

KUNSTMUSEUM THUN



THE OTHER KABUL. REMAINS OF THE GARDEN 3.9. – 4.12.2022

ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

“What once was, can one day become again,” wrote political scientist Ekkehart Krippendorff. His idea that the future, rather than being invented from whole cloth, can be forged based on the ethical deeds of our ancestors is an encouraging one. Krippendorff’s motto could be applied, for example, to the Bagh-e Babur gardens in Kabul, which fell victim to war in 1992. Between 2000 and 2008, the parched terrain was cleared of mines, restored and replanted. Today, families and friends can once again enjoy picnics there, a long tradition in Afghanistan.

Bagh-e Babur (the Garden of Babur) has always been a meeting place for diverse cultures. Created in 1528 as the tomb complex of a Mogul from India, the site was later transformed into gardens on the Persian model. The state-ly gardens have been open to the public since the nineteenth century. As in the gardens, multiple voices are heard in the international exhibition *The Other Kabul: Remains of the Garden*. Some of the participating artists are of Afghan origin and others come from Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkey, France, Switzerland or the Netherlands. Rather than documenting the state of Kabul, they dare to conceive of a city that was once famous for its gardens as a congenial living environment for the future.

Susann Wintsch, curator at the Treibsand association, has been developing the exhibition *The Other Kabul: Remains of the Garden* since 2018, in collaboration with the artist Jeanno Gaussi. When they launched the project, Afghanistan was still on its way to becoming a democracy. In 2020, the Kunstmuseum Thun came on board for the realisation of the project. And when the Taliban seized power in August 2021, the concept remained unchanged. Because the “other Kabul” must persevere, in Afghanistan and everywhere else.

ROOM A AND F

The 16-part painting series by Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai (b. 1988 in Najibabad, lives in Weimar) is a tribute to Bagh-e Babur. The compositions are inspired by the architecture of the garden. Golden twilight suffusing a water basin evokes a golden entrance gate. Decorative elements summon visions of lounge chairs arranged on an imaginary beach. The texts quote inscriptions from tombstones and a mosque, or record conversations. The artist has removed the dots from the consonants that would render the Urdu and Dari characters legible, so that she alone can decipher her memories of Kabul.

Ursula Palla’s (b. 1961 in Chur, lives in Zurich) bronze *Fireweed* is a tribute to the willowherb, a plant that proliferated across fields of rubble in Europe after the end of the Second World War, which is why it was called bombweed in the UK and Trümmerblume in Germany. Weapons were melted into the alloy used to cast the bronze sculpture. *Fireweed* thus literally transforms violence and destruction into vitality and fertility.

ROOM B

Magical sounds resonate in Almagul Menlibayeva’s (b. 1969 in Almaty, lives in Berlin and Kazakhstan) video work. The wind blows all around and through a yurt where a woman crouches inside. Behind the framework we can catch a glimpse of the so-called “Hungry Steppe”, a semi-desert in the centre of Kazakhstan. A group of nomads is in the process of leaving. Between these scenes, we see shaman women, “goddesses of the steppe”, who symbolically charge the barren desert landscape with new life.

In the artist’s photographs, women stand in front of historical mausoleums along the Silk Road, for example the tenth-century mausoleum of Aisha Bibi in Taraz or the mausoleum of the fifteenth-century Sufi master Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Other figures pose like column sculptures in ruined

buildings on former collective farms from the Soviet era, when the Kazakh countryside was used as a testing ground and a site for Russian gulags. With their aesthetics reminiscent of glossy magazines, the artist's works form a counterpoint to these past offences.

ROOM C

Many countries adopt national flowers. They are usually meant to summon feelings of home – for example the Swiss edelweiss. But they are also used as political symbols, a global practice that the artist couple Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi (b. 1961 in Karachi and 1957 in Seattle, both live in Ithaca) explore in their Efflorescence Series. *Laleh*, *Padma* and *Shapla* are radiant, incandescent works of art. Their stylised forms, like neon advertising signs, will go on glowing forever – or at least until they run out of power.

ROOM D

Animals have appeared for many years in the works of Necla Rüzgar (b. 1972 in Turkey, lives in Ankara), often in close, mystical association with women. In *Fauna*, one hundred sparrows lie on the ground, swept into a corner as if dead. The objects have in fact been painted by hand to look astoundingly lifelike. Animals and women have a special status in many cultures, according to the artist, but both are at the same time victims of oppression and murder. Rüzgar has based her artistic practice on analysing this phenomenon.

ROOM E

Pieter Paul Pothoven (b. 1981 in the Netherlands, lives in Amsterdam) examines the history of the ancient lapis lazuli

mines in north-eastern Afghanistan through a postcolonial lens. For over 6,000 years, the mines have supplied an extensive trade network with lapis lazuli of the highest quality. In 2009, the artist had a block of the rock sent to Holland and developed from it an eight-part painting series focusing on ultramarine pigment, one of the most precious in the visual arts. The artist's installation *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang* features a piece of the blue mountain rock that German geologist Karl Brückl photographed in 1936. The millimetre-thin slices of stone in the slide frames transport viewers to a fantastic microcosm.

