

# To hold you close as you fall with the hope that you *may rise in a better place*

The realization that almost a year later there are still few words that will best describe what happened in Afghanistan in August 2021, is rather daunting and somewhat defeating. Partly because no words small enough to fit this page can carry the weight and gravity of the sea of pain and loss unleashed upon a nation for years, made ever more visible overnight. The end of an occupation marked the rise of the despotic Taliban regime. It is a titanic change that is increasingly more visible, but we are still to fully grasp its consequences and effects upon the people in all its forms. Who won, and who lost in the two decades-long war waged upon the land is a bewildering question, but what has become ever more evident is that it was the ordinary citizens whose lives and futures were gambled in a contest for power between the United States and its allies, and the Taliban.

In our increasingly connected but shockingly distant and remote world, it didn't take long for everyone to become spectators of the end of the US imperial game which they had long ignored. As scenes of desperation at Kabul Airport were etched onto television screens everywhere, famously enshrined by the unbelievable desperation of the men who saw no other hope but to cling onto the C-17 US Air Force plane, only to then live on as falling stars, captured by cell phone cameras in broad daylight. Two of them, Safiullah Hotak and Fida Mohammad, had clung to each other before falling onto a rooftop in Kabul. While it feels mentally and physically jarring to think of the fear that must have crept into them as they took on this journey to the impossible, their eventual destiny served as a reminder of how the American occupation and its foreign and local allies viewed the local population and their lives as dispensable. This was made even more visible by a drone strike on civilians in Kabul the day before the US withdrawal, the shooting of civilians by on the ground and a suicide attack at Kabul Airport.

While the deaths, the losses, desperation and calamities of the end of the American occupation were genuinely shocking to the world, albeit momentarily, if one were to look closely and truthfully at the events of the last two decades, this end was nothing but expected—another moment in an utterly destructive war that had destroyed many lives was only set apart because it was no longer invisible—giving the world a glimpse into what truly this long war was: a bloody occupation blanketed under the guise of a mission for democracy and freedom. On the other hand, this moment for reflection upon the US and its allies' occupation was rather quickly overshadowed by the return to power of the Taliban, whose own track record of violence and atrocities rivals that

