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In Afghanistan, Performance Artist Packs Up His Bling

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QUIL LAWRENCE



Aman Mojadidi, who grew up in Jacksonville, Fla., moved to Afghanistan in 2003 because he thought his homeland was

finally on the mend. The guerrilla artist is also known as the Jihadi Gangsta, and he has provoked controversy and laughter with his work.

Courtesy of Aman Mojadidi

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Performance artist Aman Mojadidi moved from the U.S. to Afghanistan in 2003, as one of what he says were many Afghan-Americans and Afghan-Europeans who thought their homeland was finally on the mend.

"It was really part of that wave of hyphenated Afghans and internationals wanting to come to Afghanistan, post-Taliban, [to] do something, rebuild, reconstruct, that kind of thing," he says.

Still, Mojadidi has been a rather singular figure in Afghanistan. He set up fake police checkpoints and ran a phony campaign for Parliament. His latest pieces include designer fox-fur flak jackets — and suicide vests. Known as the Jihadi Gangsta, Mojadidi has provoked controversy and considerable laughter as a guerrilla artist.

But now he says it's time for him to leave.

Conflict Bling Leads To Character

Mojadidi grew up in Jacksonville, Fla., but he always had one foot in Afghanistan. His father, a doctor from a storied Afghan family, returned every summer to act as a combat surgeon for the mujahedeen — the rebels who fought the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Mojadidi even visited once during the war with his father, but decided fighting was not for him.

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In his Kabul studio, Mojadidi cocked a gold-painted Kalashnikov that was sitting on display next to a gold prosthetic leg. He calls it "conflict bling."

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Aman Mojadidi

"Afghans often talk about, you know, I did jihad for x number of years, and so I deserve kind of x, y and z," Mojadidi says. "It seemed almost to me like bling — like this kind of internal bling that represented their status, their position, their almost social wealth, at least."

The idea evolved into a character called the Jihadi Gangsta — a combination of an Afghan warlord and a hip-hop gangster. Mojadidi combines the traditional Afghan robe and turban with a tank-top and a gold-plated pistol hanging around his neck.

One photo from a series shows the Jihadi Gangsta sitting on a sofa watching television surrounded by guns, bullets, booze and a supplicating woman wearing a burqa but almost nothing else. Once he had the character, Mojadidi took it a step further.

"It seems like the natural kind of culmination of the Jihadi Gangsta would be for him to run for Parliament," he says.

The Checkpoint Stunt

The Afghan Parliament is full of former warlords and their subordinates. Mojadidi's campaign slogan was, "Vote for me, I've done jihad and I'm rich." His face on the posters is obscured by the words, "Your favorite jihadi here."

"It was interesting because you had a lot of people say, 'You're telling the truth in this poster,' and, 'We have a lot of criminals now in power and in the government,' " he says. "But the posters themselves didn't last on the walls maybe three or four days — they were ripped off."

Mojadidi also took on more quotidian corruption with a performance piece called Payback. He bought a police uniform and set up a fake checkpoint in Kabul.

On a video of the stunt, motorists pull up with dread to a checkpoint that will often involve the police hitting up drivers for small bribes. Instead, Mojadidi hands them an apology for any bribes they've ever paid, along with a small "payback" bribe.

"Four of the cars that I offered money didn't take the money. I think they either thought it was some sort of setup, or they just really couldn't quite wrap their head around it," Mojadidi says. "And then you had some people who just took the money and drove away."

But Mojadidi says his love affair with Afghanistan is over. As with many Afghans who came back in recent years, he says progress has been disappointing.

He plans to return periodically, but his next exhibit, showing in Paris, is called "Goodbye Homeland."

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