



FIRST BUT NOT LAST TIME IN AMERICA

INTERVIEW WITH KUBRA KHADEMI

Can you tell us about the works exhibited in the Collection Lambert?

Kubra Khademi: This is a new project, inspired like all my previous works by the situation in Afghanistan. These are large tapestries. They were inspired by “terrible” things. I use this word on purpose; I’m aware of its significance. Since the Taliban came to power, I’ve followed the situation in my country through the media, but also thanks to a network of relatives and friends living in Kabul. Everything that happens in Afghanistan touches me directly. However, creating paintings or performances is something that happens beyond any emotional power. For each new series, I go through many inner stages of research, with the uppermost desire that what I end up showing must belong to the realm of beauty. It’s through those works and thanks to them that I can breathe. My artistic work, divided in series, is part of that process. The point is to go through, and to have things go through, a true transformation. Paintings, performances, video, tapestries... I strive to find the suitable form each time. It’s not illustration.

In your paintings and tapestries, you show Afghan women in diverse situations...

My works are inspired by the activism of women in my country. Their resilience is extraordinary; we have to talk about a real revolution here. Many of those women activists are fighting day to day. I’ve kept following their actions after I found asylum in France, after a performance, “Armor,” for which I walked through the streets of Kabul wearing an iron armour that emphasised my breasts and buttocks, the very parts that draw the lust of men in my country and about which the Taliban are obsessed, and which make us the objects of non-stop harassment. I was able to walk for eight minutes before I had to find shelter in a car and drive away as fast as possible. I received death threats. Wherever I go, I’m hounded by my origins. If I have to carry this burden, I also have hands, and in my hands I can hold tools. So I create paintings and performances. The women depicted in my paintings or tapestries aren’t “naked;” they’re free bodies. My mother beat me with an electric chord when I was five because I’d drawn one after returning from the hammam. Everything revolves around the bodies of women in Afghanistan. The Taliban want to cover them, they want to cover everything with the weight of religion. Since their ascent to power, they’ve tried their hardest to make it seem like half the country is under control... while trying to figure out what to do with the other half! My country is defined by that division and nothing more. Since time immemorial, Afghanistan has gone through ceaseless wars, through all those “ups and downs.” Today, thousands of people, of inner migrants, are always on the move. The media is telling the truth: people are being killed. But I don’t want to paint those dying people. I’d rather show how bodies can resist, leave home, begin to exist.

What is your vision of the situation in Afghanistan?

Westerners have access to information on television, but Afghan men and women are more than just that! What matters next to that poverty and terror is to discover the actions conducted by women activists. The situation in my country is unique. Whenever there’s a geopolitical change involving Russia, the United States, or other countries, I wonder what the immediate consequences will be for my country. Afghanistan is like a football you can hit, or maybe... a mathematical principle! Even children, even my mother, who is illiterate, have to make those calculations: who will be our allies now that this or that guy is in power in his country? Afghan women are fully aware of the danger of the situation they are in. They know they can die for their cause, that their children can die of poverty. They march in the street and look the Taliban in the eye. Their slogan is Bread, Work, Freedom. They chant it relentlessly. They are kidnapped or assassinated; but to no avail: they keep resisting, even though they are deeply alone. My work is inspired by their bodies, their struggle against the Taliban, those erstwhile terrorists who have now become our rulers. Are they still seen as terrorists by other countries? It would be disappointing if they weren’t.

Your works are your response to the power of the Taliban and of the patriarchy in general...