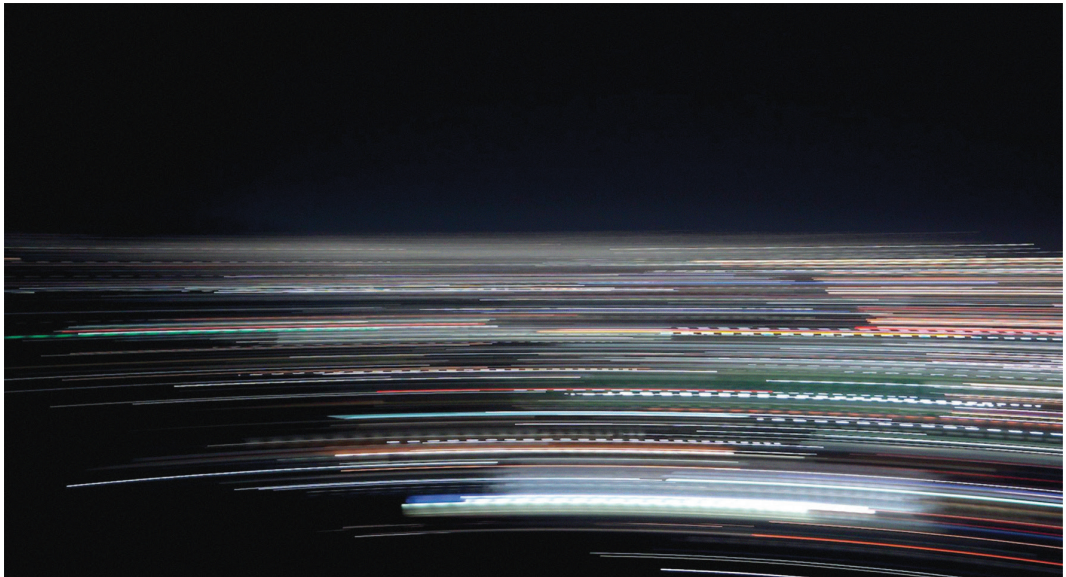
















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of the occupying armies. Nevertheless, this tragic turn of events marked the power of visibility and the urgent need for a critical reexamination of Afghanistan's recent history beyond the official narrative dispersed during the American occupation. This monumental task has been at the core of the artworks produced by the artist Aziz Hazara. Despite his young age and the pressures of working in a hostile social and convoluted artistic environment, he has long sought to critically reexamine the visible and invisible sides of the war and how it continues to shape Afghan society.

In a rather enigmatic scene, three young boys are photographed standing shoulder to shoulder at the centre of the image. With barren hills behind, glimpses of white light are scattered like stars above them. Beyond looking directly at the viewer, the subjects' presence is strangely heightened by the blur that restricts the viewer from clearly constructing their faces. In addition, the image's ghostly greenish luminescence further exacerbates the unease pulsating from the image. Part of a series of seven photographs titled *Camouflage* (2016), Hazara created this work utilizing military night vision goggles used by US forces in Afghanistan, which the artist bought from a local market in Kabul.

In these staged scenes captured through the master's tool, Hazara allows the viewer to reflect on the invisible and hidden sides of the American war and the technologies that facilitated inconceivable violence. He presents the viewer with a glimpse into the loss, trauma and confusion inflicted upon many Afghan families during night raids or "kill or capture" operations, a military tactic used by the US and its allies. At one point, the international forces reportedly conducted forty raids per night across Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> These raids often involved the sudden bursting into civilian homes, resulting in casualties and human rights violations that would never be accounted for, as both this foreign military and its local allies would see any search for justice as an act of war against their succinctly created and glowing narrative of life under the occupation.

During his speech to the United States Congress and the nation on 20 September 2001, President George W. Bush emphatically claimed that they "should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes visible on TV and covert operations secret even in success."<sup>2</sup> Against this background, which according to the Cost of War Project<sup>3</sup> resulted in the eventual deaths of nearly 71,000 civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Bush's claims about (covert) visibility and invisibility are a significant cause of how the true face of the subsequent two decade occupation was hidden from the public. This invisibility plays a central role in Hazara's art practice, as he takes up his monumental task of investigating and bringing to light the ghastly spectacle of war that has scarred many inside the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Gaston, 'Night Raids: For Afghan Civilians, the Costs May Outweigh the Benefits', *Open Society Foundations*, 19 September 2011; <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/night-raids-afghan-civilians-costs-may-outweigh-benefits>; accessed 16 May 2022

<sup>2</sup> 'Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation', *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2001; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html)

<sup>3</sup> See <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>

Transgressing the dramatic images produced by photojournalists that exploit the theatrical cruelty of war through the abject bodies of its victims, in *Camouflage* Hazara utilizes obscurity as a powerful tool to guide the viewer's attention from the victim to the perpetrator. The blurred images directly reference the murky evidence used by the foreign armies and their local allies to sentence the local subjects of these raids to acts of violence. As Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), "the memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local."<sup>4</sup> This localness is evident in the Hazara's work as he deliberately attempts to respect his subject's blamelessness, as a consideration that any citizen in Afghanistan could have been that subject, even himself. Instead of facile compassion often aroused by the widely circulated images of the war, Hazara's works aim to incite examination and investigation which was not a common practice for artists working in Afghanistan, his sad images evidence of the barbarity of a war that lacked transparency in its conduct.

The most potent works of art emerge from a deep connection with the environment that gives them their meaning and urgency, where the artist has not only observed the various causes and material encountered but also has lived with them. An undeniable amount of lived experiences seeps out from Hazara's artworks towards its audience, specifically related to how the military technology that flooded Afghanistan after 2001 began to interpolate itself into the physical and cultural environment.

