Fig. 1
Piles/ruins/fragments, some that are left of the Buddhist statues (constructed 100-490AD), bodily discarded (destroyed by Taliban, March, 2001), pieces protected/sheltered, torn, (saved for possible reconstruction @ $45 million each) at the cave's site, Bamiyan, Hazarajat, Afghanistan, 4/16/08. (Jayce Salloum, photo and caption)

Bamiyan Notes

An Alternative Perspective on the War in Afghanistan

Haema Sivanesan

For centuries, the colossal statues of the Buddha were a defining feature of the Bamiyan Valley in the central Afghan region of the Hazarajat, an area mostly occupied by the Hazara people, a Shia Muslim minority in a predominantly Sunni Afghanistan. In 1998, Hazarajat fell to the Taliban and Mullah Niazi declared the Hazara people to be "infidels."[1] Several massacres were reported between 1998 and 2000.[2] Finally in March 2001 the Taliban blew up the Bamiyan Buddhas. Twenty journalists were flown from Afghanistan's capital Kabul, to Bamiyan to report on the destruction. For Canadian journalist Kathy Gannon, it was a profound experience to stand where the 55 meter high statue once stood. The enormity of the outline of the colossal statues signified a void that could not be destroyed. Equally remarkable "was the staircase that weaved and wound its way to the top of the head of the Buddha, but from inside the mountain." The destruction of the statues, Gannon notes, was a tragedy, "but it was also a tragedy that Afghanistan and Afghans were ignored, and had been ignored for decades."[3]

The Hazara people believe themselves to be descendents of the sculptors and labourers who carved the figures of the Buddha into the majestic mountainside of the Bamiyan Valley. The Hazaras perceived the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as an act of terror and humiliation, designed to seal the Taliban's capture of Bamiyan. However, the destruction of the Buddhas was also undoubtedly a gesture of provocation and defiance aimed at the international community, coming six months prior to the attacks on the US September 11, 2001.[4]

In April 2008, Canadian artist Jayce Salloum travelled with Pakistan-based Hazara artist Khadim Ali from Karachi to Islamabad, onto Kabul and then overland into the Bamiyan Valley. Their objective was to survey the Central Afghan landscape and its contexts, to observe the situation on the ground, and to engage in encounters that would provide insight into the lived conditions of the Hazara people. The artists travelled independently, and to some extent, clandestinely. The Afghan landscape is scarred by decades of conflict, ravaged by drought and desperate poverty, troubled by tribal rivalries, ongoing government corruption and neglect, and a persistent Taliban presence. But since Bamiyan was no longer in the international eye, and secured by the presence of New Zealand peace-keeping troops, the artists were afforded a great deal of mobility, and access to key people and sites. Of specific interest to this project were the ruins and cave sites of the circa fifth century Buddhas, as a site from which to engage with the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Through the process of this collaboration, it became apparent how the case of Bamiyan located the fault lines, ideological divides and inequities, that underline the current conflict in Afghanistan: of the excessive wealth of nations against the desperate poverty of others; the impossibility of modern democratic or secular nationhood when warlords hold the rule of law; and the isolating speed and impact of global change, technology and commerce for a nation without basic infrastructure.

Salloum and Ali's journey through Afghanistan resulted in a collaborative installation titled, دل که سوز ندارد, دل نیست (the heart that has no love/pain/generosity is not a heart).[5] The project takes its title from a Sufi song that Hazara girls at a school assembly in Kabul sang. A key videotape in the installation depicts a scene of these girls at a morning assembly in the school courtyard under a brilliant blue sky–an image of future promise. (...heart...) consists of a series of ambient and documentary videotapes alongside photographs of various sizes arranged in conceptual clusters and displayed with miniature paintings that contribute a narrative and allegorical thread. Also included are various collected ephemera including objects, notes, children's drawings, photocopied documents and maps that comprise the evidence of a journey. The installation appears as a spatialized scrapbook, developing a sense of journey or itinerary and producing an impressionistic account of the landscape of Afghanistan beyond the front line of war. The installation proposes a detailed description of a culture through various modes of documentation, but bringing an artist's critical and aesthetic perspective to the reading. Arranged in thematic constellations, the clusters of photographs, videos and paintings play with scale and composition, often developing patterns of repetition and reiteration, suggesting a mode of visual analysis.

