Exhibition

zahra khodadadi



Zahra Khodadadi in her studio at Villa Arson, 2022
photo credit : Mohsin Taasha

villa arson

September 29 – October 2, 2022

Galerie provisoire

nice

Interview between Éric Mangion and Zahra Khodadadi on the occasion of the artist's residency at Villa Arson and the presentation of her work to the public in the "temporary gallery" from September 29 to October 2, 2022.

Eric Mangion: You worked between 2017 and 2021 for the United Nations on a program dedicated to environment (UNEP). What program was it exactly?

Zahra Khodadadi: The Office where I worked, the United Nations Environment Program, has had a role since 2002 in laying the environmental foundations for sustainable development in Afghanistan.
This program focuses on building environmental resilience and sustainability throughout the country.
Also I worked as a Knowledge Management Assistant with UNEP my responsibilities were designing the publications, managing their social media, taking photos, and filming during their events, projects, and missions in the provinces.

E.M.: When and how did you develop your photography practice of photography?

Z.K.: I started photography while I was studying graphic Design at Kabul University in 2012. After my graduation from university in 2014, I had to find a job to support my family. So, I joined an international organization called Impassion Afghanistan as an intern graphic designer, it was my first professional experience after the university. It was the best experience
because I could learn many things and put graphic design into practice, since the educational system in the university was not satisfactory or up-to-date and practically, we did not learn anything. After my first job, I worked with the UN Environment Program. All this time I never stopped doing photography, I tried to use my official holidays, leaves, and weekends to practice photography. I worked as a freelance photographer during my official job with many photo agencies and journalists.
In conclusion, the reason I worked with organizations was to support my family and to buy the equipment I needed. In every situation, I never stopped doing art and taking photos. Art for me is the most important.

E.M.: You define yourself as a “street artist”. What does this mean for a photographer?
Does this make you a documentary photographer?

Z.K.: Honestly, I can't define myself! My vision when I do photography, graphic design, films, or murals, is to document and show the issues and realities of the Afghanistan people. I do and will do whatever I can to explore my feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, it doesn’t matter how and which medium! That’s why I love art!

E.M.: You will have often taken pictures of families. Why this choice?

Z.K.: The Families project is one of my first long projects, which I started in 2019. It took shape when I was separated from my family for security and practical reason at the time when I was working. Living alone for a young and single girl is not only taboo but it also creates a lot of difficulties. In the meantime, I met many other girls and boys who lived like me. Most of their families had migrated many decades ago to neighboring countries, but they decided to return to Afghanistan alone to work and study. My attention was drawn to the family photos that were common among families in the past decades, and I realized that in many families this culture has been replaced by individual selfies or pictures of groups of friends, and even this is disappearing. So, it made me think about the meaning of family, the meaning of being together, and how migrations, war, and modern life affect it.
In addition to all this, my previous experiences and my knowledge of my society made working on this project really important and interesting, since Afghan society is not only multicultural and multi-traditional, it is also endangered, and remaining alive is never guaranteed at any time for anyone. So for me doing this project is both about documenting and making art. I tried to take photos in a very natural way of these families, in their private space (home), and to change and/or replace this kind of photo with an artistic image. The most interesting and at the same time most challenging part of this project was the process of communicating and finding families.

E.M.: Can you tell us about this surprising photograph, Untitled, 2016? We can see a woman and her daughter running in a game park in the middle of the desert. It looks like an abandoned school.

Z.K.: Yes, it was my first trip to Bamiyan on an assignment (my motherland, Bamiyan, is located in the central highlands of Afghanistan, surrounded by the Kuh-e-Baba and Hindu Kush mountains. It's one of the greenest, safest, and most traditional cities in Afghanistan. The people of Bamiyan are mostly from the Hazara ethnic group and it’s a bit of a cultural capital of Hazarejat. Bamiyan is known as the land of the Buddhas. The statues sit in ancient caves where people come to pray. Unfortunately, the Taliban government destroyed many Buddha statues in 2001, including two of the largest carvings in the world). The exact location of the photo is the National Park of Band-e Amir. This Park has six incredible lakes and during the summer it’s very crowded, but I went there during the quietest time.
There was just one other family whom you can see in the photo. The movement of the mother and her daughter surprised even me when I took the photo.

