistan. I have, of course, simultaneously developed my own artistic practice.

NEA: You mention at the end of your TED Talk that through your work, there's the risk of jail, being misunderstood or misinterpreted, but that you do this work because it's your calling. What has been the worst repercussion of your work? Has there been anything you conceived of, then shied away from, because you thought the risk was too great? Is there a piece your most proud of?

MOJADIDI: First off, I wouldn't really use the word "calling" as it gives too much of a religious connotation to things. I do it because I feel I must. As for repercussions, I've been very thankful that there haven't been any serious ones as I have tried to do the more public works either with layers of separation or do the work guerilla-style by just getting out there and doing it.

Right now I'd say the piece I'm most proud of is the excavation as installation *What Histories Lay Beneath Our Feet?* which I did for the 1st Kochi/Muziris Biennale in India; the exhibition is running until about mid-March this year. Using my own family's migration history, which I then merged with elements of imagination, I created an historical narrative which was then supported by an archaeological excavation, replete with a dig revealing the foundation of a 19th-century habitat and various artifacts such as ceramic sherds (actually found while digging to make the art work!), lapis lazuli beads, a compass, etc.



What Histories Lay Beneath Our Feet? by Aman Mojadidi. Photo by Benjamin Pritchard

NEA: What do you think overall is the role of the artist in the community? Why do we need our artists?

MOJADIDI: I'd go back to why I make art and what I try to say through it. I think artists can provide new ways of seeing and understanding the world we live in; ways that are important because they can help open eyes and free minds from what are often, in my opinion, societies that only try to compartmentalize things, ideas, and people and impose only those hegemonic understandings of the world that continue to support disproportionality in power, wealth, access to resources, access to information, access to a good education, access to healthcare. Maybe it sounds too lofty, but it's really not. I'm only saying that it can be a sort of vehicle through which people can travel to their own understandings of their communities, state, nation, and the world rather than simply accept those of others. And THEN, when seen through a new lens, new action can be taken to improve things.

NEA: Conversely, what do you see as the responsibility of the community to the artist?

MOJADIDI: To support the arts in their communities. To try and take ownership of their communities through creative means and by welcoming artists in their communities to work together. There are always challenges to face in one's own community, and art can be used to confront those challenges by looking at and approaching them differently. I think community-supported (and I don't mean financial support but conceptual support) art projects can be some of the strongest projects for improving lives.

NEA: At the NEA we say "Art Works," meaning the work of the art itself, the transformative way art works on individuals and communities, and the fact that artists are indeed workers. What does that phrase mean to you?

MOJADIDI: I think it does work. It may take a long time, and it may not seem tangible enough for some, but an artwork works in ways that are often imperceptible but highly effective. The best metaphor I can come up with comes from Taoist philosophy, so I see that "art works" in the same way water in a river passes over and around a rock with no perceptible change taking place in the rock. But in actuality the rock is being carved by the water with each flow, and over time, it shapes the rock into something entirely new.

Tags: [Afghan-American](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Aman Mojadidi](#), [Art Talk](#), [National Endowment for the Arts](#), [NEA](#), [Traffic](#)

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