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 (2015–16); and Queens Museum of Art (2016). She has taken part in group exhibitions including Not Visible: Contemporary Art by Arab-American Artists, Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan (2005); Democrazy 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: Films in the Darkroom, Secession, Vienna (2014) and MOCAK, Kraków, Poland (2016).


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.

Lead support for exhibitions and programming at Blaffer Art Museum is provided by Olivia & Peter Farrell and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Major funding is provided by Leslie & Brad Bucher, the John P. McGovern Foundation, and the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts.

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Tuesday-Saturday 10:00am-5:00pm
Thursday 10:00am-8:00pm

120 Fine Arts Building
Houston, TX 77204
blafferartmuseum.org

Always free.
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 listed and statues shredded; 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 address it to it sideways, as if approaching a horse with an uncertain temperament. 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 constructional and deconstructional aspects. What we think of as the ‘factual, 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 accommodate the annals in their history. 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 re-read.

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 research, and the re-framing of Afghan cinematic materials in the capturing, if no less vexing space between actuality and allegory—where contradictions, fables, and omissions dance with fleeting glimpses of vacancy. Combining restored footage of five unfinished films shot between 1978-1991 with present-day interviews of directors, actors, and crew, as well as period newspaper footage, posters, photos, and documents, Ghani cobbles a patchwork hypothesis that parallels the shambles of the country’s history from this era alive.

It began in 2011 during her work with the country’s national film institute and archive, Afghan Films, as Ghani attempted to spur the antipodal organization into a program of preservation via digitization, re-cataloging, circulation, and the commission of critical writing. She explains that “concomitance 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 custody, 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 produced between 2002-2012, during her first visits to a country she had only known provisionally 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 (2009 documents intimate pockets of the titular city in the final days of 2002, piecing 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 maps “the cycle of repeated collapse and recovery that Afghanistan has undergone over the course of the 20th century.”

Such rise and fall oscillate 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 reconciliation, rural resistance to attempted reforms, American backing of mujahideen rebels, and prolonged civil war. In efforts to placate and indiscriminate the populace during this tumultuous time, the Communists invested heavily in film as a patriotic vehicle of propaganda. The five unfinished films Ghani employs for her project—The April Revolution (1978), Downfall (1987), The Black Diamond (1988), Wrong Roy (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 began 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 on screen.” As a case in point, The April Revolution was sponsored by Hafizullah Amin who seized the presidency in 1978, 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 newsreel footage to cinemas across the country. In ensuing productions live ammunition was consistently employed in the battle scenes. An accidental death of an ex-soldier, ex-agents were cast as spies, siners would lurk at the periphery 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 unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a mystifying, if forever unanswerable riddle of life and death, and a memento mori, full of flickering images of execution scenes, assassinations, soviet invasion, and life, producing a