



One Piece by Hangama Amiri: Arayeshgah-e Bahar

Words by Sarah Burney

Hangama Amiri is memorializing the everyday lives of contemporary Afghan urbanites. Combining a fashion designer's toolkit with the history and language of painting, Amiri is creating rich images that place Afghan women at the center. We see a colorful bazaar, banners for Khatool Mohammadzai, the first and most senior female general in the Afghan National Army, young men and women relaxing in a public park, a group of girls posing for a photo, ads for eyelash extensions, and more. Her 2019 textile installation *Arayeshgah-e Bahar* (*Bahar, Beauty Parlor*) depicts the crowded interior of a beauty salon, an all-female space. Yet there is an armed man standing outside.

Kajal sat down with Amiri to discuss the creation of this piece, the hierarchy of art materials, and the lives of Afghan women.

Kajal: Hi Hangama, thank you for making time to discuss *Arayeshgah-e Bahar*, (*Bahar, Beauty Parlor*) with me. Are we looking at a real place? Is this image based on a photograph you took? An image you found? A memory? Or is it imagined?

Hangama Amiri: It's all of the above. I looked at a lot of other people's photos of salons in Afghanistan that I found on Google but *Bahar, Beauty Parlor* is also one of my memories. It's a very contemporary memory from my recent time in Afghanistan visiting salons with my cousins. I have a lot of cousins and when I went back to Afghanistan in 2012 a few of them were actually getting married so I had the opportunity to go with them into the salons. It was so fascinating. The politics of Afghan beauty is so loaded – outside of the salon, everyone is hidden under the hijab but once they were inside that space, they felt so free.



Hangama Amiri, *Arayeshgah-e Bahar (Bahar, Beauty Parlor)*, 2019, Chiffon, cotton, suede, silk, denim, mesh-screen textile, shoelace, hanging wires, bamboo cord, printed paper image, and found fabrics. 117 x 288 inches.

And beautiful! These women wearing hijabs and niqabs are all coiffed and dolled up.

Yes! I think there's a really interesting point here: these women, the way that they're making themselves beautiful, it is only for themselves, not for men. As soon as they walk outside, they don't show off the beauty, right? There's a secrecy behind it. It's very different from how we read the politics of beauty in Western culture. Over here it's much more exhibitionist but in Afghanistan it's all quite hidden. It's just for their community, for women. It was really fascinating for me to be in these beauty spaces.

There is a special female camaraderie in those all-female beauty spaces.

Salons are such an intimate space. So loaded with personal information. There's the contact, the touch from one female to another – especially in these societies. That's how women feel comfortable, to be touched by another woman, to be treated by another woman. There's different ways of communicating with a stranger. You don't know her but you ask these personal questions all of a sudden. And these spaces are usually women owned, the boss is a woman, so there's this kind of special hierarchy of a female-owned business. In Afghanistan they actually name the salon after themselves. So this one, *Bahar, Beauty Parlor*, Bahar is a female name, the owner's name. It makes me really feel happy when I see that female authority.



A detail from *Arayeshgah-e Bahar (Bahar, Beauty Parlor)*.

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So who are these women inside *Bahar, Beauty Parlor*? I'm assuming the central figure is a bride because of her outfit. Is this a whole bridal party sitting together? Are you depicting real women?

Yes, she's the bride, the essential figure – the one that is actually gazing at us. I wanted her to be the central focus and she's the only one who is wearing traditional Afghani clothing, a bridal dress from the Kuchi tribes that comes with multi colors and mirrors attached within the decorative ornamental weave.

The women inside the interior space of the salon, including the bride, are not direct references to specific individuals. Instead, they are collectively based on my memories of strangers, a group of women who I witnessed getting ready for a wedding in Kabul city in 2012, family members, my cousin's wedding preparations, and friends who I engaged with while I was in Kabul city. This is a whole bridal party in the sense that the bride is joined by her mother, sister, and close female friends. They are shown close together within the salon and waiting room to capture their relationships to one another as a family.

Is the bride getting a massage? Waxed?

She's getting a hand massage like the one you get after they do your nails. It's such an intimate experience – the touch from this other woman who's holding your hand to care for you, to heal you ... it feels so nice. But you know people read different things when they see her, is she getting her nails done? Is it a cosmic hand reading? I like that too – leaving it an open question. But the idea of touch was really important for me to include in this image.

Your decision to have her look at us, almost makes us feel like we're intruding – like we've been caught staring.

There's two things that I'm thinking about. Firstly the history of portraiture, specifically the way painters use the power of gaze to direct the viewer. There's a one-to-one conversation that happens when the portrait is actually gazing at you, they [the subject of the portrait] somehow puts you in a gate, saying "This is how far you can stand in front of me and have a conversation." There's a sort of security space that they claim.



