

Near and Far

Nigel Lendon

BRIAN SPOONER'S ESSAY 'WEAVERS AND DEALERS: THE AUTHENTICITY OF AN ORIENTAL CARPET' of 1986 perceptively explores the relationship between cultural distance and the desire for authenticity, seen through the critiques of primitivism and orientalism. In the case of the rugs of the Turkmen, he explores the crucial nexus between the makers of 'tribal' carpets and the influence of markets and their network of dealers on the perceptions of both makers and audiences. Since then a highly innovative genre of rugs/carpet known as 'war rugs' has emerged, largely at the hands of the Baluchi peoples, neighbours of the Turkmen, who have endured two decades of conflict and dislocation. In disentangling the complexity of the knowledge of such traditions in the world outside Central Asia, Spooner argues that the West's quest for authenticity is enhanced by cultural distance from the source of these artefacts. He suggest that such claims to 'authenticity' are informed not by ethnographic knowledge, but by the 'lore of the dealer . . . generated by the history of the trade and of Western interest, rather than by the conditions of production.' He is equally persuasive when he concludes 'whichever way we turn in an attempt to explain our interest in oriental carpets, we run sooner or later into mystification.'

So I should not be surprised that my attempts to understand these works in this genre seem utterly distorted by my distance from the reality of the world of their makers. And yet as I search among their forms and images for clues to their meanings and values I find myself astonished by their diversity, resilience and capacity for innovation. And I am moved by what I read as a desperate and sombre appeal for the negation of what they depict — that is, to interpret these works as essentially anti-war sentiments.

These makers, the artists of this exhibition, have been subjected to the gross generalisations of American/European media representations of race, identity and religion, when their country of origin was twice on the global stage in little more than a decade. The pursuit of al-Qaeda and the overthrow of the Taliban refocussed world attention on Afghanistan in the year following the September 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center, and subsequently the second Iraq War has again brought the Central Asian region back to the immediacy of the daily news.

The false sense of proximity created by globalised media representations sits in marked contrast with the material presence of these artefacts, through which there appears to be a complementary channel of communication, however problematic its reception may be. These works powerfully transmit their meanings against the flow of the dominant discourses through whatever complex modes of marketing and distribution, and subject to whatever influences and distortions of tradition may occur. It is the material presence of these artefacts that conveys a different order of immediacy — reminding us of the virtual presence of the makers themselves. Unlike electronic media, the materiality of the artefact cannot be separated from the hand (the life, the experiences) of its maker. That these images now come to us on the internet is another such illusion of accessibility, despite the fact that the makers and their circumstances remain unknown. Such access, we must remind ourselves, depends on access to the technology on which I am writing this text.

Distance and dislocation enter almost every aspect of the consideration of these simultaneously beautiful and horrific artefacts. This is not simply a consequence of the circumstances of their reception by distant viewers in contexts unimaginable by their makers. The effect of distance can be conceived as reciprocal and complementary as both maker and viewer try to imagine each other. The reality of their production is that these carpets are primarily made for



Plate 12

trade to the outside world, as they have always been. Thus with few exceptions, they are made to leave their immediate context of use, and take their seemingly contradictory messages outwards, with little understanding of the potential audiences they reach or the reactions they may engender.

For anyone outside the immediate context of a work's production, understanding the maker's motivation is a fundamentally speculative exercise. Context, in any specific quasi-anthropological sense of attempting to understand the circumstance of a work's production, use and dissemination, is not a knowledge on which the beholder can draw. At best we rely on a mere generalisation of a rug's formal characteristics as the evidence of its origins. The majority of these 'war rugs' are identified as made by the semi-nomadic peoples called Baluchi (at least in their style), whose origins are in the north west of the country. And yet the traditions of carpet making in the northern regions of the country, the patterns of social interaction, and access to materials and markets have been drastically disrupted by two decades of war. Context, whether that of the maker's original location, or in their nomadic passage through familiar territories, or through the makers being internally displaced within Afghanistan through the effects of decades of conflict, or in unfamiliar territory as refugees, renders any interpretation based on associations with regional traditions problematic. The most recent carpets, from the mid-nineties, are more likely to reflect the mass exodus to either Iran or Pakistan, as a consequence of the various brutal regimes which swept through the country in that decade. In these different situations, the context of their production may be more or less traditional, made by women and children in relative seclusion, or radically non-traditional, made by men in refugee camps, with no particular rug-making heritage of their own.

