



IN ITS IMAGERY *THE HAUNTED LOTUS* REFERS TO THE GIANT SLEEPING BUDDHA THAT LIES UNDISTURBED, ACCORDING TO LOCALS, BENEATH THE SOIL OF BAMİYAN, IMPERVIOUS TO THE DESTRUCTION ABOVE IT. ITS CRISSCROSSED WRAPPING RECALLS THE ARCHITECTURAL SCAFFOLDING SUPPORTING THE EMPTY CLIFF-FACE NICHES THAT ONCE HOUSED THE BAMİYAN BUDDHAS BEFORE THEIR DESTRUCTION.

Khadim Ali combines historical tradition and contemporary storytelling in his delicate miniature paintings. Working between Sydney, Kabul and Quetta since 2009, Ali explores notions of good and evil through his art, drawing inspiration from the epic poem *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings, by the late tenth-century Persian court poet, Ferdowsi. Against a backdrop of muted pigment washes and floating calligraphic forms, Ali's ambiguous characters emerge with white wings and curled malevolent horns. Stories unfold with them, exploring the complexity of identity and survival in a region wracked by centuries of intertribal warfare, then Taliban rule.

Ali was born in Quetta, Pakistan, in 1978, and his family's story, like that of many Hazaras of Afghan descent, is one of dispossession and persecution. Massacres against the Hazaras in the 1890s and 1920s saw his great-grandfather, then grandfather, driven from their Afghan homeland, the latter fleeing as a teenager to pre-partition India and serving in the British Army. When he left Afghanistan, Ali's grandfather took just two books with him: the Holy Koran and *Shahnameh*. With its exquisite illustrations and vivid stories of human suffering and triumph, *Shahnameh* would play a central role in Ali's upbringing many years later. So too would the heroic character Rostam, who appeared in many of its stories and fought against humanity's dark side, symbolised by demons.

One of Ali's strongest childhood memories is of his grandfather singing stories from *Shahnameh* to entertain family and guests during the coldest months of the year, when they would gather for warmth at the local mosque. Ali's first encounter with miniature painting came through his grandfather's book, which was copied from an Indian sixteenth-century edition with illustrations by the acclaimed Persian miniaturist Bihzad. By listening to the book's stories and the conversations of his elders, Ali discovered his own history: 'When I learned of the massacres of the Hazaras, I found myself as a Rostam in my imagination, making our land free.'¹

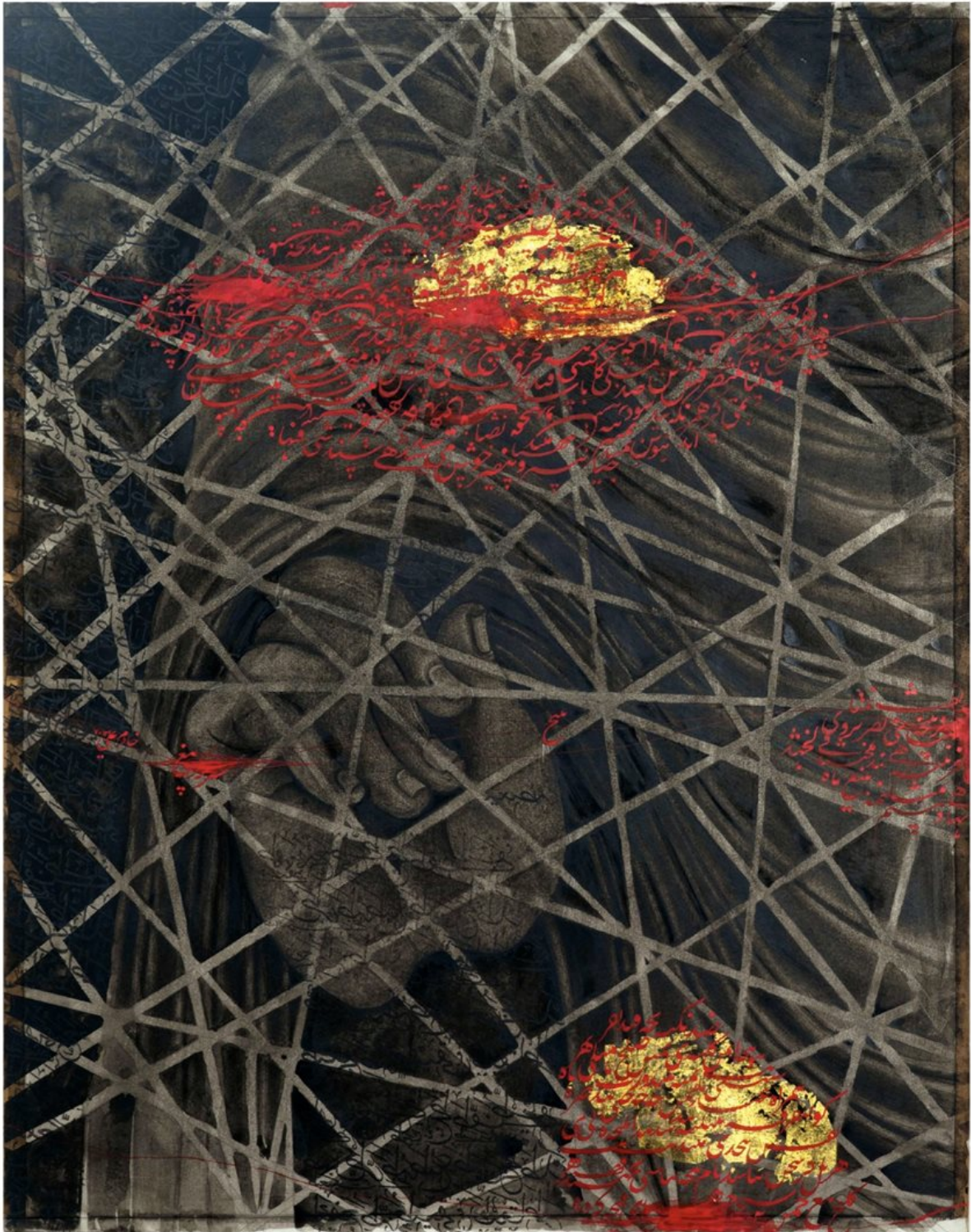
Ali made his first short visit to Afghanistan in 1995 as the Taliban fundamentalist political party rose to power there. It formed a new government the following year, ruling with oppression and brutality until its Allied overthrow in 2001, and has since continued to inflict terror and violence on civilians, particularly women and girls. With their long beards and dark clothing, the Taliban soldiers embodied

