

## **On Heroism and the Afghan Diaspora Artists**

### **By Leeza Ahmady**

"Afghanistan is a special place." Every person who has ever been there has said this to me no matter what the circumstances of his or her visit. Some went to Afghanistan for archeological interests in the nineteen-fifties, some as hippies during the seventies. Many went to cover the wars in the eighties and nineties; while others have gone as part of the recent reconstruction efforts or what Indian writer/activist Arundhati Roy calls: the "NGO-ization" of another battered country.

What makes Afghanistan so special? Maybe it's the majesty of its nature, or the raw, active, but complicated attitude of its diverse people. Or maybe it's the "heroic" quality in their collective behavior, which is at once, double-sided: a grandiose display of hospitality towards foreigners, coupled with a fierce repulsion to any kind of foreign intervention. Whatever the case, throughout history, the world seems to have to deal with the Afghan territory and its "heroically" intense attachment to independence.

Under many names and guises, positioned at the cross roads of various civilizations, Afghanistan has had to produce all types of heroes to defend itself against those set out to become heroes at its expense. The classical giant of all heroes, Alexander the Great for example, was finally broken here, while nineteenth-century British expansionists couldn't decipher enough commander-heroes to rule Afghanistan. They were expelled not once but three times from its soil. Finally, let's not discount Afghanistan's resistance in the eighties, which brought Soviet style heroism to its great and final fall.

What's the price for all this heroism? Who pays for it? We seem to live in the shadow of one hero or another, or better yet, under the shadow of one ego or another. Afghanistan was destroyed in the process of its heroic fight against Russians, while other Central Asian nations who didn't resist earlier Russian-Bolshevik colonialism, seem better off today. But are they psychologically intact? There are passive heroes and there are aggressive heroes. Either way, the price paid to live under the shadow of all heroes is too high.

The works of Afghan Diaspora artists Lida Abdul and Mariam Ghani explore the realities of war and recovery, which are in many ways by-products of various acclaimed heroisms. In April 2005 Lida Abdul returned to Afghanistan to create three new works that were shot in 16mm film and transferred to video for the Venice Biennale 2005. In

her work: "White House" Abdul is seen painting the ruins of a beautiful 1920's Romanesque style building on the foot of a hill in Kabul. In a silent, serene, and repetitive gesture she paints everything in white: the building's remnants, heaps of stones and rubble on the ground, and the back of a yielding young Afghan man dressed in black. Maybe by this act, in a kind of Sufi-Fluxes tradition, Abdul is calling for a new kind of hero: that of hope and prosperity.

Most of Abdul's videos are silent performance-based works charged with visual potency. In these works experiences of loss, tragedy and fragmentation are explored through ritualized exercises that sanction expression to the artist's profound desire for understanding life's events.

Mariam Ghani's video "Glass House Home Movies" explores the fragmented societal perspectives created as a result of her multiple identities. An excerpt from her bio best relates how Ghani has become a contemporary hero herself. She hunts for example for the material of her video works by fearlessly walking through heavily guarded, male dominated pavilions in Kabul where thousands of Afghans gathered last year to write their new constitution.

"Born in 1978 to an Afghan father and Lebanese mother, Ghani in her practice as a media artist uses her multiple identities to position herself as a translator, revealing channels of communication between cultures that consider themselves foreign to each other by investigating places, people, moments and ideas that inhabit, embody, or create the border zones where those cultures intersect."

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