

I am looking for you like a drone, my love

Aziz Hazara + Unknown carpet makers

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Referencing the ancient traditions of Sufi poetry and the 21st century proliferation of drone technology, the title of this exhibition suggests a complex romantic intoxication which collapses the search for one's beloved with the act of surveillance. Once available only to highly specialised industries, drones now facilitate aerial photography that transcends private and public boundaries for the general population. This curated grouping of rugs by unknown makers and photography by Aziz Hazara has arisen from an increasing awareness of the limitations of standard museum/ gallery-based binaries. The divisions between traditional and contemporary, craft and art, collective and individual, unknown and known, artisan and artist are blurred, less fixed and possibly irrelevant in the ideas about history and the nature of lived experience generated by this combination. In this sense, *I'm looking for you like a drone my love* can be understood as being about the consideration of oneself, in relation to another's surroundings and culture, which is woven into a reflection about the intersecting aspects of change and continuity. This understanding was significantly heightened with the incidental learning that weaving rugs with his family was an integral part of Hazara's growing up in Afghanistan.¹

Readings of Hazara's imagery are filtered by the presence of the 5 kilims from Afghanistan placed directly in front of his work.² Similarly, understandings of the rugs are contextualised against Hazara's still photography and video. Implicit in the exhibition layout is an invitation for viewers to remove their shoes and stand or sit on the rugs whilst looking at Hazara's work. The experience of engagement with the textiles is inseparable from the experience of the engagement with the photography. More specifically, *I am looking for you like a drone my love* presents an opportunity for simultaneously grounding oneself in the warm glow of the richly patterned hand-woven rugs and immersing oneself in the visual overload of Hazara's digital images.

Far from pure documentation, there is a poignant compelling poetry about Hazara's imagery of waste in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of international troops. His trio of works in this exhibition, which vary in scale and photographic technique, reveals the detritus as a sprawling skin of scrub that covers his homeland. All of the works were photographed on site at the largest of the former US airbases near the ancient city of Bagram, about 60km from the capital Kabul. In early July 2021, the last US troops left Bagram, '*by shutting off the electricity and slipping away in the night without notifying the base's new Afghan commander*'.³ Afghan forces subsequently surrendered the base, including its prison, to the Taliban in mid-August 2021.⁴ Hazara's iconography is the packaging, electronic waste, furniture and random junk left behind after two decades of foreign occupation. Whilst linked thematically, each work provides a different facet of the landscape.

Collectively, Hazara's photograph and videos present macro and micro understandings of the site. The 12.8 metre panoramic photo, *I'm looking for you like a drone my love*, from which the exhibition takes its title, spans the entire length of the main gallery wall. The expanse of junk is overwhelming, and Hazara's seemingly unending landscape/dumping ground depiction suggests abandonment and hopelessness. His second largest work, a projected video, *Untitled 1*, is the only work to include the presence of humans. Shot from a single point of view the video documents men scouring a section of the airbase for items of use. There is no romance about recycling or repurposing in this

¹ Phone conversation with Aziz Hazara 17 July 2021 in which David Sequeira first raised the possibility of curating an exhibition of rugs and new works by Hazara.

² A kilim (gilim) is a light but highly durable flat tapestry-woven carpet or rug made in Afghanistan and other parts of Asia.

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-06/us-left-bagram-airfield-at-night-didnt-tell-new-commander/100272238> retrieved 14 April 2022

⁴ https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/usa-to-hand-over-bagram-air-base-to-afghanistan-forces-in-20-days-121060200091_1.html retrieved 14 April 2022

imagery. Instead, the process of gleaning seems a desperate and competitive act.⁵ The sound of men's voices, the flapping of plastic and the menacing wind blowing against the microphone amplifies the sense of futility of trying to 'find a needle in a haystack'.

Hazara's smallest work, the monitor based looped video *Untitled 2* is also shot from a singular fixed view. In this case, the camera focusses on tiny section of the site dominated by a tangle of data cables and a monitor. The meta irony of monitoring a dysfunctional discarded monitor in a junk yard via a functional gallery monitor in a contemporary art context is overt. Again, the sound of wind against the camera microphone is important in communicating the remote dustiness. An integral part of Hazara's highly celebrated multi-channel video installation *Bow Echo*, wind seems an important leitmotif that signals flux and temporality.⁶

The notion of variation within variation is an important aspect of rug making throughout South Asia. Subtle shifts in the geometry and colour of each rug's design across geographies and time periods articulate uniqueness and individual difference within set conventions of practice. In Afghanistan, the shared experience of removing of shoes before walking on rugs is important in symbolically connecting people with each other. In domestic settings, the rugs identify interior spaces as sites for families, social gathering, the sharing of meals, prayer and other everyday activities. Their presence in this exhibition echoes the possibility of this function for the gallery and its visitors.

Two of the first three kilims encountered in the exhibition date from the 1950s, whilst the third was made in the 1980s. The tonal variation in these textiles results both from the use of natural dyes and the process of fading that has taken place across several decades – their bold geometric patterns have been softened by time and light. These rugs have lived through generations of both Soviet and American occupation of Afghanistan. Standing on them without shoes, viewers experience their woven texture. They stand on geometric pattern, often symbolic of ever evolving continuity, whilst looking at Hazara's unrelenting accumulation of waste. The kilim paired with *Untitled 1*, whilst similar in design is noticeably 'younger'. Its colours are more saturated, and its pattern is more dramatic. Made within the last 3-5 years, its lifespan probably mirrors that of most of the junk in its video counterpart. Similar in age, the smallest rug, displayed with Hazara's smallest work, *Untitled 2*, is considerably more intricate and its weave is significantly tighter than that of its counterparts. Like the focussed crop evident in *Untitled 2*, this rug invites close inspection.

The pairings of rugs and photography in this exhibition advocate multi-sensory approaches to looking and perceiving. The immediacy of physical contact with a rug – experiencing its textured history, design and function, is likely to stimulate a more profound understanding of the rug itself and of Hazara's imagery than that provided by viewing alone. The rugs can be understood as a tactile invitation to locate oneself in the process of looking. This combination of practices – photography and weaving, functions as a reminder of the importance of context in developing an understanding of art, particularly in a culture in which ancient tradition and uber modernity are deeply entwined.

Dr David Sequeira

Aziz Hazara is represented by Experimenter, Kolkata, India
Afghanistan rugs courtesy Najaf Rugs & Textiles, Melbourne, Australia

⁵ Gleaning is the act of collecting leftover scraps from farmers' fields after commercial harvest. Jean Francois Millet's painting, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas, depicts peasants gleaning a field after the harvest. This theme, subsequently explored by Pissarro 1889, Renoir 1888, Seurat 1881 and Van Gogh 1885, has resonance in Hazara's video *Untitled 3*, 2021

⁶ Aziz Hazara, *Bow Echo*, 2019, Five channel video installation with sound, premiered at the Sydney Biennale 2020. In 2021, Hazara won the Future Generation prize for this work. In *Bow Echo* five boys climb and try to stay perched on a large rock, battered by high winds.