



AFGHANISTAN

Self-Described 'Redneck' Takes On Kabul Art Scene

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Aman Mojadidi poses as a "jihadi gangster" in a photo titled "After a Long Day's Work," part of the "A Day in the Life of a Jihadi Gangster" photo series.

"I'm an Afghan by blood and a redneck by the grace of God," Aman Mojadidi says

in introducing himself. "I'm an atheist and a radically politicized artist."

Nine years ago, the Afghan-born American performance artist returned from Florida to his native Kabul. In that time the 41-year-old has made a name for himself as a leading provocateur within the Afghan capital's emerging art scene.

Through various art forms, including film, photography, and public installation projects, Mojadidi has waged a relentless campaign against what he sees as the excesses of the Afghan government and political stagnation in the war-torn country he was forced to flee as a child.

Mojadidi's chief targets have been corruption, which he says permeates all levels of society, and the monopolization of political power by the country's former warlords and militia leaders.

"The rampant corruption manifests itself here in a way that it affects everyone, not just the higher levels of politics. I also think [a problem] is the political control in the hands of jihadist leaders," Mojadidi says.

"I don't think the country will be able to really move forward as a nation until political power ceases to be in the hands of those who rest all their authority on the fact that they did jihad against the Soviet Union," he adds. "They are keeping the country stagnated in that period."

'Jihadi Gangster'

That criticism has been evident in several prominent projects.

In "Payback," a video installation released in 2009, Mojadidi impersonated a police officer and set up a fake police checkpoint in Kabul. But instead of asking for a bribe, he offered money to baffled motorists and apologized on behalf of the Kabul police department for any bribes they may have paid in the past.

Mojadidi took things a step further when, during the country's parliamentary elections in 2010, he secretly plastered fake campaign posters of himself on streets across Kabul. The posters, which show Mojadidi in a black turban with a

gold-plated pistol hanging around his neck, read: "Vote for me! I've done jihad -- and I'm rich."

Met with rave reviews, Mojadidi's work has gained global exposure through exhibits from the United States and Europe to Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

PHOTO GALLERY: Some of Aman Mojadidi's work (photos courtesy of the artist)



Photo Gallery:

Aman Mojadidi, Kabul's Leading Artist-Provocateur

Speaking Truth To Power

Some, predictably, take offense to pictures depicting him as a warlord sitting beside his golden wooden leg, trying to watch television while a scantily-clad, burqa-wearing woman tries to get his attention.

By the same token, photos of him sitting in a barber shop adorned in a Confederate flag, swilling Budweiser beer, might rub some in the religiously conservative country the wrong way.

But while Mojadidi has occasionally come into conflict with the Afghan authorities, he has never been formally charged. And he has answers for his

critics.

Working in Afghanistan has been "schizophrenic," Mojadidi says. He insists that although the country is a "junkman's paradise" in terms of artistic practice, the development of the Afghan art scene is being held back by religious radicals and powerful politicians keen on stifling criticism.



Aman Mojadidi describes his relationship with his uncle, former interim President Sibghatullah Mojadidi, as "love-hate."

"There are these religious and political constrictions on what can be exhibited and what can be shown publicly," he says. "If it's critical of the religion of Islam or critical of some of these power-holders, then one runs the risk of being at the least censored and at the most potentially imprisoned or facing some sort of charges."

His artwork has also strained his family ties. Mojadidi admits that he now has a "love-hate relationship" with his uncle, Sibghatullah Mojadidi, a powerful former mujahedin and onetime interim Afghan president who now heads the opposition National Liberation Front political party.

"He doesn't necessarily agree with my lifestyle or the way I carry my life forward or the choices that I make," Mojadidi says. "In general, we tend to get along quite well but I don't in the end know whether he fully understands the scope of some of the work that I'm doing."

Giving Something Back

Mojadidi says the Afghan art scene is still developing, and suffers from a lack of galleries, museums, and exhibitions. He says many art projects in the country are driven by foreign cultural centers and organizations, rather than by Afghan artists themselves.

Truly indigenous art might only take root when foreign funding phases out and Afghan artists are forced to make do with what little is available to them, he says.

"The art scene here is still very nascent," Mojadidi says. "It's still very much driven by the development system that's been in place here for the last decade. There is a foreign cultural center or a foreign NGO that's interested in doing a project as opposed to really being something that has taken root [in Afghanistan]."



"Just a Trim," a photo in the "Afghan by Blood, Redneck by the Grace of God" photo project

After exhibiting his work in Kassel, Germany, for the past three months, Mojadidi is heading to Paris, where his new short film will be screened from October 8 at the Palais de Tokyo, one of Europe's largest centers for contemporary art.

The film, titled "Memories Lay in Ruin amidst a Garden on Earth While Birds & Planes Battle for the Sky," is a conceptual perspective on the notion of a lost Garden of Eden.

"The film shows the remaining wall of an Angur Khana, where grapes were hung to dry into raisins by my family. The compound this wall is a part of was the old Mojadidi fort just outside Kabul, where my family lived," Mojadidi says.

"It was a fully self-sufficient community with orchards, livestock, a bakery, and farm with crops. A sort of 'Eden' that was later destroyed by the Soviets after their invasion and the family's joining of the armed resistance movement against them."

Despite a busy schedule that will see him visit India in the next several months, the dusty streets of Kabul are never far away from Mojadidi's thoughts.

What drives him to labor every day in the hostile conditions in Afghanistan, he says, is the same reason he moved back to the country in the first place.

"What moved me here has a lot to do with doing something to contribute to Afghanistan and to do something to help Afghanistan in some way," Mojadidi says. "There's also a desire to get to know my cultural heritage and try and connect more with that heritage."



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