

Bauer

Martina Bauer Freie Journalistin

Maraka* with Aatifi

Martina Bauer: You're originally from Afghanistan, which is not exactly important in the international art market, and whose contemporary art is largely unknown...

Aatifi: Afghanistan actually does play a role on the art market – unfortunately with stolen art. But that doesn't fall within the scope of my responsibilities. I make my contribution to contemporary art, though.

Your script art is based on traditional calligraphy. What role do characters play in your painting and graphic art?

For me, characters are a part of totally abstract art between people: art for humanity. As for the question as to what role they play for me, and how I came to art, one could also ask a fish how it came to the water.

When you were six, your parents sent you to a master calligrapher, in parallel to your schooling.

I went there three afternoons a week. It was a very large school in the middle of Kandahar. This master was very well known and very strict. I started off with the beginners. After two or three weeks, I came into contact with advanced pupils, and got into discussions on calligraphy. I advocated the opposite of what they believed in. I was for a less traditional and technical way of learning.

So you questioned the rules from the start?

We artists are constantly questioning the rules. Actually, there are no rules. Rules are created by people. And we are also people. That means that we can change that. What rules existed in my field – art – was something that I wanted to decide for myself.

At that time, had you already begun altering letters?

I altered letters, I tore up my drawings, in order to explain how something different could be achieved. "Climb up into this tree," I urged my fellow pupils, "and look down at these broken-down shapes on the ground. That's another form of calligraphy – forget tradition."

That sounds like a detached relationship to tradition.

I grew up in a culture in which abstract art is totally at home – with a several-hundred-year-old tradition. In all of Afghanistan, around about me, everything was

abstract. Everything that women in Kandahar sewed by hand consisted of geometrical shapes, colours, colour compositions. All of the rugs were abstract, and the sum total of patterns around me were abstract – or said something else to me than what people normally interpreted them as meaning. For me, this abstraction was much more important and beautiful and interesting than this tradition. As a boy, I never worried about what was good or bad for me. I simply took the freedom to do what I wanted.

Kandahar was once a cultural and political centre, and the capital of Afghanistan. Did you have access to European art there? Did you deal with Western artists?

History shows that all of Afghanistan's important intellectual movements in the fields of theatre, cinema and literature arose in Kandahar – with great literary figures and great poetry. Kandahar was and is an important political centre. It was there that we received literature via Iran or India, and there that I came into contact with European art. However, it was clear to me that in Kandahar, with its traditional, highly developed painting of miniatures and its traditional calligraphy, there would be no freedom for my abstract calligraphy. Kabul was pretty free, and had an art academy. That's why I moved there at seventeen.

You came to Germany in 1995, and to the former East Germany several years after Reunification. How were things then?

By chance, I landed in Dresden. After three weeks I met a musician and artist from Australia and we became friends. Shortly afterwards I went along with him to a pub and there was Professor Siegfried Klotz with other professors from the HfBK Dresden, and we met him. Klotz saw my photos and said, "I invite you to my studio, it's open to you any day. If you want to come there I'll take you on, you can skip the entrance examination, etc., I'm behind you now." It was really great.

Photos?

Yes – I had photos of paintings, of my earlier work. I had nothing but a backpack I always had with me. Everything was in my backpack: pens, drawing pad and photos. That way I could 'prove' myself; it was my ID.

You spent a year as a guest student at the Kunstakademie Dresden under Professor Klotz. What contact did you have with your fellow students?

Apart from Professor Klotz, I had no contact with other people and no one had any contact with me. I was in their midst, and almost like a penguin in the desert. This special status gave me complete freedom.

Going back to the development of your script art: how did – and does – your type of calligraphy differ from that of the classic calligraphers?

They spent a lot of time drawing traditional, academic shapes. I freed the shapes roughly from the text, but not yet completely from the content – only from the general way of portraying them.

What sort of content did you use?

They were poetic texts.

What did you get from the HfBK, from the German school?

First and foremost, I got the freedom to come and go there, and at least there was no civil war in the background.

The freedom to change calligraphy is something you took for yourself back in Afghanistan. But the freedom to fragment it and radically reduce it – is that something you only began doing in Germany?

The reason for that is that the whole world is being shattered. The whole world is divided, everything is in motion, and because I left everything behind, pared everything right back in my life, I also pared back my art. I took calligraphy far, far away to another territory. I returned the originality to these aesthetic forms, without content. This aesthetic itself must be the topic – and this compositional, abstract distribution which touches people in a completely challenging manner, and which they can interpret in their own way. The origin is in there, but the handwriting is mine, and that's great.