The photographs and videotapes that comprise (...heart...) focus on the everyday realities and quotidian details of ordinary people who have lived through decades of conflict. They are intimate in their keen observation of detail: looming snow-capped mountains viewed through dusty windows, picturesque landscapes littered with disused tanks and war artillery alongside moments of enduring life–a pigeon sheltering in the alcove of a restaurant, a budding dandelion in a bed of hail, a shocking pink tarpaulin stretched out as an awning. These images of the landscape convey an eerie stillness and desolation evocative of the mood in Afghanistan. Salloum depicts the scarcity of things and the frugality of living, recorded as a photographic catalogue of piles–sticks, rocks, scraps, shrapnel, junk, disused parts and ruins. Every object is worthless yet precious, giving the viewer an insight into the conditions of poverty in Afghanistan.

One of the videotapes records the ruins of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The silent, looped footage pans across a vast and enigmatic array of sandstone rocks–the rescued fragments of the colossal

Buddhas–sorted into piles, catalogued and housed in sheds near the original cave site. A related cluster of photographs depicts larger pieces of ruins wrapped in high-tech plastic. This material documents the ruins of the Buddhas at a specific moment in history, at a turning point between destruction and conservation or possible restoration (fig. 1). For the Hazara, the ruins of the Buddhas are the ruins of an identity–symbolic of an originary sense of connection to a place and evidence of the Hazara people's role in Afghanistan's history. The ruins of the Buddhas, however, also conserve a violent and traumatic history. The ambition to reconstruct the Buddhas from their ruins suggests a process of recuperation–a process of remaking or rehabilitating history and identity–to restore a symbolic order, to restore dignity and a sense of belonging.

In another video, the viewer is taken through the labyrinthine caves of the Bamiyan mountainside, into what would have once been the belly of the smaller Buddha.[6] Here and there, Nasir Mudabir, Director of Historical Monuments in Bamiyan, points out jewel-like fragments of fresco paintings: the rainbow halos of Buddhist divinities, the folded knee of a saffron-robed monk, now barely recognizable. The soot-stained domes of the interior of the caves are desecrated by scores of boot prints left by Taliban soldiers. Ali paints these caves in a series from 2007. The monumental, sheer cliff wall is articulated only by the honeycomb fenestration of the ancient cave-dwellings once inhabited by Buddhist monks. The massive, vaulted niche of the colossal, standing Buddha appears in Ali's paintings as an abstract, mutating, shadowy form that dominates the landscape.