Their reception in the outside world is a process of decontextualisation, which now ends with the works hanging on the white walls of contemporary art galleries and museums. This process begins in the traders' markets such as those of Peshawar or Hamburg. There, so-called 'war rugs' are a tiny proportion of contemporary rugs made by Afghans for the various marketplaces through which they pass. Each stage in their trajectory from the inside world of their production to the outside also exercises its own influence on the production of successive generations of rugs — where price, interest, and demand, all feed back secondhand, or more remotely, to the workshops where they are made. Nevertheless, via the many dealers and middlemen, the market for these carpets creates an impression in the minds of their producers of an audience receptive to the rugs' messages and values.

As I will seek to demonstrate in the second part of this essay, it seems inconceivable to me that these works may be accounted for solely as commodities. A recurrent theme in the rhetoric surrounding these works is the inherent opportunism of the chain of dealers, merchants and weavers. I would argue that even the rugs which appear closest to 'airport art', for instance those which take as their subject the WTC attack or the 'War against Terror' (Plates 13 and 14) follow traditional forms of practice in responding to the market, much as the carpet trade has always done. These most recent manifestations, rather than transposing traditional forms and patterns with the symbols of war, are better understood as a mirror of the West's own representations of itself.

Our attempts to understand these works proceed despite the fact that what we don't know outweighs what we do know. We don't know, for instance, very much about a given rug's origins, the locality or circumstances of its production, or the identity or even gender of its maker. We don't know the pressures being exercised on the genre that are causing its internal transformation. We do, however, know the stories of our own encounters with these works — which for this writer, began with chance encounters in fellow artists' studios and houses. This was followed by seeing works in small numbers, or in small collections appearing in dealers shops or galleries at the more exotic and outsider end of the contemporary art spectrum. In the first half of the nineties, it was difficult to gain much of an understanding of the scope of the genre. Rug dealers sometimes would have one or two, but a sense of range or complexity and the values of this new genre were not accessible outside of the rug trade until the internet revolution of the late 1990s. Curiously, for a



trade oriented to a global market for hundreds of years, once again we see the creation of a new audience for these works within the context of contemporary art. It is contemporary artists and art theorists who have the interest and critical framework for appreciating an artform which challenges or disrupts the conventions from which it is derived, and who place a particular value on the tension between innovation and tradition.

Tradition is a problematic concept to apply to such diverse, innovative, and contradictory works. It is well recognised that Baluchi rugmakers are historically renowned for their capacity for innovation. Thus their complex associations with 'traditional' precedents are evident in as many different forms as there are types of war carpets. In the 1980s some carpets appear which barely admit the evidence of the militarisation of Afghan society, where armaments and weapons are almost completely hidden (that is, highly abstracted) in the interstices of traditional structure, pattern and ornament (*Plate 8*). At the other end of the spectrum, rugs are clearly made opportunistically, in response to world events like 9/11, using forms and imagery derived more from CNN montage techniques than any sense of tradition or origin. However some newer rugs (for example *Plates 9 and 15*) seem to be in the process of re-integrating once explicit militaristic forms into pattern and ornament.

The most compelling of these carpets produce an intensely ambiguous, even contradictory, play between our understanding of tradition and value. It is tempting to speculate that those which show the most subtle variations to an established convention of carpet-making mark the beginning of the genre. The evidence seems to suggest this is the case. Yet the time-scale between the earliest of these, made perhaps in the mid-1980s, and those of the early 1990s which show an almost complete transformation of form, cartographic space, and political narrative, is less than a decade. Given the social and political complexity of these years, we remain wary of too-prescriptive an account of this innovative elaboration of the genre in all its variant connections with the conventions from which they originate.

