

Exhibition catalogue

remak





Future Afghanistan





- 4 Hand-coloured photograph of a Taliban wrestler; anonymous, Kabul, 2001 – 25 x 33 cm

Front cover: Bollywood star cut-out in private window, Kabul; photo by Najibullah Musaffer, 2006.

Back cover: Counternarcotics symbol printed as a sticker or reproduced on posters and other educational material; Sayara, Kabul, 2007

Future: Afghanistan

Notice to the Exhibition

8 February – 24 March 2008

**by Robert Kluijver
Curator**

**semak
in
The Hague**

Introduction

Future : Afghanistan displays the contradictory forces that shape contemporary Afghan society. While a war is being fought in the southwest of the country and many Afghans still lives in medieval conditions, the capital Kabul and other parts of the country are rapidly modernizing.

The millions of young Afghans that came of age during the years of exile in Iran and Pakistan are developing a pop culture influenced by internet and satellite TV.

Afghans returning from the West in turn attempt to restore the pre-war fame of their homeland in, for example, carpet-weaving.

Meanwhile young Afghan journalists and artists are discovering freedom of expression and the possibilities offered by new media, and employing this for a critical analysis of their society.



They tackle issues such as drug abuse, poverty and the challenges faced by the fledgling democracy.

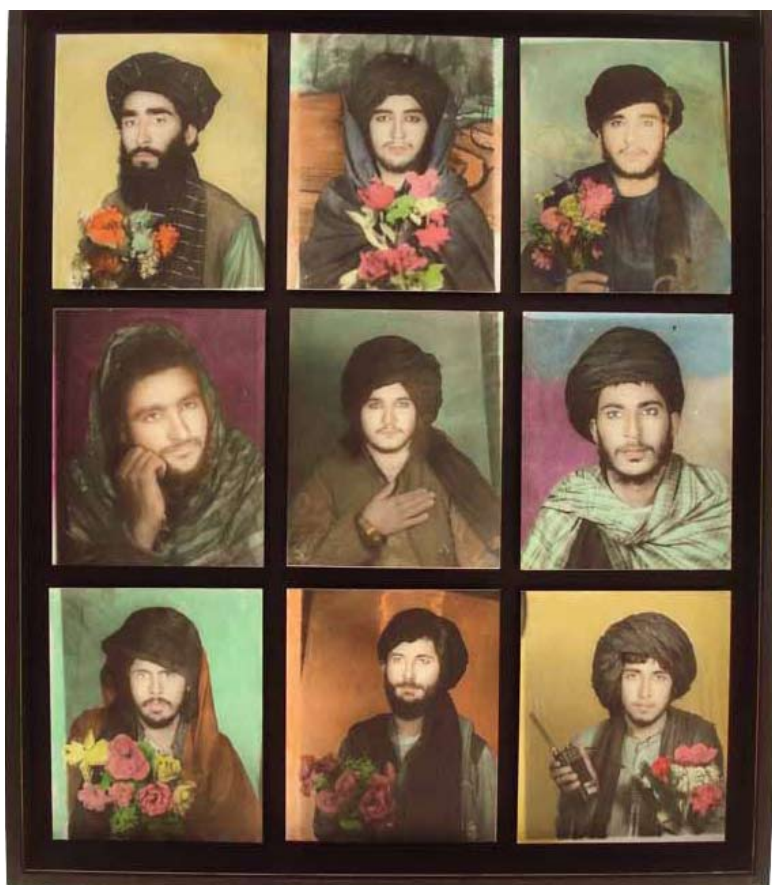
But not all Afghans are benefiting from the new situation. Those exposed to bad government or NATO's aerial bombing campaigns may feel more inclined to take up arms against the 'crusaders' and their Afghan 'servants'. They revert to tribal customs to implement their elementary notions of justice and violently reject all external influences on their conservative culture.

Future: Afghanistan, the second exhibition to be held in Gemak seeks to illustrate the principal strands in Afghan contemporary culture from the subjective points of view of young Afghan artists, photographers and filmmakers themselves.