E.M.: About Hazara families, we know how this people has been martyred for centuries in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Is this a way of testifying to their suffering?

Z.K.: The Families project includes on all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. Although I am a Hazara my work is about everyone.

E.M.: You are a woman artist. This must make it even more difficult to practice your art in Afghanistan. What obstacles did you encounter?

Z.K.: Although Afghanistan is a war-torn country, life can be difficult for anyone, but in the field of art and photography, it is many times more difficult, especially for women because Afghanistan is a patriarchal and traditional society. First, insecurity is the main obstacle for all who are more engaged outside of their home and with society. Second, as a woman, I had to have not only enough courage and strength but I

also had to work more with men in spite of the patriarchal and noxious culture.
My challenges as a photographer were not being able to participate in any traditional games like Boz Kashi, Sag Bazi, etc. Because all these games are for men. I couldn't stay out late in the evening. I usually needed to find other friends to be able to do photography or other activities like mural painting. I was verbally and physically abused several times for having a camera. In addition to all these issues, the lack of a proper art gallery, work space or even a consistent and permanent art center where we could have activities and show our works was one of the important problems that prevented us from working as we wanted.

E.M.: As we are having this conversation, it's been exactly a year since you urgently left Kabul by plane, like thousands of other Afghan people. Under what conditions did you manage to escape?

Z.K.: We took a flight to France on August 12 just three days before the Taliban took over. We had never really planned to leave Afghanistan until the Taliban got close to Kabul and the number of explosions increased. But we had to do something to stay alive. The situation in those days was extremely stressful because everybody was very worried about the uncertainty. It was getting harder to get visas for all countries, and the cost of flights was increasing and there were many rumors spreading. It was a miracle for us that we were able to get an urgent visa from France. After a week we were able to buy tickets. Once we had a flight, and we entered the airport, everyone looked very worried and in a hurry to leave and catch their planes. For me, that day was the worst day of my life because it was the last day I saw my family and my country. And I don't know when and how I can return and be reunited with my family.

E.M.: Were you able to take pictures of these terrifying moments?

Z.K.: No, I couldn't.

E.M.: Have you heard from your family and friends who stayed behind?

Z.K.: Yes, I have. Thankfully my parents and siblings were able to evacuate a few weeks after the Taliban took over the government, and now they are fine and safe out of Afghanistan.

E.M.: After living several months in Marseille between August 2021 and January 2022, you settled with your partner (artist Mohsin Taasha) in Nice, where you were both hosted by Villa Arson. How are you adapting, and what relation are you gradually developing with our culture?

Z.K.: In fact, adapting to a new system, a new culture, especially a new language, is difficult and time-consuming but it's not very challenging or hard. I am happy that here everyone has the freedom and the right to do whatever they want or believe. Now, I'm trying my best to learn the language and at the same time, I'm focusing on my artistic projects.

E.M.: And lastly, you have been working on pictures of exploding cars for the last few months. Why did you make this choice, and how do you conduct your research?

Z.K.: There are many reasons why I chose damaged cars. The first one is criticizing the absence of a security control system, and in general criticizing the whole system of Afghanistan's government. The second one is to use the damaged cars in an artistic way as an element both for documenting and creating artwork. In the last two decades in Afghanistan, there have been many attacks or explosions every month, every week or even every day. All of these show the lack or absence of any security system and any clear and efficient system in Afghanistan's government.
In this project, I chose the damaged cars because they somehow transported explosive materials - there are no accurate statistics about this -, or because these cars were targeted and exploded. I conducted research on each car to find out when it happened, where it happened, who or which group claimed responsibility, etc. For me, the event is not only an event, it's also what reveals the different and most important issues, the stories, and or the period. As you noticed on the artworks, the main element is cars, I want to make them more visible so that
attention is first attracted by the car's abstract shape rather than the story behind its reality and its violent and bloody atmosphere, and then, after, one can notice the details and the caption.

Zahra Khodadadi's residency is supported by the PAUSE Program for Scientists and Artists in Exile run by the Collège de France, in partnership with the Agency for artists in exile.