Lida Abdul

LANDSCAPES OF REMEMBRANCE

An Afghan artist’s video monuments provide an outlet for fantasy and lament as her country rebuilds.

By Rebecca Catching
Abdul’s work can be considered a kind of “monument making” that fits into the traditions of Central Asia, a land dotted with memorials.

Wind whips across the plain, creating a curtain of dust that nearly obliterates a sturdy, flat-roofed building in the distance. Copper-skinned young boys clad in camouflage colors—gray, khaki, brown and green—line up, each bearing a brick that they hand to a man with a shock of unruly hair and a pained expression. In return, he pays them a pittance while chiding them about the quality of the bricks. “Children are the most susceptible and the most resilient beings,” says Lida Abdul, about her video, Brick Sellers of Kabul (2006), recently included in the exhibition “Soft Power: Asian Attitude” at Shanghai’s Zendai Museum of Modern Art in late 2005 and at Tate Modern’s “Illuminations” in early 2008. Abdul continues, “Kabul is full of kids who run in the streets, but if you knew their lives you’d wonder how it is possible for them to keep going. When their laughter disappears—or even fades—then hope dies too.” On screen, the camera pans across the scene and zooms in on the brick sellers’ transactions: symbolic acts of rebuilding in a land of obliteration.

Born in 1973, Abdul left Afghanistan with her family in 1987 during the Soviet occupation. They made stops in India and Germany before settling in the US, where she studied philosophy and political science at California State University, Fullerton, and completed an MFA at the University of California, Irvine. Feeling the pull of her homeland, Abdul returned to Kabul in 2001 to explore the changes taking place.

By that time the country had witnessed a whirlwind of destruction, with the art community especially hard hit. In 1995 the Afghan National Museum’s roof was struck by a rocket, setting off two years of looting that fueled illicit trafficking in antiquities. Furthermore, mujahideen rebels, vying for power in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, not only pillaged the facilities but also used the card catalogs as kindling, sending the museum’s records and archives up in smoke.

The constant conflict made it hard for artists to survive. Upon assuming control of the country, the Taliban dealt a final blow in 1996 when it declared all forms of art from music to dance and visual arts to be against God and made headlines in 2001 with the demolition of the sixth-century Bamiyan Buddhas. Abdul references the demolition in her work Clapping with Stones (2005), for which she assembled a group of men in the Bamiyan Valley to knock stones together in front of the site of the Buddhas, emulating this traditional form of worship in an appeal to the gods to put a stop to the cultural turmoil.

Although filmed with modern equipment, Abdul’s work can be considered a kind of “monument making” that fits into the traditions of Central Asia, a land dotted with memorials, buildings, ruins, sacred trees and cave paintings. Instead of appeal to the gods to put a stop to the cultural turmoil.

Abdul’s performance, rather than “whitewashing” Afghanistan’s reality, creates a canvas, in her words, “a surface for something new. A film of white that preserves the destruction yet simulates a sculpture that can distract the viewer into a new space.” She continues, “Afghanistan is littered with rubble, but at some point people become blinded to the utter desolation around them and maybe even begin to inhabit it, to hide in it and use it as camouflage of sorts.”

Abdul talks about bringing collective embarrassment to the fore, and her performance work Tree (2005) unearths a series of terrible incidents in recent history. The eponymous tree was once used as a hangman’s gallows, and Abdul harnessed the support of local village men in the task of uprooting it and carrying it away. The laborious, communal task underscored the emotional toll of a nation confronting its history.

Tree and works such as War Games (What I Saw) (2006) recall the ideas of German artist Joseph Beuys, who propagated the healing potential of art and viewed the world as one giant “social sculpture.” War Games depicts a group of men mounted on horseback trying to pull down a blown-out building, casting local people in the heroic role of re-builders. Abdul also discusses her affinity with the photographer and installation artist Gordon Matta-Clark’s “building cuts,” for which he sawed into derelict buildings to create larger-than-life architectural sculptures and images, reflected in her reclamation of abandoned, ruined

(Left) WHAT WE SAW UPON AWAKENING, 2006. Film still, 16 mm film on DVD. Courtesy the artist.

(Above) BRICK SELLERS OF KABUL, 2006. 16 mm film transfer to video. Courtesy the artist.

(Above) CLAPPING WITH STONES, 2005. Film still, 16 mm film on DVD. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin.
spaces. “Everything is recycled in Kabul and everything has a use, infinite uses. In a destroyed land, building materials are bought and sold like pieces of people’s dreams.”

Despite these bleak words her narrative is one of hope, leading her to investigate faith and how people rely on belief in higher powers when faced with a torrent of disasters. Abdul is fascinated by the process of proselytization and the Christian missionary work currently taking place in Afghanistan. She is interested in the communication between individuals and their gods and “how and why people ventriloquize the speech of some gods and why others give them credence.”

Although inspired by local issues, Abdul’s art always seems to hover on a transnational plane; like Palestinian artist Emily Jacir (SEE P. 81, AAP 54 & AlmAnAC 3) she is interested in engaging the public to commemorate the tragedies of her homeland. Jacir’s Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages That Were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948 (2001), involved over 140 participants (Palestinians, Israelis and others), who came to her studio to stitch the names of the villages onto the side of a refugee tent.

Abdul is fascinated by the way authentic local culture is being eroded and replaced by mass-produced, mass-marketed forms. Global Porn (2002), a performance captured in c-prints, features the artist with a golden substance dripping from her mouth in what she says is a comment on our passive consumption of international culture and our acceptance of the forces of cultural homogenization, namely the Internet, multinational marketing campaigns and fast-food.

“Homogenization seems to be taking place all around us, yet in such a ‘pleasurable’ way that many of us don’t even notice how the boundaries between things are slowly being eroded to make everything go down smoothly.” The sweet nectar that fills the artist’s mouth—while enjoyable—also prevents her from mouthing her resistance.

Despite a professed indifference to neologisms such as “post-nation” and “post-identity,” Abdul has become a global nomad since leaving Afghanistan. Her work is largely cerebral and can travel with her anywhere. This gives her the freedom to take inspiration from wherever she may be. Abdul is adamant about not being geographically pigeon-holed. “I don’t really belong to any group and, frankly, I don’t want to. I make art about things that affect me, because I believe that events are a form of speech, a question of sorts that demands a response. If we don’t create a dialogue, then one day we stop hearing everything except the little narcissist inside us.”

Lida Abdul is a featured artist of Asian Contemporary Art Week 2008, taking place at multiple venues in New York from March 16-24. Abdul is also one of nine artists shortlisted for the third biennial Artes Mundi Prize, to be awarded in late April 7. Her work is on view in the Artes Mundi 3 Exhibition at the National Museum Cardiff, Wales, from March 15 to June 8. Her first US solo exhibition opens at the Indianapolis Museum of Art on April 11 and continues through September 28.

(Above) WHITE HOUSE, 2005, 16 mm film on DVD. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin.

(Opposite) HOUSE WHEEL, 2003, Video still. Copyright the artist.

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