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An Analysis of Contemporary Art in Afghanistan: a practice-led study

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MA by Research

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Contents

Preface

Introduction

Historical Context to my Work

Afghan Rugs

Afghan War Rugs

Contemporary Afghan photographer and Artist

Methodology

Development of studio practice and exhibition

Exhibition of artwork by contemporary Afghan artist

Analysis and finding

Discussion and conclusion

Limitations to the study and ideas for further research

List of Illustrations

References
List of Figures

Fig. 1 East, (2016) 30.5 x 30.5 cm stitching on canvas acrylic Dilara Changis

Fig. 2 West 8, (2016) 30.5 x 30.5 cm stitching on canvas Dilara Changis

Fig. 3 Lendon, (2015) Afghan War Rug

Fig. 4 Afghan war Rug, (2016) Authors own collection (18.34 x 10.74 cm) Dilara Changis

Fig. 5 Pierce (2015). *Math book*,

Fig. 6 East 9, (2017) 30.5 x 30.5 cm stitching and acrylic on canvas Dilara Changis

Fig. 7 Saeedi, M. (2014). *Life in War, Afghanistan - in pictures*

Fig. 8 Hassani, S. (2013). *Dreaming Graffiti Kabul*;

Fig. 9 Image of the final exhibition (2016) 18.33 x 12.33 cm Dilara Changis

Fig.10 Image of the final exhibition (2016) 9.04 x 13.59 cm Dilara Changis

Fig 11 Image of the final exhibition (2016) 9.04 x 13.59 cm Dilara Changis

Fig 12 Hirst, D. (1990). *A Thousand Years*

Fig. 13 Akhlaqi. A (2016) untitled

Fig. 14 Akhlaqi . A (2016) untitled

Fig. 15 Saifi . M (2013) *Colourful Moment*

Fig. 16 Saifi . M (2012) *Crazy World*

Fig. 17 Saifi , M (2015) *Saifi Ashqari*

Fig. 18 Roqia . A (2016) *untitled*

Fig. 19 Alavi . R (2016) *Untitled*

Fig. 20 Ali . M (2013) *the Tired family*

Fig. 21 Ali. M (2016) *untitled*

Fig. 22 Alimi. M . (2016) *Untitled*

Fig. 23 Alimi. M . (2016) *Untitled*
An Analysis of Contemporary Art in Afghanistan: a practice-led study

Preface

My sense of identity and imagination is conflicted by, rather than unified by, two different identities, one that is well knowing of the echoing of Kalashnikovs and AK 47s, where people’s lives are shaped by endless war; and the other evolved through a Western 21st century, enshrined with the freedom of speech and expression and with values of democracy and human rights among other things. Afghan people feel a sense of injury which I can resonate with and that motivates them. Like many other Afghans, I’m motivated to keep producing artwork as a way to understand the world around me. This practice-led research encompasses my story as a child growing up in conflict and an analysis of my recent art practice, as a way to unlock the rich history of Afghanistan and of the implications for Afghan artists continuously caught in conflict and its implications.

Introduction

Contemporary art in Afghanistan has been influenced by years of conflict, destruction and war (notably from the 1979 Soviet invasion until now). The present practice-based research will examine the insights of artists and their work in order to paint a picture of how art still plays an important role in a conflict zone despite the challenges and struggles that the artists face. Muzafar Ali, a young artist born in Afghanistan, now living in Australia states: “Evils come and go, weapons are made and devastated, empires are established and dispersed, and humans are born and die. What remains are their footprints - mostly in the shape of ‘art’” (Ali, 2016). Ali goes on to say “Art will live longer than any other evil trends. Art shall live for generations, no matter if we will still be alive to witness the impact or not” (Ali, 2016).

This study has been made difficult by barriers of communication and being able to contact the artists in different parts of Afghanistan due to issues with a lack of electricity and communicating devices. Similarly, the barriers of cultural understanding have been difficult to overcome. I have had to learn to communicate through these difficulties although I had an early knowledge of Afghan culture I had a limited understanding of different tribes and languages. There are at least twenty-five different languages and dialects to have some knowledge of in order to facilitate conversation. Contemporary Afghan art is a developing process and is not as recognized as Western art forms would be. This study has been challenged by the continuing conflict, on understanding the different art forms and understanding the uncertainties the artists face in developing their work for contemporary audiences.

I feel that it is critical to do this study, because it is important to widen both my understanding of the challenges the artists face and to introduce Afghan art to a wider audience in the West. There are key cultural and tribal differences across Afghanistan which makes it crucial to understand a complex country which continues to be ravaged by war and conflict and the difficulties this presents in the development of a contemporary art culture. Social media provides an entrance into the Afghan art world as more artists are able to post and share information about their work and their motivation for producing art. I have been able to take advantage of this in contacting some of the artists I interviewed which aided the process of communication. I was born in Afghanistan in 1991, during a period of conflict amongst local warlords and later the Taliban between 1996 and 2001.
Having lived two separate and different lives, and growing up in two different environments, each with their own understandings attached; this present study was inspired by those experiences. The first art image I ever saw as a young child was a propaganda cartoon produced for the Taliban and distributed to children in a local area. It evoked fear through threats that the Taliban were “coming for us”, and having never seen such artwork this had a profound effect on me. The years of war in Afghanistan have resulted in many conflicting interpretations within Afghan artwork, leading to my desire to explore further whether the narrative of conflict continues to run within the work of all those who practice art in Afghanistan, or who are of Afghan origin now living in different countries due to the conflict. The aim of this research was to evaluate the sources of inspiration for current Afghan artists and to discover the social and cultural problems which impact upon their work, and in particular whether the theme of conflict and working within a conflict zone runs within their artworks. This plays into the theme of identity as well through displacement and the secondary part of the research was involved with understanding whether identity within art can be fluid and what impact this has on the art produced by artists who like me, have experienced conflict and have been displaced.

My own art has been developing over several years from when I was at College and I used art to express my own identity as a person and an artist and to make sense of an environment I had never experienced before. Therefore, it is interesting to look at how the conflict in Afghanistan has shaped the lives of the artists there and their identity.

The research question was: What inspires contemporary Afghan artists and what problems do they face as a result of conflict?

The objectives of the research were:

- To provide a brief history of art in Afghanistan in relation to contemporary practices
- To evaluate how conflict is understood within the researcher’s own art work.
- To produce and curate an exhibition of Afghan artists, providing them with a voice and platform for exposure

**Historical Context to My Work**

The heritage of art in Afghanistan goes back more than 5,000 years. The Gandhara era, between the first and seventh century was especially important for Greco-Buddhist art. The position of Afghanistan on ‘the silk road’ brought an art influence from other areas such as Greece, Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq, Syria and Kuwait), Rome and India (afghanistan-culture.com, 2016). As well as the iconic Bamiyan Buddhas, which were statues sculptured into the walls of a cliff in the Bamyan valley during the 4th century, many oil-based murals have also been discovered in the same region, over centuries of investigation into the historic art of Afghanistan (National Geographic, 2008).

Furthermore in the late 1970s, a collection of over 20,000 gold ornaments, including coins, necklaces and other jewels was discovered, found buried in mounts in Jowzjan Province, northern Afghanistan. Some of the ornaments dated as far back as the Bronze Age, and they collectively became known as the ‘Bactrian Hoard’ (Somerville, 2010).

The story of the history of Afghan art reveals that there is a tradition of art within the culture which predates the conflict. The conflict can overshadow and downgrade the history of Afghanistan and the part which art and culture play in that. The history and tradition of Afghan art play as big a role in the cultural life of the country as do similar traditions in the West.
However during decades of war (the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979-1989, the Mujahideen uprising of 1980-1996 and the Taliban occupation from 1996-2001) arts were stolen from Afghanistan and smuggled to Pakistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries. Later, in the Taliban period all artwork was banned and much destroyed, such as the Buddha statues in Bamiyan and arts and sculptures from the Kabul Museum, where two thirds of artefacts were stolen or destroyed (World Archaeological Congress, 2006). The new Afghan government is now investigating and restoring much lost artwork. Over the last fifteen years Western genres of art have become more widely introduced into Afghanistan, such as painting, photography and installation art.

As art in the West saw forms such as conceptualism grow in prominence in the 1960s and installation art in the 1970s, Afghan artists are only just beginning to have these forms of art introduced to them. Shamsia Hassani, a young Afghan street artist describes how she attended a graffiti workshop in 2010 when a professor from the UK travelled to Afghanistan to teach Afghan artists the practice (Art Radar, 2013). A new generation of Afghan artisans in woodwork, ceramics, calligraphy and miniature painting have been nurtured too, in the “internationally accredited vocational institute” of the UK charity Turquoise Mountain who are teaching artisans inspired by Western ideas combined with traditional Afghan techniques (Turquoise Mountain Trust nd). The setting of Turquoise Mountain looks back in history to the restored buildings of Murad Khani in Kabul and takes inspiration from that for its artists.