I wanted to rip apart the frame because I am interested in the imperfections and fragmented edges of my memories.

Social distance!

Yes! That's how I read the power of gaze, portrait paintings, and the value of the subject matter. If you look at historic Western paintings, Renaissance paintings, the posture tells you a lot – it shows class. It speaks to who they are, how they are valued in society. All through the power of the gaze – the power of the subject looking straight at the viewer. Kerry James Marshall uses the gaze a lot in his paintings as well. I was very inspired by his work.

The other thing I'm thinking about is my material. I'm using fabric not paint. Fabric carries such an immediate invitation to the viewer. It's fabric! It's the thing that's always attached to our body, it's a material that always gives us comfort. And so people love to touch my pieces. They won't do that to a painting. There's a hierarchy between these two mediums. I'm trying to find a way to make my subject guard the material. So when I put her in the center of this piece, and she's gazing at us, there's a warning she's giving to not come closer. This also brings the question of perspective into play. You have to put yourself at a distance in front of this work. So what is your perspective? Literally and conceptually. From how much distance are you looking into this world? Do you really understand what's going on? I think a lot about how material can speak with the subject, and how they can protect each other.

I also choose to work with fabric because it helped me resolve a question I repeatedly asked myself within my studio practice: the issue of the frame. Western paintings on canvas are often visually contained within rectilinear shapes like a square, a vertical rectangle for a portrait, or a horizontal rectangle for a landscape. When I work from memory, those memories never have a perfect edge. I wanted to rip apart the frame because I am interested in the imperfections and fragmented edges of my memories. That's why none of my textile pieces have perfect edges. They are not square. They are fragments of memories that I have put together—not a linear narrative that exists within predetermined boundaries.

There are three elements of this work that I suspect aren't fabric: the dollar bills peeking out of pockets, the wall art, and the book on the couch. Starting with the money – are those real dollar bills?

Yes, those are real dollar bills. When I was in Afghanistan I found it so interesting that the dollar had such a high value, such a high exchange value. People were carrying dollar bills, not Afghan afghani money – all my male cousins, they all had dollar bills in their pockets. And that's how they would buy things! And I would see so many young kids holding these bundles of dollar bills outside to exchange the money to afghani. It was so surprising to see the dollar, that I'm so familiar with in the Western world, in my world as such a high art object. And that this is the thing that they use to exchange their value, to exchange products. I was fascinated but at the same time, part of me was like, "Really?" I'm still questioning the presence of the dollar. The dollar is such an American thing – in a way it feels as if the American invasion still exists.

Was the Russian ruble ever similarly used?

Yes, both the ruble and dollar were used, but the dollar bill has always had a more stable and higher value, which made it more of a marker of social status.



A detail from *Arayeshgah-e Bahar (Bahar, Beauty Parlor)*.

The photographs on the wall look faded, almost bleached. Are those real photographs that you've aged?

Yes, they're actual photographs. I've covered them with a fabric used for drawing or transferring patterns. It has grid lines on it and I used it to cover the surface of the photographs because I needed to blur the realism of the photo, I needed to put a shield of another fabric to hide those details. There were multiple references I was making. The photographs in the salons are always bleached by sunlight so it achieved the look I wanted. But it is also a reference to whitewash and the idealization of Western beauty standards. In Afghanistan, like most other cultures, we have colorism – people prefer white skin to brown skin or darker skin. So for me it was a question – What if I put a veil of white, that kind of hides the color of skin in the photo but also whitens it?

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Who are the aspirational beauties on the wall of *Bahar, Beauty Parlor*?

Most of the photographs are images of Bollywood stars but there are two photographs from a late 80s magazine called Zhvandun. Zhvandun was published in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation and I guess because the Socialist Party was supporting this magazine, they used to elevate the progress of women in the arts and entertainment, and the cover was often an artist. The woman in the image that's in the middle of the piece, her name is actually Hangama – I was named after her. She's a very popular Afghan singer, I believe she lives in the States now, California I think, but she's been famous since the '70s. My grandma from my father's side was really into her music and when I was born in 1989, she named me after her. My parents were like, "Oh, we can't name a daughter, our daughter, after an artist. It brings shame" or something like that but I guess my grandma really believed in the artistry and the artist's voice and insisted. Including Hangama was my personal signature to this piece but using the photos from Zhvandun was important because I was giving importance to these female Afghan figures alongside the Bollywood stars and the women in the salon.

When you went to the salons in 2012 was this mishmash of Bollywood and Afghan women the imagery on the walls?