Likewise our understanding of value and intentionality can only be deduced from our assumptions of the similarity and difference between these 'war' carpets and their closest precedents. In the latter, value is ascribed precisely to the virtuoso repetition of conventional designs, with all their internal semiotics of pattern, ornament and structure. Yet if the world in which these traditions are located is disrupted, symbolic and representational pictorial modes are mixed, and the potential for the carpet to speak politically is allowed, then the conditions are ripe for a highly innovative new genre to emerge.

In this context, a concept of value attributed to evidence of a residue of former referents may almost be lost within the architectonics of new forms and subjects. For example, the map of Afghanistan features strongly in such imagery, with or without armaments or other associative elements — such as the poppy borders and plants depicted in *Plate 2*. These map carpets depict and identify the shape of Afghanistan and its (many) composite provinces, as if to affirm the country's forever threatened sovereign integrity (see the front cover, and *Plates 2, 3, 13, 14, and 15*). The profile of the nation appears in these examples to link both the specific and generalised political subjects within an overall idealisation of national identity and independence. It also provides a framing device for political narratives, such as the rugs which depict the mujahideen's challenge to Najibullah and his subsequent gruesome demise (*front cover and Plate 3*).

In a remarkable application of rug-making to politics, a rug made in the early 1990s (*Plate 3*) predicts the Soviet puppet dictator's death by hanging, watched by his opponents including Ahmad Shah Massoud, and by then, the ex-President Rabbani. As has been suggested, this particular rug may have fulfilled the function of an effigy, a chilling premonition of events that finally took place at the hands of the Taliban in 1996. The other Najibullah rugs have the same historical and stylistic origins. The images of cityscapes and specific topographies are similarly



complex in their references to historical time. As well as representations of the actual theatres of war (*Plate 5*), they also encompass depictions of both idealisations of pre-war memories and desires of a different future.

In a different and more subtle sense, value may be linked directly to those elements which affirm the identity of the individual makers, within the larger tradition from which they draw their knowledge and expertise. No two rugs of the same subject are ever quite the same. Some are dense with pattern and ornament, providing the space for the rugmaker to innovate and individualise each rug. Even the guard borders suggest a concern for the longevity and hence the utilitarian value of the makers' labours (see *Plates 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10* and the *back cover*). These dense fields are also rich with historical associations and references, just as they may also incorporate figures with explicit allegorical meanings (see *Plates 1* and *back cover*). And finally we must remember that these objects are occasionally also prayer rugs, in which case they are 'seen' with eyes closed in the act of prayer.

The carpet we have titled 'The Story of Jahan Bakhsh' (*Plate 1*) presents a seemingly unresolvable challenge and at the same time an extraordinary potentiality. The viewer sees an image, an object, and a text. As an image it conveys a narrative of passion, horror, sorrow and revenge. It is also an object built from half a million hand knotted pixels, and therefore it also speaks of an extraordinary human labour. And as a text it speaks directly about its makers' origins, and spells out the specifics of the allegory it describes. Thus far, the text is resistant to literal translation. So all I can do is adopt the position of the distant viewer, and ask myself, what do I understand from what I see?