**Afghan Rugs**

The tradition of beautiful, oriental, hand-made rugs and carpets goes back centuries in Afghanistan, featuring unique Afghan prints and styles (afghanistan-culture.com, 2016). In a commodity based economy, before oil was the commodity of choice, the Middle East traded in rugs (Kremmer, 2007). Carpet weaving was an ancient art of Afghan people living in villages with their rich history, surrounded by natural beauty and natural resources. The rugs had a local role in the community and were central to business as the traditional craft was passed down from generation to generation. “Rug shops were the center of the community, the place where people would go to get the latest gossip, and rugs were the center of the home because in a culture without furniture, people sat on the floor” (Kremmer, 2007).

The people who crafted the rugs were historically of the Hazara, Turkmen and Uzbek ethnicities. The Hazara people, along with other ethnic minorities such as the Uzbeks, live mainly in the central highlands of Afghanistan, among the Koh-i-Baba Mountains, to the west of the Hindu Kush. They live in a harsh climate at an altitude of about 1800m, where the winter temperature can drop to between -1 and -16 degrees C. Winter can be isolating, with high abundant mountains providing fresh and useful grass and plants for livestock. A large number of the populations are involved in working on farms with their livestock, mainly sheep.

The rug movement has been able to survive as it is a low tech business which does not need electricity to power it. As long as the shepherds could tend their sheep to produce the raw material (sheep wool) then the women could dye and spin and the rug makers could weave their trade. Sheep also provide essential economic benefit in terms of producing cheese, milk, yogurt (which can be made into dried yogurt, known as kurut) and ultimately being a source of meat as well. Rugs and carpets are the largest export of Afghanistan. The rug making environment and the understanding of the craft skill is important for contemporary Afghan artists. The reusing and recycling of materials furthermore is conducive, in the same way that the recycling of the ideas involved is an important mechanism to keeping the craft alive, post conflict.
My artwork has been inspired by this tradition and its development through to Afghan war rugs. I have used colour in a traditional way, to represent the Afghan flag, but I have added extra colour to represent contemporary 21st century boldness into it. This contrast in colour symbolises the transfer of sensibilities from a third-world country into a British-Western culture. The colour spectrum represents the search for a new identity and grows with the search for new ideas. The thread work uses striking colours such as blue or red or brown and black and sometimes I left the thread hanging to represent the feeling of being in a constant state of becoming and the feeling of a loss of identity falling between two cultures.

The artwork has taken me on an extraordinary journey of my roots; roots which are excavated by the process of my artwork. This process has led me on an exploration of the past and reveals a dark history of the two most recent wars in my country, including the broader conflicts in Afghanistan, and puts me as the researcher in an unsettling position of unearthing dark stories which are complicated both personally and professionally as an artist.

The fabrics I have used are just standard canvases and the media I have employed has been a mixture of stitching and painting to present the traditional Afghan war rugs in a new way for a contemporary audience. The influences of De Stijl can be seen in the way I have constructed the canvases. It creates another pathway away from the traditional war rug and adopts a newer identity which raises more questions and reflects maybe confusion as I seek to search out my identity as an artist between two cultures and to represent that.

Within this study I imagine myself as a journalist-artist, reporting from a diverse culture, a culture which is under my investigation – one that has engaged the imagination of my generation, one living with the uncertainty of conflict. This has developed the malaise of depression which has grown out of the evil and the lack of promise of a certain future. Later on in the research we will look at how this has affected my fellow Afghan artists. My artwork has been developed to re-express the form of Afghan war rugs within my own space and time now living in the West. However, I now have a freedom to express whatever I feel about the conflict which I also experienced and escaped from. This influences my imagination and helps to shape my work in relation to the broader art arena of the West. The transfer from one culture to another has allowed me to explore a different way of living and behaving as there are freedoms in the West which might not have been open to me had I remained in Afghanistan. I am often influenced by the two contrasting cultures in my work and in the way we produce work – but also acknowledging some comparison between the wool and textile industry in West Yorkshire to the rug making traditions of Afghanistan. For example, stitching in Afghanistan is predominantly women’s work and so to a certain extent that is also true of the textile industry in this country where women might be employed in the manufacturing processes of textiles but there is far more scope for male textile workers and designers in West Yorkshire. In Afghan terms this is far more like breaking a taboo of a male engaging with stitch work at all in a country where I have another claim to identity.

I investigated Afghan rug making by watching documentaries how those old age master techniques processed the wool: hand spun thread from wool fibres tied around a heavier object such as a rock. As gravity pulls the rock down the wool fibres are stretched out and aligned so they are pulled into the thread which is being made. The balls of wool spun by village women are then rewrapped into large skeins so they can more readily take the dye. The wool is prepared for the dyeing in a mordant bath so the dye will adhere to the wool fibres. The fibres are then dyed in smaller cauldrons using natural dyes. While wool preparation is proceeding others are working on designs. Artists then draw
a ‘map’ on graph paper, creating a design guide for the weavers. The weavers perform hand knotting on vertical looms following the designs. A 6x9 foot carpet can take up to 6 weeks to complete and contains 700,000 knots. As they knot different sections the weavers then spend a long time in a brushing action to tighten up the knots and keep the rug/carpet taut so that the pattern is uniform. The final processes include cutting the nap which traditionally was done by hand but is often now performed by machine. Then the carpets are washed by applying lots of water and brushing until the material is softened and the colours are permanently fastened. Finally they are dried and are ready to be sold on. The advantages of the hand processed carpets traditionally manufactured are that the natural dyes are not in any way harmful to humans. The Afghan rug industry is very proud of this natural resource. (Rob, 2012).
Afghan War Rugs

Prior to the conflict, artisans in Afghanistan often represented traditional scenes in their work, but since the Soviet invasion of 1979 Afghan rugs have reflected the state of conflict and war which has ravaged the country. The original rugs once showed images of flowers and birds, deer and landscapes and have been replaced by images of war, including tanks and military hardware and weaponry.

The designers who found themselves in refugee camps expressed their emotions and feelings in their rug design using images taken from around them – displaying images of hand grenades, AK 47s and other weaponry. Afghan rugs and carpets once famous for their beauty and design morphed into war rugs, reflecting the conflict and frustration at the war zone their country had become (Cahill, 2009). A form of visual art born out of a distinct set of circumstances, they have become a highly sought after commodity in their unique portrayal of war and conflict. After the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, Afghan weavers in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan produced one of the earliest examples of apparent propaganda war rugs through a range of imagery (Lendon, 2015). One example is the representation of president Najibullah as a “puppet” of the Soviet Union.
“The figure of the president is depicted with hammer and sickle tattooed on his forehead, being dangled over the map of Afghanistan by a giant hand descending from the North” (Lendon, 2015) showing the important role at the time that the rugs played in protesting for liberty through propaganda. Afghan rugs became more like papers or history documents, targeted at external forces outside of Afghanistan, and distributed accordingly, in more recent times through the internet for example, on sites like eBay.

In the same way my work has also been impacted by the visual remembrance of things I saw as a child in Afghanistan and thus my artwork shows guns and tanks, hand grenades and AK47s. However, my interest is the transformation of images of war into abstraction, where nothing is imagined – the work does not appear in the form of rugs but adopts the sensibility of abstract colour field painting – but using traditional rug making methods such as stitching alongside more modernist painting techniques which highlight influences which I have had in a Western culture: American artists such as Hans Hoffman, Clifford Still providing some points of reference.

There was apparently no precedent for the rugs to carry political messages; however the rug makers began to work the imagery from the Soviet occupations into their crafts, firstly as a way to assemble Soviet battle, later as a way of making money from the tourist trade. Kremmer (2007) states “In the beginning, the rugs celebrated Islamic rebellion, but now they are more ambiguous. Some are pro-American, but I’ve never seen a pro-Taliban rug”. What Afghan war rugs depict could be described
as stunning and equally somber, and Kremmer (2007) further highlights how they “are quite mysterious [...] they haven’t been studied in any great detail, who made them and why, what are the messages?” This show how there is a great degree of ambiguity as to the true messages behind a lot of the rugs, and whether they celebrate or abhor war.

