

Hangama Amiri's 'A Homage to Home' at Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, and in the Sharjah Biennial

Kathy Battista

Hangama Amiri, 'A Homage to Home', The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, USA, 5 February – 11 June 2023; Hangama Amiri, *Threshold* (2022), in 'Thinking Historically in the Present', Sharjah Biennial 15, UAE, 7 February – 11 June 2023

Hangama Amiri is an Afghan Canadian artist who lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut. A graduate of the prestigious MFA programme in painting at Yale School of Art, her journey to the hallowed Ivy League was not a typical blue-blood legacy line. Her family fled their native country, Afghanistan, in 1996 when she was just seven years old, after the Taliban seized control of Kabul. Moving through various countries, they finally arrived in Canada in 2005 when Amiri was a teenager. These few sentences belie the trials and pitfalls of refugee life, a reduced biography of a complex and multi-faceted experience. Amiri's practice reflects the hybridity of diasporic lives: it is both nostalgic and future-leaning and most often takes the form of 'paintings' constructed of textile, thread, and sometimes digitally printed images. Her process is like some painters: she sketches an idea, then creates a small gouache study, which is ultimately scaled up into the larger fabric work. It is important for several reasons: for the recent resurgence of textiles in contemporary art; for its depiction of Afghan life and traditions as well as the expatriate condition; and importantly, for its feminist stance that draws on personal experience to depict the struggles of Afghan women and girls. Amiri's work was seen concurrently in two exhibitions in the spring of 2023: a solo show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, and as part of the Sharjah Biennial in the UAE. In both exhibitions, Amiri used textiles to highlight the female experience in Afghanistan, as well its citizens living abroad, through poetic compositions that echo reality as well as imagined scenarios.

'A Homage to Home' was Amiri's first solo museum exhibition.¹ Albeit early in her career, Amiri's show was impressive for its scale and ambition: her works filled the gallery spaces and enveloped the viewer through their architectural scale and meticulous details. The museum's

¹ The exhibition, which took place from 5 February – 11 June 2023, will travel to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri in 2024

chief curator, Amy Smith-Stewart, dedicated the entire ground floor to the exhibition: three separate galleries and one corridor hosted twenty works, most of them newly created by the young artist for this show. The exhibition took the viewer on a journey as one moved through the galleries: ranging from works that depict exterior urban facades of Kabul to intimate domestic interiors, and then to tableaux of public spaces that embody concepts of migration and change. Throughout, the artist used her chosen medium, textiles, in two and three-dimensional works, as well as one using neon, to comment obliquely on how society represents itself through various embodiments of women – from their faces, hair and fingernails, to mandated fashion and the spaces that they inhabit.

The exhibition began in a large gallery off the entrance foyer. This room was anchored by one of the artist's largest and most ambitious works to date, *Bazaar* (2020).² Here, Amiri recreates an imagined moment in the city of Kabul, showing storefronts, reading from the left as a beauty salon, a textile shop and a postcard shop. In the upper left quadrant, a woman in a wedding dress holding a bunch of flowers is seen on a sign above the salon. The textile shop, which centres the composition, shows tightly arranged reams of stacked and rolled fabrics, a sight familiar to anyone who has ever shopped in a middle eastern or central Asian market. The artist's labour is evident throughout, with care taken to render each fabric individually and to contrast these with the patterned floor as well as the shop signs, written in Farsi, above. With a *trompe l'oeil* effect, the artist also includes a rich purplish velvet fabric that literally spills out of the piece, as well as patterned, Kaftan-style garments that hang above. These three-dimensional moments add a depth to the scene and shape the composition in the same way that a painter would use shadow or shading.

