

RUGS OF WAR

In a world where thousands of electronic images of global conflict circulate daily, a series of 'war rugs' exhibited at the 2004 Adelaide Festival of Arts presented a record of war via 'half a million hand knotted pixels'.

This brief introduction to *The Rugs of War* exhibition is composed from the catalogue and weblog writings of curators Nigel Lendon and Tim Bonyhady

Rug picturing Mohammad Najibullah, → whom Moscow made President of Afghanistan in 1986 and the Mujahideen ousted in 1992; late 1980s – 1990s, Pakistan Baluchi style, knotted woollen carpet, wool on cotton warp, 930 x 1900 mm

World Trade Center, September 11; ↗ Afghanistan, 2002, knotted woollen carpet, cotton warp, 610 x 810 mm

Armaments with three women wearing ↗ the burqa; about 2000, Baluchi style, knotted woollen carpet, woollen warp, 1235 x 2000 mm



War rugs are the product of the nomadic Baluchi people of Northern Afghanistan, most of whom were displaced to Iran and Pakistan during the two decades of conflict since the Russian occupation in 1979. Rug-makers began incorporating the implements of war into their designs almost immediately the Soviet Union invaded their country in 1979. They continue to do so today in the wake of September 11 and the 'War on Terrorism'.

The rugs produced in response to these events constitute the world's richest tradition of war art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries — a product of at least hundreds if not thousands of anonymous weavers. Some have been dubbed protest rugs, others have been called victory rugs. Although generally known as war rugs, they also have been interpreted as anti-war rugs. As well as portraying the actual theatres of war, they also depict idealisations of pre-war memories and desires of a different future.

War rugs, like most oriental carpets, have generally been discussed from afar. Our attempts to understand them proceed despite the fact that what we don't know outweighs what we do know. There are map rugs and cityscapes, rugs dominated by guns, tanks and aircraft and others in which the weaponry is hard to discover. The number of different basic designs is vast, the variations on these designs are prodigious. Many are steeped in the traditions of Afghan carpet-making, but others are almost devoid of reference to these traditions.

At the meeting point between East and West, the artists of Afghanistan have produced an extraordinary new visual arts genre to represent the experience of this horrific era, using their own distinctive media and aesthetic forms. Through its innovative qualities, this form of rug-making breaks out of its original categories of fine craft and ethnographica to sit precariously alongside contemporary and avant-garde art, and political art and propaganda.

Even the rugs which appear closest to 'tourist art', for instance those which take as their subject the

World Trade Center attack or the 'War against Terror', respond to the market much as the carpet trade has always done. Rather than just transpose traditional forms and patterns with the symbols of war, these most recent manifestations are better understood as a mirror of the West's own representations of itself.

The events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath have transformed war rugs, not only because of the ousting of the Taliban but also because Afghanistan returned, however temporarily, as a focus of global attention. The greatest demand for these rugs, probably for the first time, is in Kabul. The American soldiers and members of the International Security and Assistance Force, journalists and aid workers in the city are a much richer market than Soviet soldiers were during their occupation.

Yet demand for these rugs is far from confined to Afghanistan. It also has been stimulated and met by exhibitions staged by dealers and collectors in Europe, the United States and Australia, and by the Internet, which has allowed dealers to reach audiences that would never come into their shops and collectors to see rugs that they never could find where they live.

The first '2002' mat sold on the Internet did not side with either the Americans or al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance or the Taliban, and contained nothing about terrorism, liberation or freedom. Instead it was dominated by a single word, 'Scared'.

The Rugs of War exhibition and catalogue were first produced as part of *Fusion* — a series of exhibitions, publications, musical performances, symposia and workshops at the Australian National University in 2003, coordinated by the National Institute of the Arts and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research

See <http://underthesun.anu.edu.au/weblogs/rugsofwar/> for the full catalogue text for *The Rugs of War* exhibition by Tim Bonyhady, Nigel Lendon and Jasleen Dhamija