The contemporary artists whom I interviewed do not exhibit the more traditional Afghan art working such as the rug making. Rather as they have escaped from Afghanistan they have distanced themselves from their culture and are trying to exhibit new ideas and highlight new identities through very different media for example photography, graffiti and sculpture. And even those who still live there are trying to adopt a broader range of working.
Fig. 4
Afghan war Rug, made in Afghanistan (2012) purchased online January 2016. Author’s own collection (18.34 x 10.74 cm)
Dilara Changis
The imagery changed around 2005 with symbols of American imperialism, such as an American top hat with a Kalashnikov inside Superimposed over a map of Afghanistan, together with Soviet military symbols, the
Designers/makers were searching for a new icon to give their audience a strong, harsh and shocking cultural experience, with the two world superpowers dominating Afghanistan. Lendon (2015) links this to social realism, with the rugs acting as a means of social and political comment, adopting the positions of the suppressed in an attempt to successfully market their product. Clearly in modern Afghanistan the war rug has continued to flourish through a set of techniques passed on from generation to generation which allow its people, in the midst of conflict, to define themselves and make themselves seen and heard. Some of the rugs furthermore have been placed in museum exhibitions, which Cahill (2009) highlights as a medium for experiencing cross-cultural, transnational ideations. The exhibition of Afghan war rugs has opened the dialogue for handcrafted artifacts to express the experience of those living in a country which has been beset by conflict. Cahill (2009, p.231) states how “The memories of war featured on the rugs become selected representations of personal and collective experience, united to form individual yet cohesive visions of warfare.” War rugs therefore “present opportunities for viewers to humanise and personalise war campaign narratives as presented in news media, and thus to rethink their own voyeuristic experience with war. In this way the memories of war by Afghan rug makers can shift perceptions and memories of war by non-Afghan visitors” (Cahill, 2009, p. 231).

Hand crafted rugs diversified with symbols of helicopters, guns, landmines and tanks create a reflection of the existence of a war zone to distant viewers. Afghan rugs reflect the country’s richness of culture and art; similarly the dark side of the war has also impacted on the rug design. Furthermore, the AK47 became the symbol of a generation. According to Raja and Mujib (2016): “Mujib’s uncle used to tell him in 2005 how during the 80s and 90s, having the best AK47 was the coolest thing” and now how the equivalent would be, “having for example a camera phone”. Raja and Mujib (2016) state “Just another fun fact, after the Soviets withdrew and even before that, in the areas controlled by Mujahidin, school textbooks used arms and weapons to teach students how to count or read and write”.

Fig. 5
Contemporary Afghan photographers and artists

More recent Afghan art (from around the 1970s to present) is difficult to trace in its origins and exact date of production, due to being destroyed or going missing during the years of conflict. Further research into the time period of the 1970s uncovered one particularly prominent artist, Mohammed Karim, who was a young Afghan photographer and painter before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 (Lowery, 2015). He worked according to the traditional Afghan artistic heritage which involved photographing subjects in portraiture form and after processing the images; the prints were then covered in linseed oil. Subsequently oil paints were applied directly onto them with fingertips. Karim’s artwork suffered however because of the civil war and later Taliban rule. Karim conveyed how the notion of importance for material belongings changed during the years of unrest in Afghanistan: “In times of conflict there simply is no room for art... survival becomes the only thing that matters” (Curran in Lowery, 2015, para. 25). And under Taliban rule, when Afghanistan’s art history almost disappeared because of the Taliban’s distaste of so called ‘un-Islamic art’ (Cockburn, 2001), his works were further compromised too. The Taliban’s definition of ‘un-Islamic art’ was the painting of living beings, but Cockburn also highlights how the group had a deeper rooted “hatred of art” (Cockburn, 2001, para. 9), seen in the way they “hacked to pieces a large painting in the presidential palace” after they took control of Kabul in 1996. To stop what was inevitably going to be the complete destruction of all art in Kabul at the time, Dr Mohammed Yusef Asefi of Kabul’s National Gallery of Art doctored 122 paintings to obscure depictions of living people, instead replacing such imagery with bland landscapes or common flowers or potted plants. Such changes were done in water colour, on paintings originally painted with oil on canvas, so that they could be easily removed later on after the Taliban fall, to reveal the true painting again underneath after applying simply a sponge with water. Unfortunately, “around 400 other pictures once in the gallery but moved to a depot, were found and destroyed by the Taliban” (Cockburn, 2001, para. 7), meaning that from this particular gallery, over four fifths of the works were destroyed. Another heavy loss was dealt to Afghanistan’s cultural and artistic heritage in the blowing up of the iconic Buddha statues in Bamiyan in March 2001 by the Taliban. The Buddhas, which had stood at the site since 507 AD and 554 AD (Gall, 2006), were described by the Taliban as iconoclastic towards Islam and therefore needing to be demolished.

My own experience in my developing artwork has been to try to set aside the conflict aspect of the Afghan experience and bring a fresh take on my culture revealed within my artwork.

Karim highlighted as well how national and international sentiment was indifferent to the plight of art during those years as Afghanistan was not a country of economic prosperity or development prior to war and that as such its preservation or progression did not occur: “Art can only progress in countries where there is economic prosperity, where there is cultural development and were (sic) people understand the value of art and artists”(Lowery, 2015, para. 27). Karim still practices, however his meeting with artist Jean Curran in 2015 led to his collection of black and white photographic portraits of soldiers in Afghanistan being completed, using the ancient hand-painting technique.

Other modern and contemporary artists and their artwork were examined, including photographers and painters. Majid Saeedi is an Iranian photographer who has spent his professional career (1992-present) covering war and conflicts. He has focused on humanitarian issues with a particular interest in documenting stories of social injustice. Saeedi highlighted how “Afghanistan has been dealing with war for fifty years... Intentionally or locally, the Afghans are people of war and bloodshed” (Saeedi,
2014, para. 5) and as a result this has spurred him to concentrate his work on the Afghan people whose story was not being told and who had lived through decades of conflict and fighting. “I decided to concentrate my work on Afghan people’s life” says Saeedi, “as the women, men and kids are the main victims of war and they were not seen anywhere” (Saeedi, 2014, para. 9). Saeedi talks about the Eastern influences of Persian and Mughal culture and contrasts this with the violence of the fighting. All around Afghanistan there is proof of the last 40 years of conflict present in the shattered buildings and the remnants of Russian tanks; they are a constant reminder of the past wars and the conflicts for the younger generation who have never known anything different. For Saeedi the temptation was to follow the conflict through photographing the front line; however his rationale of wanting to tell the stories of social injustice and his enjoyment of street photography led him to focus more on the citizens of villages and communities away from the very front line of war. He has tried to capture the lives of those caught in the middle of the fighting and serves to indicate the vulnerability of those trying to live out normal lives against the backdrop of war.

My own work contains imagery of war symbols and weaponry which in itself is representational of injustice. Furthermore my art work is anti-war in the way I create my canvases - though they adopt images with obvious war symbols such as helicopters and hand grenades and guns they slowly transform into abstract forms and the stitches are missing which makes the war symbol incomplete, becoming redundant as a weapon, and transforming into another form. In the wish to avoid further dogma and rhetoric, abstraction provides me the potential to make something which is open to interpretation. The loose stitching and the threads which are left unstitched provides a different tacit understanding of the work, highlighting the potential for incompleteness to become something else, hopefully, something more positive. The canvases where I have added paintwork on top of the stitching are an attempt to further detract from becoming something - by adding seemingly abstract colour and shape to almost lessen the effect of the war symbolism.

Fig. 6
East 9, (2017) 30.5 x 30.5 cm stitching and acrylic on canvas
Dilara changis
In a similar manner to Saeedi, Shamsia Hassani depicts the problem of the traditional Afghan patriarchal society where women are subordinate, and conservative Islamic law leads to a lack of access to education, forced marriages and domestic violence for women. It is argued that these themes have been exacerbated due to the backdrop of war and the rule of the Taliban, where as a result 73%-78% of women were found to have major depression (Amowitz et al, 2003), leading some to self-harm and attempts to commit suicide, as Majid Saeedi’s piece shows.

Hassani describes her works as being self-expressive in “Every character in my artworks is me, because my problem is the same as every other Afghan woman’s”. But she however goes on to describe these problems as being as a result of war: “Our problem is not the burqa but the war” (Montagu, 2014, p.46). The need for education and equality of power is emphasised in both of their works and despite injustices and the lack of education, there is hope among ordinary Afghan people for life to improve. The conflict in Afghanistan has posed challenges for young artists in the country but Hassani, Afghanistan’s first female street artist, states that “Art is stronger than war” (Art Radar, 2013). Like Saeedi, she was born in Iran, but to Afghan parents. She returned to Kabul in 2005 to pursue her education in fine art at Kabul University and now practises as a digital and street artist with the Kabul Art Project and the Berang Association. She is seeking to give women a voice through art by running graffiti workshops which will empower women to speak out rather than conceal their political opinions. Graffiti is her main focus and she transforms walls in Kabul scarred by weapons and war, into pieces of defiance.
Fig. 8
Hassani, S. (2013). *Dreaming Graffiti Kabul*;
She explains the importance of this medium is that it is outside and very visible to the wider population rather than hidden behind the walls of a gallery. Hassani has highlighted how lack of galleries means that most Afghans have no chance to see painted art first hand whereas “if it is there for a long time then people will slowly memorize it and it will be part of their everyday life... and they don’t need a ticket” (Montagu, 2014, pp46-47). She feels she is democratising the art by allowing everyone to see it and further to this, obscuring the bad memories associated with the war: “[...] if I colour over those bad memories then I erase war from people’s minds. I want to make Afghanistan famous because of its art not because of its war” (Art Radar, 2013).

