



THE FORCE OF FORGETTING

ALI BABA AURANG, SHER ALI HUSSAINY, SAHRAA KARIMI AND KHADIM ALI

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 LISMORE
REGIONAL
GALLERY

Front cover:

ALI BABA AURANG

[UNTITLED] (detail) 2011

barley ink with reed pen on paper,
54 x 36cm

THE FORCE OF FORGETTING

ALI BABA AURANG, SHER ALI HUSSAINY, SAHRAA KARIMI AND KHADIM ALI

CURATED BY KHADIM ALI

“I want to say that this visual offering is a sharing of the artistic feeling of trauma and the force factor of forgetting. We have two types of forgetting, one is natural, where people have limitations of recalling memories. The other is a forced forgetting which is not individual but social, and where the collective memory of a society is wounded. From the beginning of the history of Afghanistan, the Hazara people have been persecuted and massacred and have been living under sectarian, ethnic oppressive regimes.

All these regimes experimented with political methods to make the Hazara forget about their past. To make them suffer this wound again and again. The force of forgetting doesn't mean to forget a history of pain, but the inability to express that memory. For this we need a silent artistic language to speak about these suppressed memories.”

Khadim Ali, Karachi, 2011



This spread, left to right:

ALI BABA AURANG
[UNTITLED] (detail) 2011
barley ink with reed pen on paper,
39.5 x 31cm

KHADIM ALI
[UNTITLED] 2011
water-colour, gouache and ink on paper,
31 x 40cm

SAHRAA KARIMI
AFGHAN WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEEL
(STILL) 2009
DVD, 56 minute duration

SHER ALI HUSSAINY
7, SCREAM 1 SERIES (detail) 2011
ink, pen and silver leaf on paper,
29 x 20cm

Curated by Khadim Ali during a recent trip to Karachi, *The Force of Forgetting* presents new works by Ali Baba Aurang, Sher Ali Hussainy, Sahraa Karimi and Khadim Ali.

The artists in *The Force of Forgetting* all belong to the Hazara community from the central highland area of Afghanistan. The Hazara are a minority group. From the 1880s, during the reign of Abdur Rehman Khan to the present day, their ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural persuasions have brought continual persecution. Despite this history of discrimination, the artists uphold an enduring connection to Afghanistan and pride in being Hazara. Poetic and emotionally charged, the works in this exhibition draw on Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage and tell a Hazara story of this war-torn country. The works confront the beauty in darkness as, in their individual ways, the artists grapple with the social and psychological impact of persecutions of the Hazara people.

As Afghanis and as Hazara, all of the artists in this exhibition have been forced to live in exile at various points in their lives, firstly in order to find safety, and secondly to attain opportunities

enabled by education and free speech to bring change within their communities. Art is a powerful medium by which to inspire discussion and one of the aims of this exhibition is to inform audiences about the human experience of the Hazara community. The works recall the past to negotiate current and future conditions determining the fate of this community.

This exhibition highlights that poetry and history are deeply ingrained in the Hazara culture. The following interview picks up on the language and symbolism of the Hazara artists, which have provided them a means by which to communicate directly with a growing international audience and art market.

At many points in Afghanistan's history, direct expression by the Hazara, and by anyone who opposed the dominant regime, could result in death. The use of figurative imagery has been dangerous and education, as a means to free and provoke autonomous thought, has been strictly controlled. Even today, in some parts of Afghanistan, creating figurative images is potentially dangerous.

Here in Australia, the debate surrounding asylum seekers has

largely taken place in the political realm, so the reflective and philosophical conversations about dealing with grief after years of extreme social persecution, as told by the victims themselves, are filtered out. This exhibition turns this situation around. It is an Afghani exhibition, put together by an Afghani curator and for an inquiring regional audience.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Khadim Ali for curating this exhibition for Lismore Regional Gallery and the artists for participating with such moving work. I would also like to thank the Gallery's curator, Kezia Geddes, without whom the exhibition would not have happened. The Gallery is extremely grateful to Ruark Lewis for working with Khadim to carry out the passionate and heartfelt interview. And finally, thank you to Jo Holder from The Cross Art Projects in Sydney for her kind assistance and to Atika Hussain for loaning work.