One of my earliest memories, of bewilderment, of the difference between our world and that of the foreign soldiers patrolling our neighborhoods early in the war, in the mid-2000s, is a story told by a friend in school. Sitting in our freshly renovated classrooms, part of the war's 'humanitarian enterprise' (that requires a separate essay to this to expose and disprove), as with any adolescents preoccupied with the never-ending search for new facts in the service of impressing our peers, a classmate, who I would refer to as "Khalid" loudly claimed that he had learned that the foreign soldiers had glasses that would allow them to see anyone naked. The bizarre fact was that even at the time his story seemed both incomprehensible yet equally believable, given the breadth and depth of military technological might that had overrun the country that was extricating itself from a decade of destruction and world isolation following the end of the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. I introduce this element here because there is a direct relationship to this subjectivity of lived experience in Hazara's artwork.

In a set of four monotone images titled *Kite Balloon* (2018), taken from the top of a hill overlooking Kabul, Hazara focuses his camera towards what appears to be a tiny white balloon seen hovering above the city. This series draws attention to helium-powered US military surveillance balloons (which measured nearly 120 feet long and were stationed at 1,500 feet high), visible over Kabul and many other cities in Afghanistan. These spy blimps have now disappeared following the exit of US forces—but the experience of living under them, that shaped the lives of many since their original introduction into the country in 2007, remains.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York City, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003

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These balloons, part of a far more comprehensive network of surveillance with their capabilities and functions highly classified, and equipped with infrared heat-sensing cameras, were considered an 'evil eye' in the sky. While they might not have been able to see the citizens living beneath them naked as "Khalid" stated, they were a direct attack on the sanctity of the private sphere below, a sacred pillar of local society. Through simple counter-imaging, Hazara reminds us of the state of fear and victimization inflicted upon innocent civilians by these surveillance systems; their presumed long-lasting psychological effects taking years to reconcile.

Contemplating the long-term effects of war on the population also becomes the central point of focus in the video *Rehearsal* (2020), where a young boy getting a piggyback ride from a slightly older friend loudly performs the sounds of gunfire, *tuh tuh tuh... tuh tuh tuh – tuh turrh turhhhh...* Shaking from the weight resting on his back, the supporting friend rotates left and right to give the young boy a broader view as he unleashes bullets firing from his imaginary gun held effortlessly in his scraggly arms. While this is a relatively short video, the work's historical potency goes beyond its length.

An Islamic holiday celebrated twice annually, Eid marks some of the most sacred and festive days in Afghanistan, when the everyday hustle and bustle of life momentarily stops to give way to the joys of family and community. In recent decades, Eid in Kabul has increasingly been engulfed by the spectacle of material consumerism. One of the most common and highly in-demand objects in stores throughout the city are toy guns, that come in various shapes and forms and have become ever more realistic and sophisticated over the years. In a bizarre twist reflective of the wider environment, children turn to these toy guns to celebrate Eid by staging fake wars waged with family, friends and neighbours. As a masterful stroke, in *Rehearsal*, Hazara presents an amalgamation of a long, violent history through this single scene. Faced with the harsh realities of growing up with never-ending war, these young subjects have internalized its mechanisms, which in return will generate them into active players in future war. This work is a reminder of how even the most sacred of moments and innocent acts of play are not only contaminated by but also instrumentalized by the poison of war.