Gemak is a centre for arts and politics set up in 2007 by the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and the Vrije Academie / Werkplaats voor Beeldende Kunsten in The Hague, the Netherlands.



Installation view of Future Afghanistan in Gemak



8 Hand-coloured photographs of Taliban,
anonymous, Kabul, 2001,
90 x 115 cm.
Composed, mounted and framed in Gemak

1. Taliban fighters

The Taliban had instituted a complete ban on the representation of human beings, but with one exception: portraits for identity cards. This was the only source of income for the surviving professional photographers of the Chara'i Sedarat, near the Ministry of Interior. People could come to have their portraits taken in their shops without fearing the intervention of the Vice & Virtue Police.

These Taliban had their portraits made in order to give them to their beloved family members or companions as a souvenir, if they were to die while fighting.

Given the rudimentary quality of the home-made box camera and the development process, it is common for photographers in Afghanistan to colour the pictures. Scratches and specks that appeared during the development process are removed, the skin is smoothed, and the portrait is 'beautified'.

The Taliban fled Kabul overnight, leaving the photographers with uncollected orders. A French aid worker, who arrived in Kabul shortly after the fall of the Taliban, bought the portraits displayed here.

2. Jihad Vanity Kit

These toilette objects would typically be in the pockets of a Taliban fighter. ‘Sorma’ eyeliner (a kind of graphite) is used routinely by Afghan, especially Pashtun, men. The little wooden holder shown here (12) would however be kept at home, as would the henna (13) used by some Pashtun men for painting their beards or hair. For travel purposes the sorma would be put in a small bag (11) and applied with a little stick. Here are implements for cleaning nails and ears (9), tweezers for plucking hairs from nose and ears (8), nail clippers (10), foldable scissors to trim the beard (7), the ubiquitous little pocket mirror (6), needles, thread and a thimble (14) for mending clothes while on the road, a ‘meswak’ stick (1) that cleans the teeth when chewed on, and a piece of ‘soap’ (2). The soap is a mix of lime and mud and can clean the skin with a minimal amount of water, especially when used with the scrubber (3). All this can be kept in a small plastic bag (15) in the pocket of a jacket. The total value of these objects is about 2 euro.

Water, of course, is scarce in Afghanistan; but the duty to keep the body clean is a religious one (this doesn’t apply to the clothes). The obligatory ablutions before the five daily prayers can be performed with sand or dirt if no water is available; otherwise the ‘dawla’ plastic jug under the table would be used to sprinkle water on the hands, face and feet.

Other religious items are the prayer beads (17), the prayer cap (4) (here a Kandahari type), the prayer mat (18) and of course the holy Koran (16). This Koran is particularly useful for travellers because it has a zip; otherwise it would need to be enveloped in a piece of cloth. The carrying of an amulet (‘tawizeh’) (5) which holds a folded excerpt of the Koran, is frowned upon by religious scholars as a superstition; however it is common to find them on the fighters.



Object which could be found on a Taliban fighter, collected by the curator.
Kabul - Den Haag 2008

3. This calendar

This calendar depicts the successful destruction of the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan. These statues, carved into the sandstone cliffs of central Afghanistan between the 4th and the 6th centuries AD, were the largest in the world. Their destruction in March 2001 awakened international public opinion to the plight of the Afghans living under the ruthless Taliban. From the Taliban side this provocative act, followed by the destruction of part of the National Museum's pre-Islamic collection, signalled the end to their efforts to convince the international community to recognize them as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.

The calendar, tellingly, was published in Pakistan, in Urdu. (Afghan printing presses at the time were too rudimentary for even this kind of poster). Following the regulations of the extremists, all human figures have been neatly edited out of the photos. The Taliban did not survive this calendar year (1422, or 2001-2002) as they were evicted by the US-led coalition following September 11. From a private collection in the Netherlands



4. Statistics

Statistics. The Taliban have become media-savvy. Recently they have started publishing their own statistics on their operations, indicating how many ‘crusaders’ (i.e. foreigners) and ‘servants’ (Afghan security forces) they have killed or wounded, province by province; and how many people they have lost themselves. Interestingly, they include civilian ‘martyrs’ and wounded on their side of the casualties. They also indicate whether the attack was a suicide bombing and the material damage it caused. Please note that these ‘statistics’ don’t tally with NATO data.