Brett Adlington Director, Lismore Regional Gallery

AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN KHADIM ALI AND RUARK LEWIS

Khadim Ali is an artist currently based in both Sydney and Karachi, Pakistan

Ruark Lewis is a Sydney artist and writer who maintains a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary practice

Ruark Lewis: You are member of the Hazara community of the central highland area of Afghanistan called Hazarajat. One of the aims of this exhibition is to correct mis-information about the Afghan ethnicity. Can you explain the ethnic or sectarian backgrounds of the artists you selected in Kabul who are participating in the exhibition *The Force of Forgetting*?

Khadim Ali: The artists are all Hazara. This is one of the first times this group of artists has had the chance to show abroad. Their voices in Afghanistan are officially suppressed. No Hazaras work in the capacity of curator or art official in Afghanistan. The State officials never take visiting curators to the Hazara land. Hazaras are excluded and kept in the dark. Hazara people are one of four major ethnic groups.¹

Although Ali Baba Aurang has shown in Central Asia and Iran, this is actually the first time the group has shown in a public gallery. The Cross Art Projects, an experimental curatorial space in Sydney, helped me to develop this composite exhibition model in 2010.

Sher Ali Hussainy is 28 and prior to the exhibition that I curated for The Cross Art Projects he had only ever shown his art in Afghanistan. He currently lives and studies in Lahore, Pakistan. He survived in grim conditions throughout the civil war in Kabul. He lost his parents at the early age of 10. Hussainy worked hard as a child labourer, becoming a carpet weaver to support his family. He’s now one of the leading emerging artists of Afghanistan in the current post-war period.

Sahraa Karimi is a documentary film maker who has returned to Kabul from abroad. She migrated to Iran at an early age and did the basics of documentary and fiction film. She then travelled to Slovakia and completed her masters and doctorate studies.

The works of Ali Baba Aurang I see as coming from the historic catharsis of the Diaspora. He was living and studying in Iran for 18 years when he returned to Afghanistan. He has started the beautiful “siyah-mashq” [calligraphic practice or “black practice”] of Movlana Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi’s divine verses in “Nasta’liq” [a predominant style of Persian script].

RL: Aurang’s work, is it a kind of palimpsest? Like the Egyptians used when their supply of papyrus was limited. They wrote messages with a reed pen numerous times across the same surface. That paper then holds a certain authority or authenticity. It indicates the actual coherent trace of the memory of information.

KA: Aurang’s work relates to the title of this show *The Force of Forgetting*. He layers darkness and blackness over and over with his beautiful and intense style of “siyah-mashq” which is as though a huge phase of history has been forcedly embedded down at the bottom of memory, and it is breathing. Then another layer of blackness is painted over the top. This is followed by other layers of brush marks, and so forth. It first appears as a mass group of migrating birds landing or dancing on his canvas of dark writing. But when you come closer you can see underneath to the first writings secreted onto the paper. It feels like there is a force tying them down in the bottom of the memory. The weight of the lines which aims to suppress itself. You can’t read it actually except at the peripheries. You feel the darkness and the pain but you do not exactly want to read the pain and intensity of it all.

RL: What is the dark history?

KA: KA: What I’m talking about is that the pain of the Hazaras is not individual. It is social. All the inhabitants in the small town of Afshar perished on the outskirts of Kabul in 1992. Hundreds of people were killed in that onslaught. There were bodies for months and the stench of decaying corpses. They were beheaded or shot. A century ago 60% of the entire Hazara population was massacred. There were minarets built of their skulls at the main public cross-roads. These head minarets signified the power of the emperor and a warning to Hazaras. The Hazaras are always somewhere in the background. Today there are few Hazaras who hold positions of power and their presence is symbolic. They are without a real, representative voice.

RL: Terror is an integral part of warfare. The violence is often a pathological action. I know from what you tell me about the massacre of 9,000 inhabitants of Mazar-e-sharif that this would have instilled in the enemies of the Taliban a great psychological paralysis. What is that place called where the massacre took place? What is the history of the ground where this violence occurred?