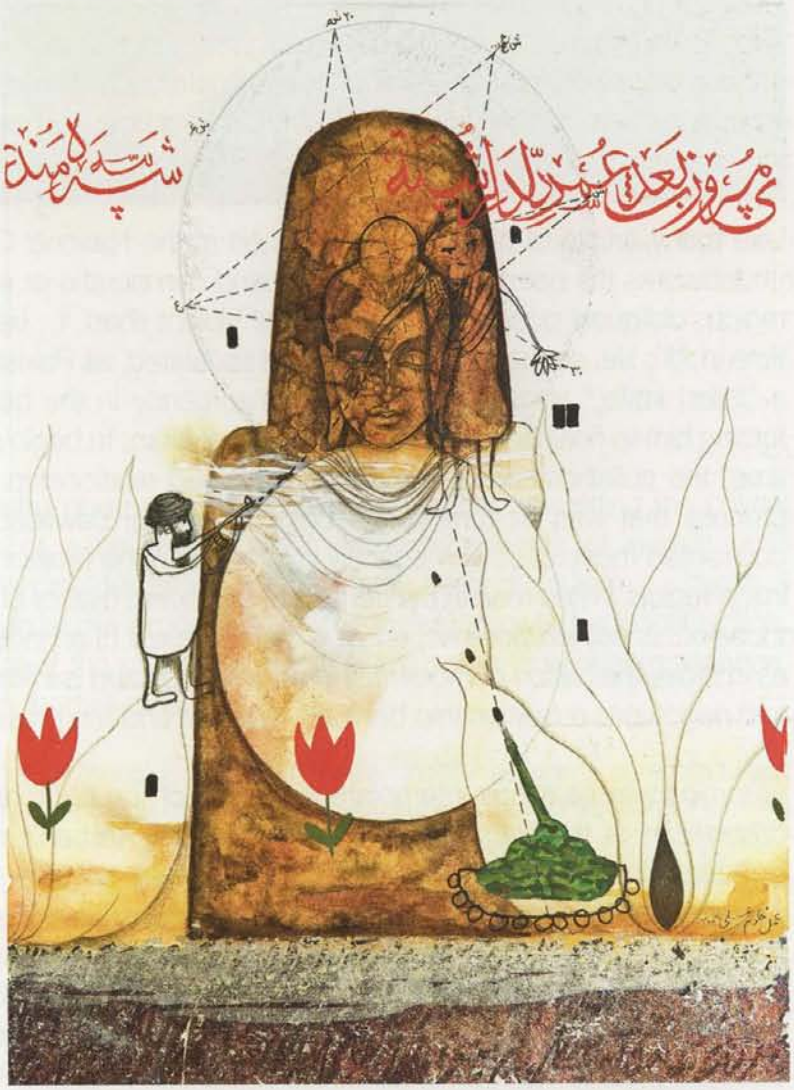

Fig. 2
Khadim Ali
Untitled, 2007
Gouache and silver leaf on wasli

In front of this niche, Ali has painted a bountiful fruit tree, as though an offering, symbolizing hope and abundance. In other paintings, he employs a motif of tulips, the harbinger of spring, new life, renewal, and the emblem of the Hazaras (fig. 2). Surrounding these optimistic scenes are jarring images of tanks, guns, grenades, and other war artillery; a Taliban fighter firing at the serene face of the Buddha; a jet plane colliding with the hollow cave where the Buddha once stood. These paintings incorporate elements of children's drawings from workshops held in Bamiyan, exploring the impact of decades of war and Taliban indoctrination on the minds of children.

A recurring theme in Ali's miniature paintings is that of the *Shahnama*, an epic eleventh-century poem by the Persian poet Firdausi that examines the moral codes informing a virtuous mode of sovereignty. Of particular interest is the story of Rostam and Sohrab, two princely warriors who fight on opposing sides of a battle. Unaware that Sohrab is his son, Rostam kills Sohrab. The story deals with the futility of war and the tragedy of misplaced heroism within the context of an ancient and epic poem concerned with elaborating the ideals that constitute a model form of nationhood. In one of the videotapes, Syed Mohammed Shah, an impoverished farmer living in the mountains of Band-e-Amir, northwest of Bamiyan, recites from the story of Rostam and Sohrab. He says, "My father used to say that whenever you are sad you should recite *The Shahnama*. It is good for people to read it because it counsels us and makes us happy."[7] The *Shahnama* provides a reassurance, an antidote, a comfort, a retreat to the past, by which to comprehend and withstand the hardships of the present (fig. 3).

Ali repeatedly paints the figure of Rostam, but this time not the heroic Rostam of his grandfather's stories, but a grotesque, demon-faced Rostam of Taliban propaganda. This figure of Rostam appears as a brutish tyrant–a new generation of holy warrior determined to annihilate populations in the name of Islam.[8]

Like many artists of his generation trained at the National College of Arts in Pakistan, Ali's work underscores the need for a progressive and democratic or socially just approach to politics in the region, obliquely positioning a critique of violent *jihad*. (...heart...) spanned an especially difficult time in Ali's life, as the war in Afghanistan escalated, as Pakistan teetered on the brink of becoming a "failed state," and as the separatist insurgency in the border state of Baluchistan intensified, forcing him to flee his home city of Quetta, Pakistan, to begin a new life in Australia. Throughout this time, the collaboration demanded a sustained relationship of friendship, trust, and patience, a process that was by turn frustrating, confronting, bewildering, and exhilarating–a process that confronted those of us immediately involved with the project with the lived realities of the situation in the region. When read in the context of the recent history of the sub-continent, Ali's paintings, like those of his contemporaries, engage the discourse of an incipient modernity, whereas in Pakistan, as in India, the notion of modernity in art develops and is informed by the discourses of nationalism and negotiates a relationship between the past and the present.

Ali's miniature paintings interpolate a reading of the photographs and videotapes, recording the destruction of the Bamiyan cave sites since the Taliban's ruthless shelling of the city's historic Buddhas in March 2001. Drawing on a culturally specific and narrative visual language, which conflates myth, poetry, and allegory, with human experiences and real world events, Ali's earliest paintings (2003) are formal and measured in their composition, using austere colours, and a watercolorist's style to convey a dark, funereal mood. Subsequent paintings grapple with the ongoing social and psychological impact of the Taliban's persecution of the Hazara people, and the current conditions determining the fate of this community.