for Ali the demons from *Shahnameh*. Although they had no beards in Bihzad's original illustrations, Ali's demons appropriated this characteristic as a way of linking past history with the present situation. The experience of being violently slapped about the face by Taliban soldiers at checkpoints, and repeatedly called a Hazara and Shia 'infidel', are indelible in Ali's memory. They find expression too through his art with its ambivalent cast of characters: at once devils and angels, monsters and heroes. This was, he said, the start of 'being demon in my dark history of genocide, of finding myself to be the infidel – and being so helpless when they were so powerful, ruling the city'. He concluded, 'Since then, I have found myself somewhere between the demon and Rostam; this was the only form of illustration I knew'.

Speaking more widely of a crisis in national identity, Ali has observed that there is 'no common or collective history' in Afghanistan due to centuries of conflict, and that one group's hero is another's demon. There is no 'hero figure' portrayed on Afghan bank notes – something that would be forbidden under Islam, but impossible in any case, due to the longstanding divisions between ethnic groups in the country. Following Ali's first visit to Afghanistan he has returned repeatedly to the capital city of Kabul, eventually establishing a studio there, and to the mountainous region of Bamīyan. Well known for the towering sixth-century stone Buddhas that were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, Bamīyan is situated on the ancient Silk Road, a connecting route between east and west. It is also the historical centre of Hazara culture and has become a reference point for Ali's miniature paintings.

In 1996 Ali left Quetta for Iran, spurred by the rising persecution of Hazaras in Pakistan and Taliban oppression. There were almost no opportunities at this time for young Hazaras living in Pakistan, many of whom were fleeing to Iran, a country that shared their Shia Muslim faith. Situated at the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, Quetta had become a recruitment site for the Taliban, fuelled by propaganda and prejudice, so Ali would spend the next year and a half in Tehran working as a manual labourer. During this period he came across an advertisement for evening drawing classes and after several approaches was reluctantly accepted by the teacher, who had no other foreign students. But the teacher soon recognised and nurtured his new pupil's talent, employing Ali to work with him as a public mural









ABOVE
The haunted lotus, 2012
Gouache, ink and gold leaf on Wasli paper,
70 x 54 cm each
Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13),
Neue Galerie, Kassel
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

RIGHT
Carpet weaving work in progress based on
The haunted lotus, 2013
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

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The haunted lotus, 2012-13
Gouache, ink and gold leaf on Wasli paper, 70 x 54 cm
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

painter during the day. He also introduced Ali to his colleagues at the local university, who invited him to join their diploma class in Persian miniature painting.

