"I want to say that this visual offering is a sharing of the artistic feeling of trauma and the force factor of forgetting. We have two types of forgetting, one is natural, where people have limitations of recalling memories. The other is a forced forgetting which is not individual but social, and where the collective memory of a society is wounded. From the beginning of the history of Afghanistan, the Hazara people have been persecuted and massacred and have been living under sectarian, ethnic oppressive regimes. All these regimes experimented with political methods to make the Hazara forget about their past. To make them suffer this wound again and again. The force of forgetting doesn’t mean to forget a history of pain, but the inability to express that memory. For this we need a silent artistic language to speak about these suppressed memories.”

Khadim Ali, Karachi, 2011
The artists in The Force of Forgetting all belong to the Hazara community from the central highland area of Afghanistan. The Hazara are a minority group. From the 1880s, during the reign of Abdur Rehman Khan to the present day, their ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural persuasions have brought continual persecution. Despite this history of discrimination, the artists uphold an enduring connection to Afghanistan and pride in being Hazara. Poetic and emotionally charged, the works in this exhibition draw on Afghanistan’s rich cultural heritage and tell a Hazara story of this war-torn country. The works confront the beauty in darkness as, in their individual ways, the artists grapple with the social and psychological impact of persecutions of the Hazara people.

As Afghanistan and as Hazara, all of the artists in this exhibition have been forced to live in exile at various points in their lives, firstly in order to find safety, and secondly to attain opportunities enabled by education and free speech to bring change within their communities. Art is a powerful medium by which to inspire discussion and one of the aims of this exhibition is to inform audiences about the human experience of the Hazara community. The works recall the past to negotiate current and future conditions determining the fate of this community.

This exhibition highlights that poetry and history are deeply ingrained in the Hazara culture. The following interview picks up on the language and symbolism of the Hazara artists, which have provided them a means by which to communicate directly with a growing international audience and art market.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Khadim Ali for curating this exhibition for Lismore Regional Gallery and the artists for participating with such moving work. I would also like to thank the Gallery’s curator, Kezia Geddes, without whom the exhibition would not have happened. The Gallery is extremely grateful to Ruark Lewis for working with Khadim to carry out the passionate and heartfelt interview. And finally, thank you to Jo Holder from The Cross Art Projects in Sydney for her kind assistance and to Atika Hussain for loaning work.

Brett Adlington      Director, Lismore Regional Gallery
Ruark Lewis: You are member of the Hazara community of the central highland area of Afghanistan called Hazarajat. One of the aims of this exhibition is to correct misinformation about the Afghan ethnicity. Can you explain the ethnic or sectarian backgrounds of the artists you selected in Kabul who are participating in the exhibition The Force of Forgetting?

KA: The artists are all Hazara. This is one of the first times this group of artists has had the chance to show abroad. Their voices in Afghanistan are officially suppressed. No Hazaras work in the capacity of curator or art official in Afghanistan. The State officials never take visiting curators to the Hazara land. Hazaras are excluded and kept in the dark. Hazara people are one of four major ethnic groups.¹

Although Ali Baba Auranj has shown in Central Asia and Iran, this is actually the first time the group has shown in a public gallery. The Cross Art Projects, an experimental curatorial space in Sydney, helped me to develop this composite exhibition model in 2010. Sher Ali Hussainy is 28 and prior to the exhibition that I curated for The Cross Art Projects he had only ever shown his art to Kabul from abroad. The migrated to Iran at an early age and completed her masters and doctorate studies. She survived in grim conditions throughout the civil war in Kabul. He lost his parents at the early age of 10. Hussainy worked hard as a child labourer, becoming a carpet weaver to support his family.

RL: What is the dark history?

KA: What I’m talking about is that the pain of the Hazaras is not individual. It is social. All the inhabitants in the small town of Afshar perished on the outskirts of Kabul in 1992. Hundreds of people were killed in that onslaught. There were bodies for months and the stench of decaying corpses. They were beheaded or shot. A century ago 60% of the entire Hazara population was massacred. There were minarets built of their skulls at the main public cross-roads. These head minarets signified the power of the emperor and a warning to Hazaras. The Hazaras are always somewhere in the background. Today there are few Hazaras who hold positions of power and their presence is symbolic. They are not there. A representative voice.

KA: The history of Hazaras is always related to “loss”. A loss of their loved ones and losing their motherland. We have lived in a state of mental and physical melancholia, which forces us to live in the memories of the past. We recall our memories in a highly poetic manner, in our visual art, our craft and our music.

May I begin by giving an extreme example of historic facts that I have tried to translate into contemporary symbolism. Let us say, “blood and bones are a strong fertiliser.” Those killed were beheaded with knives and consequently, the land was fertilized with their blood. I was standing at that place with my abstract feelings, a feeling of nothingness. I was thinking it might be the case where the symbolic meaning of the Dasht-e-jhanda bala had changed so dramatically. An old man came and stood beside me. He began reciting a poem of the emperor and a warning to Hazaras. The Hazaras are always in public cross-roads. These head minarets signified the power of the emperor and a warning to Hazaras. The Hazaras are always in the background. Today there are few Hazaras who hold positions of power and their presence is symbolic. They are not there. A representative voice.

KA: That field was called Dasht-e-jhanda bala, which means “raise the flag”. At this open space people traditionally had come together to celebrate. The Dasht-e-jhanda bala was a huge open place where people gathered for marriages and wedding parties with singing and dancing. The soul and the psyche of that place was once joyous. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban chose that place for celebrations of the massacre of the inhabitants. In 2001 the Taliban collapsed. A year later I went there to see people gathering to recognise their relatives from their personal belongings at the exposed mass grave at that place. And you asked me whether it was a psychological victory for the Taliban! I believe shedding blood is the weakest way of imposing power. It only embeds hatred in a recurring history, so it was a moral defeat for the Taliban.