Within the same work, to the right of the textile shop, Amiri depicts a postcard shop, where images of glamorous women – Western and Afghani – are placed alongside reproductions of the Statue of Liberty and other landmarks. For the artist, this represents a distant past that is no longer possible under the Taliban's regime, to which Amiri attributes the 'defacing and erasing of female representation'.³ During the American occupation of Kabul there was a loosening of the strict Islamic rules, which offered women opportunities to educate, be educated, work and move about the city. As a child, Amiri could wander through the market of Kabul, where she observed women as creators and entrepreneurs. Shop windows had large posters of beautiful women, and transparency in public spaces was not an issue. Today, one cannot see through the salon windows, which are covered for the sake of feminine modesty: the same activities take place in the same locations, albeit all without sight of the women who are literally hidden in the shadows. The celebration of women advertising themselves in public is being erased and replaced with Farsi text on signage. Through the Western images – the cityscape of New York, for example – the artist adds pieces of her own immigrant experience into the work. These

² This piece was previously exhibited as part of 'Pop South Asia, Artistic Explorations in the Popular', a group show at Sharjah Art Foundation, 2 September – 11 December 2022

³ The artist in discussion with the author, 18 April 2023



Hangama Amiri, *Bazaar*, 2020, installation view in 'A Homage to Home', 5 February–11 June 2023, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, courtesy of the artist and COOPER COLE, Toronto, and T293, Rome, photo by Jason Mandell

moments of 'in betweenness' allow Amiri to insert her subjectivity and remind viewers that home is a shifting concept for the artist as well as for millions of others in our world. These moments of reflection call to mind the early quilts of Faith Ringgold, who often inserted personal and fictional narratives into her work, and who is an acknowledged inspiration for Amiri.

On an adjacent wall, Amiri showed *Azizi, Tailor Shop* (2022), which presents another store with similarly stacked reams of fabrics. This work is linked to *Bazaar* (and others) using black plastic wires that resemble powerlines and which emulate the connectivity of an urban setting. The artist created a patterned floor that, combined with the change in scale of the fabric reams, creates a sense of depth in the composition. The sign that hangs above the shop shows a male figure in traditional garb, with Farsi text and phone numbers. This sign is rendered in an iridescent, ice-blue textile, which gives it the impression of neon. Amiri discussed how certain fabrics can emulate sound or light and call to mind the clamour and energy of a city centre. While the shop sells clothes for women, it is, however, named after a man.⁴ This is typical of the artist's depiction of the complex gender constructions that sit side by side in her native city. As Amiri acknowledges, gender had its own language in that environment. Most businesses were owned by men, but for two decades after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with the US occupation, women owned and operated their own businesses. The artist celebrates that time by

⁴ The artist in a public discussion with the exhibition curator, 5 May 2023

foregrounding spaces that are dominated by women – such as the bridal salon, tailor, and the beauty shop on the opposite wall. However, each of these spaces are devoid of women, signifying the erasure of female experience in that society both before and after the US involvement.



Hangama Amiri, *Azizi, Tailor Shop*, 2022, muslin, cotton, leather, suede, clear plastic, polyester, silk, velvet, faux leather, wool, iridescent fabric and found fabric, 287 x 273 cm, courtesy of the artist and T293, Rome, photo by Chris Gardner

At the opposite end of the gallery from *Tailor Shop*, Amiri's *Nakhoonak-e Aroos/Bride's Nail* (2022) adds to the atmosphere of a bustling urban place. In this wall-mounted neon, a pair of hands with painted nails hold a pile of grapes while others fall from their grasp. The term for a bride's nails is taken from the Farsi word for oblong yellow grapes, typical of how the feminine body has often been described as fruits in the history of literature and poetry. In Amiri's early *oeuvre*, she often used pomegranates and other fruits as stand-ins for female body parts, so the grapes are a natural progression in her practice. The neon, however, constructs time in a different way than textile. It defies the logic of nature, with an ability to create light day or night, again calling to mind the people, life and sounds of a bustling city. This sculpture relates to the salon beside it and is a portion of the name for the salon, 'The City of Brides'. *Bride's Beauty Parlor no 2* (2022) is a banner rendered in textile with Farsi script and shows a woman's closed eye and makeup containers as well as a wrapped car, an Afghani bridal tradition. Friends wrap the entire car with a giant bow for the bride and groom, thus transforming an everyday object into a gift.

