

# SHE PERFORMS



interview

## HANGAMA AMIRI

Following my exhibition review of Hangama Amiri's first US Solo Show *Wandering Amidst the Colors* at Albertz Benda, New York, this article features the artist herself, and her musings about bringing the show together:

Hangama A. Amiri often refers to herself as an Afghan-Canadian artist emphasizing her multicultural background. She was born in Pakistan but “started living” in Kabul, where she lived for about 7 years until her family was forced to take refuge, first in Pakistan, then Tajikistan, and ultimately in 2005 in Canada (which she refers to as her “second home”). Hangama currently lives in New Haven CT. *Wandering Amidst the Colors* is Amiri's first US solo show after her 2020 graduation from Yale's MFA program.

Blockus, Caroline. “Hangama Amiri” *She Performs*, 14 April 2021. <https://www.sheperforms.com/sheperforms/hangama-amiri>

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*CB: First of all congratulations on your first solo show here in NYC. What an exciting milestone especially after the year we've had. I have to say, I absolutely love the notion of creating a show about home in a city like*

*New York. Would you mind sharing a little bit of the background and the process of creating those works?*

HA: I had a general idea of what I wanted to propose for a solo show in New York and that was circling mainly around the concepts of home and identity. I also wanted to utilise my position as an artist – which is a very privileged one – and represent a community I feel closely connected to. This past year, living through the pandemic, I felt so closed off, I was thinking a lot about home and, as a consequence, my shifting definitions of home. And since I work a lot with and through memory, “home” became more of an accumulation of feelings and something that you find you belong to and not necessarily just something physical or a territory.

So I went to search for Afghan communities in NYC. I wanted to offer an autobiographical exhibition and bring in the objects and collective memories that I experienced along the way. This exhibition is a collection of all the little and larger objects, photos, postcards, flags, products, foods, and such that I have seen around those communities and in the stores that felt like home to me. Looking at the rice sacks for example: I grew up eating those products – I guess I really missed that community sense and living through the pandemic just accelerates that desire of going “home” again.

Albertz Benda has a really interesting architecture, and the first time I came to the gallery, I wondered how my textiles would occupy this space. The experience of moving through the gallery space, from one room to another, or from “door to door” inspired me to do something with the entranceways, to create that kind of experience for the visitors to move from community to community – from shop to shop.

In this globalised world, one does not need to be in Afghanistan in order to feel home. In a way, I was neither here nor there, but I could find a lot of freedom to move around the different spaces.

So this show is an amalgamation of images, and also an amalgamation of me, positioning myself in between those images that I have seen – to see the layers of the past and present all at the same time.

CB: *Can you share some specific examples for some of the works?*

HA: *Bahar, From Kabul (Rice Sack #1), 2021*: The front layer of rice sacks I created myself, and this particular one is pretty interesting because she – or they – are called Burāq. Most often represented in the Islamic texts, Burāq is a living thing that is half-human, half-animal, and they're usually represented as a horse with wings and a female-looking body. So it has that interesting in-betweenness and queerness that was really inspiring to include this as visual imagery and to challenge our perceptions of gender.

*A.K. Fabric Shop, 2021*: So this was one of the stores where I got my fabrics from: A.K. Fabric shop in the fashion district – you should go when you're there. I also had collected fabrics from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and from friends who would sometimes bring me fabrics. And so all these fabrics – that come from so many different corners of the world – really speak to the notion of multiple identities that I wanted to include here. **These fabrics sort of become portraits** and if I could, I would love to give them each their own space.

*Self-portrait with Afghan Suzani Textile, 2021*: I call this piece “Self-Portrait”, not only because it depicts my hand, but because I associate a very important encounter with this old Afghan-American man, who owns this beautiful store in the heart of Manhattan. It is called Nusraty Afghan import. Meeting him was a very emotional experience, which I will never forget. He is also on Facebook. He shared his story of being a student in Kabul and how he hasn't been back in so long and how he misses it. It was just such an immediate connection to migrant stories and migrant spaces. Just sharing how we are so far away from home, but at the same time, we are able to find these little moments that can make us feel safe and that give us a sense of belonging.

We spoke Farsi, immediately, and so language also has that connecting power. But language can also become a certain border. There are things and situations where I can express myself better in Farsi and then there are others where I am more comfortable with English – it depends on the context.

*Gulzar, Beauty Salon, 2021*: The subject of salons is represented a lot in my work. My inspiration and explorations were really tied to understanding what public spaces Afghan women feel liberated and where they find a sense of belonging. This subject is also questioning (western) beauty politics, which are very different, because here (in the US) we can be very exhibitionist with our bodies while outside. What I noticed whilst going to salons in Kabul City was that everybody was feeling so liberated: they were enjoying getting their nails done, getting their hair done, but then, as soon as they would walk outside, it would be under a hijab, or their burka, or any other fabric that the women would choose to feel protected. **So the beauty politics come down to women wanting to be beautiful for themselves not for men, and not for the male gaze.**

For this show, however, I was less interested in focusing strictly on gender normativity, but more in comparing my experience of being “inside and outside”. In this particular salon where I was getting my nails done – Gulzar Beauty – I noticed the multilingual writings. It excited me to realise that there were multiple different (brown-skinned) women working in the same space: I felt really safe being among them and being treated by them. And then the flip-side was when I walked outside and I would see so many of these advertising images of men and women being treated, but their skin colours would be white. There is just a lot of dominant beauty (propaganda) around white bodies that communities are still promoting: the representation of the “other” face as opposed to their own.

Being an artist is a very privileged position, one where you can flip the story, and therefore flip history in a way. So I took the opportunity and the space to do that – to make people with browner skin be treated, to help them heal and relax. This past year has been all about mindfulness and self-care. And so I called this piece *Rupture and Repair*, as it is made up of all those different layers, whilst also providing an oasis of tranquility. I printed a seascape on chiffon and collaged it with the person getting head massaged and that way embodying these two layers of rupture and repair: once you're broken there will be time to be healed again and that is obviously also very autobiographical.

*CB: Have you found your home?:*

HA: Making these images and these works sort of ensures that these feelings, associations, and memories (of home) will stay with me. So I would say yes. There were these moments particularly when meeting the people I mentioned that I felt like I was home but you know that is momentary – sometimes it stays with you sometimes it goes away again, but I guess that is just the migration experience. So I don't know, I feel at home in a way that I have the artist community here and that is the sort of home that I always longed for and always searched for. And I am happy to have that. It's a very solid question, and ultimately it's both: yes and now. It is – again – in between.



Gulzar, Beauty Salon, 2021



Rupture and Repair, 2021