KA: That field was called Dasht-e-jhanda bala, which means to “raise the flag”. At this open space people traditionally had come together to celebrate. The Dasht-e-jhanda bala was a huge open place where people gathered for marriages and wedding parties with singing and dancing. The soul and the psyche of that place was once joyous. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban chose that place of celebrations for the massacre of the inhabitants. In 2001 the Taliban collapsed. A year later I went there to see people gathering to recognise their relatives from their personal belongings at the exposed mass grave at that place. And you asked me whether it

was a psychological victory for the Taliban! I believe shedding blood is the weakest way of imposing power. It only embeds hatred in a recurring history, so it was a moral defeat for the Taliban.

RL: By orchestrating their genocidal action, the Taliban had inflicted not only a military victory, but a psychological victory in the minds of the Afghani people. Here we can experience how history helps create history in every stage of the images in this exhibition. How does this kind of history find its representation in the poetic constructions in Hazara art?

KA: The history of Hazaras is always related to “loss”. A loss of their loved ones and losing their motherland. We have lived in a state of mental and physical melancholia, which forces us to live in the memories of the past. We recall our memories in a highly poetic manner, in our visual art, our craft and our music.

May I begin by giving an extreme example of historic facts that I have tried to translate into contemporary symbolism. Let us say, “blood and bones are a strong fertiliser.” Those killed were beheaded with knives and consequently, the land was fertilised with their blood. I was standing at that place with my abstract feelings, a feeling of nothingness. I was thinking it might be lucky if those victims never saw how the symbolic meaning of the Dasht-e-jhanda bala had changed so dramatically. An old man came and stood beside me. He began reciting a poem of Hafiv Sharazi in Farsi dating from almost 500 years ago, which was relating to the red tulips growing in abundance around those mass graves. There had been rains the whole winter after the long period of drought between 1992 and 2001.

مرنگ یم رحس هلال نمرج رد ابص اب

I was speaking to the breeze of the tulip gardens on that morning (mourning).

نانفک نی نوخ همه نی دنایک نادیهش هک

Whose martyrs are they who are wearing red coffins?

Women Behind the Wheel (2009) shows the psyche of change in the culture of a male dominated society. Karimi picks up on the transitional moment, and shows how and why government can foster social change and break through cultural resistance. Afghani women have always experienced containment. Her film displays their effort to change this. The challenge is first to change the family life – to make them understand, and then to make society accept their change. It is contemporary Afghani women now who are really making very clever endeavours to alter the archaic traditions.

RL: When I look at the combination of the artistic forces present in this exhibition, I might try to summarise what is present in each instance. In Aurang’s paintings there are gestural marks and poetic lines representing a multiplicity of voices and struggle. Hussainy makes his impressions from the history of the collective pain. Karimi conveys how technology has aided the reconstruction of the economy of Afghanistan after the affects of the long period of an internal war, and how women might participate in this in the future of the country. Now, can you explain how your own beautiful drawings work in this accumulation of visual expression – what you have referred to as the silent language of art?

KA: They are beautiful yes, but I don’t think their content of screams or pain is beautiful. And art is often such a sugar sweetened “transformation”. I need to draw the audience to my haunted vision of dark history.

The skin of the sunflower is drawn as animal skin portraying the open wound of forgotten history. A history growing on the martyrs’ land, which has been fertilised with their blood over

the centuries. The neck of the flower is tilted down looking at the earth. It is a conversation with multiple layers of historic trauma. That’s my kind of self-portrait.

RL: You are describing an allegorical condition in that remarkable drawing. The texture of the black built up from a saturation of line upon line so delicately drawn across each other until it appears like soft matted animal hair. A reproduction could never remake that detail justly. In that drawing you loosely inscribe a sequence of lines, almost haphazardly – maybe they are wire traces or fence lines with two words “object” and “subject” announcing the origin of things.

KA: I always try to reduce the gap between the states of conceiving ideas and how I finalise the physical execution of a work. I would like to have a child’s spontaneity in the physical implementation of “subject” and “object”. That was an accident. It wasn’t intentional. On the paper I already had the two words written. I was trying to decide what would be the subject of the drawing. Conversely I wanted to configure what would be the objective outcome. The question might have been how to amalgamate these opposites. On the one hand a force outside of one’s body and then a body without its organs. Of course the nature of these opposites forms a symbolic unity in the end. I managed this graphic outcome with the plant, the ground of the paper with the lines accommodating the pre-existing inscription, with the organs outside of the human body. In another way, the meaning is not absolute nor over-determined, as it has to be made open-ended, so it is active yet unfixed in a silent language of the visual.