This resonates with my own philosophy as in my work I want to show glimpses of hope to my audience by describing the colour and shapes of the war rugs into a more positive image which highlights hope and shows the brightness of Afghanistan and its future. The traumatised past revealed in the emblems of war transforms into hope for a future where art is important and the center of attention rather than the war itself.

There are artists living in war and conflict zones who are affected differently by the experience. Some artists become part of the resistance movement, whilst others become peace messengers: artists who reflect on the conflict and seek to bring people together through optimism. Rahraw Omarzad set up the Centre for Contemporary Art in Afghanistan (CCAA), the only type of its kind to offer courses and workshops which are aimed at young Afghan artists. Crimmin (2014, p.9) argues that there is “undoubtedly valuable and extraordinary work taking place in the arts addressing conflict, by individual artists and by cultural organisations across the world” and that what is promising is that “a significant degree of interest in the role of art in the context of conflicts comes from people in many different areas, both within the arts and beyond, including human rights workers, student journalists, historians, civil servants, cultural theorists, funders, geographers and philosophers” (Crimmin, 2014, p.9). Montagu however suggests that to some extent this has stifled natural creativity and reduced the autonomy of the artists working in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan. She argues that the instrumentalising of art as a tool of social change is compromising artistic freedom, a view that Aman Mojadidi agrees with (Montagu, 2014). Mojadidi is an American artist of Afghan descent whose works have won critical acclaim and feature the exploration of cross cultures and cross-cultural identity. He believes the American and British support into artistic and cultural endeavours in Afghanistan have been only in the pursuit of good publicity for the nations, attempting to pave a path for a succinct military withdrawal (Gerner, 2012). Montagu furthermore believes that Afghan arts charities and initiatives such as CCAA rely upon funding from outside of Afghanistan simply to be able to continue to operate, which Mojadidi agrees with: “Funding is obviously always an issue, Afghanistan has developed a culture of dependency on funding” and that as a result this has “hampered individual motivation and creativity” (Gerner, 2012, para.12).

This contrasts with my own experience of art production where I have a freedom, not necessarily available to all Afghan artists, to be able to produce art work. The university experience has allowed me the necessary funding to be able to create art in whatever way I see fit.

Mojadidi was the curator of the 2012 Kabul version of the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition. dOCUMENTA is an exhibition which predominantly features Afghan artists, held in Kassel, Germany and is considered as the world’s most important art exhibition. It began in 1955 and takes place every 5 years. The exhibition in Kassel took place in 30 venues with artworks by eight Afghan artists represented as well as artists from other countries that refer to Afghanistan in their artworks or
build connections between Kassel, Kabul and Bamiyan. The Afghan artists’ exhibition was physically and conceptually sited at four other locations - Kabul, Alexandria, Cairo, and Banff, as well as in Germany. These related to “four main positions corresponding to conditions in which people, in particular artists and thinkers, find themselves acting in the present: Siege, Hope, Retreat, and Stage” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012, para.2). "Kabul and Bamiyan together constitute a crossroads of these conditions. Here, simultaneously with the state of hope, artists frequently experience the condition of being under siege, as well as that of withdrawal and exposure" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012, para.3). She goes onto say “War creates facts. But art, too, can create facts of a highly different order” (Gerner, 2012, para.2). She suggests that “art has a major role to play in the social processes of reconstruction”, with “imagination as a crucial force in that process” and in ways “that do not isolate people even further, but provide opportunities for the opposite” (Gerner, 2012, para.2). The purpose of the dOCUMENTA was inspired to regenerate the creativity of the artists of Afghanistan and Gerner (2012) reported that the young artists of Afghanistan gained confidence from the seminars and the program set up by dOCUMENTA and protested by expressing their own convictions and concerns about art. The Afghan people had forgotten how to make art and were regaining their confidence to trust their own creativity. Whilst I did meet Christov-Barkargiev briefly the discussion did not extend to my artwork but I have been influenced by her exhibitions which have inspired and given confidence to young Afghan artists and I would count myself as one of them who has been inspired by this onset of art promotion. This also reveals a cohort of fortuitous artists who now have the chance to reflect the Afghanistan they know through art and not through war.

It is clear that the debate around the role of art in war is changing and fresh ideals and new ideas are coming forward. For example contemporary artist George Barber said that “art kicks off a few things; plants a few ideas” (Crimmin, 2014, p.11) and “it can influence how that war is remembered” (Jones in Montagu, 2014, p.11), which in the case of Afghanistan is arguably done through war rugs. It is put forward that the issue of cultural history and memory is very important. Omarzad (who set up the Centre for Contemporary Art Afghanistan, after the fall of the Taliban in 2001) considers it vital to the national memory of the country to remind people of their own culture and history, contrary to the policy of “forgetting” advocated under the Taliban (Montagu, 2014). He saw that as a form of resistance to the policy of cultural obliteration i.e forgetting, which was advocated by the regime who closed down art schools and destroyed monuments.

I consider that ‘forgetting’ is not an option for artists but that the work must contain what is remembered of the past but must reflect the hope for the future. With these young and upcoming artists the world is in their hands and they can choose to present the Afghanistan they both remember and want to see grow into an artistic future. My canvases therefore included imagery from the war but reset those images by reclaiming the focus of the subject matter by the materials used and instead of foregrounding the harsh realities of warfare added other media to soften the harshness of the imagery. Initially I focused around those artists/photographers already established in the field of Afghan art/photography and the key issues have been highlighted by those who have previously researched into the field of art in Afghanistan. The study then evolved to interviewing five artists, whose work later featured in a final exhibition. These artists were: Muzafar Ali, born 1986, a Hazara photographer whose work has been inspired by his role as a political advisor for the United Nations and whose work has been exhibited in South Korea, USA, Canada, Australia, as well as in Afghanistan; Mariam Alimi, born 1980, who began photography training at the AINA agency led by the Australian photographer Travis Bread and who has since been working under the supervision of the world-renowned photographer Tim Page at the UNAMA. Also featured were Roqia Alavi, a photographer who lived as a refugee in Iran until she was 16 years old and later trained under
Afghanistan’s 3rd Eye initiative; and Meena Saifi, who is a young Afghan artist who has studied in exile under the tuition of Ustad Qais Nawabi, a famed Afghan painter. And finally, Ali Akhlaqi who was born in 1987, after spending his childhood as a refugee in Iran, like Roquia Alavi. In order to understand the work of these photographers and painters I read Sontag’s book regarding the Pain of Others (2003) where she investigates how the viewer regards the pain of others within artwork. This underpins the way I have analysed the work of these Afghan artists. Inevitably art concerning war or conflict will contain images of suffering.

“The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image – of an agony, of ruin – is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war” (Sontag, 2003, p. 21) which Sontag says is a way that our photographs unite two contradictions, namely the ‘credentials of objectivity’, from the camera itself and the fact that the photographer has a point of view. Virginia Woolf highlights that the photograph itself is an objective record and yet as seen by the human eye it transposes to the viewer’s brain and memory which translates the image interpretatively (Sontag, 2003, p.23). Therefore, we all become familiar with the image to differing degrees and understandings and as a result, no one testimony of the events can be the same as another’s after witnessing second hand.

The role of the narrative in the presentation of a photograph is key to enable the viewer to understand the reality of the situation. Sontag argues that a war photograph with no attached narrative can provide no basis of understanding, and serves simply to shock, accomplishing in informing us that “war is hell” (Sontag, 2003, p.81). If the pictures of atrocity are current, then presumably we are invited to do something right now to stop further horrors whereas if we are looking at horrors long ago they raise the awareness for us of human wickedness and leave us not exactly knowing what to do with the information. She highlights the work of Edmund Burke who says: “I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortune and pain of others”. This explains how we may slow down as we drive past traffic accidents and how we read avidly the reports of atrocity and war and horror situations. Sontag looks at the effect of pictures on our belief that atrocity is happening: “When there are photographs a war becomes real” (Sontag, 2003, p. 93). However she also describes the effect of the hyper saturation of images, when we become numb with the horror and fail to have our “conscience pricked” anymore: the view that our capacity to respond to experiences with an ethical viewpoint is being eroded by the sheer volume of horrendous images. She suggests that reality is no longer key but representation has become the way forward and that we live in a “society of spectacle” where we are only interested if the spectacle is realised. Sontag concludes by saying that the observer of the images of war and atrocity can have no real idea of the situation and cannot truly understand how terrifying or dreadful a situation is.

Because of my own history and experience the war rug motif with its brutal imagery, I can respect this tradition. However as I have now experienced a new regime which is softer and more responsive to art form so I have incorporated that sensitivity into my work through technique and through different media such as embroidery. I am not distancing myself from the brutality of war which my work still proclaims but I am distancing myself from a totally brutal presentation by the production of my artwork. This production characterizes the sensitivity and exposes the emotion.

