Art in Contemporary Afghanistan

John Wall

From 17 to 21 November 2019, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) in Kabul hosted an exhibition of painting, ‘Art and Film in Contemporary Afghanistan’, and a minor festival of short film. On exhibition were around one hundred paintings by artists from the cities of Kabul and Herat, some independent, others academic artists from the Fine Arts departments of the University of Kabul and the University of Herat. The paintings drew on many genres, from abstract expressionism, impressionism, hyperrealism, still life and the portrait, to the Persian miniature, in both its classical and various post-modernist iterations. Alongside the exhibition, artists from the University of Herat also conducted workshops for students, offering instruction and practice in painting and drawing, and attended by up to one hundred students who were keen to extend their domain of creativity. The short films on show were directed by several of the professors in the Fine Arts department at the University of Kabul, although this review deals only with the art exhibition and not the film festival. This was the second exhibition hosted by the university in 2019, the first being a show of the work of Artlords, a Kabul-based art collective that focuses on graffiti and antiwar images.

At the opening ceremony of a 2015 exhibition in Kabul, the late Dr Sharif Fayez, founder of the American University of Afghanistan, declared that the great achievement of art in Afghanistan was simply that it existed, when the policies and practices of the Taliban government during the late 1990s had, in fact, sought to expunge it from the collective imaginary. What this 2019 exhibition attested to, however, is that art in Afghanistan not only exists but is thriving, and is brimming with experimentation, eclecticism, imagination and learned technical skill.

It is worth mentioning here, parenthetically, that over a long period of time Afghanistan has suffered the degradation of its artistic heritage, with the great works of Timurid Herat and Moghul Kabul having disappeared from the country and now hanging in museums elsewhere. It may be noted that the American University of Afghanistan, conscious of this absence, and under the direction of Professor Michael Barry, has acquired and put on permanent exhibition at the university 160 high quality laser prints (on aluminum sheets) of major works produced in Timurid Herat during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Moghul Kabul in the mid-sixteenth century, and Moghul Delhi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Walking through the improvised gallery of ‘Art and Film in Contemporary Afghanistan’, viewing works and discussing art with students, artists and professors of art, one thing becomes clear – namely, that artists and the institutions of art education in this country are engaged in a
fully-fledged, post-modernist dialogue with the history of art in three regions of the world: Afghanistan, the Middle East and modernist Euro-America. Indeed, a visiting professor of art from the University of Herat, Abdul Naser Sawaby, commented that his artistic exploration of the principles of spatial organisation in the works of the great Kamal ud-Din Behzad (1450–1535), from Herat, had made him take notice of the spatial insights of modernists like Braque and Picasso, there being something like a common visual culture linking the Persian style and the European modernists.

A significant number of works in the exhibition draw heavily on the lessons of impressionism and abstract expressionism, in a way that has revitalised these styles and produced a genuinely popular art in Afghanistan. Both on the street and in the academies, artists produce depictions of public spaces, streets and marketplaces that are painted in an impressionistic style using acrylic paint, trowelled on and spread with wide (and often, coarse) brushes. There is a preference for strong primary colours, with an accent on blues, whites and ochres, with reds for balance. There is a mechanism at work in these paintings that impacts the politics of individual identity and its presence in social space. In paintings, figures of men and women emerge out of the vividness of the colour and the textures of the paint itself in ways that suggest a distinct pleasure in the body. However, being fluid in composition, such bodies seem to dissolve beneath the eye and melt back into the elements of colour and light, thus averting the gaze of the moralist and affirming the autonomy of the body in otherwise closely scrutinised public spaces.

In other works, there is less concern with the play of light and more with something like the aerodynamics of image. In his painting *Flight* (2019), Kabul artist Mohib Ataye uses course brush strokes, Jackson Pollock-like sprays, chunks of seemingly decaying paint and a sense of physical roughness to create a work of delicate poise and elusive painterly depth. For Ataye, the encounter with Euro-American styles of the twentieth century are of particular personal importance. Art school was not an option for him during the late 1990s for the good reason that such institutions had ceased to exist in Kabul. He read books on art and found in Euro-American modernism the kind of experimentation with colour, line, texture and technique that he could readily put into practice. Mohib Ataye desired not only to paint but also to experiment with the
possibility of living a life based on artistic principles, principles that were themselves undergoing an evolution.

The basis of art pedagogy in Afghan institutes of Fine Arts involves the study of the traditions of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Persian miniature. The objective is threefold: the reappropriation of art history, the cultivation of drafting skills, and the exploration of ways in which contemporary art practice and culture might be invested with the extraordinary power, technique and creativity of these classic forms to produce a new art. As Abdul Naser Sawaby notes, ‘We are all children of Behzad’, referring to the great sixteenth-century master of Herat. There are significant differences in the way artists from different parts of the country engage with this tradition. Those from Kabul tend to use their knowledge to create a ‘popular form’ of landscapes, vivid in colour, rich in motifs and dynamic in organisation. One example is the work of Madineh Rahmani, who transposes the figures of animals, especially horses, and the decorative effect of nomadic living spaces – the patterns and folds of the tent – onto a flat space of trees, grasses and flowing water, creating the genre of the Pastoral for the gaze of a society increasingly shifting from rural to overcrowded and heavily congested urban environments.

