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Aman Mojadidi



BY JENNIFER KABAT

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Art, activism and the Jihadi Gangster

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'Vote for me, I've done Jihad and I'm rich.' So ran a poster during last autumn's parliamentary election in Afghanistan. Advertising an unknown parliamentary candidate, the posters appeared mysteriously around Kabul, and the candidate – face blacked out – wore a suit with a heavy gold chain and gilt gun around his neck. A line of text ran over his face: 'Insert your favorite jihadi here.' The posters managed to singlehandedly critique the elections – and their accompanying corruption and abuses of power – far better than anyone else, the US government included. They were the work of **Aman Mojadidi** <<http://www.wearyourrespirator.com/>> , not a candidate but an artist – and they could have got him arrested or even killed.



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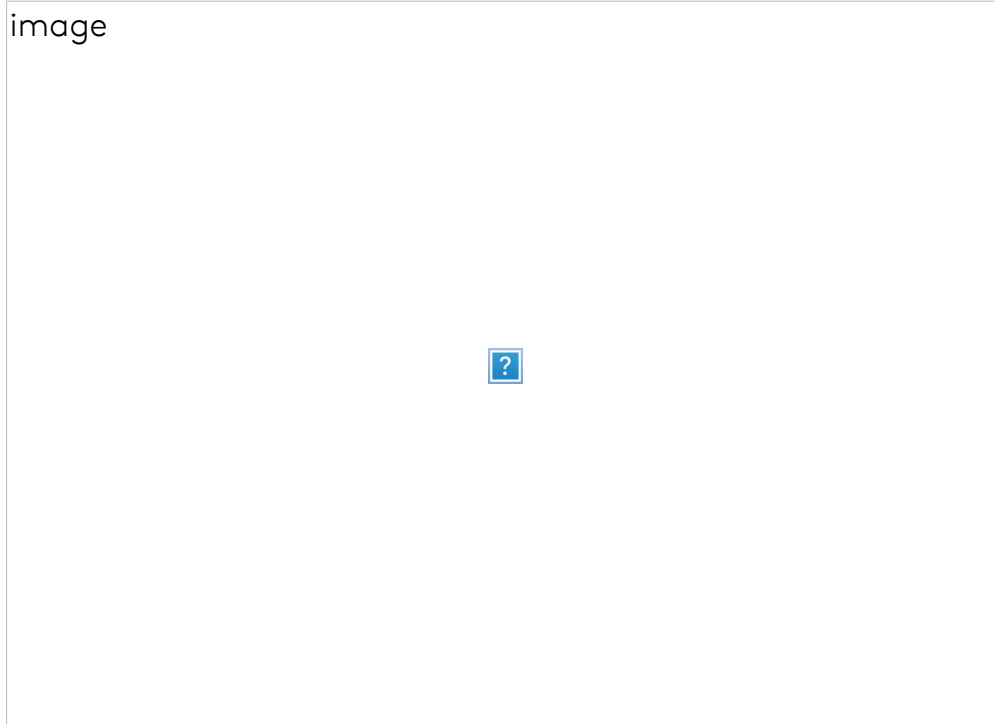
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Mojadidi usually brushes those dangers aside, but the night he put up the posters someone complained to the police and he and his friends driving him were stopped. Luckily he had finished wheat-pasting and had already thrown away the evidence. All that was left was the glue on his hands. Still, complaints were made to the electoral commission and Mojadidi's uncle, Sibghatullah Mujaddedi an influential politician, has even said such work could get him in trouble.