Methodology
The methodology used in the research is predominantly practice-based research - making art work in the studio in response to the literature review and vice versa; conducting a literature review in response to the orientation of making art work in the studio.

It involved qualitative methods (the exploration of underlying reasons and opinions) rather than quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods provide more in-depth information about particular subjects, however they can be time consuming as they may involve interviews which need transcribing and analysing. Both qualitative research and quantitative research can involve surveys, where information can be obtained fairly quickly from a large number of participants, but in the focus of my qualitative research, the answers to such surveys were in the form of worded opinions, rather than numerical values. Furthermore this meant observation of the data was subject to interpretation, rather than measured against a test hypothesis. Therefore my data was collected by Skype interviews, by social media such as Facebook, by email to the artists I was interested in. Also my curated exhibition produced data from questionnaires filled in by visitors.

The advantage to this was that analysis of this collected data could occur in great detail without being tied to strict test procedures. Some may argue that this could have led to too much subjectivity and potentially researcher bias, but this was nonetheless by far the most appropriate research method to deploy to comprehensively collect information on the subject in the most conducive way. However this method of contacting the artists I selected by email and other methods was a safe approach especially for those still residing and working in Afghanistan.

Both primary and secondary research was carried out. The secondary research involved internet searches to collect a range of data, of articles from newspapers (the Guardian, Irish times, Huffington Post) and of documentary films on YouTube, for example. Social media also played a role in enabling further appreciation of the artists who had profiles, on apps such as Instagram and sites such as Facebook. Research was also conducted through visiting a Steve McCurry exhibition in London, on his work shot in Afghanistan.

The methods used in the primary research were questionnaires/surveys and interviews. An initial questionnaire was sent out to a sample of fifteen Afghan artists whose contact details were obtained through internet searches and from the websites of the Afghan art organizations, the Afghan Photography Network (APN) and the Kabul Art Project. The questionnaire was based on the research question as well as aims and objectives of the research, with the questions being mainly open questions that allowed artists to answer in more detail. This method however did not result in any responses. Upon reflection this may be down to the lack of understanding of the artists of what was expected of them as the researcher now understands that data collection surveys are not perhaps carried out in Afghanistan. An alternative method was used which involved Skype interviews and telephone interviews. The artists were firstly emailed to tell them about the research and to ask them if they could help by giving permission to be interviewed. This was done in a less formal manner: six artists responded to the e-mail and the interviews went ahead. The questions from the questionnaire were adjusted to make them less formal, in an attempt to gain the trust of the artist. The interviews were conducted in a language that was most appropriate such as English or Farsi.

Ethical practices were also taken into consideration. These were according to the regulations of the University of Huddersfield. Before the interview the nature and aims of the research were explained to participants who were asked to give their consent; and ethical consent forms for the research were completed and signed by the researcher and tutor. The participants understood that they could...
withdraw at any time. They all consented to use of their own names in the research and also consented for the interview to be videoed or audio taped. When arranging the interviews it was attempted that a time be arranged and that this was to be adhered as much as possible, although some interviewees had difficulty due to lack of internet access, or because of restrictions on lack of confidential spaces to talk.

Alongside the process of gathering the interviews and collating the data from them, I was in the studio working on my own portfolio and being influenced firstly by my own memories and then by the constraints of the artists I was interviewing, and finally in relation to that, exploring the freedom which I have in the Western territory.

- Sketchbook for developing ideas and themes
- Visiting galleries
- Researching online sources
- Put visualizations into practice and drawing on early childhood memory I began to work on canvas and embroidered images
- With some later canvases I added acrylic, inks

The recorded interviews were transcribed word for word as much as possible although occasional words were omitted due to the inability to understand what was being said by the interviewee, sometimes down to their accent or the muffled effect caused by poor internet connection. The method of analysis chosen was thematic. The interview transcripts were read through and different codes or themes highlighted and the contents of the interviews were then summarised according to the different themes.

**Development of studio practice and Exhibition**

Through my studio work I was hoping to discover whether the influences that feed into the work of the artists I interviewed, are present in my own work. In exploring Afghan art in the research, I abandoned the previous traditional techniques and focused instead on the creative practice involved in Afghan war rugs, one of the most distinct types of artwork not just of Afghanistan, but of the world. The rugs have historically told the many stories of this vast and varied country and more recently, of a civilisation which has seen so much. Previously I enjoyed drawing, painting and etching, but in looking into Afghan styles of artisan craft, this channelled me to explore the techniques of the native country of the artists, whilst wanting to reinvent these styles using the materials in a new environment: on canvas. The use of thread was found to be representative of both Afghan carpets and rugs, but also of Huddersfield and its historic textile industry, which was exciting and which helped focus the studio practice. The materials utilised and the stitching techniques used on the canvases are symbolic of this heritage as well as the environment I now find myself in. Furthermore it was realised that the practice of harvesting wool was virtually the same between Afghanistan and the historic textile industry in Huddersfield, meaning my work became a definite assimilation of the two different cultures. To understand more about the historic industry of textiles and wool in this region I did some research. The Colne and the Holme rivers (of the Huddersfield area) run through the Pennine hills, providing a plentiful supply of soft water, which was essential for the washing of raw wool for Huddersfield textile makers. By the early 1700s the textile industry was beginning to be born, engrossing the people living in hillside cottages around Huddersfield, so that by 1911, 22,000 people were employed to produce textiles in the area (Whitwam, 2011). During the mid to late 1800s when the industry was growing fastest, this was also
the time of the first two Anglo-Afghan wars (1839-1842 and 1878-1881), which further ties the two countries together in a history of conflict and of craftsmanship. This is part of what has influenced me in my own practice in the materials I have used and in the subject matter I have explored.

My imagination, however, is conflicted by, rather than unified by, two different identities: one that is well knowing of the echoing of Kalashnikovs and AK 47s, where people's lives are shaped by war; and the other invented in a Western 21st century, enshrined with the freedom of speech and expression and with values of democracy and human rights among other things. Afghan people have a lot of sense of injury which resonates with me and which motivates them, like many other Afghans, to keep producing this kind of artwork. Through this practical work, I attempted to unlock stories of the rich history of Afghanistan and of the implications still being felt through being caught in endless conflict. I can feel a certain life being breathed into my artwork through my own sense of adaption from one environment to another and deeper senses of reality from the Western environment I now live in.

The war rug that was acquired allowed a greater appreciation first-hand of the craft and was found to equally paint a familiar story of conflict and strife, therefore acting as a source of inspiration for the reproduction of its themes on canvas. Through the studio practice an attempt was also made to bring historical context of Afghanistan and in an attempt to tie together themes of Afghan and British imagery, there are references to maps, poppies and weaponry on the canvases. This was done in the hope of portraying my view of Afghanistan and offering an opportunity to learn about an unfamiliar and often misunderstood country, with its remarkable civilizations of varied peoples and culture. The narrative of the pieces reflects Afghanistan's collective past, and the differing intensities of stitching define the uncertain future of a country with a dark history. Most of all though, in the green, red and black of the Afghan flag, which Afghans proudly associate with, a new optimism is born reflecting the continued hope that they have for a country one day at peace.
Fig. 9
Image of the final exhibition (2016) 18.33 x 12.33 cm
Dilara Changis
Fig. 10
Image of the final exhibition (2016) 9.04 x 13.59 cm
Dilara Changis

Fig. 11
Image of the final exhibition (2016) 9.04 x 13.59 cm
Dilara Changis
Exhibition of artwork by contemporary Afghan artists

The exhibition aim was to allow the audience to embrace a visual and new cross cultural experience and to challenge the accepted notions of Afghanistan and its culture, as well as to give a platform for exposure to the artists whose works were displayed. They were found through social media, whilst some were also contacted through email provided on the Afghan art network websites that the researcher discovered. To conduct research into the opinions of Afghan art from those who have no relationship with the country or its people, a questionnaire was given out to ask the opinions of the audience before and after the exhibition on their views about Afghanistan and importantly about Afghan art and history. A total of seven people were questioned, from a diverse age and background, ranging from 20 to 54 and from undergraduate students through to PhD holders. These questionnaires highlighted the audience’s mixed perceptions of Afghanistan, from those who saw the country as steeped in “violence, conflict, oppression” and being home to “rugged mountains”, “harsh weather conditions and the Taliban” to those who to some extent recognised the alternative cultural associations, such as “Afghan carpets”. Furthermore only two out of the seven expressed any basic knowledge about the history of Afghanistan and only the same number believed they had ever witnessed any Afghan art, with one respondent believing they had seen a National Geographic magazine piece from the “late 1990s”. The audience’s response to being questioned on what they would expect to see in an exhibition featuring Afghan works, was a lot more varied however, with some expecting to see “photography” and “modern art” compared to others who thought to see “traditional crafts including woven fabrics, wooden artifacts and precious metals”, indicating there being no fixed understandings on what Afghan art ‘is’.