RL: I am interested in what might almost be considered inciden-

tal forms in your paintings. The trace looks indeterminate – I mean that it’s made by chance and not intentional.

KA: Of the marks, I believe everyone has the imagination of the child still in them. At first that imagination is sealed within them. The social contract dictates to a child and moulds them from the outside. I see this as something against the nature of our freedom. So I enjoy my loose drawing, and its unknown state and indefinite quality, which is not pre-meditative and has the curiosity that allows its final outcome to naturally emerge.

It is our external experiences that put us in the social mould, and in some other state of mind. Maybe at some stage of our lives we need to experience that freedom of our childhood again. Perhaps you just close your eyes and draw freely on some paper. All we need is to be free on that paper, which is to say that I am not free. I am thinking, and translating all the time. You know language is such a large part of our art, but I feel it comes at some loss to a more natural sense of being.

¹ RL: In Afghanistan there are four major ethnic groups distributed geographically. The first group, the Pushtun people, make up almost 30% of the Afghan Population. They hold the predominant power in Afghanistan and live at the western Border of the country to the south to Iran. Second, the Tajiks, make 22% of the population. The Tajik people live in the north, toward Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The third are the Hazara, who make up 19%. The fourth group, the Uzbeks, are 10%. They are very strong in the north west of Afghanistan. In the 1890s, the Pushtun massacred 60% of the Hazara people. Hazara are Shiite Muslim. The rest of the ethnic groups are Sunni Muslim but they are not united as a group.



ALI BABA AURANG

Ali Baba Aurang is an established calligraphic painter, having practiced for almost 20 years. He studied calligraphy in Iran where he lived for 18 years during The Afghan Civil War. Aurang has since returned to Afghanistan, and is now based in Kabul.

This page, left to right:

[UNTITLED] 2011
barley ink with reed pen on paper,
39 x 28cm

[UNTITLED] 2011
barley ink with reed pen on paper,
39 x 28cm



KHADIM ALI

Khadim Ali was born in Pakistan in 1978 and is currently based in both Sydney and Karachi, Pakistan. He has an international profile and has exhibited in museums and biennales including the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; The Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival, Melbourne; the Venice Biennale, Italy; the British Museum, London and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

HAUNTED LOTUS 2010
water-colour, gouache and ink on paper,
36.2 x 31cm
Collection of Atika Hussain



SAHRAA KARIMI

Sahraa Karimi is a Hazara woman, born in Kabul in 1981. At 15, she fled the country to Iran and then, 5 years later moved to Slovakia to study. She attended Comenius University in Bratislava and received her Ph. D. in documentary and fiction film. She has since returned to Kabul.

This page, clockwise from top left:

Sahraa Karimi on location

Bottom left:

AFGHAN WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEEL
(still) 2009



SHER ALI HUSSAINY

Sher Ali Hussainy was born in Kabul in 1982 at the time of The Afghan Civil War. Hussainy is studying at Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan on a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation scholarship and is based in both Kabul and Lahore, Pakistan.

This page, left to right:

2, *SCREAM I SERIES* 2011
ink, pen and silver leaf on paper,
29 x 20cm

4, *SCREAM I SERIES* 2011
ink, pen and silver leaf on paper,
29 x 20cm



GALLERY 1

THE FORCE OF FORGETTING
Lismore Regional Gallery 19 March – 23 April
Photograph: Alberto Sanchez

Khadim Ali would like to dedicate this publication to Asad Buda. He would also like to thank the artists, Katarina Krmáčová, producer of Afghan Women Behind the Wheel, Ruark Lewis, Brett Adlington, Kezia Geddes, Jo Holder, and the Lismore Regional Gallery staff and volunteers and Atika Hussain.

Back cover:
ALI BABA AURANG
[UNTITLED] (detail) 2011
barley ink with reed pen and silver leaf
on cardboard,
51.5 x 36.5cm

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