Ali returned to Quetta in 1998 and a year later received a scholarship to study miniature painting at the prestigious National College of Arts in Lahore, where he graduated in 2003. He then established a studio in Quetta and another in Kabul, travelling between Pakistan and Afghanistan regularly as he built his practice, and subsequently exhibited his work in Karachi and Dubai, then London and Fukuoka, Japan. In 2006 he participated in the 5th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane with 'The Bamiyan Drawing Project', inviting Afghan children to share their culture with local school-children in Australia. Another iteration saw children in Fukuoka respond to the Afghan children's drawings through their own illustrated narratives. Ali emigrated permanently to Australia three years later, the first Hazara to do so on the grounds of 'distinguished talent', and is completing a Master of Fine Arts at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, this year.

Since his relocation to Sydney Ali has exhibited, spoken publicly and curated independent projects introducing contemporary Afghan art to the wider world. In 2012 he participated in a seminar series initiated by dOCUMENTA (13) linking the cities of Kabul, Bamiyan and Kassel, then showed his miniature paintings as part of the prestigious quinquennial exhibition at the Neue Galerie, Kassel. Built around shared themes of destruction and renewal, the relationship between Kassel and Kabul was further expanded through a group exhibition of contemporary Afghan artists in Kassel as part of dOCUMENTA (13). His miniature paintings were also exhibited, then acquired, by the Guggenheim Museum, New York, as part of the institution's South and South-East Asia curatorial program.

Ali's ambitious miniature painting *The haunted lotus*, 2012, formed a centrepiece of his dOCUMENTA (13) participation. Presented across four individually framed parts, it depicts a reclining Buddha figure wrapped within an elaborate network of crisscrossing lines, and winged demon figures massed before it. In its imagery *The haunted lotus* refers to the giant sleeping Buddha that lies undisturbed, according to locals, beneath the soil of Bamiyan, impervious to the destruction above it. Its crisscrossed wrapping recalls the architectural scaffolding supporting the empty cliff-face niches that once housed the Bamiyan Buddhas before their destruction. Using a simple palette of white, red and gold leaf against a rust-brown backdrop, it brings together the artist's concerns across time and place, suggesting the possibility for renewal that lies dormant within all violent acts.

Speaking about the controlled, often sombre, use of colour in his miniature paintings, Ali observed that he grew up 'in a depressed, deprived community' as a Hazara: 'I had no control over my art; whatever was pouring out of me, whenever I tried to do something joyful, beautiful or colourful, I couldn't'. His paintings incorporate the natural colour of the Afghan landscape and its objects – disused weapons, rusting military tanks – as well as the black and lapis lazuli of the local women's burquas: 'Rust, blood, blue linen, dark history – that is where my colour palette is'.

Ali has also spoken about the complex relationship that many Afghans have towards the history of carpet weaving, something that he explores in his latest body of work:

The only colourful thing I could look at was carpets, carpets woven by refugees to survive. Now the children of refugees hate the carpets, as adults, because they were made to weave them and suffered injuries. Most of my friends have lost their childhoods to carpet weaving factories where they worked for ten rupees a day, or two loaves of bread.

In his March 2014 solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Ali seeks to alter the meaning of the woven carpet as an artform, working in collaboration with Hazara weavers in Herat and Kabul who have become deeply involved with the project. A creative and joyful activity, rather than a forced one, which also injects money into the local community, the weaving of a large, lapis-blue-robbed devil has been undertaken in secrecy to avoid censure by conservative Islamic scholars who oppose its overt pictorial format.

Time is a central factor in all of Ali's art, from the miniature paintings that can take up to two years to complete to the weaving process, which is equally time-consuming and intricate. Ali uses traditional Wasli paper for his paintings, pasting four layers together with a wheat-based glue for extra rigidity, and sulphate for protection against insects. Using a combination of dyes, including tannins derived from tea, coffee, onions and walnut skins, as well as ground pigments and gold leaf, an under-layer is created. Pencil outlines are then filled with thick black carbon lamp and gum arabic, with the paper washed and dried repeatedly to create the impression of colour coming out of the page, not absorbing into it. The sanding back of the surface further creates a worn, textured effect onto which the earthy stains and colour pigments are then applied. Fragments of Farsi and Arabic script float across the picture plane, like text above a page; often untranslatable, they comprise a palimpsest of stories and memories that coexist alongside the pictorial imagery.

Reflecting on his creative process, Ali has observed, 'Sometimes in my practice of art, when I do something, I have no words for it. So I have to spend some time, have some intimate discussion with a piece of art, to understand it, to make it clearer for myself'. This process of understanding – of channelling then unravelling layers of history and trauma – reflects the healing of a culture that has withstood violence and oppression, to emerge as both resilient and powerful in voice. Using traditional miniaturist form and narratives, Khadim Ali's art transforms history into the present. It resonates for audiences today around the world who have experienced conflict, offering new ways of understanding a landscape that is built on loss and determined in its reinvention.

Khadim Ali: The Haunted Lotus, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 6 March – 1 June 2014.

1 All quotes are from a conversation with the artist, 16 October 2013.