Below the sign was *Arayeshgah-e Shahre Aroos/28 Brides Beauty Parlor #1* (2022). This large-scale piece shows the virtuosity of the artist's craft. She creates architectural space through the selection of textiles: a marble pattern creates the floor of the salon while a dark blue floral creates the walls of the waiting area. The sofas in the waiting room are also rendered in a floral fabric, with bits of a solid, dark brown leather that suggests the wood of the furniture. Long pieces of a shiny synthetic fabric create the illusion of mirrors in front of the salon chairs. Images of beloved actresses and singers (including Miss Afghanistan and Hangama, the actress the artist was named after) are digitally transferred on to fabric and then sewn into the composition to create posters on walls and a magazine on a sofa.

The beauty salon calls to mind the classical theme of a woman at her toilet, seen throughout art history from early Renaissance Flemish painters to Picasso, Renoir and Berthe Morisot. Unfortunately, this tradition is usually associated with the male gaze, given the demographics of historical artists, although Morisot is one of the exceptions to the rule. Amiri disrupts this theme as a female artist; however, the female figure is tragically absent, a cipher of religious totalitarian control. Women owning their own spaces, such as the one depicted here, is not something that is typically seen in the history of art and it represents Amiri's original contribution to art practice. In this case, though, the salon is devoid of women, a melancholic comment on the current situation for Afghan women since the withdrawal of the US. The piece calls to mind Kerry James Marshall's iconic *Da Style* from 1993, with its depiction of the barbershop as an important site of community and exchange for the African American community. The depiction of this theme in Marshall's painting was another disruption for the history of art, showing people of colour in a celebration of style. While Amiri pays homage to Marshall, her signature technique and the stark absence of figures, except when seen in advertisements, shows a new and important approach to this topic.

Moving to the next space, the feeling in the second gallery (The Screening Room) was quite different. Where the first space was bright, long, and contained several works, the energy changed in this second one. The artist and curator decided to use a gentle, grey colour on the walls, and a rich, burgundy carpeted floor. This gave the viewer an impression of being in a domestic interior. It felt intimate and slowed the pace of viewing. The room also contrasted with the first in that there were only three works on show: two featuring a singular woman, and one a still life. This room was pivotal for the exhibition as it is where the artist reflected on her childhood, which was spent largely in the company of women while her father tried to establish citizenship abroad. Amiri recalls growing up in various countries, including Pakistan and Tajikistan, and the many strong women with whom she spent time as she conjures these intimate spaces where women could be seen uncovered and in relaxed states. With women now removed from public life, it was important to the artist to show Afghani spaces that people don't usually see in the media. As Smith-Stewart has written, 'the home has come to personify a contested site, a place of entrapment but moreover a space of imagination, community, and

defiance'.⁵ Amiri's work then, illustrates two important points: the home as a place of refuge, but also as a place of containment. Like many second-wave feminist artists before her – Martha Rosler, Helen Chadwick, Mary Kelly and Monica Ross, for instance – Amiri focuses on the domestic as a politicised site for family and personal dynamics.⁶