Found on the internet, in Arabic and in English translation, in December 2007. See the end of the booklet for all internet addresses.

Statistics

Table of statistics for operations carried out in 1428 (April to November) 2008

Province Name	Number of operations	Human and financial losses to the enemy						Human and financial losses to the Mujahideen				
		Suicide-operations (out of total)	Killed crusaders	Wounded crusaders	Killed servants	Wounded servants	Destruction of assets/ammour	Martyred mujahideen	Wounded mujahideen	Christian martyrs	Wounded civilians	Destruction of assets of the mujahideen and the area
1 Kandahar	26	6	26	6	26	41	16 cars + 1 armour	34	18	45	36 cars + 4 villages	
2 Helmand	18	2	13	8	43	27	11 cars + 1 armour	28	23	32	22 cars + 4 villages	
3 Kabul	7	4	13	6	35	31	2 cars + 3 armour	4	0	6	4 cars	
4 Logar	8	1	12	7	24	13	10 cars + 1 armour	13	5	24	4 cars + 2 villages	
5 Zabul	13	0	7	4	33	28	15 cars + 2 armour	6	6	3	1 village	
6 Ghazni	8	0	3	2	16	12	2 cars	5	3	4	2 villages	
7 Nuristan	5	0	14	7	34	13	3 armour	2	2	7	0 village	
8 Herat	0	1	4	9	11	7	3 cars	2	0	4	2 cars	
9 Kunar	0	0	3	13	13	21	armour	4	0	0	3 cars	
10 Paktia	6	0	3	1	16	0	2 cars	3	6	11	0 village	
11 Farah	0	1	4	1	14	0	2 cars	0	2	8	3 cars + 1 village	
12 Paktika	0	0	3	1	6	7	4 cars + 1 armour	4	3	7	3 cars	
13 Kandahar	3	0	1	2	5	5	2 cars	3	1	2	1 home	
14 Herat	5	0	3	1	12	7	4 cars	2	1	3	1 home	
15 Paghata	6	0	1	2	20	9	4 cars	4	3	4	1 village	
16 Baghlan	3	0	0	0	12	5	1 car	1	2	0	0 cars	
17 Kapisa	5	0	2	7	9	3	2 cars	2	3	4	1 car	
18 Nuristan	3	0	0	0	9	5	2 cars	2	0	0	0 cars	
19 Faryab	2	0	0	0	3	3	1 car	1	0	0	0 cars	
20 Helmand	3	0	0	0	0	2	1 car	0	0	0	0 cars	
21 Badkhashan	2	0	0	0	4	2	1 car	5	0	0	0 cars	
22 Bamand	3	1	3	2	5	4	2 cars	1	0	4	2 cars	
23 Farah	2	0	0	0	6	2	1 car	2	0	0	0 cars	
Total	147	15	114	63	401	261	706 pieces	147	63	183	64 cars + 14 villages	

5. Ali Baba Aurang

The calligraphic works by Ali Baba Aurang, a young Afghan painter who studied calligraphy in Shiraz, Iran, are what most Afghans would want 'contemporary art' to be: challenging tradition with innovative elements, but aesthetically pleasing, intellectually satisfying and firmly rooted in the own cultural sphere (not 'pandering to Western taste'). Even the Taliban could accept this kind of art, although they may object to lines of Persian poetry being used instead of verses from the Holy Koran.



6. Raheem Walizada

Raheem Walizada returned from New York to his native Afghanistan in 2002. He spearheaded a group of cosmopolitan young Afghans involved in the arts, and mostly living in the USA. Backed up by his gallery “Chukpalu” on the 5th Avenue in New York, he took up his traditional family business of making carpets, but with his own contemporary designs. His carpets were exhibited in galleries throughout the West, and in the Afghan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2005. He now employs thousands in several cities of Afghanistan, thus helping the revival of the Afghan hand-made carpet industry. Raheem’s carpets are also sold in his Kabul-based “Nomad Gallery”.