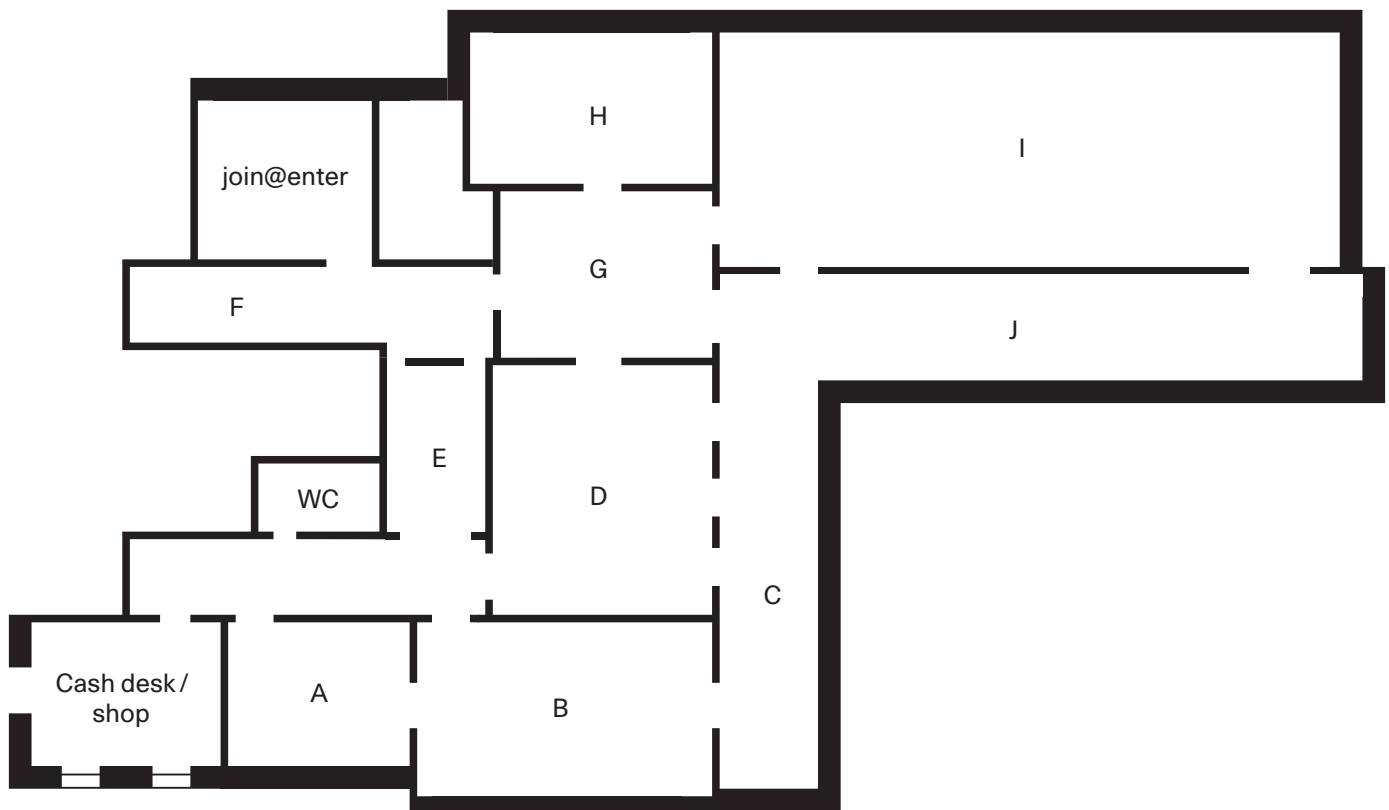
ROOM F

People enveloped in red cloth make their way through a snowy landscape. They unwittingly summon images of drops of blood. And indeed, they are meant to recall a suicide attack in the midst of peaceful demonstrations in Kabul's Deh Mazang district on 23 July 2016 that took the lives of scores of people. The victims of the attack are buried today on a hill above Kabul. Mohsin Taasha's (b. 1991 in Kabul, lives in Marseille) figures seem to bear witness to their tragic fate. The soundtrack to the work was composed by musician Farshad Akbari.

ROOM G

Kubra Khademi's (b. 1988 in the Afghan province of Ghor, lives in Paris) drawings were made for the hatches of old prison cell doors at the Galleria delle Prigioni in Treviso, Italy. Each drawing represents a crime for which women alone can be prosecuted. For example, when they fall in love with a man other than the one chosen for them, or

OVERVIEW



when they freely express their femininity. Men are never charged with such crimes. In her works, the artist lustfully turns this demonisation of the female body on its head, immersing us in a world of mythical forces.

The wall installation by Chantal Romani (b. 1971 in Lucerne, lives in Zurich) consists of delicate, translucent leaf skeletons and tells of the fragility of nature. The artist collected the over 2,000 leaves in the forest and extracted their chlorophyll in a complex process. Now the fragile arrangement floats like the mirage of a wall.

The aluminium sculpture *Thistle* by Ursula Palla (b. 1961 in Chur, lives in Zurich) is neither stylised nor embellished but instead radically demonstrates how reality can be messy and unruly but all the more elegant for it.

