

## Khadim Ali | Sher Ali *What Now My Friend?*

Curated by Salima Hashmi  
Essay by Asad Buda

Aicon Gallery Exhibition: December 17, 2020 – January 23, 2021

Press Preview & V.I.P Reception: Saturday December 19, 1:00pm – 7:00pm

35 Great Jones St, New York NY 10012



Khadim Ali, *What Now My Friend?*, 2020,  
fabric tapestry, 309.5 x 96 in.

We are delighted to present *What Now My Friend?*, Aicon Art's debut solo exhibition of artists **Khadim Ali** and **Sher Ali**.

Born of Afghan Hazara parentage, Khadim Ali grew up on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. As a child, Ali was deeply influenced by his grandfather, a *Shahnameh* singer, and by the miniature paintings that illustrated the stories of the *Shahnameh*, a tenth-century Persian epic. The artist's intricate works encompass imagery from history, politics, literature, poetry and mythology to explore contemporary events such as the civil war in Afghanistan and personal experiences of persecution, displacement and discrimination.

The present exhibition, curated by preeminent artist, curator, and contemporary art historian, **Salima Hashmi**, brings together an important body of work that features four large tapestries by Khadim Ali and a video installation that he made in collaboration with Sher Ali. The exhibition is accompanied by an essay by writer and historian **Asad Buda**.

The title work a scroll-like tapestry that frames the exhibition is a powerful re-casting of the characters of the *Shahnameh* (or Book of Kings). A primary reference point that has recurred in Ali's pictures over the past decade, the *Shahnameh* is the 10th-century Persian writer Ferdowsi's epic couplet-based poem. The heroic protagonist, Rostam, has in recent years been politically and perversely appropriated by the Taliban. In the present re-casting Rostam is killed by foreign troops in Afghanistan's prisons, historical demons are locked up with Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists and other ordinary criminals. We notice that people are burning American and European flags outside the court of Baysunghur Mirza in Herat. It is a folding in of time onto itself - past, present and future blend into a sometimes-serene, sometimes-violent milieu. As Buda has said in an essay that accompanies the exhibition, '*The protagonists Rostam, Tahmineh, and Sohrab are three sources of temporal-spatial inspiration for us: past, present, and future / tradition, land, and progression. They offer a powerful allegory for the irrationality of world politics and the absurdity of war.*'

Ali was trained in classical miniature painting in Lahore, Pakistan and in mural painting and calligraphy in Tehran, Iran, and as a result he



Khadim Ali, *That Is How It Was*, 2020, fabric tapestry, 124.5 x 165.25 in.

incorporates delicate handwork and materials from these traditions into his intricately rendered paintings, and large textiles. The materiality of the work speaks to Ali's broader concerns as an artist who hails from an incredibly disenfranchised community. Produced in the artist's Kabul studio through the Covid19 pandemic, *That Is How It Was* (pictured alongside) is a timely work about the incredible inequality of resources that the worldwide lockdown has helped perpetuate. Further intensifying the absurdist idiom of this work is Khadim Ali's collaborative work with Sher Ali, *It Was Not Like This Ever*. In a video, a game of snakes and ladders is appropriated and then activated by young members from the artists' community in Kabul. Playful banter is juxtaposed

against the insidious circumstances of death by the hand of various forces that lie in wait.

The exhibition evidences the artist's abiding interest in traditional and modern motifs of Eastern and Western art-historical references, Khadim Ali's works tell stories about loss (of his own cultural heritage and of human values) and about how meaning shifts as words and images are perverted through ideological adoption. As Jason Smith puts it *"The terrible beauty of Ali's work is that it is compelled by such a deeply personal context of destruction. As he (Ali) explains: "It is a conversation with multiple layers of historic trauma. That's my kind of self-portrait."*

Khadim Ali was born in 1978 in Quetta, Pakistan. His family, belonging to the Hazara minority, fled Afghanistan to escape Taliban persecution. From 1998–99, he studied mural painting and calligraphy in Tehran, Iran. He earned a BFA at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan (2003), where he studied traditional miniature painting. He completed artist residencies in Japan through the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (2006) and Arts Initiative Tokyo (2007). Ali moved to Sydney in 2010 and earned an MFA at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales (2012). In 2012, Ali presented five paintings at Documenta 13, including one at the quinquennial's first presentation in Kabul. His works were featured along with Imran Qureshi's in the Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Ali organized and participated in *The Haunted Lotus: Contemporary Art from Kabul*, Cross Art Projects (2010), and *The Force of Forgetting*, Lismore Regional Gallery, Australia (2011). His work was included in *Future: Afghanistan*, Gemak, The Hague, Netherlands (2008); *Living Traditions*, Queen's Palace, Kabul (2008), and National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan (2009); *Safavids Revisited*, British Museum, London (2009); *Only from the Heart Can You Touch the Sky*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne (2012); and *Home Again—10 Artists Who Have Experienced Japan*, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2012). Ali lives and works in Sydney, Quetta, and Kabul.

Please contact Aicon Art ([erica@aicongallery.com](mailto:erica@aicongallery.com)) for more information.