Chukpalu Nomad Rug; wool with natural dyes,
Afghanistan 2007 – 296 x 290 cm

7. Khadim Ali

Khadim Ali, born in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 1978, first worked as a mural painter in Iran, before attending the National College of Arts in Lahore (Pakistan), where he learnt the technique of miniature painting. He now works in the Pakistani border town of Quetta, where many Afghan refugees live. The miniature paintings shown here come from four series:

The Suicide Bomber series (2005) speaks of the futility of suicide attacks, wreaking havoc and spilling blood but ending in the white limbo of anonymity.

The Qaeda-ye Reyadi series (2005) contrasts classical education, typified by the lying Buddha and Da Vinci's Vitruvian man, with the education Afghan refugees received in the 1980s and 1990s through the CIA-sponsored schoolbooks that were to prepare them for Jihad. These schoolbooks teach how to count using weapons and ammunition, and instruct the alphabet with words like Infidel, Jihad and Kalashnikov. In some schools they are still being used.





The Rustam series (2007) is based on the Persian epos “The Book of Kings” which is still told throughout Afghanistan by parents and storytellers. In some cases the Taliban appropriated these pre-Islamic myths to terrorize the Hazara minority, to which Khadim Ali belongs. For example, they called themselves the ‘winged Rustam’ when they set about ethnically cleansing parts of the Hazara homeland in and around Bamiyan, thus turning Rustam the hero into an evil genius.

The Absent Kitchen series (2007-2008) is a new and ongoing project by the artist. He asked children of the 6-8 age group in his native Bamiyan to describe their lives and experiences in drawings and short texts. Impressed by the amount of violence in the drawings (one of the children drew the ‘absent kitchen’ of his shelled house) he then requested children from the same age group in Japan, Australia and the UK to respond to the Afghan children’s drawings. Khadim Ali incorporates elements of all these children’s drawings in his own work.



Let's Make a Great Pattern (2007) seems to be a thread and needle version of the American Flag, at different levels of unravelling. It is, however, opaque watercolour on wasli. Wasli is obtained by gluing several sheets of paper together and then rubbing them until smooth, and is commonly used for miniature paintings.

Flag Ceremony (2007) is the video of an installation set up by the artist in a park in London. Passers-by consume cans of Coca Cola (normal and light) and Pepsi that the artist has arranged on shelves in the pattern of the 'stars and stripes'.

9. Mariam Ghani

Mariam Ghani is a New York-based artist of mixed Afghan and Lebanese origin. She returned to Afghanistan several times in the period 2002-2004. The two installations shown are the result of her personal experience of state-building in Afghanistan.

Kabul: Constitutions is an interactive video installation illustrating the complex process of adopting a new Constitution, in a month-long assembly (Loya Jirga) that was held in Kabul from December 2003 to January 2004. The carpet reproduces the floor-plan of the compound where the 500 delegates gathered, ate and slept during that month, surrounded by guards, UN advisors, Afghan government representatives advisors and personnel. Under the carpet 34 sensors are installed, which send signals to one of the three DVD players beaming images to the front, left and right of the spectator. By standing on a specific map point, the spectator triggers the view from that perspective, be it the tea-boy, a diplomat, members of the press or a female delegate. The installation is described in detail in the guide-book that can be consulted in situ.

The work raises questions about the subjectivity of such a monumental political process as the approval of a national constitution.



20 **Kabul Constitutions**; 3-channel video installation with 3 stereo soundtracks, carpet and sensors, New York, 2005 & Den Haag, 2008 - 600 x 500 x 260 cm

The low-tech nature of the installation (hand-made sensors made of cardboard and aluminium foil) reflect the level of the constitutional proceedings, and eventual technical failures of the installation are a metaphor for the (mal)functioning of Afghan constitutional law today.