RL: By orchestrating their genocidal action, the Taliban had inflicted not only a military victory, but a psychological victory in the minds of the Afghan people. Here we can experience how history helps create history in every stage of the images in this exhibition. How does this kind of history find its representation in the poetic constructions in Hazara art?

KA: The history of Hazaras is always related to “loss”. A loss of their loved ones and losing their motherland. We have lived in a state of mental and physical melancholia, which forces us to live in the memories of the past. We recall our memories in a highly poetic manner, in our visual art, our craft and our music.
I was speaking to the breeze of the tulip gardens on that morning (mourning). The tulip has a precious value in Islamic beliefs and signifies the trauma of the civil war. His drawings and paintings remind me of a volcano which he will not allow to erupt. It is as though something has leaked and stained the paper. He is normally a quiet person, but his drawings have the appearance of screaming and show his torment.

RL: Can you speak now a little bit about Sher Ali Hussainy's drawings in the exhibition?

KA: Hussainy as a child in Kabul witnessed the massive social trauma of the civil war. His drawings and paintings remind me of a volcano which he will not allow to erupt. It is as though something has leaked and stained the paper. He is normally a quiet person, but his drawings have the appearance of screaming and show his torment.

RL: Were the Hazara people able to make a photographic documentation of the atrocities?

KA: No Hazara were not allowed to photograph these things. During the Taliban if anyone was even seen wearing a clean dress and show his torment.

RL: You are describing an allegorical condition in that remark- able drawing. The texture of the black built up from a saturation of screams or pain is beautiful. And art is often such a sugar sweetened “transformation”. I need to draw the audience to my language is such a large part of our art, but I feel it comes at some loss to a more natural sense of being.

KA: I always try to reduce the gap between the states of conceiving ideas and how I finalise the physical execution of a work. I would like to have a child’s spontaneity in the physical implementation of “subject” and “object”. That was an accident. It wasn’t intentional. On the paper I already had the two words written. I was trying to decide what would be the subject of the drawing. Conversely I wanted to configure what would be the objective outcome. The question might have been how to amalgamate these opposites. On the one hand a force outside of one’s body and then a body allows its final outcome to naturally emerge. It is our external experiences that put us in the social mould, and in some other state of mind. Maybe at some stage of our lives we need to experience that freedom of our childhood again. Perhaps you just close your eyes and draw freely on some paper. All we need is to be free on that paper, which is to say that I am not free. I am thinking, and translating all the time. You know language is such a large part of our art, but I feel it comes at some loss to a more natural sense of being.

KA: Of the marks, I believe everyone has the imagination of the origin of things. The skin of the sunflower is drawn as animal skin portraying a symbolic unity in the end. I managed this graphic outcome with the plant, the ground of the paper with the lines accommodating the pre-existing inscription, with the organs outside of the human body. In another way, the meaning is not absolute nor over-determined, as it has to be made open-ended, so it is active yet unfixed in a silent language of the visual.

RL: I am interested in what might almost be considered inciden- tal forms in your paintings. The trace looks indeterminate – I mean that it’s made by chance and not intentional.

KA: The trace looks indeterminate – I mean that it’s made by chance and not intentional. But they are not united as a group.
ALI BABA AURANG

Ali Baba Aurang is an established calligraphic painter, having practiced for almost 20 years. He studied calligraphy in Iran where he lived for 18 years during The Afghan Civil War. Aurang has since returned to Afghanistan, and is now based in Kabul.

KHADIM ALI

Khadim Ali was born in Pakistan in 1978 and is currently based in both Sydney and Karachi, Pakistan. He has an international profile and has exhibited in museums and biennales including the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; The Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival, Melbourne; the Venice Biennale, Italy; the British Museum, London and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
SAHRAA KARIMI

Sahraa Karimi is a Hazara woman, born in Kabul in 1981. At 15, she fled the country to Iran and then, 5 years later moved to Slovakia to study. She attended Comenius University in Bratislava and received her Ph.D. in documentary and fiction film. She has since returned to Kabul.

SHER ALI HUSSAINY

Sher Ali Hussainy was born in Kabul in 1982 at the time of The Afghan Civil War. Hussainy is studying at Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan on a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation scholarship and is based in both Kabul and Lahore, Pakistan.
Back cover: ALI BABA AURANG
UNTITLED (detail) 2011
barley ink with reed pen and silver leaf
on cardboard, 51.5 x 36.5 cm

THE FORCE OF FORGETTING
Lismore Regional Gallery
19 March – 23 April
Photograph: Alberto Sanchez

Published by Lismore Regional Gallery
131 Molesworth Street, Lismore
NSW Australia 2480
T. 61(2) 6622 2209
E. artgallery@lismore.nsw.gov.au
www.lismoregallery.org
ISBN 978-0-9804400-5-8

Khadim Ali would like to dedicate this publication to Asad Buda. We would also like to thank all the artists, Katarina Krnácová, producer of Afghan Women Behind the Wheel, David Lewis, Brett Adlington, Kezia Geddes, Jo Holder, and the Lismore Regional Gallery staff and volunteers and Atika Hussain.

Catalogue credits:
Design: rangestudio.com
The artworks and images are courtesy of the artists and The Cross Art Projects.
Images and text are copyright of the artist, writer and Lismore Regional Gallery.

Lismore Regional Gallery is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW.
Lismore Regional Gallery is a Creative Industries Initiative of Lismore City Council.

All rights reserved. Except under the conditions described in the Australian Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, duplicating or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Contact Lismore Regional Gallery for all permission requests.