Following the viewing of the works at the exhibition opinions appeared to have changed on the art of Afghanistan, with comments such as “rich and complex place with a fascinating history” and specific references to the artwork displayed as being “beautiful and thought provoking” and the artists being “talented”. Five of the respondents showed clearly marked changes in their ‘opinions towards Afghan people and culture’ with comments such as “I have become more interested” and “more aware of how Afghans view themselves” and “now I realise there is more to Afghan people than war”.

Abstraction can encompass freedom as it is not an overt and obvious channel of one particular ideology over another. However as an art form it has been utilised in propagandized imperialism, for example in the 1960s the CIA sponsored American exhibitions of the abstract movement, whereas artists themselves at the time were more interested in Eastern spirituality (for example Buddhism). Similarly the Muslim art movement has favored abstract forms of elliptical beauty. Abstraction of form enables me to find a space, metaphorically and visually, where I can be sensitive to representing the pain of others, as well as come to terms with my own situation.

The moral dilemma of aestheticizing war/conflict is debated in Susan Sontag’s ‘Regarding the Pain of Others’ (2003) where she highlights the innate human desire to admire sometimes dreadful situations: there is the need to look and not look equally. We can be drawn to view horrors and yet we draw back from them out of disgust, as is arguably the effect of some of the aforementioned artists’ work, such as Roqia Alavi’s and Muzafar Ali’s. Sontag (2003) discusses this dilemma in her book, in the context of her work as a photographer where she is involved in capturing the moments of pain which she sees in others and the moral predicament that follows in their viewing by a larger audience.

Sontag suggests that the culture of news transmission where “you give us twenty two minutes and
we’ll give you the world” (a popularised slogan of the rise of radio news broadcasting in the 1960s) is par for the course for modern technology which makes the world seem smaller and less complex. She suggests that this attitude condenses the world and we fail to see the complexity of life and culture and art behind the snappy headlines and small sound bites of information we are exposed to. She highlights the ‘quintessential modern experience’ (2003, p.16) of watching atrocity from our living rooms as a daily occupation and how the reality of the experience becomes blurred in our medium of consumption. We become numb to the actuality of the situation through the abstract lens through which we consume the information and in addition this fuels the media fascination with war and violence further: a ‘if it bleeds it leads’ mentality, in which Sontag describes the audience’s response as being one of “compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view” (2003, p.16).

As a result, Sontag suggests that there is a never ending hunt for the more dramatic, as in the old slogan from Paris Match (French cultural affairs magazine): “the weight of the words: the shock of the photos.” (2003, p.20). This evidences that the shock itself has become the commodity the world wants to see and takes value from. This makes for an ethical dilemma as to what images the photographer takes and should share with the world. Sontag highlights particularly the ethical dilemma of the photographs of battlefields, pointing out that there is a beauty in the devastated landscape of the post battle aftermath and yet “to find beauty in war photographs seems heartless” (2003, p. 67). She goes on to illustrate the discussion of the correctness of photographing candid images of war and how those involved in war photography “have become increasingly concerned with the issues exploiting sentiment” in their photographs (2003, p.71). The debate about the function of photography, of whether it is to beautify, ‘uglify’, or naturally observe a scene, she suggests is done entirely in the context of eliciting a response. Sontag discusses the archival nature of photography and she illustrates this with photographs of genocide being a body of work which have the power to evoke horror in the viewer, whilst equally attempting to ensure that the crimes which are depicted continue to evoke the same horror in the next generation.

My work depicts the crime of war within the imagery which I use but adds distance to that as the movement of the work includes fragile hand stitching and painting which illustrates the fragility within me from my past experiences but moves me as an artist forward into a more hopeful scenario. My work contains hints of a troubled background but is the story of two worlds set apart and also reflects the world I find myself in now by the addition of bright colour and the cultural differences which this represents. The juxtaposition of the imagery with the techniques references the cross cultural aspects in my work. My artwork practice is reflecting the changing ethos of Afghanistan from a war torn land to a place where art might flourish as shown by the artists I have interviewed in my research. I have used war imagery but depicted it as fragile threadwork with strands still hanging form it to illustrate the far reaching impact which war can have and has had on my life. The artwork illustrated in my research and my own practice are highlighting the fact that the technologies of war might be redrawn to encompass a new age where cultural benefits might overcome the legacy which war has left behind.

My research began in conducting analysis of secondary sources of work relating to contemporary art movements in both Britain and Afghanistan. I attempted to draw comparisons in the nature and themes within the works I analysed, whilst simultaneously looking at the two movements from an abstract lens, so as not to falsely represent what I was certain would be very differing subject matter. In particular I focussed on the ‘Young British Artists’ (YBA) movement of the 1990s, and on Afghanistan's first contemporary art prize contest, held in 2008 (Patience, 2008) to gauge a general view of what could be considered revolutionary recent movements in the respective countries. I
hoped an understanding of the British modern art world in respect to similar traits in Afghan works could be forged through watching the ITV Perspectives documentary 'Kick out the Jams' by Gary Kemp (2014), which investigates the YBA scene in 1990s Britain. The group of 'Young British Artists' emerged at the end of the 1980s and changed the face of art throughout the later 90s era, with their brash, uncensored and at times shocking work. Among them were Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, the Chapman brothers, Sam Taylor Wood and Gavin Turk. Looking at some of their work from my viewpoint there is a vulgarity which horrifies beyond the imagination, but at the same time it reveals a form of freedom of expression that is like a movement in its own right, encapsulated specifically in subjects like life and death and life experience.
Hirst’s 1990 piece ‘A Thousand Years’ is a perfect example of this and I personally can relate to the elements of the piece, such as the dead cow’s head which takes me back to my own childhood in Afghanistan where the dead decomposing body parts of animals were a common and natural occurrence on the street and which would attract innumerable flies of all descriptions, which Hirst’s piece also features. The contrasting difference between the two experiences is that in Afghanistan the decomposition of the head and of the surrounding flies to maggots would be part of a natural process; whereas Hirst manufactured the same effects in gallery conditions. Hirst’s 2012 piece called ‘Medicine Cabinets’ is a concept Afghans may be able to relate to however, as they have survived during hard times in which medicine was not available. Poor people in Afghanistan would relate to Hirst’s concept of the medicine chest being ‘god’ and being synonymous of hope in the struggle between life and death, the ongoing theme in this piece. This piece would have possibly been seen as more taboo prior to the YBA movement, but Hirst’s art clearly celebrates that as there is no hiding from the overarching theme. From the point of view of an Afghan artist, this type of work would probably be alien and out of context, a form of art that most will never have yet been exposed to.

The YBAs challenged the status quo and their art sought attention in challenging the face of contemporary and modern art. Much of Tracy Emin’s work (‘My Bed’ for example) is deeply personal and reveals her vulnerability and her difficult relationship issues, which to the average Afghan artist may be shocking and out of context as their perspective is often more traditional and customary. Through ‘My Bed’ Emin revealed her vulnerability in being a woman in her time and displayed through this piece how she uses her art as therapy to deal with issues she has had. Afghan artists’ work can reveal the same vulnerability due to the issues they have experienced during wartime. Artists working this way are in search of solutions; they are looking for a voice. Hirst portrays the more everyday experience in what he sees in the world around him whereas Emin’s work shows rawer emotions that she is fighting with inside. Afghans are still living in the context of a third world country with all that that entails and so the impact of some of the YBA’s art work may be above their understanding. Further more the creation of work such as what the YBAs produced is only achievable in a free society with freedom of thought and expression, a concept previously alien to Afghanistan but that may now start to emerge where artists can express themselves in new, evolving ways. This will involve a degree of courage as they seek it in a time of continued political instability and conflicting ideologies. For my own part as an Afghan person I missed out on this kind of freedom of expression in art and the ability to connect art to my own sense of reality. My recent art practice where I can explore my impressions of two separate cultures has allowed me to address this omission.

Additionally I also looked to other Afghan sources of recent art, which was more difficult to engage with somewhat due to the lack of information that was present, which I assumed to be down to the lack of establishment of art again in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Analysis and Findings
The artists who I contacted and whose work eventually featured in the 'A glimpse of artwork from a conflict zone: Afghanistan' exhibition were fundamental to the formation of my understanding of working as an artist in Afghanistan and the issues influencing Afghan art work. I came to understand that their works reflect a multitude of themes, from daily life in Afghanistan to the effects of war, violence and persecution.

Ali Akhlaqi firstly described how producing art was for him a contextual way to outlet the feelings he faced as a refugee in Iran: “I was suffering mentally. Iranian people used to give Afghan people a hard time. But art was the only way I could express myself. Art allowed me to stay calm”.

Akhlaqi’s works feature strong bold colours with subjects often depicted in a western European fashion, rather than in traditional Afghan dress. This style and the strong colours used are likely to be the direct result of the Western teachers he trained under at Kabul University, which he graduated from in 2012, post-Taliban. His depictions of women and their features such as sometimes uncovered hair, painted in vivid colours like green, red and purple.