Her Dressing Table (2022) is a portrait of Amiri's mother who sits in a chair at her dressing table, which is placed at the foot of her bed. It is immediately striking that she wears Western-style clothing and her long hair flows uncovered. Her crossed legs are created from tonal scraps of denim and her crossed hands show blood-red fingernails that match her lips. Cosmetics and beauty potions are on the table, symbolic of a time when women had more freedom and could wear makeup and paint their nails, as well as of what happens in the private sphere. Here, again, the artist takes pains to use different patterns and textures to suggest depth and details around the room: lace indicates curtains, while the bedspread is created from a printed chiffon fabric. Shiny strips of material on the mirror give the impression of reflectivity and darker tones are used to suggest her mother's shadow. The work again recalls many art historical depictions of 'Venus at her Toilet' and yet is created in an innovative and handspun manner. Amiri's Venus is her mother, who is depicted as beautiful and commanding of her own space, her gaze directed at the viewer. The artist celebrates female resilience and a subtle resistance to the regime imposed upon women and girls by the Taliban, who have banned makeup, nail polish and shiny fabrics, which are seen as distractions to men. The work harks back to the restrictive attire of women in the 1990s, when the artist was a child and witnessed the wardrobe transformation of her mother and aunts into matte clothes, makeup-free, and not allowed to paint their nails.

Across from her mother, *Reclining Woman on a Sofa* (2022) also shows a female figure in command of her own space. Considering the history of art, it is atypical to see a brown person sitting in her bedroom, elevating her own space. In Renaissance painting, for example, we see many reclining women. They are typically porcelain-skinned and painted by a white male artist. Amiri's work confronts and ameliorates this history, showing women in a state of self-care, calm and pleasure, symbolising a quiet resistance to the current regime in Afghanistan. Through her work, the artist challenges the hierarchy in art history, and especially in painting. Textiles have been aligned with embroidery and needlework, so often seen as domestic hobbies rather than high art. Here, the fabric choices are aligned with the carpeted floor: the rich red of the floor in *Reclining Woman on a Sofa*, for example, echoing the carpet on the gallery floor.

Still Life with Alocasia Plant (2022) shows a snippet of an interior space that features the titular potted flora on a side table in what could be presumed to be a domestic interior. The skill of Amiri's innovative technique has to be acknowledged in this work. The artist uses varying fabrics to suggest different surfaces: thin cork creates a hardwood floor, while the greens of the alocasia leaves read as tonal with muslin, velvet and cotton. A darker velvet is used, for example, to

⁵ Amy Smith-Stewart, 'Reflections on Home', in *Hangama Amiri, A Homage to Home*, Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, 2023, p 11

⁶ See Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London*, IB Tauris, London, 2012

depict the base of the leaf, while lighter hues ‘paint’ the veining patterns. Amiri says that ‘everyday objects bear witness and tell a story about a person’s history’. ⁷

In a clever curatorial move, two of Amiri’s works lined the corridor en route to the last gallery of the exhibition. *For Long, Soft, and Strong Hair* (2022) and *Olivia, Bleach* (2022) both advertise beauty products for Afghan women that show the dominance of Western beauty ideals: skin bleaching and other processes, which create a hierarchy of beauty standards. They are abutted up against each other, as one would find posters on the street flypapered to walls. Smith-Stewart writes eloquently regarding these works:

Amiri repeatedly uses beauty as an agent to resist systemic sexist oppression. Under Taliban rule, women are prohibited from wearing vibrant and shiny fabrics, red lipstick, and nail polish. In response, she integrates textiles that shine, shimmer, and reflect, surfaces that parade a feminized aesthetic that she expresses as loud, joyous, and monumental. Flaunting the provocative and outlawed, Amiri counters patriarchal authority and traditional Islamic norms by emphasizing female self-determination and interweaving marginalized stories that centralize women’s empowerment.⁸



Hangama Amiri, *Facial Care, Beauty Salon*, 2022, muslin, cotton, polyester, chiffon, suede, velvet, iridescent paper, inkjet print and found fabric, 216 x 169 cm, courtesy of the artist and COOPER COLE, Toronto, photo by Chris Gardner

⁷ The artist in discussion with the author, 18 April 2023

⁸ Amy Smith-Stewart, ‘Reflections on Home’, op cit, p 10

These advertisements are heartbreaking, not only for their lack of celebration of dark-skinned beauty; they are also now unseen in the current oppressive regime in Afghanistan. They lead into a large space that Amiri divided into three sections: one dedicated to works associated with migration, with another concentrated on imagined past and futures for girls, and more advertisement-type works hung above.

