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ARTS

05 January 2013

The Deconstructor of Afghanistan



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Shahina KK (/User/806)

Amanulla Mojadidi's subject is one of the most censored societies in the world

One of Amanulla Mojadidi's most famous works is a 'reverse bribe'. In 2001, he set up an artificial check post in Kabul, installed hidden cameras, purchased a police uniform and stopped around 50 cars in the guise of a police officer. He offered a hundred Afghanis to each of the passengers as compensation for bribes they had to pay to the police in the past. The cameras also captured his visits to shops to buy his police uniform. All of it together came out as a video installation, *Pay Back*, and created a stir after being exhibited at art galleries in Paris, Cairo and Mumbai.

HIGHLIGHTS



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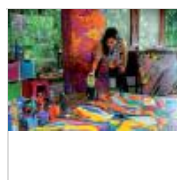
BY THE AUTHOR

At the ongoing Kochi Muziris Biennale, Mojadidi's work is an 'attempt to subvert the dominant narratives of history'. In this piece of installation art, he has weaved a history of his ancestors—real and imagined— by combining elements of story-telling and archaeology. The installation displays an excavation that traces his family's history—which has an Indian connection. "My ancestors were Naqshbandi Sufis who had migrated to Punjab (near present-day Chandigarh) and stayed there for more than a couple of centuries till they returned to Afghanistan in the 16th century," he says. He has mixed fact with fiction by creating an imaginary character Zaman Mojadidi, represented as a forefather who had spent his life in Fort Kochi, and created a narrative by which Aspinwall House, the British- era building which is the main venue of the Biennale, was built by the British by demolishing structures built by Zaman Mojadidi. The installation of an archeological excavation to find the ruins of Zaman Mojadidi's demolished structures symbolises his queries on the plurality of Afghan culture. "This archeological site is created for illustrating the story of my ancestors that challenges the orthodoxy of religion," he says. "The Afghan ministry of culture acknowledges and focuses only on Islam, though there is an intermixing of cultures. It is a pluralistic society: there are Sikhs in Kabul, there are also Jews."

Mojadidi sports tattoos in French, Sanskrit and Japanese. His beard is long but that has little to do with religion. He is a non-practising Muslim and an atheist. "I am very lazy in shaving," he says. But the beard also helps him blend into a crowd in Kabul. Mojadidi was born to Afghan immigrant parents in the United States. He was brought up in Florida, but often travelled to



MORE IN THIS SECTION



Afghanistan for vacations with his father, a surgeon who was also a sympathiser of Mujahedeen fighters against the Soviet invasion. As a field doctor, Mojadidi's father actively assisted the Afghan National Liberation Front. Mojadidi has childhood memories of being dragged off to anti-Soviet demonstrations at the Russian embassy in Washington DC and chanting slogans like 'Long live Islam' and 'Down with Communism' since the age of eight. As an artist, it was a natural progression for his work to be a political commentary. On his webpage, a statement about his own art says this: 'My practice is based on personal experiences intertwined with curatorial and academic research in cultural studies. Having grown up as an American citizen of Afghan heritage, in a world that is simultaneously globalised and fractured, my work combines traditional storylines and postmodern, often parodist, narrative strategies to approach themes such as belonging, identity politics, conflict, cultural traditions (be they real, imagined, invented), as well as the push to and resistance against modernisation...'

Contemporary art is in a peculiar phase in Kabul. In spite of pervasive censorship, Mojadidi has never faced any direct threat from the Taliban. "I am doing a sort of guerilla art," he says. "I did a poster campaign in 2010 prior to the Parliamentary polls. Posters with slogans like 'I am a Jihadi, I am rich, vote for me' were pasted in different corners of the city. We quickly shifted from one street to another." He found the Taliban indifferent or too busy to notice. "Anyway, I criticise warlords, Western militia and the Afghan government through my art. So each one of them thinks I am against the groups they also hate."

Being a contemporary artist in Afghanistan is challenging because of a lack of community support. “The scarcity of galleries, museums and exhibitions do bother an artist, but nothing bars [one from] making a work of art.” Mojadidi says that there is a nascent art movement there by a group of artists engaged in painting, video works and installations. But their exposure is limited. “I used to tell them to go ahead with their work. Nobody can hold them back from producing a piece of art. Exhibiting is secondary, though it is a bigger challenge.”

A photo series done by Mojadidi in 2009 called *Jihadi Gangster* was censored in Kabul but received accolades in Paris. Amanulla was photographed in different costumes that blended the idea of a Western gangster with that of an Afghan *jihadi*. One of the photos featured the gangster wearing a black turban and gold-plated gun around his neck and exposing a tattooed body. “In a way, the *Jihadi Gangster* series is an exploration of my own dual cultural heritage as an American-born Afghan with strong family ties to politics in Afghanistan,” he says.

Mojadidi has no definite answer to the question of his sense of belongingness. “I am neither American nor Afghani. Despite being a citizen, I am not fully American in the US. In Kabul, people tend to treat me as an alien, though I have a long beard and hide my tattoos as much as possible. It is interesting to see how one is deprived of one’s authority to define one’s own identity. In art, I try to explore the fractured identities of people,” he says. He, however, has a clear answer on whether he is an

artist or activist. “Artist, hundred per cent. My medium of expression is art. I demonstrate my political convictions through it.”

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