Fig. 13
Akhlaqi. A (2016) untitled
could be argued to be flirting with the provocations of 'immodesty' that deeply angers many factions of Afghanistan's religiously zealous society and that would have courted harsh punishment, such as torture, under the Taliban regime. Akhlaqi further challenges the accepted notions of contemporary Afghan society in his use of certain colours in a manner differing from the arguably generally envisaged uses of them; light blue for example which can be strongly associated with the burka, he uses expressively in hair and eye colour. Whilst toying with the imagined connotations of the colour, this simultaneously reflects perhaps the ethereal hopes of Afghans, in that light blue being the colour of a cloudless sky and or clear ocean, ties with ideas of stability and transparency, of calm and hope: the hopes of many Afghans one day for their country in the midst of past conflict and strife. This overall confidence in colour could be argued to represent Akhalqi's hopes for his country becoming bold, progressive and modernising, much like his paintings.

His celebration of women furthermore, provides an insight into the mind of a modern Afghan male and it could almost be suggested that the metaphorical conviction in many of his pieces is symbolic of a wider context where Akhlaqi is apologetic for the actions of the greater male population of Afghanistan for its abuses of women. His statement “I am the master of my creatures” is reminiscent of the Taliban era dominance of men over the lives of women, in which women were seen as a man's property (be it husband, father or next male of kin). This reflects also the ongoing domestic power struggles in a country still rebuilding its identity and reforming its values post-Taliban. By referring to women as 'creatures' additionally, this ambiguously or perhaps intentionally associates them with both insects and other primitive species, and with mythological creatures portrayed as strong and fearsome, whilst also epitomising vice and virtue to the observer. This ambiguity could be metaphorical of Akhlaqi's own struggle with his acceptance and understanding of women in a country with such a contradictory past and so deeply divided on the issue. Later in his accompanying statement

"The portraits form a big part of my world.
They are fanciful creatures.
They are girls, because girls have purer and more powerful dreams than others."
They are the boldest in dreaming.
I enjoy talking to them.
They are not speaking with their mouths but with their stares.
Their gazes are full of words, emotions and a kind of hypnotism.
The emotion of their words is the same color as their eyes, and the color of their eyes is the complement of my moments.
My unbalanced impressions dance with colors, go everywhere, and are insanely careless.
I’m lord of my world’s fanciful creatures, and I’m the lord who worships his creatures’ dreams, and believes in them and reaches redemption”.
Akhlaqi .A (2016)

He voices more liberal sentiments however to the treatment of women, giving hope that this could be the start of a wider movement in which artists like himself lead the way in the progression of women’s rights.

His artwork and his approach is in contrast to mine. Where he has taken images that would almost be taboo in Afghanistan and reworked them with colour to present a statement, I have used more traditional images form the customary and traditional crafts of Afghanistan as in the war rugs which I have reworked.

Meena Saifi’s work equally recounts the struggle of women in Afghanistan, seen from a female perspective. It is clear to see in Saifi’s similar use of bold colours, sharp strokes and strong features in her subjects that her western inhabitancy lends to her virtuosity, much like Akhlaqi. Her experimentation with female form and nudity however in some of her pieces such as ‘colourful moment’
Fig. 15
And ‘crazy world’ could be argued to make her the most controversial of the artists to the mainly conservative Afghan society, and her work classified as “haram” [forbidden in Islam], as she herself described. In ‘crazy world’ she paints a woman topless, with only the woman’s hair and a draped piece of cloth, extending from the head in a very loose hijab style, covering the breasts of the woman. The use of these two highly contentious features (hair and hijab) in covering the woman’s ‘modesty’ contradicts the historic suppression of women’s sexuality in Afghanistan and in the blue of the cloth there is again reference to the burka which many would argue symbolises the suppression of the female body. Blue is also the colour of the biggest and most prominent mosque of Afghanistan, aptly entitled the ‘Blue Mosque’ in Mazar-e-Sharif. So in using blue for the loose, free flowing hijab, Saifi clearly ties it and the portrait’s other connotations to the dominance of the Muslim religion in Afghanistan. In the use of the woman’s hijab and hair in covering her body, Saifi simultaneously acknowledges the struggle women have faced in ‘owning’ their own bodies over religious supremacy, contrasting this with her depiction of these features as pure and natural, much like the female body. The woman’s unhappiness in the portrait is clear through the use of the colour black around the eyes and the black tear like structures flowing down her face. This unhappiness could be reflective of not only the aforementioned struggles women face, but also of the more general suppression of women in what is expected of them in such a society. Saifi described when interviewed how her drive to produce art stemmed from her ambition to not “[...] become the same as other girls, and end up with the same destiny that has been decided because you’re a woman” which is to “go get married, have three kids, take care of those three kids, listen to your husband, take care of your husband’s family”. This damning verdict of what life holds for the majority of women in Afghanistan shows us clearly how far the country has to come to be in line with our own western values of the role of women in society.

One of Saifi’s overarching themes of oppression through religion is also extended to male subjects, such as in ‘Ashquri’
The portrait of a sad looking elderly man in a turban, which is painted entirely once again in blue, With the aforementioned connotations of this colour to the rule of Islamic law in Saifi’s work, the observer cannot help but connect the two and in turn the overbearing implications of religion perhaps, on the man’s happiness. The sadness in the man’s eyes is further enhanced by the way in which he is painted with his head very slightly tilted down, as though the weight of turban he is wearing, which men were forced to wear under the Taliban, is symbolic of the toll of Taliban rule on Afghans and the unhappiness that bearing the weight of their rule has had. The painting of the portrait entirely in blue could be suggested to symbolise the hope of calm, stability and freedom one day for Afghanistan, much like the way in which its use can be interpreted in Akhlaqi’s work. Equally however Saifi’s self-professed cynicism of this, “there is no such thing as freedom because freedom, in my opinion, is something with no rules or laws [attached] and there’s no such thing in this world”, and description of how struggle persists “because you can’t change mind and belief”, could lead the observer’s conclusion to be one of her defeatist acceptance of the role of religion and the freedoms it takes when forced upon a population.
Both these artists have explored freedom and gender issues which they observe from both sides of the conflict. Whilst I have observed the conflict in my artwork my subject matter is very different. These artists are challenging the status quo in their country where I am just reflecting on the impact of the conflict on me and how that influences the art I produce.

Akhlaqi and Saifi both also recounted how their drive to produce art has been somewhat curtailed and affected in the past because of their family’s distaste for art. Akhlaqi said “[…] my family [have] never supported me. My dad is a mullah; he was always against what I did or do”, whilst Saifi similarly described how for her “Some portion of relatives are not [supportive]: the majority in fact”, once again highlighting the conflict of interest between art and traditional religious values. On the other hand I have had the freedom in the West to produce what artwork I like and the whole university experience to underpin my study.

In Roqia Alavi’s featured photography (above), the burqa and the role of women are again a central focus and in this sense the issue of religion once again at the forefront of the work. Her first piece shows a woman sitting at a market presumably selling the artistic displays that are in front of her, one of which she holds. It is of a canvas bound to what looks to be a tambourine with the canvas featuring pictures of two western looking women with hair uncovered and face and arms showing; the antithesis of the burqa-clad woman holding them. The imaginary figures of the canvas are in a lot of ways as alive to us as the woman herself, of whose features we can see almost nothing at all, therefore displaying the likely enforcement once again of the woman’s conditions upon her; Gohari (2000:108-110) noted at the time the Taliban opinion on the displaying of a woman’s face being “a source of corruption”. Had she conviction in the supposed morals of maintaining ‘modesty’ and minimising “corruption” through the wearing of a burka, it is unlikely she would choose to sell art.
displaying the very opposite. Furthermore, the interesting question is raised as to the opinion of the society surrounding her to the artwork displayed as it is unlikely the woman would choose to display something that would court controversy and anger others, particularly her male counterparts. This leads the observer to question the disposition of the society and the perhaps ambivalence of its values in the light of Afghanistan’s confusing past. Sentiments of the real life conflict between art and religion were echoed by Alavi in her anecdote when interviewed of how she has witnessed other artists facing trouble with religious values: “[…] some of them [for example when] drawing a picture of a mosque. That kind of art work brings a lot of fighting, arguments, the mullah telling the artist that “you have not the right to draw a mosque”. Alavi remains optimistic however and hopes that “photography can initiate a revolution and lead to greater social transformations”.