Upon entering the last gallery, the viewer was confronted with three sculptural works on low plinths: *Bahar, from Kabul (Rice Sack) #1* (2021) and *Darya (Rice Sack) #3* (2021) were placed on top of each other on one pedestal, and *Afghan Dry Fruit* (2022) was placed on another nearby. The rice sacks and dried fruit represent long lasting nutrition that can be easily transported. *Departure* (2022), a wall work depicting a station wagon packed with boxes, was situated in a sightline between these sculptures. Taken together, they were a quiet reminder of the plight of the refugee: taking anything that can be carried almost ‘on one’s back’, existing from food that is non-perishable, living in a stateless condition. The lack of figures on this side of the room, besides on the rice packages, served to remind the viewer that the artist does not just represent her personal experience – this is the condition of millions of nameless people never known or acknowledged, who live on the fringes of societies, although they were educators, translators, doctors or other professionals in their home countries.



Hangama Amiri, installation view of ‘A Homage to Home’, 5 February–11 June 2023, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, with (on the left) *Recess*, 2022, and (on the floor) *Bahar, from Kabul (Rice Sack) #1*, 2021, *Darya (Rice Sack) #3*, 2021, and *Afghan Dry Fruit*, 2022, and (on the wall) *Departure*, 2022; above are *Facial Care, Beauty Salon*, 2022, and *Mah Chehra Beauty Parlor*, 2022; courtesy of the artist and COOPER COLE, Toronto, and T293, Rome, photo by Jason Mandella

The artist populated the remainder of this gallery with two major works about the condition of young girls in Afghanistan. *Recess* (2022) was one of the most poignant works in the exhibition. The work occupied an entire wall and depicts schoolgirls in a yard outside of their school. It is a familiar scene to many around the world. Amiri's early years were spent both at home and in and out of schools in different countries as her family migrated. When the Taliban restored their power after the recent US withdrawal, female educators were removed and at present girls can no longer study. As the artist says, 'women have been a by-product of the system'.⁹ It is important that the girls in *Recess* are not seen inside the school building. Instead, they are relegated outdoors, shut out of education, shut off from intellectual and social progress. It is noticeable that the schoolgirls are even detached from each other, which represents the chaotic state of mind of refugees: wanting to flee but not knowing which direction to go, a state of mind familiar to the artist through her own personal experience. Fathers home school their own daughters.

Some of the girls are rendered with their hair flowing, a throwback to Amiri's childhood when a glimpse of freedom was apportioned in the country by the US occupation. People were fashion-conscious and wore major global brands. Today, women must wear long matt clothes and remain veiled. Veils are a form of protection for the women and girls and have a royal history. In more strict families, girls start to cover their hair in the first grade of elementary school. It becomes mandatory, though, at puberty. A divisive topic internationally, the veil is both a signifier of religious control and the Muslim female experience; however, many women choose to wear a veil and modest fashion has seen a recent groundswell.¹⁰ The schoolgirls' shoes also reflect global brands, easily recognised on some careful looking. While this represents one of the areas girls can express themselves, it also symbolises Afghanistan as a post-global society that has been invaded by various countries in different eras. Nike, Adidas and other major brands are pervasive there, as everything is exchanged.

The schoolgirls are also detached from the toys that are seen around them. At the bottom of the scene, a beach ball lies unused. A shiny, seductive object should attract the attention of the children. Yet, this group of young girls are not doing the things they are supposed to do, representing the lost childhood of the artist as well as all the women shut out from education. Through this work, Amiri questions the politicisation of the female body, which is continuously used as a control tactic. Preventing half of the population from obtaining an education is a form of oppression that leads to a widespread morass and depression. Indeed, the black robes of the schoolgirls and the black squares of the ground lend an overall feeling of heaviness to this scene. It recalls, in palette and composition, Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849–1850, where the black of the mourners becomes homogenous. In the same way that Courbet used black paint to symbolise a frayed emotional state, Amiri uses dark textiles to send a thinly veiled message.