Kabul: Partial Reconstructions investigates the meaning of rebuilding a city, a culture and a society. Retro-beamed onto the central screen of the installation, a short video compares the physical reconstruction of buildings with cooking and woodworking processes, and the gradual changing of a person's clothes. On the right is a table with a ballot box; the visitors are invited to fill in a questionnaire about their democratic habits and slip it into the box. On the wall, especially for this installation, hangs a list of the more than 400 candidates that vied for one of the 33 seats in the National Assembly on behalf of Kabul. A laptop connected to the internet is on the table to access Mariam Ghani's website *Kabul Reconstructions*. On her site (see end of booklet for the URL), a web-based version of *Kabul: Constitutions* can also be found. Next to the table three monitors show footage shot from a car on a route the artist repeated through Kabul each year (2002, 2003 & 2004) to track the gradual changes appearing in the city.



Kabul Partial Reconstructions; mixed media installation with 3-channel linear video, 1-channel linear video projection, 4 stereo soundtracks, ballot cards, and website, New York 2005 & Den Haag 2008 – 300 x 240 x 200 c

10. Khalid Hadi

Khalid Hadi, born around 1980, was but a boy when he started taking portraits for the registration cards of handicapped victims of the civil war in the early 1990s. He worked in his hometown of Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan. In 1993 Mollah Omar, the future leader of the Taliban, registered in that centre after losing an eye in combat. This portrait is the only one known of the reclusive leader of the Taliban.

When the Taliban came to power Hadi, who had clan connections to the Taliban leadership, eventually ended up as one of their official photographers. In 1997 and 1998 he witnessed, as a front-line photographer, the massacres that occurred when the Taliban captured, lost and regained the the Northern city of Mazar-i Sharif. In 2000 he fled to the USA, where he ended up in a fast-food delivery job. He had taken with him the photograph of Mollah Omar, which he successfully sold to Magnum. Khalid Hadi now spends his time between the USA and Kandahar, where he has set up the cultural publication 'Shkola' with other progressive Kandahari's.



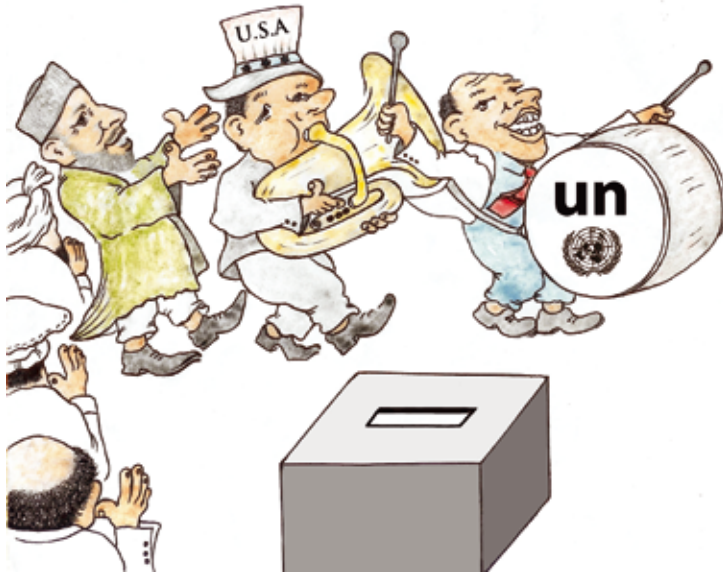
22 The reclusive, one-eyed Mullah Omar, spiritual leader of the Taliban, photographed in 1993 by Khalid Hadi.
Distributed by Magnum Photos



War victims; Khalid Hadi, Kandahar 1992-1993,
composition and printing by Ed Grazda, New York, 2004 – 60 x 84 cm

11. Khaliq Alizada

Khaliq Alizada is a young cartoonist working in Kabul. Among his many drawings is this satirical representation of the Afghan presidential elections in 2004.