The contradictory burqa-clad woman piece differs in some respects from the very traditional representation of Afghanistan that Alavi’s other piece provides us with. It is of a girl in a red hijab, hiding part of her face with the material, she is the main focus in front of a line of washing hanging behind her. Furthermore, only one of her eyes is able to be seen which obscures the observer’s ability to distinguish any real facial expression from the girl, conveying perhaps her embarrassment or reluctance to be photographed. By covering her mouth, we imagine her as if deprived of any voice and therefore as a passive subject, obedient to the commands of others (likely men), much like the suppression the woman wearing the burqa
Muzafar Ali’s photography conversely explores ideas of displacement and identity of the individual. His works feature the people of Afghanistan that he photographed whilst travelling around the country in his work with the UN. In particular photographs such as the displaced family in a remote valley

They feature a people who are shaped by persecution: the Hazaras. Despite the persecution and ill treatment they receive from other Afghans and particularly the Taliban, due to their Mongolian ancestry and general support for the government, Ali’s photographs display the resilience of their spirit immaterial of conflict and strife. The narrative of his lens focuses on their daily lives rather than on the conditions that shapes them, which he describes as forming a part of his goal to show “how real Afghan people are to the world”. Ali’s work in many ways is a painful reminder for me of my own childhood back in Afghanistan, where I was locked between mountains, in a vast region such as the photo of the family displays. Ali explains how the family had been travelling for many days to lodge a complainant with the local tribal council:

“Mr. Yousuf, is sitting in the outskirts of Nili, the capital-town of Afghanistan's remote Daikundi province. He lived 130 km east of Nili. He had a small piece of land for cultivation on the mountain when it was confiscated by a warlord of his village in 2007. He had no power to get his land back, which was the only source of survival for him and his family.

Yousuf traveled for 14 days by-foot to reach to Nili to lodge a complaint in the court against the warlord and get his land back. He brought his family with him because he was afraid, the warlord will marry his daughters. Yousuf was so poor that he had to rely on people’s givings on their long journey to Nili. They walked mostly with empty belly - in a hope to get their land back.
I mobilized UN’s Human Rights Unit to closely monitor his case upon his arrival and complaint. Despite, UN monitoring his case, he was not able to get his land back from the warlord till 2009. He was stranded in Nili, the family spending their days and nights in the barren mosques and ate left overs of mostly poor people.

Yousuf and thousands of other Afghans are victims of years of war which empowered the warlords who not only killed hundreds of thousands of Afghans but also committed gross human rights violations across Afghanistan. The warlords and their affiliates are also responsible in undermining Afghanistan’s error and corruption prone judicial system.

Whenever I see Yousuf and his family’s picture, I fall into deep thoughts about him and his vulnerable family. I don’t know what happened to his land, where they stayed, what they ate and how they survived in the volatile situation of Afghanistan.” Ali. M (2016)

The awe that is inspired by the landscape sits in sharp contrast to the bewilderment that the faces of the family display, but no indication is given as to the nature of the problems they may face. Additionally, the barren, ivory monochrome of the landscape differs strikingly from the bright, colourful patterns of the clothes of the family. In this sense his works show a side of Afghanistan that we have never witnessed before, an ambiguity we are unfamiliar with in the comfort of our learned understanding of Afghanistan as being a country of war and violence, and of an association of the country with images of such. In Ali’s piece of the two boys laughing, our understanding of Afghanistan is therefore further questioned by this perhaps unusual display of amusement and innocence by the subjects and further to this, the subjects in question displaying unfamiliar facial characteristics to the usual representation of Afghan boys as pakol-wearing Pashtus. In this sense, Ali captures perfectly the side to Afghanistan that many do not recognise exists, the side that does not engage with barbarity or violence, but rather is caught somewhere in the middle; as he described when interviewed “they support the government [...] and fought for education, to promote democracy and human rights values”, but who, like other Afghans, in a country dominated by violence and conflict are “besieged in their own country, strangers in their own country”.

In one of Ali’s other photographs is a man seen sitting down having his picture taken on the street another man is standing holding a background sheet to his picture who is looking at Ali’s camera. The more complex set up of their arrangement in order to take a self-portrait is contrasted with the simplicity of the way in which our view (through Ali’s photograph) is captured. Paradoxically however we are equally reminded of the simplicity and primitiveness of their culture, and in some ways this almost questions our complex western cultures and our understanding of others so far removed from ourselves.
Mariam Alimi’s work similarly encapsulates a lot of daily life in Afghanistan in a way that is abstract from the war and conflict of the country, particularly her two featured photographs of women in traditional dress sorting yarn for carpet making and then of a woman working to collect cow and sheep dung to burn, whilst simultaneously cradling a child.
In the photograph of the women preparing wool for rug and carpet making, the traditional artisan crafts of Afghanistan are displayed giving a rare view into the physical aesthetic of craftsmanship in the country. The carpets displayed in the background are traditional rugs, without any of the imagery associated with war (displayed on war rugs) present. The patterns on the rugs from the researcher’s understanding are customary to centuries gone by, when rugs would display images inspired by ideas of the silk road, and from the mosaics of the Afghan mosques. More contemporary patterns can be seen to the right hand side of the photograph, where a map of Afghanistan is surrounded by Islamic imagery such as the dome of a mosque, with underneath the emblem of Afghanistan. This imagery reflects my own studio practice (reproductions of rug-like themes on canvas), in which I recreated some of what I have seen in war rugs and which I have been personally affected by, such as the witnessing of guns (Kalashnikovs and AK-47s) and hand grenades. Furthermore the colours I used in my works were of the Afghan flag (green, black and red), with the red also being symbolic of poppy production, which reminds me of my own childhood where wild poppies grew nearby in the village where I lived. My childhood curiosity meant I enjoyed squeezing the colour out of the poppies onto my hands, which I liked to pretend was henna.

The wool the women are crafting with, as previously discussed, will have come from sheep, which links the two photographs in their recycling and reusing of natural materials such as is traditional in Afghanistan. These materials, when combined with basic techniques passed from generation to generation, produce essential goods which the people of Afghanistan, especially rural villagers, survive upon. Furthermore the women in the rug making photograph are wearing patterns that associate them with their environment – as if they are a part of the surroundings and in this sense fundamental to the art and the culture being observed. Most poignant also is the fact the work in both photographs is being done by women, which is reminiscent of traditional gender roles in developing countries, where women often do craftwork to sell and basic farm work in order for a family to survive, all whilst raising children. This is likely to have been a heritage also familiar to Afghanistan prior to the Taliban era ban on women working (Fielden & Azerbaijani-Moghadam, 2001).
In conclusion, the works of these artists are both introspective and outwardly critical; a display of their experiences and equally the change they want to see. They encompass different themes, through the differing imaginations of the artists who are in Afghanistan or managed to flee from the country, but all are on the central theme of conflict, as was illustrated in the title of the exhibition: ‘A glimpse of artwork from a conflict zone’.

All are a way of making the voices of the artists’ heard through their visual imagery. War has become a part of their identities, but does not wholly define who they are. It has made me appreciate all the things we take for granted as artists in the democratic western world, such as freedom of expression and freedom to produce what we wish. Some of the artists I worked with were risking their lives and struggling to simply being able to communicate with me sometimes via the internet. For me, the experience has helped me learn more about the modernizing voices of Afghanistan; those that embrace freedoms, equality and women’s rights for example and I am hopeful that in the future those voices transcend Afghanistan’s troubled borders. By holding this exhibition it will have opened up a new discussion and question people’s preconceptions about Afghanistan and about art from Afghanistan too.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objectives of the research were:

- To examine the history of art in Afghanistan
- To develop the researcher’s own artwork and explore whether conflict is a central theme to this work
- To produce an exhibition to enable a glimpse of artwork produced by contemporary Afghan artists and photographers and to give them a voice and platform for exposure

The present research aimed to answer the question how can I understand what inspires contemporary Afghan artists and what problems do they, and I, face as a result of conflict?’ In order to do this it was important to examine the history of art in Afghanistan as well as cultural influences. It was found that war and religion had a significant influence on the artists and their artwork. The themes of human rights and freedom flowed through their art. The female artists used their artwork to rebel against traditions, highlighting women’s rights.

An examination of the insights of artists and their work has shown how art still plays an important role in a conflict zone despite the challenges and struggles that the artists face.

The debate about the function of photography (Sontag), the role of the narrative in the presentation of a photograph is key to enable the viewer to understand the reality of the situation. Sontag argues that a war photograph with no attached narrative can provide no basis of understanding, and serves simply to shock, accomplishing in informing us that “war is hell” (2003, p.81). I have developed as an artist, gained further awareness of contemporary art in Britain and Afghanistan. My exhibition has informed me and the other viewers that Afghan art is developing and starting to breathe. My own art work has been prepared alongside my fellow Afghans and has been influenced by their concepts and ideas.
Limitations to the study and ideas for further research

The main limitation to the study was time and difficulty of interviewing artists who did not always have the technology to connect easily to be able to communicate across large distances. Language was also a limitation to some extent as my own knowledge of Farsi was limited. It was important to be able to understand the culture and the limited experiences of some of the artists. It was important to maintain the topic under research during the interviews. If this research was to be taken further, it would be beneficial to conduct face-to-face interviews to obtain more in-depth understanding of the participating artists. The traditional crafts could also be explored in more depth, especially the ancient rug-making techniques. These would help me to develop my own work further.
References