⁹ The artist in discussion with the author, 18 April 2023

¹⁰ For an article on the recent trend towards modest fashion, see Yasmin Khatun Dewan, 'The Co-opting of Modest Fashion', *The New York Times*, 15 October 2019
www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/style/what-does-modest-fashion-mean.html?searchResultPosition=1

Amiri's personal connection to the subject also mirrors Courbet: *A Burial at Ornans* was painted after the funeral of his beloved maternal uncle. Amiri mourns the loss of freedom and potential for generations of girls.

New Born, Baby Girls (2022) was seen across from *Recess* in the exhibition, and could be considered a companion piece. In this work, the viewer is transported to an NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) where two babies are seen in incubators. The blankets covering the babies are rendered in red and aqua patterns, offering a glimpse of warmth and comfort to an otherwise sterile scene. These girls have already been subjected to birth trauma and will eventually grow to understand the reality of their gender in the country as it stands at present – in other words, these infants will someday be the schoolgirls seen in *Recess*, alienated and unsure of which direction to turn.

Amiri was creating the works for 'A Homage to Home' concurrently with work on a major installation for Sharjah Biennial 15, 'Thinking Historically in the Present'. For her contribution to this biennial, the artist recreated, albeit with artistic license, the classroom experience that she had as a child. This resulted in a major installation, *Threshold* (2022), in which eighteen desks and benches are divided into two sections and separated by a black textile work that hangs in the middle of the space. It reads like a classroom, divided by a blackboard. Again, the funereal reference with black is not overlooked. Sharjah Art Foundation commissioned local Emirati craftsmen to create the classical desks and stools in the installation. If these desks look familiar to Western viewers, it is because the artist acknowledges that this type of classroom furniture would have been donated by NGOs rather than be native to the country. Amiri recreates her memory of the classrooms that she was shut out of from the age of six due to the Taliban seizing control.



Hangama Amiri, *Threshold*, 2022, mixed media installation with black fabric and black thread, image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, photo by Danko Stjepanovic

Amiri created the textile element of the installation with the help of a tailor, and together they created approximately sixty to eighty school uniforms out of the black matte material that is typically used for these garments. It is a synthetic, patriarchal fabric, designated to women because it hides all the forms of bodies. The uniforms are sewn in black thread and then assembled with the same thread, creating an abstract piece that suggests the presence and absence of bodies both through the garments and the interstitial spaces between them. This textile was a new challenge for the artist as she had to think about it being legible from both sides. At twenty feet long, she would work on one side and then flip it over and work on it again from the other side. It encompassed the entirety of her studio and is her largest textile work to date.

The artist saw the black textiles as invisible identities: fragile and strong, tied and untied, abutted bodies hanging. Everything was done by hand and hung by its own thread. The black colour was chosen by the artist, who acknowledged it as ‘powerful colour in history of art’.¹¹ In this textile aspect, she creates a form political resistance. *Threshold*, like the works shown at the Aldrich, reveal an artist who is forming a new chapter in the history of art. Amiri draws upon art historical precedents, yet her practice is rooted in both atypical materials and subjects. It is significant that she reveals the Afghan female experience through poetic works that are not overtly polemical. Her work is both poignant and technically masterful, and like many of the greatest artists, she tackles important political subjects from a personal, subjective position.

Kathy Battista is a writer, educator and a curator of exhibitions in museums, galleries and non-profit organisations. Her research is primarily focused on cross-generational feminist art, in particular performance and body-oriented practice. She is curator of 89 Greene, a project space in New York, and is an ensemble member of New School of the Anthropocene.

¹¹ The artist in discussion with the author, 18 April 2023