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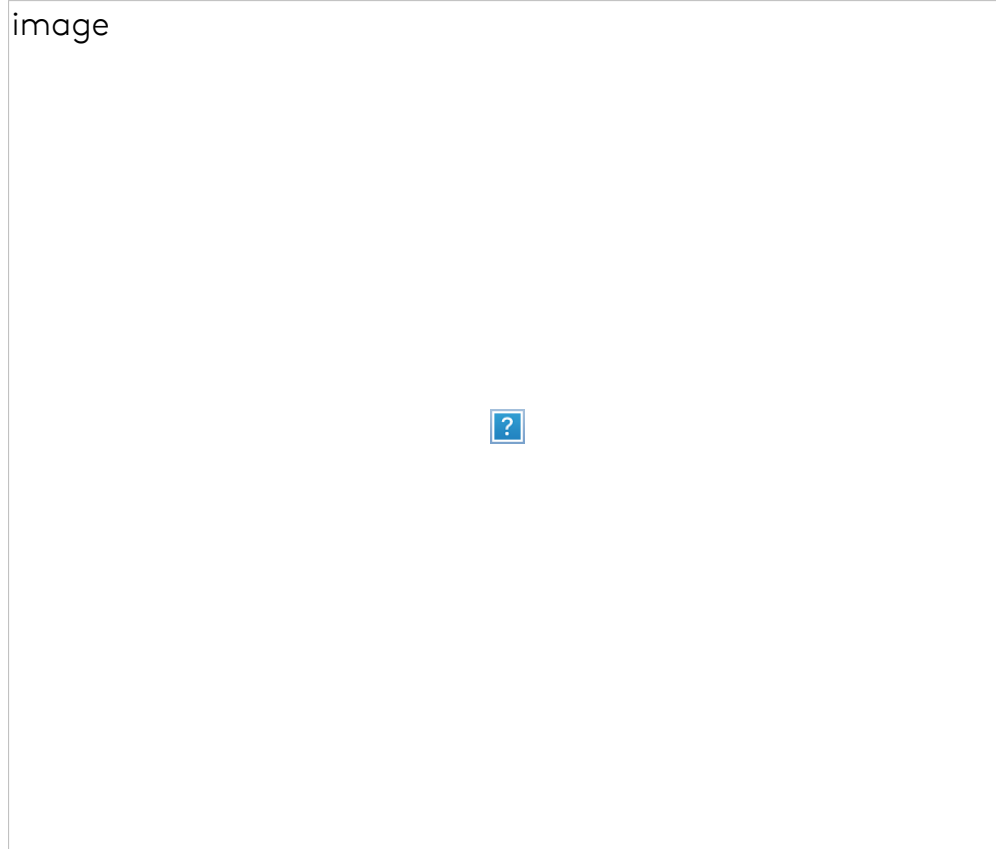
Mojadidi moved to Kabul in 2003 work for NGOs and help rebuild the country. He'd grown up in Florida, a vegetarian and a surfer. His uncle had been a powerful mujahidin leading forces against the Soviets – Afghanistan was always a mythic faraway place in Aman's sense of identity. That is until he was 19, when he went to visit, travelling to the front lines where his uncle was leading the battle for Jalalabad in 1990. Aman fired some mortars and realized, 'I'd defined myself as Afghan, but that day was the first time I started to think that if I'm Afghan, I'm definitely not that kind of Afghan.'

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Now he sports tattoos and a bushy beard. In the US people think he's a foreigner, the nameless other, and in Afghanistan they take him for an American. He doesn't quite fit in anywhere. Before moving to Kabul Mojadidi lived in Los Angeles, worked in the art world there and received an MA in cultural anthropology, but in his own work he found a way of pulling together both sides of his identity, bringing Western conceptualism to Afghanistan's issues. He's taken aim at the kind of Kafkaesque world of NGOs, the economy of war and the international community's neocolonialism, as well as the exoticism ascribed to a conflict zone. Mojadidi also acknowledges the attention that this brings his own work, something he calls 'Conflict Chic'. (Witness the way Iraqi artists **have been feted as this year's darlings at the Venice Biennale** <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/2ed8469c-8d56-11e0-bf23-00144feab49a.html>> .) Mojadidi would never begrudge anyone the exposure for their work, but he's working

on a piece now that addresses the issue, conflating the ideas of war, conflict and fashion.



He has also helped establish a national art prize and taught workshops on street art, though they were less successful than he thought. 'Basically,' he explains, 'there's no drive here for tagging. It's such a repressive society and the idea of doing work that pushes boundaries isn't common.' So Mojadidi is the one left pushing them. Like with his character the Jihadi Gangster. It grew out of listening to the way people talk about fighting the Soviets. 'They were wearing their jihad like bling is worn in the West to show their status and position.' So he created his hybrid persona to articulate that hypocrisy. 'They're talking about Islam and defending the faith,' Mojadidi says, 'but they drink. They're violent. They're responsible for countless innocent deaths and prostitution.'