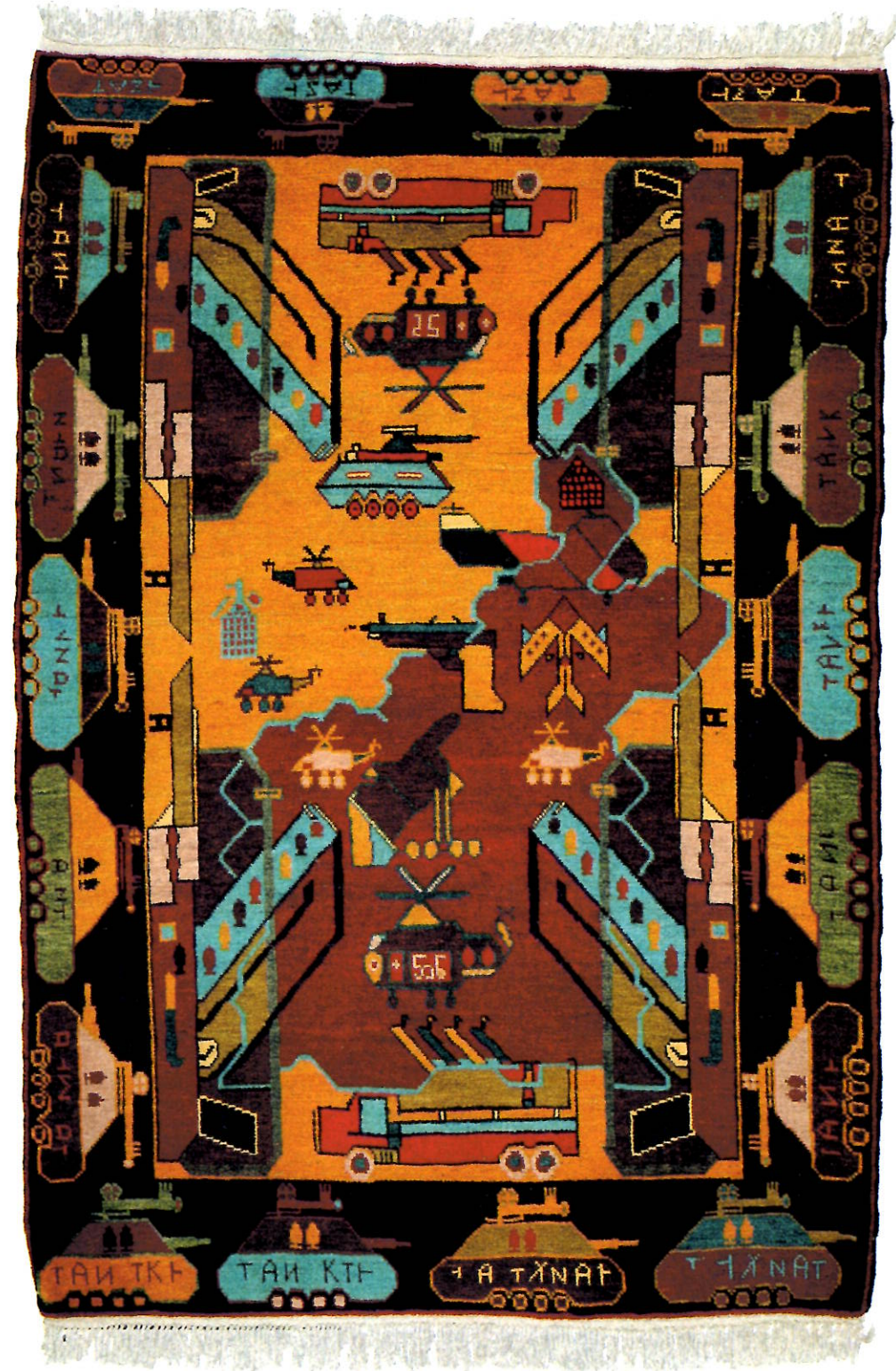
In one sense this is to enter a play of imaginaries, to ask, how is it this image comes to me? I imagine back along a trajectory from Canberra to Canada to Hamburg to Afghanistan. I try to imagine the builders of this extraordinary image/object, and their circumstances, and their motives.

What do I see? I see that it is made by hand, perhaps by many hands, a work carried out over a year or more. It is constructed from bottom to top, so that the main body of the text precedes the building of the lower register of the image. The text appears to be written in a hybrid vernacular form of Farsi that is hard to translate in any literal sense. Many of the characters have been distorted in the translation from a cartoon, a cartoon whose author is lost.

In their rudeness and immediacy its forms are so evocative that it seems inconceivable that the labour of its production is merely economic. It is a labour of such power, sorrow, and anger that its motivation and significance is more than its monetary value alone. For how much more saleable, valuable and economically comprehensible would a more conventional carpet be, if made under the same conditions, with the same input of labour, to some traditional set of patterns and cartoons, which subsequently finds its way through the same markets? And yet here is an image which cries its message — but to whom?

How do I read the imagery? It is made from the base upwards, yet is read visually from the top down. It is constructed in two registers, separated by passages of text. In the upper register the complex gestures, scenes and narratives show a man in white triumphant astride a red figure (depicted as a devil, with horns), holding the devil's wrist with one hand, about to stab with an orange dagger with the other.