12. Najibullah Musafer

The Afghan photographer Najibullah Musafer lives and works in Kabul. He has a database of over 100,000 documentary photographs depicting all aspects of life in Afghanistan. His work has been shown in several exhibitions in Kabul. Here, three series of his photographs are shown:

Campaigning for the 2005 Parliamentary Elections: in the run-up to the September 2005 parliamentary elections, the country was gripped by poster madness. More than 6000 independent candidates contested the 250 national assembly seats and seats on provincial councils. Practically none of them had any political experience. Their campaigning was mostly limited to holding rallies and plastering the city with posters. Photos on display in the exhibition, from left to right and top to bottom:



Security: For 30 years now the Afghans have had to cope with insecurity on a daily basis. It was one of their main reasons for popular acceptance of the Taliban, who, however, replaced the chaos caused by armed gangs with state terror. The international community and the Afghan government believe the solution lies in strengthening the state security sector: army, police and intelligence services. Many Afghans however are worried that the newly trained and armed security forces will turn on each other and on civilians as soon as the central government loses its grip over them.



Reconstruction in Kabul. Afghans expected a quick reconstruction of their country by the international community; however the latter decided to leave this task to the Afghan state and private sector, and instead concentrate on building the capacity of the State. This takes longer than expected and still hasn't delivered sufficient results to satisfy the general population. Six years after the coming to power of the new regime and despite billions of dollars spent on reconstruction, much of Kabul still lacks electricity, drinking water and a sewer system.

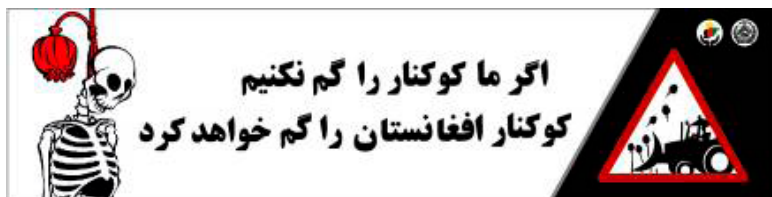


Children watching the traffic from a shop demolished to widen the road.

13. Poppy cultivation

Poppy cultivation has become the major motor of the Afghan economy. Although it funds the Taliban insurgency and criminal elements, it also provides income to many farmers and day labourers. Despite heavy pressure from the USA and large-scale counternarcotics funding, heroin production has boomed since 2001. Initially the major concern was the export of heroin to the West. But since the use of this drug has skyrocketed among Afghan citizens, new campaigns focus on the socially disruptive effects of addiction.

All posters in the exhibition and the billboard were produced by Sayara Communications Agency, set up in Kabul in 2003.





Come on, let's get rid of poppy: campaign poster in Dari and Pashto for the Afghanistan Special Narcotics Force Sayara, Kabul, 2004

Videos shown in the exhibition

Future: Afghanistan

14. The problem of drug consumption is addressed in two documentary video's:

Children on Opium, 1'30", by Salma Zulfiqar of the UN News Agency IRIN (2007), shows elder ladies in the north-eastern province of Badakhshan smoking opium in the traditional manner; believing it has medical virtues they blow the opium smoke in the face of children.

Golpary, 21'57", by Mustafa Kia (2007) is the story of a 12-year-old girl, her mother and a 14-year-old friend, who are all addicted to heroin. They live by begging and stealing in the streets of Kabul. The documentary maker convinces Golpary and her mother – with difficulty – of attending detox therapy in a centre for addicted women.

Shelter, 5'45", by Sayyed Mohsen Hossaini (2006), is probably the first Afghan animation film. It depicts the horrors of war and how a young boy finds beauty in the midst of it.

15. In the central hallway a TV displays contemporary Afghan pop culture:

The Medley of programmes of Tolo TV, 20'30" (2008), showcases some of the most popular Afghan TV programmes. The TV station, established in 2003, regularly faces attacks by the conservative establishment and the fundamentalist clergy, but it has successfully become the mouthpiece of a new, western-oriented youth culture. Most of its programmes are modelled on successful Indian and Western predecessors, such as Afghan Star (based on Idols), but all of the contents shown here are produced in Afghanistan.