ROOM H

Baqer Ahmadi's (b. 1995 in the Afghan province of Ghazni, lives in Zurich) video installation shows the artist sitting and being showered with flour and honey. These ingredients are traditionally used in his homeland to make desserts. But here it seems that the young man has been detained by an institution or system that is punishing him by raining down sticky and dusty substances over his head. The artist nevertheless tries to sit there gracefully and not show any discomfort.

ROOM I

In the installation *No Language* by Jeanno Gaussi (b. 1973 in Kabul, lives in Berlin), an inscription written in Dari on the plates, napkin rings and tea towels says: "You don't need language to wash dishes." In a festive setting where otherwise animated table talk might be heard, different associations come to the fore here. For example the poorly paid dishwashers and the social gulf between them and the beautifully laid table.

The Super-8 footage from a private archive in the work *Fluid Body* by Neda Razavipour (b. 1969 in Tehran, lives in Lucerne) shows scenes of pleasant summer holidays at the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan. But the more recent footage in the video was taken in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The two countries share a history of abruptly drawn borders during the Cold War. In interviews with people on both sides of the Aras River, the artist recorded memories of that era. The former separation cannot be overcome even today, despite open borders.

The ornamental imagery in the series *Domestic Suicide for all Seasons* on closer glance reveals living spaces that are closed off from the outside world, homes where women jump out of the windows or hang or immolate themselves in the courtyard. Parastou Forouhar (b. 1962 in Teheran, lives in Frankfurt) develops the ornamental elements in her paintings using digital means. Any deviations that might have occurred in freehand painting can be eliminated in this way. The artist's working method is thus a metaphor for a rigid ideological system from which individuals have difficulty escaping.

The 1,000 small portraits produced by the artist Latifa Zafar Attai (b. 1994 in Ghazni, lives in Tehran) are directed against social and gender-specific exclusion and the denial of human rights. The rows of likenesses show living contemporaries of the artist who, like herself, belong to the Hazara ethnic group. The Hazaras are discriminated against in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries and robbed of their rights. By embroidering each passport photo by hand with a mask of fine wool threads, the artist protects the identities of those depicted and implies that one day all people will be equal.

In the installation by Yerbossyn Meldibekov (b. 1964 in Kazakhstan, lives in Almaty), the central square in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, is the protagonist. The construction kit contains ten monument models, each disassembled into its constituent parts. The building instructions are derived from historical photographs of the monuments and the corresponding competition designs. They thus introduce us to the eventful history of communist national ideologies in the twentieth century.

ROOM J

The Doll Project recalls Conceptual Art and Arte Povera. It can be read as a portrait of the city of Kabul. The twenty initial objects were fabricated from rubbish found on the streets of Kabul. Some of the figures have a plastic bottle as body, others a piece of wood. Shahida Shaygan (b. 1997 in Ghazni, lives in Zurich) produced her work in Switzerland. Among her dolls are frightening and eerie figures and others that look scarred by life. And yet the work as a whole exudes a feeling of empathy and makes a statement on the dignity of all things and creatures.

Monica Ursina Jäger (b. 1974 in Thalwil, lives in Zurich) painted her mural with chlorophyll taken from plant species that have been cultivated for centuries: maize and cotton. Historically, the discovery of maize is associated with bloody genocidal wars, and the cultivation of cotton with the era of slavery. By contrast, the natural extraction of pigment here is meant as a way to take issue with the systematic poisoning of our soils. To keep the painted plants from fading in the light over time, the artist will refresh them during the course of the exhibition

To accompany the exhibition, Hirmer Verlag has published the extensive catalogue "The Other Kabul: Remains of the Garden" (D/E), with descriptions of the artworks and essays by Taqi Akhlaqi, Haleh Anvari, Robert Harrison, Helen Hirsch and Susann Wintsch.
Design: Mondo Messmer, Lucerne

Kunstmuseum Thun
Thunerhof, Hofstettenstrasse 14, 3602 Thun
T +41 (0)33 225 84 20
www.kunstmuseumthun.ch

With the kind support of the:



ELSE V. SICK STIFTUNG

ERNST UND OLGA
GUBLER-HABLÜTZEL STIFTUNG

pr:helvetia

TREIBSAND

artlink

IMPRINT

Director: Helen Hirsch
Exhibition concept: Susann Wintsch, Helen Hirsch
Exhibition management: Claudia Blank, Alisa Klay
Administration: Marianne Lutz, Michael Röthlisberger
Financial management: Tanja Hählen
Communications: Elsa Horstkötter
Art education: Saba Bach, Regula Brassel, Elisa Daubner, Meret Landolt,
Gabriele Moshammer, Anna-Lisa Schneeberger
Exhibition installation: Lisa Blatter, Raffaella Chiara, Dan Reusser, Mirjam
Sieber, Simon Stalder, Henry Thomet
Graphic Design: Bonsma & Reist

“The Other Kabul” is a guest exhibition of Verein Treibsand, curated by
Susann Wintsch in collaboration with Kunstmuseum Thun.