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INDEX OF THE DISAPPEARED AT SPECIAL COLLECTIONS IN MD ANDERSON LIBRARY

To add context to *What We Left Unfinished*, this exhibition also presents a series of works in which Ghani maps the ongoing reconstruction of Kabul after 9/11 through a personal lens. Speaking to the haunting, and increasingly prominent presence of absence, the exhibition extends to the Special Collections section of

UH's MD Anderson Library as well, where Ghani presents her and Chitra Ganesh's collaborative work *Index of the Disappeared*—a weighty, if not less elusive archive of post-9/11 redactions, renditions, detentions, and disappearances on an unprecedented global scale.



Mariam Ghani & Chitra Ganesh, *Index of the Disappeared: Parasitic Archive* installed at New York University, 2014.

ABOUT MARIAM GHANI

Mariam Ghani was born in New York in 1978, and graduated with a BA in comparative literature from New York University in 2000, and a MFA in photography, video, and related media from the School of Visual Arts, New York, in 2002. The daughter of a Lebanese mother and an Afghan father, Ghani grew up in exile and was unable to travel to Afghanistan until 2002. She works in installation, performance, photography, text, data, and video, and is also an activist, archivist, writer, and lecturer.

Ghani has had solo exhibitions at the State Museum Gatchina Palace and Park, Russia (2013); Rogaland Kunstsenter, Stavanger, Norway (2014); Saint Louis Art Museum (2015); Indianapolis Museum of Art (2015–16); and Queens Museum of Art (2016). She has taken part in group exhibitions including *In/Visible: Contemporary Art by Arab-American Artists*, Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan (2005); *Democracy in America*, organized by Creative Time at the Park Avenue Armory, New York (2008); *Between Heaven and Earth*, Calvert 22, London (2011); and *Utopian Pulse: Flores in the Darkroom*, Secession, Vienna (2014) and MOCAK, Kraków, Poland (2016).

Ghani participated in the Liverpool Biennial (2004); Sharjah Biennial (2009 and 2011); Documenta, (2012); and the parallel programs of the Gwangju Biennial: *Burning Down the House* (2014) and *Manifesta 10* (2014); and the Dhaka Art Summit (2016). Her films have been screened at transmediale, Berlin (2003); CPH:DOX, Copenhagen (2004, 2012); the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2008); Museum of Modern art, New York (2011); and Rotterdam Film Festival (2013).

Some of Ghani's recent texts have been published in e-Flux, Frieze, Foreign Policy, and Triple Canopy. She has received a number of fellowships, awards, grants, and residencies, most recently

from Creative Capital, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Public Library, the Doha Film Institute, the Schell Center for International Human Rights at Yale Law, and the Center for Constitutional Rights. She is on the Film/Video faculty at Bennington College, and her work is represented by Ryan Lee Gallery in New York.

This exhibition is organized by the Blaffer Museum's Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator Steven Matijcio, and runs until March 14, 2020. Special thanks go to Christian Kelleher, Head of Special Collections at UH Libraries, for collaborating on the presentation of *Index of the Disappeared*, and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York for their assistance and support of this exhibition.

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Cover image: Detail of film registration still from *Follow the Leader*, 2019.