During the campaign he kept hearing people say, 'See that

candidate in that poster, he's responsible for killing 30 people in the village next to mine.' Or, 'Back in so-and-so year that candidate was corrupt.' The project didn't simply get Mojadidi into trouble with the authorities but also his family; many of them thought he was criticizing his uncle. (For the record he wasn't but other jihadis).

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In the video *Payback* (2009) he dressed as a police officer, setting up a checkpoint to search cars. Instead of demanding a payoff, he paid the drivers US\$2.00 each – the average price of a police bribe. Some people accepted the money. Others thought it would turn them into a target later. *Payback* started

as a commentary on fraud in the country. 'Everyone hates the police,' Mojadidi explains, 'because they're always asking for money, and it seemed like something that should be addressed in art. I wanted to see how easy it was to put yourself in power with a uniform.' He even intentionally chose the lowest ranking one.

Simply getting it was dangerous. Given the number of suicide bombers who dress as the police to attack government agencies and foreign compounds, people aren't supposed to be able to just buy uniforms (though Mojadidi found one worryingly easily). Had he been caught, however, he could have been marked out as a suicide bomber. Then there was the bizarre situation of going to the local police station to tell them he was doing a project in their district. They didn't ask any details of what he planned but did offer a guard. Mojadidi declined. They sent the officer anyway. Now in the video he can be seen wielding an AK-47, guarding the fake officer giving back money in a kind of surreal doubling. Mojadidi and the cameraman filming the piece were both unarmed.

The hazards only really struck him as he was stopping the cars. 'It occurred to me then that, of course, there could be insurgents,' he says, 'that they often detonate themselves when the police search cars. As I opened a trunk it hit me: what if I find something? What if I actually discover explosives in the back? What do I do then?'

Now the audio piece *A Love Letter to Kabul* that he's just finishing takes on the Orwellian nature of daily life in Afghanistan. Inspired by the security announcements sent to all US nationals registered with the embassy (Mojadidi himself registered in 2008 so he could vote for Obama), he found the warnings oddly comic. They reminded him of love letters, the

way a woman might write to her man. 'Hello honey,' he says in a *faux* lady's voice, 'there's a roadblock at such and such. Or a large crowd is protesting at another location.'

He's rewritten and personalized the announcements. Soon to be read by a woman, they got an oddly serendipitous conclusion when US Special Forces killed Bin Laden last month. The letters end on May second with his death when the embassy posted: 'Due to recent anti-terrorist activities in Pakistan, movement is restricted for you....' Just as there's no direct mention of Bin Laden in the bulletin, Osama is never named in the last love letter. Still they hit on this idea of how enemies – particularly long-term enemies – are enmeshed, a bit like lovers, colouring every aspect of life, even without naming just who the enemy might be.

Mojadidi describes Bin Laden's death with a complexity few muster. Living in a conflict zone, the personal and external get conflated, he explains. They can't be separated out. 'That's part of what makes his death so confusing. Nothing will change here, yet he was an actor in the "global theatre" that's been created (by him and Bush) through such an abstract concept as the War on Terror. Now one of the protagonists is dead, leaving the audience – or at least me – looking in disbelief at the space he occupied. In another sense it's deeply personal. For the last ten years at least, if not longer when you include the years he spent doing jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets – that's 25 percent of my life, he's been a force in my life. So, seeing him channel-surfing with the ski cap and grey beard made me feel almost sympathetic towards him. He had probably become more enthralled by the role he was playing in that theater than the actual impact of his actions. The role of a lifetime, I guess.'

In the West, art rarely has such high stakes or such power; in Kabul, Mojadidi arguably has more influence as an artist than he did as a development worker. The stakes are high in his work – it's one of the few times that being an artist garners this level of attention to political issues. Working as an artist lets him say things that are far more complex than are otherwise permitted in a zone of conflict. This isn't to say there aren't genuine dangers involved. Speech isn't exactly free in Kabul, but under the cover of 'art' he can blend in activism and produce provocative work that gets to the heart of the issues in Afghanistan. It's rare that art involves real risk; for me, that is one of the key roles of art but one that few artists take.

JENNIFER KABAT

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