

SHE PERFORMS



Last week I had the wonderful experience of visiting Albertz Benda Gallery in Chelsea and experiencing Hangama Amiri's first US Solo Show *Wandering Amidst the Colors*. During that visit the artist herself generously made some time available to walk me through and tell me about her body of works. The following is a review of the Exhibition, an Interview with the artist will be published shortly.

In *Wandering Amidst the Colors*, Hangama Amiri maps out her journey through the abstract and material complexities of the concept home. Having been a migrant almost her entire life, Amiri reflects upon the desires of her inner world but also influences from outside. The result is a blend of autobiographical and introspective reflections but also contemplations and processing of larger societal issues, like body autonomy, gender and racial representations, and underlying biases. She emphasises the privilege she has as an artist in shaping and shifting these narratives, by using her unique – gentle but strong – voice.



(left) "Couple Sightseeing" 2021, and (right) "Collective Objects", 2021

Hangama's art is defined by the accumulation and mixture of her experiences. In order to create this body of works, she went out in search of New York City's Afghan communities: she structured the exhibition by laying out the physical spaces she visited and complementing them with the visual materiality of memories and associations – creating a spatial storyline.

The journey begins in Kabul City, depicted with the iconic Qargha Lake in *Couple sightseeing*. It is the starting point of the journey, as it marks the first conscious memories the artist has of home: a peaceful and idyllic Afghanistan. Amiri then goes on and takes these early memories and establishes an immediate, universal connection through one of the most

tangible aspects of how a home can be made, experienced, and remembered: food. For this show, Hangama debuted still life in her oeuvre, presenting a collection of different sweet and savory foods, but also classic pantry items, like tea and rice, for which she created her own packaging imagery. By embedding still lives onto fabrics she also critically reevaluates the omnipresent hierarchy of paintings in the art world, and challenges that conception.



(far left) “Still Life with Palow and Grapes”, 2021, (top left) “Still life with Kolche Abe-Dandan (Afghan Baked Goods)”, 2021, (bottom left) “Still Life with Seekh Kebab Palow”, 2021, (center right) “Sadaf Teas”, 2021, (top right) “Still life with Kebab and Basmati Rice”, 2021, (bottom right) “Afghan creamroll”, 2021

The deeper one goes into the gallery space, the deeper one also moves into the web of memories and overlap of time and places. The different pieces and layers of fabrics embody the intangible constructs of home, identity, and belonging, but also the sensory experiences and physical things the artist encountered during this past year whilst creating the works. The people Amiri met in those days, became another crucial factor in her experience. Her encounters were partly planned, partly incidental, but each added a spot to the exhibition’s conceptual map of *home*.

Just as thoughts sometimes blend into each other and occur simultaneously, so do her pieces contain multiple elements that clash and harmonise, compete for attention and complement each other, without ever overwhelming the space or the gaze. It is a festival of colours, a bazaar of impressions.



left) "A.K. Fabric Shop", 2021, (right) "Self-portrait with Afghan Suzani Textile", 2021



(left) "Gulzar, Beauty Salon", 2021, (center top) Untitled, 2021, (center) "Self-portrait with Afghan Suzani Textile", 2021, (right) "Magic Salon", 2021

Overall it is an exciting yet comforting experience – the works in *Wandering Amidst the Colors* are eerie and dreamy. The effect can naturally be attributed to Hangama’s skill as an artist, but is also achieved thanks to the tactile nature of her materials: her quilt-like tapestries soften the walls and create subconscious connections and associations with warmth, comfort, and protection. As Hangama observes: “Fabric as a medium really is associated with memory: fabric captures smell, and time, lot of bodily attachments – we are all wearing fabrics. It is also a fragile medium, so it really touches and resembles all those notions of memory I am talking about and it really reconnects with what I am trying to convey in my art”. Further, the process of sewing itself has something very contemplative and meditative to it. It represents resourcefulness, creating comfort, repairing something, holding it together, adding to it – and that way ultimately embodying the migrant experience.

Wandering Amidst the Colors exists somewhere in between history and novelty, tradition and innovation, the known and the imagined, reality and dreams, past and present, here and there: it is mixing different cultures and influences and brings them together to one identity: What could be more New York – home for so many of us.