You spent five years in Dresden...

That was generally important, to work there as a painter and to come into contact with graphic art. That was my discovery in Dresden: graphic art with its very mysterious, uncontrolled techniques. I developed my plate art there – I still do that today. It is a very, very beautiful art form, which was unknown to me in Afghanistan. I became familiar with a great many graphic art techniques in Dresden, including aquatint lift-ground, a technique which is very uncontrolled and unpredictable. Even as a child I loved everything that couldn't be dominated, and where a risk is involved – and I still do; it's the best. Nowadays graphic art is every bit as important in my work as painting.

In Dresden, you worked in a very monochrome manner, and in dark colours. Was the German school reflected in your paper works to some extent? After all, in traditional graphic art it tends to be the classic colours of black and dark blue that are used.

With me, that probably has more to do with the black ink that I worked with in Afghanistan. Black ink is also very reduced to its own graphic forms; it's neutral. I worked in black and white, black on white paper, with the forms as I saw them – and graphic art corresponded exactly to this quality. That's why I picked it up at once, and with such pleasure. Another thing about the German school and Germans: I think Germans and Afghans are very alike – as people, in their mentality and taste. They are so similar to each other; they move very straight, have patience and their own style. They are good, but they mustn't be offended. Causing offence is not on.

From Saxony in the former East Germany, you went over to the West...

I've always kept on working. At present I live in Bielefeld, have my big studio here, in a nice town – not too small and not too big. Here, I can work in peace and I've still got a lot of plans. In principle, though, I can emigrate to Spain tomorrow with a backpack and begin there anew. A geographical location doesn't mean that much.

Since 2010 you've been travelling again regularly to Afghanistan, to Kabul. For over fifteen years, you were unable to do this. Did you miss your old homeland?

Homeland usually exists only in one's memory. What remains is a geographical location that's in a constant natural flux. Hence, the best homeland is the one you carry in yourself.

Let's talk about something that has to do equally with homeland, politics and art: lapis lazuli.

In Afghanistan, a war has been going on for thirty-five years on account of mineral resources: oil, gas, precious stones, lithium and many others. Back when I was a youngster, I found lapis lazuli very, very interesting on account of that colour, and I was always angry that there was this war because of these resources, with many people suffering and losing their lives because of this. Such a beautiful colour, such a beautiful nature, and so many people killed because of it. Hence, lapis lazuli remains a symbol for me to this day.

Even Michelangelo held lapis lazuli from Afghanistan in high regard, and made use of it.

Aatifi [laughing]: Afghan lapis lazuli is a very special stone. It has a very compressed colour. No matter how much it's broken down, it does not become transparent. That means that it's a very dense colour whose intensity hasn't changed for thousands of years, which always stays the same. That's lapis lazuli from Afghanistan. In art history it is known that Michelangelo had a yearning for the stone, and kept on sending pupils for it while he was painting the Sistine Chapel. "Bring me the blue paint from lapis lazuli," he'd say. They'd bring it, and he'd send them away again with the words, "No, not this one – only lapis lazuli from Afghanistan." [laughs again] This colour keeps for a long time and remains very vivid. It doesn't lose its luminosity, even when exposed to daylight.

This colour is often found in your pictures too.

I like blue in general, in all its shades. I like blue like the universe. When I look at it, I see an infinite freedom and a great calm in it.

Do you yourself paint a lot with pigments?

Yes, I always use pigments. I blend them in order to influence the character of an abstract form, how it will look. Even as a boy, I was used to producing the liquids for my representations. To date, I use brushes I've made myself, paint I've influenced myself. These standardised colours and paintbrushes aren't my thing. Moreover, a good calligrapher must create his own tools. There are only special people for producing the ink who have this recipe, although some calligraphers also have it. How the ink is further influenced in the studio is something that is each individual artist's secret.

We shouldn't reveal your secret now...

If we reveal it, I'll have another secret the day after tomorrow.

How do you go about painting?

When I lay stretcher frames on the floor and stretch the canvas over them, I can already

see scenery, an incredible collision of natural elements, almost like a volcano or a universe. The universe fascinates me because it is nature in the raw, because all its elements are in motion. In the whole world, in our lives, in the universe, nothing stands still; everything is in motion.

How does it feel to stand in front of a blank canvas?