Fig. 3

Syed Mohammad Shah,
reciting Tahmina &
Rostam section,
Band-e-Amir,
Shahnama video still, Jayce Salloum, 2010 (2008)

In the installation, paintings, videos, and photographs mediate each other, unsettling the critical contexts and art-historical lineages of each artist's work, reviving a sense of density and juxtaposition characteristic of Salloum's previous projects. Drawing on the archival form, (...heart...) is designed to engage the viewer in an active process of reflection and knowledge construction, encouraging the viewer to make sense of the material in terms of his or her individual experience. Salloum explains with relation to earlier bodies of work:

...viewers became part of the process [of...] choosing their own paths, initially seduced, compelled, and confronted, making decisions, and in this manner being responsible for visualising and reconstructing their own cultural/political perceptions...[9]

Accordingly, curator Jen Budney proposes that the central concern of Salloum's practice is epistemological:

[the works] ask questions about what we know, why we know what we know, and how we acquire our knowledge, as well as how our knowledge relates to our understanding of truth, belief, and justification...[10]

The effect is to disrupt the passive consumption of images in order to destabilize "naturalized" discourses and categories of knowledge, or, "...to counteract the fulfilment of knowledge"[11] by revealing its contingencies.

A striking aspect of (...heart...) are the portraits that form a significant cluster of photographs in the installation. These portraits have the utilitarian and uniform aesthetic of bureaucratic practices of photography–passport photographs, identity cards, licences, school photographs. Arrayed together in grids, they suggest a community or population, a larger cultural identity, which describes the landscape of Bamiyan as a site of human struggle. The portraits convey the vulnerability of the people–the innocence of the children, the trust of the young women, the worn faces of the men–and examine the character and resilience of human subjects living in conditions of ongoing conflict.

Salloum remarked to me that the idea to photograph a series of portraits came about from watching Ali take photographs of the people around him. He describes the process of making some of the portraits in the market in Bamiyan:

> ...I walked up and down the street "speaking" in gestures with one word at my disposal... I made my way down the street, and had soon amassed a collection of sixty or seventy images at close range while holding the camera up between the person and me, for just long enough until the smiles stopped, and there was that space/time where an unsureness arose, a faint question, then I took the picture.[12]

In this recollection, Salloum describes the precise moment of an encounter wherein the condition of alterity is revealed–in the uncertain and disarming moment of a pause where his subjects reveal a vulnerability, a tension, a truth. The subjects of these pictures are unnamed, but not necessarily anonymous, their individuality being articulated by the tilt of the head, an irrepressible grin, a weariness, an aloofness, a quizzical gaze. These are not the blank gazes of contemporary photographic portraiture. The photographs capture an intensely direct gaze that addresses the viewer, engaging a relationship between the subject and the viewer. These pictures locate an ethical dimension to the concerns of the project, compelling us to ask: Who are these people? What is my relationship to them? What is their relationship to this seemingly parched, post-apocalyptic landscape? What is our responsibility or obligation to these people? Are they antagonists or protagonists? Victims or survivors? How have they survived?

Another grid of portraits was taken by Ali at Marefat High School in Dasht-i-Barchi district, a vast Hazara enclave in Kabul. It originally functioned as a co-educational school, but following a government edict, now operates in two sessions–a morning school for the girls, and an afternoon school attended by boys. A video loop depicts the girls at morning assembly in the courtyard of the school under a blue, spring sky. The girls sing the national anthem and school song, then make their way to the classrooms–an image of future promise. This cluster of material reflects on the aspirations of future generations of Hazaras, some of them now returning to Afghanistan after having lived as refugees in Iran or Pakistan (fig. 4). The building of schools has been a key development project, assisted by foreign aid and international peace-keeping forces. For the Hazara, education is perceived as a means to a better life–a means to achieve justice, social equality, and human rights. A recent *New York Times* report states:

> Since the 2001 invasion, an influx of Hazaras has changed the composition of the capital. More than a million Hazaras now live here, making up more than a quarter of the city's population...with a new generation of Hazaras attending school in relative security, and motivated by their parents' dispossession, their success could alter the country's balance of ethnic power.[13]

