

You Probably Expect Me to Drink Fresh Pomegranate Juice

Afghanistan Country Report by Aman Mojadidi

Sitting with a friend one afternoon in the garden of Flower Street Café we started speaking about contemporary artistic production. He had recently returned to Kabul after undertaking a four-year BA Fine Art in Lahore. He was excited to discuss the course and show his portfolio which had expanded, in terms of conceptual development, use of materials and technical skill since I had met him several years previously. But he was already worried about missing the stimulating conversations and collaborative encouragement he had experienced in Lahore, and did not know whether he would be equally stimulated now that he was back. He was uncertain about his own continued growth as an artist and that of contemporary art in the country.

Not an uncommon concern among artists in Afghanistan, it was still true that the possibilities and opportunities in contemporary artistic practice, development, and exhibition available today could not have been imagined a decade ago. The *Center for Contemporary Art of Afghanistan (CCAA)* founded by Rahraw Omarzad continues to run painting classes and hold exhibitions. The *Afghan Contemporary Art Prize (ACAP)* that provides workshops and exhibition opportunities to artists from across the country was resurrected in 2013 for its 4th edition, after a two-year hiatus. Young artist-run collectives such as *Taasha (Hidden)* and *Behrang (Colourless)* are becoming more active (with Behrang receiving a Prince Claus Fund grant in 2013 and two of its 'members' beginning work on *Black Shorwa*, an online arts magazine), and, the engagement for the best part of 2012 by *dOCUMENTA (13)'s Afghan Seminars* that brought together Afghan and international artists through workshops, seminars, and exhibitions in Kassel and Kabul.

However it is more complicated than that. Although I am as worried as my friend about the fate of artistic production here, the sources of my worry differ. For me, what links the above activities is that they were all born in the last decade within the context of conflict, including the invasion by, and nation building projects of, Western nations. Therefore it becomes a sticky endeavour trying to separate them from that experience, especially when the production of art is often so intricately tied to the environment within which it is produced.

Furthermore, although one cannot imagine that conflict is chic, the cultural commodification of Afghanistan's instability can be seen both in the country and abroad. Take a look at the *West's* film and television industry where any number of productions contain references to Afghanistan and its war (*Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland* being two of the most recent). Then jump to arts and culture in Afghanistan itself, where besides the above-mentioned initiatives, governments have been throwing money at a variety of contemporary art projects such as exhibitions, rock music festivals and filmmaking (led by the USA's public diplomacy budget that according to SIGAR - the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, totaled \$148 million in 2010-11 alone). All these are within the scope of their propaganda (called "information campaigns" when undertaken by America) to show that more than a decade of economic and militaristic interventions have led to the creation of a contemporary culture that not only helps justify their initial invasion, but will also help validate their pending withdrawal from the country.

This exaggerated glamorisation of contemporary culture has, like carnival mirrors, created a distorted reflection of reality. But when 'reality' is in fact 'surreal,' how does one think that contemporary artists and their practice might grow? Especially when the hyper inundation and proliferation of contemporary culture and foreign funding, over the last decade, has rather than actually penetrated it, largely washed over the cultural psyche of Afghan society, like a bucket of water emptied over hard, dry earth rushing out to cover a large swath of land, evaporating before it can properly penetrate the ground to nourish the soil.

Is it therefore even possible to create art within such a context without feeling as though you are a part of that same process of cultural commodification? When artistic production is co-opted by foreign political interest that largely focuses itself around themes and subjects that serve the propagandist needs of donor nations rather than the creative potential of artists themselves? Organise an exhibition of twenty artists on September 21st, the International Day of Peace, and you get at least fifteen pieces that incorporate a white dove into the work somehow. Do the same on March 8th, International Women's Day and you will get a room full of blue burqas.

Contemporary art in Afghanistan is seen as an exotic anomaly, and so has become romanticised in ways that ignore depth of content and artistic freedom, but rather promote what others (whether a foreign donor nation or a gallery/museum curator or an international media outlet) want to see being produced in the country. In what could be deemed quintessential 'Saidian' Orientalism, Afghan artists are expected to be not only the voice of a culture and a nation, but to be a particular voice, one that is familiar enough, but still exotic enough; keeping the Afghan artist locked in replicating imagery or themes that serve as geopolitical scarlet letters, for the viewer to easily locate the artist.

But at an even deeper level, what happens when we 'Orientalise' ourselves, like Mustafa Sa'eed in the classic postcolonial novel *Season of Migration to the North* by Sudanese author Tayeb Saleh? What happens when we create work that only fits within expected caricatures of what Afghan artists (be they visual artists, writers, filmmakers, etc.) should produce? How about when the very production of work is directly tied to a foreign initiated project with a foreign-defined theme, leading us further down the path of creative dependency? Contemporary artistic production in Afghanistan is the messy offspring of Conflict and Development, and long will be the road traveled if the child wants to become something more than its parents.

Back in that café with my friend I ordered a fresh pomegranate juice, and thought about all these issues that can confuse one's mind. At least mine has been clouded already, and these 'big picture' debates have to some extent become the conceptual prison in which I find us incarcerated; where the depth of our work becomes reduced to mundane bumper sticker philosophy like 'Art for Peace' or 'Art Against War'. But I tried to settle into the moment and simply appreciate hanging out with a friend I had not seen in a while, speaking about art.

And then it occurred to me that perhaps this muddy beginning was simply a necessary phase through which contemporary artistic practice must pass in Afghanistan, before finding itself in a place where the question *What is Afghan about your art?* is no longer asked (or, at the very least, not systematically); a place where we as artists cease to make asking *ourselves* that question a mandatory precursor to our own practice, and feel free enough to pursue ideas and create works that are, perhaps, unexpected.

A place where we can drink whatever we want to drink.