Madineh Rahmani, Inside, 2019, gouache and watercolour, 70 x 55 cm, courtesy of the artist
The approach of the Herat artists, in contrast, is to ‘sample’ elements like line, colour and literary mode from the tradition of the Persian miniature, recombining them in the search for a contemporary open-ended idiom. In Continuum, Abdul Naser Sawaby takes the motif of the horse from historical illustrations of epic poetry. In this lyrical work, the three horses prancing across an empty landscape in unison are painted with the evident finesse of the old style – exquisitely delicate, graceful creatures, propelled in movement as much by the force of the curve as by any notion of ‘horseness’. The shifting luminosity and the rhythmic repetition in the movement of this work is, according to Sawaby, an allegory of time, of time as the production of difference in repetition.

The great Muslim philosopher, Ibn al-Arabi, came up with the notion of the ‘imaginal’ to describe a dynamic, non-metric space that is simultaneously of the world and not of it. According to this way of seeing the world, art occupies this space of an ‘in-between’. Sawaby believes that art is driven by the power of the imaginal in such a way that it transforms ‘the journeys of humans in time into a song of humanity’.

Of particular interest here is that artists in this region tend not to see their art as representational or mimetic in the Aristotelian sense of mimesis. Rather, the work of art is understood and conceived as an object in itself, whose relation to reality, however that may be defined, is one of transformational and creative force. A second painting by Abdul Naser Sawaby plays with the notion of transformation. This work, cryptically entitled Mimesis, inverts the order of Continuum (these are two works in a series of three), with the figure of the animal in the centre of the frame no longer leading other figures but following, not painted in gold but black. These figures...
represent the Asian bison, an endangered species in the region stretching from Turkey through Iran to Afghanistan. But the \textit{mimeis} of the title does not refer here to the realist depiction of nature. The reference is, rather, to the repetition of certain ‘ways of seeing’ that exist both in nature and human society, the rhythmic repetition and multiplication here of the curve in what Paul Klee calls the adventure of the line, ‘the line going for a walk,’ constitutive in this work of the domes, the joyous cloud formations, the multilayered horizon and the curvilinear physiology of the bison themselves. Central, too, is the colouristic contrast of gold and black, expressive of the Zoroastrian vision of the struggle to create a luminous life (of the mind) out of conflicting forces. It is the task of art, says Sawaby, ‘to identify anomaly, contradiction and impasse, giving shape to the means necessary for their resolution’. The vivid greens, reds and blues of the Persian miniature of the past, a quality that so impressed Henri Matisse, give way in these works to flat tones of grey, green and blue, traversed at the same time by golds and blacks.

What has been said of Sawaby’s work also applies to that of another artist from Herat, Nila Osmani, who has painted an expansive but minimalist piece, made up of fragments of the artistic tradition. The difference with this work, however, is that its central motif deals with the existential. The rock, protruding into the cosmos, is painted in the classical Persianate style, where it normally signifies a wilderness or an unknown element, a hiding place for spies and demons living outside organised society, but a refuge, too, for hermits seeking enlightenment. In Osmani’s work, the rock is inhabited by humans serenely going about their business with tools and ladders, mobile and self-contained in a way that is reminiscent of Giacometti. Here the existential is interpolated into the symbolic, decorative world of the miniature, a world more used to political and theological idealisation than the rhythms of the everyday. The rock, with its organic contours, protrudes into space, thus generating depth of field. Yet the spatial field is, to a certain degree, flat, after the fashion of the classical miniature, maintained here by the rectangular sun (\textit{shamsel}) that centres the whole work. This resulting tension is what some observers have called the ‘mobile space’ of the miniature, the oscillation between a two and a three-dimensional field.
There is a sense in these paintings that new and dynamic forms can be extracted from the traditional, the active element being the transformational dynamics of art. The artworks presented in this exhibition suggest that art is indispensable to the project whereby a new world might be built upon the ruins of the political violence that has afflicted Afghanistan with such devastation over the last forty years. Such transformational praxis holds within itself a radical capacity for creativity and renewal. We see this in the poignant fragility of these post-modernist miniatures, as well as in the oftentimes garish vitality of the impressionist and abstract expressionist works. Their most powerful resource, in addition to the dedication and skill of their makers, is the capacity for a profound meditation on the nature of space, time, the self and the aesthetic nature of thought. Not only in terms of the aesthetic, but also the social, must the power and necessity of transformation be understood as a mode of being-in-the-world.

John Wall teaches literary studies at the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, focusing on psychosocial mechanisms and poetics in the literatures of the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia and Western Europe. He has published on Samuel Beckett, most recently in Samuel Beckett Today /Aujourd’hui, contributed a chapter in a book on Tristan Tzara, published by Rodopi, and has also edited volumes on the production of cultural space, and the transformational properties of music in contemporary cultures, both published by Cambridge Scholars Press. His short fiction has been published in Zaporogue.