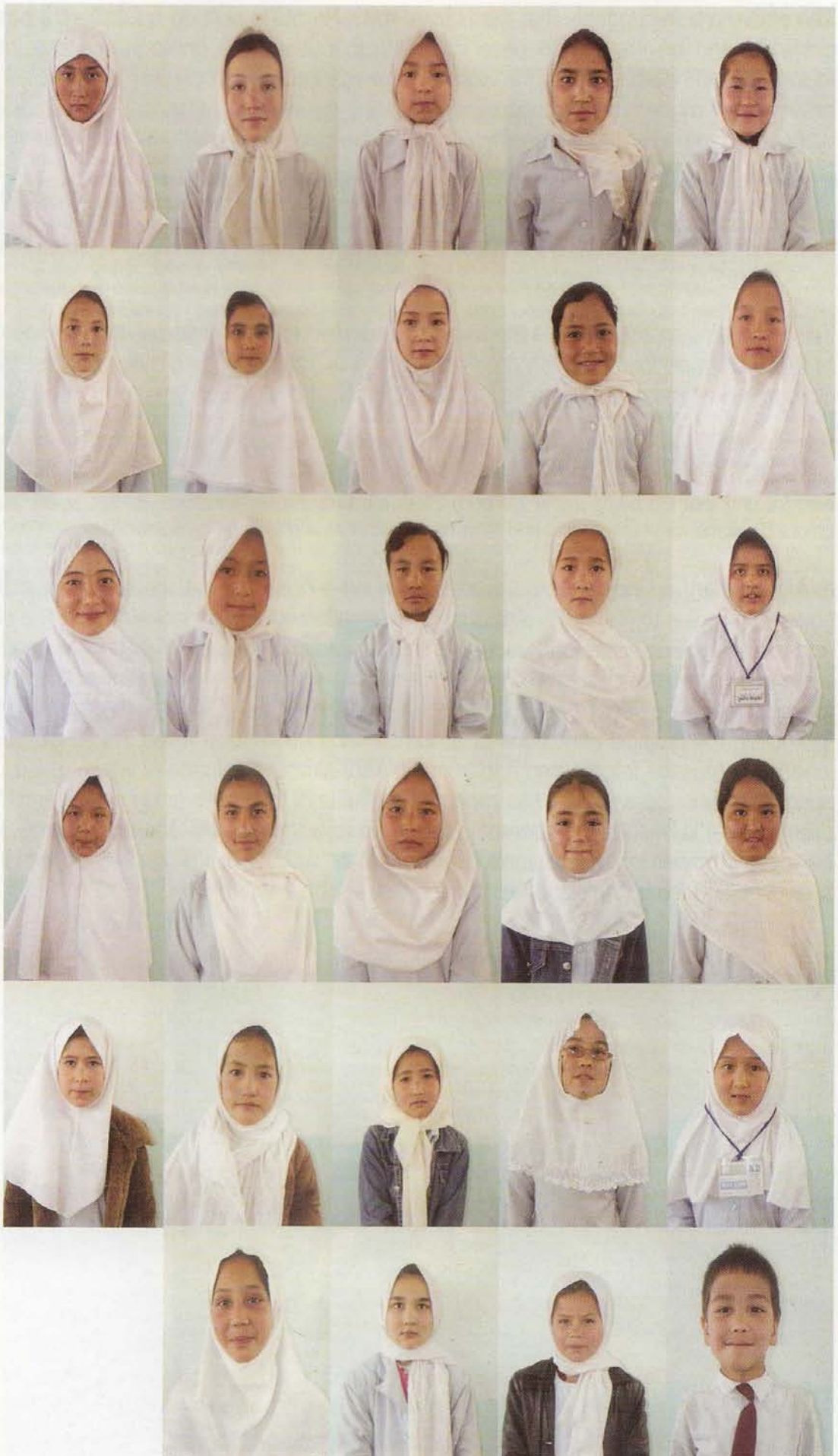

Fig. 4

Marefat High School, Dasht-i-Barchi, Western Kabul,

The above article suggests that the Hazara revival is being built on education. It notes that these gains depend on the Taliban never returning to power. The photographs and interview tapes included in (...heart...) reveal the concerns of the Hazara people to have access to the basic privileges of modernity–education, opportunities for women, essential civic amenities, dignified work and hope. In a 2004 interview with anthropologist Virginia Whiles, Ali stated:

> Schooling is sacred... I feel my work is a form of revenge because when I am working I feel I am doing something against ignorance... we Afghans [Hazaras] have never had the chance of showing that we can do something, we have been treated like animals by the Taliban... I would love to work in a world without discrimination as to where you are from.[14]

This emphasis on education, including education for women, indicates the progressive inclination of the Hazara people, but also outlines a notion of education as a means of resistance. Fittingly, Salloum and Ali's project takes its title from the Marefat High School's school song:

> O God bless me with a heart, full of love. And fill that heart with love and feelings for humanity/The heart which does not feel the pain of others, is not a human heart/And a sad heart full of sorrows is only water and clay/Fill my heart with fire until that fire burns my whole body/Bless me with a tongue that can always speak about the pain of others/Bless me with compassion and fill my heart with love and feelings for humanity...