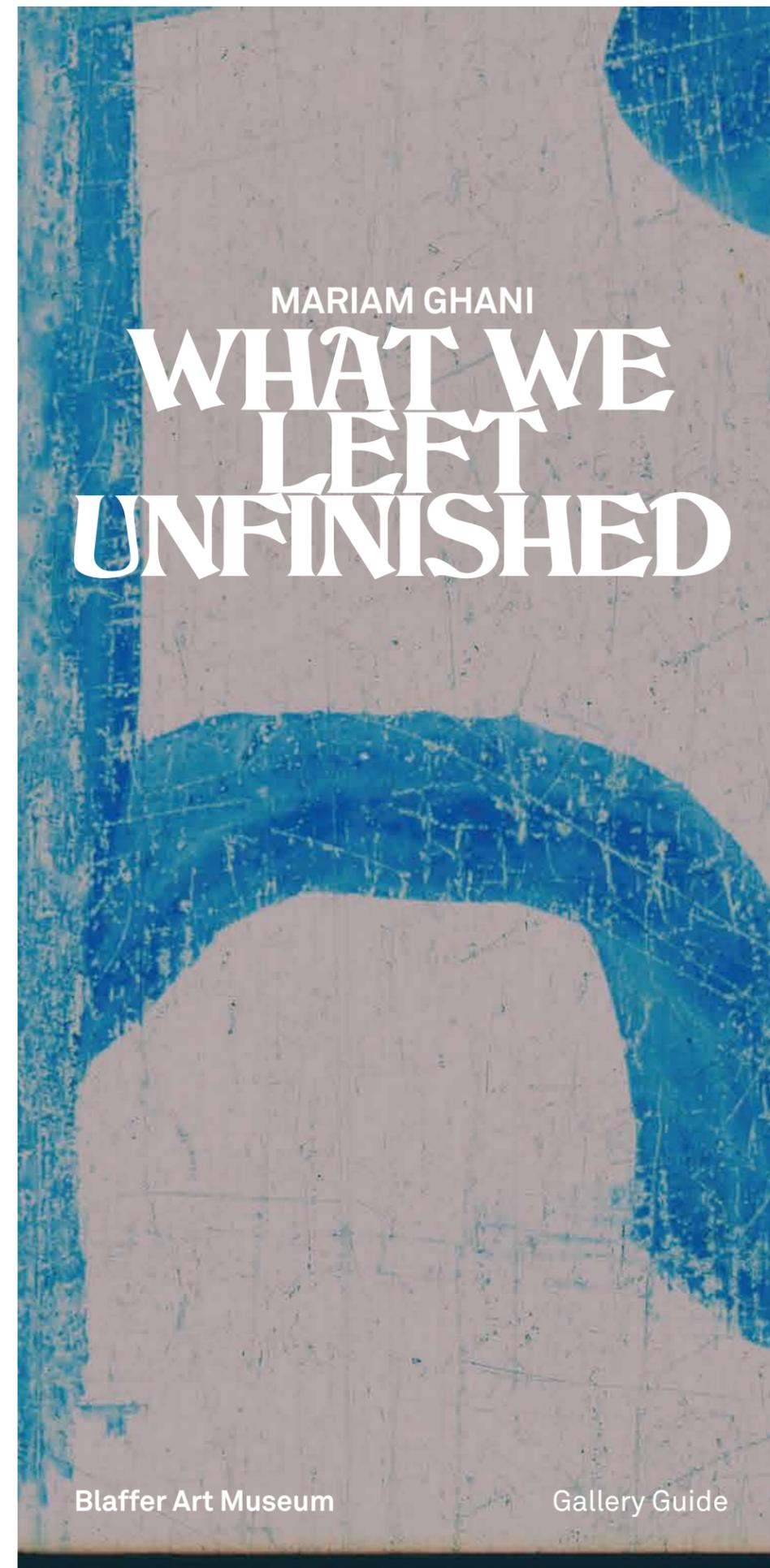
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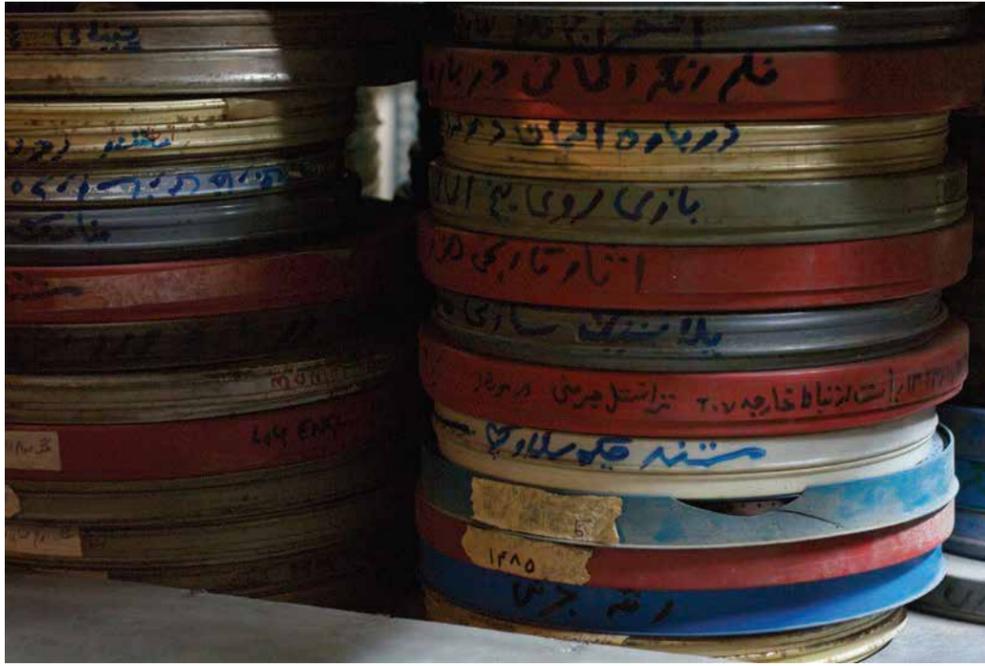
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MARIAM GHANI WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED

Blaffer Art Museum

Gallery Guide



What We Left Unfinished (Indexical Films, 2019)

MARIAM GHANI: WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED

It is not simple to work with an archive in a country like Afghanistan, where books, films, and monuments are all subject to burning; stupas are looted and statues shattered; and sites sacred for one reason or another are eroded by both natural and human disasters. Understandably, Afghans are wary of anyone who proposes to 'mine' any cultural resource they still possess.