The text above tells us it is a story about a young man, named Jahan Bakhsh, apparently killed in war. The imagery appears to be the story of retribution. In the lower register an orange mustachioed horseman rides triumphant over an armoured or camouflaged, kneeling, antenna'd 'crusader' figure (the word is derived from contemporary political discourse). So how might any specific figure or symbol be read?



Surrounding these protagonists are animals, warplanes, helicopters, and machine guns, which are all relatively explicit, and serve to bring the allegory into the present. Likewise secondary figures, observers, are represented as figures in contemporary time, with modern weaponry. The victims of war are shown beheaded, legs and hands cut off, blood on the ground at their feet — or, if they are lucky, supported by a walking stick.

These figures are monstrously distorted, some wearing uniforms and headdresses, bearded, heads and feet enlarged, or shrunken, thus distorted in the artist's seemingly impassioned quest for the potency of the image. Animals (perhaps jaguars, perhaps scavenging dogs) are eating bones in some nightmarish allegory of death, while other elements (the inverted vessel) defy interpretation.

How to account for such a multiplicity of interpretations is itself characteristic of this tradition's challenge. Some informants say the rug is from Herat, yet the text is written in a hybrid vernacular form of several languages. They tell me it apparently describes a folk tale, or a song, the story of Jahan Bakhsh, the origins of which is yet to be discovered.

Other informants suggests the language of the text (with its many errors) is from northern Afghanistan. One informant from Herat suggests such carpets were sometimes a gift from the mujahideen to commanders who aligned themselves with Massoud in the war to overthrow the Soviet puppet dictator Najibullah. If this is the case the rug shows no wear, suggesting it never reached its intended destination, and was somehow highjacked (by economic necessity perhaps) into the chain of dealers, and ultimately the internet auction system.

From our distant vantage points we attempt to understand the complex meanings this tradition engenders. The complexity of its imagery, for an outsider, is enhanced by our speculation on the way these carpets are valued. From the outside, these rugs transport the viewer back to the values of their origins — even though the origins of their artisans and artists seem irredeemably lost through decades of upheaval and devastation. In another sense, the outside world finds the evaluation of these works intensely problematic — neither fine art, nor decorative, nor craft — an 'art' apparently without an authorial voice.

Outsiders read the ambiguities of these works with difficulty. Our interpretation is reaching towards an understanding of the tradition's various categories. Within the typology outlined here, propaganda, historical opportunism and didactic forms contrast with works that can only be seen as lamentations of loss and a plea for the removal of the need to speak about war. Perhaps they should all be re-categorised as 'peace rugs'.

Cross-culturally, we valorise such objects by calling them art, and we intuit meanings and values our culture expects of high art. It is no contradiction to expect this art to reveal such realities as the horrors of war, and by implication, to argue for its elimination.

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Biographies

TIM BONYHADY is an art historian and environmental lawyer at the Australian National University. His books include *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting 1801–1890*, *Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, Politics and Law* and *The Colonial Earth*. He was also co-curator of *The Heads of the People*, an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, and the curator of *Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth*, an exhibition at the National Library of Australia, Art Gallery of South Australia and State Library of Victoria.

JASLEEN DHAMIJA is a historian of textiles and costumes who has worked and researched in India, as well as with the United Nations in Iran, the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa. She has written over a dozen books, contributed to many major art journals and organized seminars and lectured at museums throughout the world. She has also been a visiting fellow at many universities in India and Australia and was Hill Professor at the University of Minnesota.

NIGEL LENDON is Reader in Visual Arts and Deputy Director, School of Art at the National Institute of the Arts, Australian National University. He has worked as an artist, art historian and curator in the fields of minimalist and conceptual art, with a particular interest in the relation between tradition and innovation, and collaborative interdisciplinary practices. In 1998 he was co-curator of *The Painters of the Story of the Wagilag Sisters 1937–1997*, an exhibition tracing a painting tradition of Central Arnhem Land, at the National Gallery of Australia.

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Tim Bonyhady & Nigel Lendon
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