In the studio, when I'm standing alone in front of a canvas, that is, of course, a huge task. When one comes up against a blank canvas and dominates it – for me, that's a way to a real world that's not yet influenced by anything. I don't have the freedom to make a difference all around me. What I've got is only this canvas, and the taking of this step forwards in order to get to grips with things. That's very difficult. I know that. For me, painting is a response to this strife-torn global society, in which people no longer have any fixed support.

Are there any other ways of expressing that besides painting?

For me, it's only painting that really sets me alight in this fragmentation, in this world, in these times – I mean the situation in this world, where people must suffer at the hands of other people. To at least master this canvas and to do something good that I identify with, in these times in which I myself live – that's what it's about for me. At this time no other power places itself in between; I just go to the canvas and touch it.

Your use of forms is reduced, wholly freed of content. The forms per se, however, are absolutely perfect...

...perfect, because I paint it that way. Perfect or imperfect, that doesn't exist in painting, it's the painter's style. When Cézanne broke down a landscape with just a few strokes, in another diagonal or horizontal line, that doesn't mean that it is perfect or otherwise. Perfect doesn't exist. That is his breakdown and that is my breakdown. That is my way.

You break things down through fragmentation and build fractures into the composition, through expressive elements, drops and splatters...

...well, that's meant to generate a vibrant atmosphere. Traditionally, calligraphy was two-dimensional and graphic. I transformed it into painting, incorporated it into painting, associated it with painting – not just with painting, but with depth and space, as well as with dynamics. It's alive, it's meant to be alive. Each stroke is meant to be incredibly powerful. And I'm interested in the mysteriousness that constitutes a shape.

You spoke of Cézanne. Are there other artists you hold in esteem?

All good artists!

What constitutes a good artist?

Concentrating only on one's own thing and not letting oneself be influenced by the outside and by the market.

Are there people who play a role in your art, in your artistic life?

All people! All the people surrounding me – good and bad – play a role for me.

Do you have any favourite places?

Aix-en-Provence is one of my favourite places, because it reminds me of Kandahar. The region has mountains and it's dry, there's a lot of sunshine and vineyards and a great deal of light, especially the evening light or the early morning light, with this blue, blue and blue. I'm simply a fan of blue. That's one reason why I visit Provence on an almost regular basis.

What general conditions are vitally important for you as an artist? What would ideal conditions be?

The ideal may yet come, but the worst is civil war, and that's behind me.

What sort of plans do you have for the future?

Work, work, exist.

What does your solo exhibition 'News from Afghanistan' in the world famous Pergamon Museum mean for you?

It's a great opportunity to show my work in a centre in Germany where the whole of Islamic art history is gathered, and to relate it to my current position. The formats of my paintings are very large and unusual. I'm happy about it!

In the exhibition, the modern age meets ancient cultural assets. At the very beginning, in the area of the stairway to the Museum für Islamische Kunst, large paintings of yours hang in close proximity to historic Sumerian-inscribed stelae.

That's a very nice story. And in the Mshatta hall, two large-format paintings in magenta are in dialogue with a façade of a caliph's palace from the 8th century. The Mshatta hall shows history, architecture, handicrafts – it's magnificent. For me, it's interesting that this is an enormous hall, with a skylight – and they've juxtaposed my magenta works with it.

How does the public react to your paintings?

With strong rejection as well as with strong praise. Strong rejection makes me as little disappointed as strong praise makes me proud. But in the middle there's a point, and that's what I pursue.

You're a very good draughtsman, and you've always drawn, from childhood onwards. Does the figurative, the representational, play a role in your current work?

When I draw or paint shapes – the abstract characters – my environment, nature and people are naturally present for me; they're always on my mind. I always draw. All of my drawings flow into the abstract. Drawing is simply an appetiser for a delicious meal.

What projects would you still like to accomplish, what ideas have not yet come to fruition?

There are many ideas and projects. In nature, everything is perfect. The only thing which should be corrected slightly is that a person should be able to live for five hundred years. One simply doesn't have the time...

So a normal human lifespan isn't long enough... Lastly, can you once again sum up in two sentences what painting means for you?

Today, tomorrow and the day after, painting means the same. Painting means breathing and air, and eating, and drinking water. One lives from it, after all; one needs it. The best thing would be for you to come by again tomorrow with a smile, and we'll talk about it...

*Maraka is a Pashto word describing a very personal conversation, a free exchange; Pashto is one of the two official languages in Afghanistan, the other being Dari.

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