With a strong and dusty wind, a familiar sign of a summer day in Kabul, pushing against him, a young boy dressed in the traditional Perahan-tunban and vest attempts to stand upon a rocky setting at the edge of a panoramic view of Kabul. This moment of endurance and perseverance is part of the five-channel video *Bow Echo* (2019) – installed across giant screens that hang in a semi-circular presentation, each channel shows a different young boy attempting the same feat, to stand upon the rock and forcefully blow into a small toy trumpet, only to be toppled off the rock by the violent wind that acrobatically animates their scrawny bodies. The viewer is invited to not only see the boys repeatedly take up this quest side by side but also listen to an eerie sound mix of the fierce wind, drones, helicopters and the tiny plastic trumpets, fighting to annul one another. In this powerfully poetic work, Hazara continues his examination of how conflict and war penetrate every part of life. The boy's journey to mount the rock can be seen as a metaphorical depiction of what it is like to grow up in an environment where the echoes of war blow fiercely at you from a young age. Once again, a toy takes a centre stage in Hazara's work, but only this time to become a tool to empower, by giving voice and not taking it. The boys' inability to stand still in the face of the wind and continue to blow their trumpets leaves one wondering what melodies they would play when the wind settles.

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Hazara further explores this contamination and instrumentalization in another work titled *I am looking for you like a drone, my love* (2021). A large-scale panoramic image of immense piles of trash, including military and electronic waste, food, office supplies and random junk left behind by the American forces after their exit from Bagram Air Base, is even more haunting as these inherently toxic and violent materials will sooner rather than later find their way into the local economy and life, just as Hazara had sourced his military night vision goggles from a local market. Contrastingly, this work reflects how the occupying forces treated the land and people as a dumping ground for military and technological outcomes with no regard for either, while it also illustrates a direct attempt to document and gather evidence against the extended economy that helped propel the war. Probing through the expansive material and noting its producers and suppliers, the viewer is invited to ponder how this war offered an opportunity for major international corporations and calculating individuals in trading lives for money.

In an uncanny dance of light and sound, in the single-channel digital video *Takbir* (2022), Hazara further offers the viewer an unprecedented look at the fall of the American occupation and the return of the brutal Taliban regime, in juxtaposing videos of Kabul's urban landscape dimly lit by imported electricity from neighbouring countries, with chants of *Allah-u-Akbar* ("God is great") orchestrated by the local government seeking to validate its own religious identity as the Taliban were entering the capital. These chants are followed by the beguiling melodies of Taliban *nasheeds* towards the end, signalling the turn of a new era and extending an invitation to investigate the crucial role that sonic media played in constructing the narratives of both the occupation and the Taliban's war. Dispersed far and wide, online and offline, these sounds are evidence to and active players in Afghanistan's recent tumultuous faith. The proposition Hazara ponders in *Takbir* is what is 'greatness' – pontificated upon fabricated truths, while a transmuted mystery lurks in the shadows. Hence, this work delineates between light and sound as symbols to investigate the epistemologies of the narratives constructed around the war in Afghanistan and its dire consequences upon the nation's future. If Afghanistan's history could teach us anything, it is that great powers come and go. Still, their legacies of pain and the scars of trauma will likely last forever and mutate into ever deadlier agents of chaos.

As is evident in these artworks, Hazara brings an emphatically nuanced look into reexamining the legacies of the American occupation that is not only brave but also unprecedented for both local and foreign artists. Moreover, his search for understanding the roots of violence and the importance of debunking the bigger spectacle of this war is nothing but extraordinary when seen through the fact that the artist lived and worked under these realities until very recently.

In Hazara's artworks, contemporary war's invisible exteriorities and extended mechanisms assume an essential place. Regarding them as consolidated instruments in the continuation of war and by making them visible to the public, he actively constructs a practice of resistance against these structures and tools of oppression. Furthermore, there is an undeniable thirst for justice in his works, making them extremely important and resourceful for our ability to memorialize Afghanistan's recent social and political history. Aziz Hazara gives us a glimpse into the long-term effects of the last two decades of war beyond its end and reminds us how it will take an extended time before we might fully grasp the extent of the damage it has inflicted upon Afghan society. Simultaneously, he subtly leverages the potentialities of art and critical examination to challenge official accounts of the war and effectively disrupt their continuity.