No. Not the Afghan women. There were definitely a lot of Bollywood and Hollywood actresses on the wall and a lot of Justin Bieber photos! Huge photos of him. It was interesting to see what people select from another culture to fit in, to look like them...to aspire to the American beauty ideal.



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Can you tell me about the book on the couch? It does not look like the glossy beauty magazine typically found in salons.

The book on the couch is by a poet named Abdul-Qadir Bedil. He was also known as Bedil Dehlavi, a Sufi saint from the Indian subcontinent, but he mostly wrote ghazals and rubayee in Farsi, which he learned during his childhood. I have a newsprint edition of this book that I've had since the 8th grade. I was in Tajikistan then and I enjoyed reading this book even though the poems were very challenging for me to understand. Regardless of their difficulty, I still desired to keep the book with me wherever I traveled. When I was working on the *Bahar* piece during my second year at Yale, I wanted to directly reference a poem in Farsi. When I looked at my belongings, I found this book once again, so I decided to reference it within the work by stitching the cover in this piece. The other reason I included it was to contextualize my figures and have other Farsi spoken viewers pick up on the language.

Are there any textile artists that you were looking at as you began working with fabric? Or was this a medium you grappled with by yourself?

It's pretty much something that I grappled with myself but at the same time, I'm not gonna lie, these days so many people are working with textiles. There's a huge new art community that's coming of age now and I'm from this millennial history and I'm proud of it. There's so many young artists working with fabric today and we are breaking the boundary around craft. I was very inspired by my class, there were so many people working with fabric, embroidery, dying and more textile crafts. We get ideas from each other, we mix and match, we have conversations, we share with each other.

It is super exciting to see artists subverting that hierarchy and saying no to the supremacy of oil paint, and turning to craft, which has been historically looked down on by the art academies.

I feel it's the art market that makes certain things high and whatever falls under it low art or craft. But for me, I've never seen painting and textiles as unequal, I've always seen them as equals. In my work, I'm still interested in the language of painting, I'm still interested in the way I'm using perspective – it's a very Western driven perspective – the palette, colors, everything that I'm looking at – I'm looking at it like a painter.

Textile art's relegation to "craft" has a lot to do with the fact that it was what women were producing, as opposed to what "professional artists", in other words men, were making. Does it feel like a "feminine" or can we say "feminist" medium to you or has it transcended that boundary now?

I do feel that textile is very heavily related to women's history. Maybe that's because those were the only tools that women were allowed to use back in that time, before they had any access to the education system or the art system. These were the woman's tools, they would embroider, stitch together and all that. But even in this contemporary world, I learned stitching from my mom – a very simple running stitch. So there is that power, there is that relation of generational knowledge coming to me as well. I'm not going to forget about that. And yes, in this art world, we do read one as masculine and the other as feminine. But I'm happy that there are so many young artists breaking that boundary.

Speaking of masculine – Can we talk about the man standing outside *Bahar, Beauty Parlor*. He is removed from the women, existing on his own piece of cloth but his presence is still slightly jarring – is he a security guard? Is he a soldier? Is he just standing there?

In most of my representational work, whether it's an exterior scene or an interior space, I include a military figure, in camouflage. At the end of the day, no matter how we do things in Afghanistan, how "free" women are, or how much access they have, they are still living in a country that is a war-zone. They are still dependents in a patriarchal society. The camo figure tells us that these women are not just average women in this interior space, they are important women, or there is an important woman in the group that needs a bodyguard. I found this very common in Afghanistan, most of the places I went to with my cousins, important women had bodyguards waiting outside. I wonder who they need security from? Is it the war? Or the public?



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I appreciate that you have included the man and through him some of the harder realities of these women's lives. Even in the most well intentioned cultural spaces here, there is an appetite for "hard stories" from our part of the world that is very off-putting. How do you navigate the clashing desires to authentically tell your story and not perform for or react to the Western gaze?

I'm so glad you asked that question. I pretty much think about this every day. Whether it's in my studio, or whether it's meeting friends outside, thinking about dating – the questions of othering and exoticization, are always around me. But I guess that's my reality. I know that people are interested in learning about my culture and that's fine. What bothers me is when they pity me or make me feel as if they are pitying my story. It makes me angry. My childhood was very different to yours but that doesn't mean I didn't experience any happiness. Don't take that away from me. My life was not always miserable. We've just had different childhood experiences. I am happy. Whatever it was that I went through it made me stronger standing in front of you. But I've stopped explaining myself a lot too. They might not understand where I'm coming from and I'm not trying to make them understand. That's where the art comes in. I have this tool to express myself and I express the happy moments, the contemporary voices, the contemporary scenes. It's not all about the misery. My visuals are about hope, about now, about the future.



Artist Hangama Amiri in her studio. Photo by Nabil Harb.

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