Through those tapestries and other works, I try to show the sexual power of women, the strength of feminine identity. Traditional tapestries often show women giving birth. In mine, those birthing scenes lead to the appearance

of pets. Women, children, and animals are the property of men in Afghanistan. Similarly, many old works show battlefield scenes. I've turned them into a field of action for women, who perform heroic acts usually reserved to men: fights against dragons, for instance, which continue to be a symbol of danger. To those now-feminine actions I add Persian poetry, the *Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*, the poems of Rumi or of Forugh Farrokhzad, the Iranian poetess who died in 1967. Poetry is an essential part of Afghan culture; I've always used it. Persian epic poetry is here juxtaposed with slogans used by Afghan women today. Thanks to my exchanges with women using *WhatsApp*, I also used so-called "below the belly button" poetry, a tradition that has been prohibited but is still very relevant. Those various types of writing become part of the epic actions led by women.

How did you manage to assert yourself as a feminist artist in your country?

When I was a child, I always said that I was an artist. When my family decided to marry me off, I said no. It was unheard of. When someone leaves the house in my country, it's to go to another... I've never seen any "feminist" books at home, I'd never even heard of such a thing. But I sensed my own status as a human being, like all Afghan women, in a society that denies it. Then I decided to lead the life of an artist. That, too, was unheard of. I left to study fine arts at Kabul University. I took a big suitcase which belonged to my family and had accompanied them on many adventures. I made it mine. I stuffed it with all I could. I knew I wasn't coming back, and I was right, except to celebrate Eid. When I got to Kabul, I was able to learn more about art, and I started to paint and do performances. I've never doubted my vocation. Growing up without once hearing that you are a human being is the standard for Afghan women. To refuse it is a fundamentally feminist act. No one taught me how to be a feminist. "You can do whatever you want" is what I've always told myself. I think that inside every Afghan woman, there is a small feminist.

Can you tell us about a performance you did in Afghanistan?

In Kabul, I did a performance with my infamous suitcase. I put it in the middle of the audience in the gallery. I got inside and zipped it shut from the inside. I didn't have a specific vision for the performance. It was a pure situation, open to the unexpected. Time passed. Then someone, a woman, opened it from the outside. I got out. No one was there. I went out and found that same person waiting for me. She started talking without letting me say a word! The performance had lasted three hours, without my realising it. That woman, whom I didn't know, told me what happened. She was in a highly emotional state. She told me how the audience had gone through all sorts of states: waiting, drowsiness, impatience, with moments of discussion, silence, anger, sadness, and hope. Without my being able to see anything, the audience had gone through all sorts of emotions when faced with a suitcase that reflected their own situation back to them: confinement, loneliness, the impossibility of escape. Everyone in Afghanistan grew up with many taboos and interdicts. That performance let people feel how they lived in a constant situation of danger. And it hasn't changed.

On the first day of the Festival, you will be presenting a unique performance at the Collection Lambert. It is based on an idea you had in France and on which you worked during your work residence in the United States in the Spring. It's something to do with clothes...

Yes, I built a mountain of jackets thrown on top of each other. They're all gray, the colour of the jackets worn by the Afghan army, by the foreign troops present in my country, and by the Taliban alike. I approach this mound of clothes through an artistic gesture, a sewing gesture during the performance. I climb up and down that mountain several times, to sew those jackets together with a golden thread. My goal is to present this heap of clothes sewn with gold, with this very obvious golden thread. Those jackets, omnipresent in my country over the last few decades of conflict, are used by soldiers, but also by the Taliban to hide the explosives they use to commit suicide-bombings. The use of this gray-coloured garment varies depending on which side its wearer is on. I saw many of those jackets during my exfiltration from Afghanistan. And the whole world saw them when thousands of Afghans rushed to the Kabul airport in a stampede. Those jackets often end up in history museums. In August 2021, using a list I'd drawn up of Afghan artists threatened by the Taliban, we worked, along with a number of culture professionals here in France, to get more than 80 artists out of Afghanistan. Like me, they had to flee their country. So I gathered the same number of jackets to tell the story of those bodies and those lives. The golden thread which binds them together is also a reminder of the gilded frames of classical paintings exhibited in museums. I want to create a specific memory of this garment in the Collection Lambert, this place dedicated to art, just like I would want to put an end with this gesture to the current situation, by changing the way those jackets are used.