Alien Crisis, 18'42" (2007), is the debut of a group of young Afghans led by the Yosufy brothers. After having defeated the British Empire, the USSR and soon the Americans, young Afghans living in the run-down Soviet apartment blocks of Kabul (Micrayon) get ready to defeat aliens too. The film is evidence of the youth's interest in martial arts, video games and computer animations.

16. Two videos that won prizes at last year's Kabul Film Festival (August 2007) deal with the civil war in Kabul and its legacy.

Gozargah, 46'01", by Abdul Hussein Danesh (2006), recounts the terror experienced by the civilian population of Kabul during the civil war (1992-1996), using local news footage of those years that has seldom, if ever, been shown before.

My Kabul, 21'20", by Waheed Nazir (2006) shows the filmmaker (one of the only representatives of the older generation of artists in this exhibition) interviewing a taxi driver and his customers about their memories of the war years. As they speak one sees all the familiar sights of Kabul pass by.

17. In the projection room three films, together lasting over two hours, depict life in the provinces. They are heavily influenced by the Iranian social realist style of filmmaking.

Drought in Hazarajat, 31'46", by Malek Shafi'i (2003) shows the terrible effects in Nawur, Ghazni, of the long drought that has ruined Afghanistan's rural economy.

Pamir Territory, 39'38", by Malek Shafi'i (2004) explores the culture and society of the remote Wakhan corridor, the mountainous region that connects Afghanistan to China. This film won a Golden Minbar at the Kazan Film Festival of 2007.

Three Dots, 57'00", by Roya Sadat (2004) is one of the first Afghan fiction movies to be directed by a woman. It narrates the story of a widow in a conservative area of rural Herat forced to smuggle drugs across the Iranian border. The movie was shot with a minimal budget in a place without any infrastructure for cinema (no professional actors, very limited access to recording and editing equipment, etc.). Roya Sadat won several international prizes with this movie.

Statement

When I first set foot in Afghanistan, in March 2000, I was immediately introduced to the Taliban Deputy Minister for Culture. I was to work with him to set up a program for the survey and preservation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. That was a year before the Taliban decided to blow up the Bamiyan Buddhas.

Over the next six years I travelled extensively throughout Afghanistan, working for the UN, the World Bank, Soros and other organizations in the fields of politics and culture. I got to know Afghans of all walks of life and witnessed at first hand the rapid transformation of their society. Their resilience in the face of adversity, their deep sense of culture, and most of all the energy with which young Afghans set about to build a new country, is truly impressive.

This exhibition attempts to portray where Afghanistan is heading today. The Taliban are resurgent, thriving on a sense of deception most common Afghans have about the current Western-backed regime, which is riddled with corruption and in-fighting between powerful clans. However, most Afghans would prefer anything to a return of the Taliban, and on the fringes of power – where art usually develops – young Afghans are formulating alternative visions of their future. These are obviously informed by what they have gleaned of developments occurring elsewhere in the world, either through personal experience or by access to the global information society: satellite TV, pirated films and Internet.

I would like to personally thank the following organizations for their essential contributions to this exhibition: Green Cardamom in London, and the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society and the Afghanistan Cinema Club in Kabul.

Robert Kluijver, Curator of Gemak

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Web resources:

4. <http://clearinghouse.infovlad.net/showthread.php?t=10962>
- 6 & 7: www.greencardamom.net
8. <http://www.chukpalurugs.com/>
9. <http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/> The guidebook to Kabul: Constitutions can be downloaded as pdf file on www.gemak.org
10. <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2003/02/mullah200302?currentPage=1>
12. <http://kabulpress.org/Gallery/>
13. <http://www.sayara-media.com/>
14. <http://www.irinnews.org/>
<http://afghanphoto.blogspot.com/>
15. www.tolo.tv
- 16 & 17. <http://www.cacakabul.org/> and http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-310/_nr-187/i.html

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