If you want to work with an Afghan archive, therefore, you cannot address your desires to it directly. You must sidle up to it sideways, as if approaching a horse with an uncertain temper. You must turn up your palms and turn out your pockets to demonstrate the purity of your motives. You must persuade it to yield its secrets, slowly and obliquely. Above all, you must try to understand what the archive desires of you. You cannot hope to extract anything from the archive without giving something back.

—MARIAM GHANI

We want to believe archives are repositories of facts and anchor points in the rolling tides of history. The reality is that these collections are continually evolving, in both their material constitution (ex. decay, displacement), as well as their meaning via the political leanings of context and culture. Mariam Ghani (b.1978) is an artist who habitually works with archives in what she describes as “the speculative, poetic realm”—reading, analyzing, and employing

them as the platform for performance. For her, the activities of archivists and historians are transformative in nature, sculpting and re-framing their respective materials into performative interpretations that accumulate in the annals. In her words, “Each performance refracts the archive through the performer’s interpretation, and each is then reflected in the archive, as the interpretation becomes another record, or another path through the records that can be retraced.”

In this light, we can view *What We Left Unfinished* as Ghani’s performance of a unique subset of the Afghan Film archive that marries documentary re-construction, historical speculation, and what she calls, “the political dangers of nostalgia.” Surveying the way cinema has been instrumentalized to construct a national imaginary in Afghanistan, this docu-feature hybrid circulates in the captivating, if no less vexing space between actuality and allegory—where contradictions, fables, and omissions dance with fleeting glimpses of veracity. Combining restored footage of five unfinished films shot between 1978-1991 with present-day interviews of directors, actors, and crew, as well as period newsreel footage, posters, photos, and documents, Ghani cobbles a patchwork hypothesis that parallels the way much of the country’s history from this era lives.

It began in 2011 during her work with the country’s national film institute and archive,

Afghan Films, as Ghani attempted to spur the antiquated organization into a program of preservation via digitization, re-cataloging, circulation, and the commission of critical writing. She explains that “iconoclasm is a very real and seemingly perpetual threat,” in Afghanistan, and this archive still bears the traces of the fundamentalist Taliban government’s efforts to eviscerate all the country’s pre-existing cultural materials in 1996. The film reels that became Ghani’s muse in *What We Left Unfinished*, as well as a number of other condemned negatives and prints, had been barricaded behind a brick wall by a prescient archivist who strategically covered up the clandestine cache with a poster of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The discovery and return of these reels from protective sequester parallels Ghani’s own relationship to Afghanistan, her father’s home country, which she had not been able to set foot until age 24. Describing her relationship to this place as one of “intimate estrangement of a 2nd generation exile who is simultaneously the ultimate political insider,” she was born in the same year (1978) that Communist revolutionaries expelled her family from the country as part of a bloody coup to assume power. After the fall of the Taliban in 2002 she “returned” for the first time, carrying the displaced history, trauma, and curiosity of a diasporic refugee in search of her hijacked history.

The exhibition at the Blaffer contextualizes

What We Left Unfinished with a series of works Ghani produced between 2002-2012, during her first visits to a country she had only known previously through second-hand stories, anecdotes, myths and the media. *Kabul 2, 3, 4* (2002-2007) tracks the rebuilding efforts of Afghanistan’s capital city from a car window as Ghani recorded her quasi-ritual drive through Kabul across three succeeding years—documenting what the artist calls “the near-seismic upheaval of a city in the grip of rapid and radical change.” The sister work *Kabul: Reconstructions* (2003) documents intimate pockets of the titular city in the final days of 2002, piercing the administrative abstractions of the provisional government to weave together footage of construction sites, carpenters at work, family members preparing a traditional meal, and the artist performing her past by trying on her father’s clothes. Father and daughter would collaborate once again in *Afghanistan: A Lexicon* (2012), as Ashraf and Mariam Ghani co-authored a notebook (extracted into a series of 12 prints for this show) that map, “the cycle of repeated collapse and recovery that Afghanistan has undergone over the course of the 20th century.”