In Afghanistan, an indigenous discussion around a notion of nationalism is yet to be formed as society struggles to gather itself through and despite ongoing decades of war. The continuing war and the struggle to establish peace and security raises the question of how to imagine a national scale in a context of desperate poverty, rampant corruption, a persistent culture of tribalism and the indomitable power of the warlords. It seems naïve for the US and allied governments to attempt to impose the political conditions of a democratic nation-state when the ethnic and geographic landscape remains fragmented and in ruins. After almost a decade of war, (...heart...) draws on a specific situation to weigh on the impact and effects of the US invasion of Afghanistan against the dilemma that is becoming apparent in the move to withdraw NATO troops: namely, that without a balance of power in Afghanistan's government or without the protection of foreign troops or a peacekeeping force, the slaughter of minorities will be inevitable.

Fig. 5

Passing by two women walking, car Allah/mirror, outside the AKHS-Agha Khan Health Services Hospital, Bamiyan, 4/16/08, caption and photo, Jayce Salloum

Notes

1- Human Rights Watch (November 1998). "Incitement of Violence Against Hazaras by Governor Niazi. Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-I Sharif," available at
http://www.hrw.org/reports98/afghan/Afrepor0-03.htm-P186_38364, accessed November 21, 2010.
2- Human Rights Watch (1 February 2001) "Afghanistan: Massacres of Hazaras in Afghanistan," available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a87c4.html, accessed February 22, 2010.
3- Kathy Gannon, "A Stairway Within the Mountain: Bearing Witness to the Destruction of the Ancient Bamiyan Statues of the Buddha" in Jayce Solloum and Khadim Ali, *(the heart that has no love/pain/generosity is not a heart)* (Toronto: SAVAC, 2010), p36.
4- "Afghan Taliban Leader Orders Destruction of Ancient Statues," *Agence France Press* Press Release, February 26, 2001, quotes a decree issued by the Taliban militia supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar: "Based on the verdict of the clergymen and the decision of the supreme court of the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) all the statues around Afghanistan must be destroyed." Available at http://www.rawa.org/statues.htm (accessed August 30, 2010). Pierre Centlivres quotes from the decree: "These statues were and are a sanctuary for unbelievers. These unbelievers continue to worship and to venerate these statues and pictures." See Pierre Centlivres, "The Controversy over the Buddhas of Bamiyan," in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2/2008, at
http://samaj.revues.org/index992.html. See also Finbarr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm and the Museum," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol 84, No 4, (Dec 2002), 641-659. For further discussion see Haema Sivanesan, "Producing Images in Times of War" in *Fillip*, 13.
5- Solloum and Ali 2010. Hereafter referred to as (...heart...)
6- The Taliban destroyed two sculpted figures of the Buddha over a period of weeks, beginning in mid-March 2001. The smaller, eastern Buddha was known locally as Shamama, and stood one hundred and twenty-five feet (38.1m) tall. The larger figure, referred to as Salsal, stood one hundred and eighty feet (54.9 m) tall.
7- Haema Sivanesan, "Absence as Presence" in Solloum and Ali, 2010, 41.
8- "Contemporary Concerns" by Quddus Mirza at
http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/oct2009-weekly/nos-25-10-2009/enc.htm - 2, accessed 21 November, 2010.
9- Charles Merewether, quoted in Solloum and Ali, 2010.
10- Jen Budney, "history of the present/map of the world," in Jen Budney (ed.), *Jayce Salloum: History of the Present*, (Saskatoon, Kamloops, Charlottetown: Mendel Art Gallery, Kamloops Art Gallery, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, 2009), 8.
11- Mike Hoolboom, "From Lebanon to Kelowna: An Interview with Jayce Salloum," in Mike Hoolboom (ed.), *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2008), 188.
12- Fion Meade and Jayce Salloum, "Re: Documentary Practices," in *Fillip*,10, 104.
13- http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/04/world/asia/04hazaras.html, accessed February 2010.
14- Khadim Ali, quoted by Virginia Whiles in *Contemporary Miniature Paintings from Pakistan*, (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2004), 62.