Such rise and fall oscillated continuously in the period between 1978-1991 following the aforementioned Communist coup d’etat—producing a series of internal purges and assassinations, soviet invasion, and withdrawal, a five-year attempt at national



Still from Khalek Halil’s unfinished film *Almas-e Siah* (*The Black Diamond*) in Mariam Ghani’s *What We Left Unfinished*, 2019. Image courtesy of Indexical Films and Afghan Films.

reconciliation, rural resistance to attempted reforms, American backing of mujahedeen rebels, and prolonged civil war. In efforts to placate and indoctrinate the populace during this tumultuous time, the Communists invested heavily in film as an artistic vehicle of propaganda. The five unfinished films Ghani employs for her project—*The April Revolution* (1978), *Downfall* (1987), *The Black Diamond* (1988), *Wrong Way* (1990), and *Agent* (1991)—were commissioned and produced by various iterations of the Afghan state, who provided budgetary support and military assistance to advance their aims of revolution, reform and reconciliation. So begat the epoch where, in Ghani’s poetic observation, “films were weapons, filmmakers became targets, and the dreams of constantly shifting political regimes merged with the stories told onscreen.” As a case in point, *The April Revolution* was sponsored by Hafizullah Amin who seized the presidency in 1979, and cast his family to play themselves in a pseudo-documentary of an event never officially recorded. When the Parcham faction of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan overthrew Amin a year later, they fueled nearly a decade of Soviet-style propaganda films in place of, or supplementing newsreels distributed to cinemas across the country. In ensuing productions live ammunition was consistently employed in battle scenes (resulting in the accidental death of an extra), ex-agents were cast as spies, snipers would lurk at the perimeter of scenes, and actors became “visible symbols of regime myth-making.” Fact and fiction became inextricably entwined in art and life, producing a mystifying, if forever partial legacy as films were abandoned as their sponsors/subjects were thrust out of power. For five movies “never dignified with denouements, in much the same way as the short-lived reigns of the communist-reformers,” Ghani aspires to renew the act of storytelling as a catalyst for remembering and forecasting.

Captioned by its director as “a mostly true story,” *What We Left Unfinished* acknowledges its tangled tapestry of apocrypha and aspirations as both a reflection of, and foil to its references. As a representative of the country’s national consciousness, “Afghan Films was,” Ghani explains, “responsible for projecting the image of the state to its citizens.” And while it sung earnest ambitions of a “future-possible state,” the “house style” of Afghan Films was, in Ghani’s observation, “to wrap a fictional story around a core of documentary footage.” All films that did not align with the present purview of the state were summarily obscured or destroyed. *What We Left Unfinished* rescues a handful of refugees and wraps a documentary around

inescapably compromised content—eschewing “truths” in favor of a cinematic meditation on some of Afghanistan’s most important fictions. Tugging on a loose thread of history and the unedited promise of films that escaped post-production sublimation and censorship, Ghani elaborates, “In the imaginary presented by most finished films of the period we see the ideal People’s Democratic Republic that could have been but wasn’t; in the unfinished films, the reality—a utopian project secured by violent force—lingers like a shadow, just barely concealed behind allegories and codes.” Her ensuing rumination “toggles between the stories in the films and the stories behind and around them... as a way to depict simultaneously the fiction and reality, dream and disintegration, of the Afghan Communist project.” Between unreliable accounts, fluid recollections, blatant omissions, and the romantic smokescreen of filmmakers who dubbed a brutal, increasingly oppressive era (that cast her family out of the country) as the “Golden Age” of Afghan cinema, Ghani paradoxically locates a cathartic path.

Recognizing that “certain facts are still easier to face when presented as fictions,” Ghani navigates the “real consequences of fake events” as they continue to haunt the present. Fraught, unsettled, and contested histories of Afghanistan’s Communist era continually resurface in contemporary public discourse, circulating like specters in a country wrestling with seemingly perpetual turmoil, and occupation. How then do they, does she, do we, perform this conflicted, yet undying archive? For Ghani, “a film archive is a cabinet of memento mori, full of flickering images of things and people long lost. When the film is projected, that which was lost lives again.” For her, a model of reciprocity is essential when extracting from the archive—participating in, and contributing to the human architecture of this enterprise. In many ways *What We Left Unfinished* is the story of a tight knit group of filmmakers who believed in cinema enough to risk their lives for art. It is their continued belief that film could save Afghanistan from the divisions, and ghosts, tearing it apart today. Ghani argues the future of Afghan films is not in protectionist preservation and the entrenchment of airless, inaccessible archives, but rather the digitization, projection, and dissemination of this history far and wide; it is in the expansion of a critical discourse that publicly enshrines the intractable value of these films as cultural cornerstones, and harbingers of the future. In this collective performance of archives past, present, and future, the work of the unfinished carries on.