

Lida Abdul, *White House*, & *Gulalhi* Stephanie Gervais

Anything is possible when everything is lost.

—Lida Abdul, *In Transit*, 2008¹

I learned of Lida Abdul's remarkable and humbling body of work while doing research for my show *Gulalhi* at the Cooley Gallery. Lida Abdul is a performance artist and filmmaker from Afghanistan who considers herself to be a nomadic artist.²

Abdul fled Afghanistan as a child in 1979 in the context of the Soviet invasion of the country, and has since lived in Germany, India, and the United States. *White House* and the other films in this screening were made in Afghanistan after Abdul's return to the country in 2001, after the US invasion and the fall of the Taliban.

Abdul describes her performances as new rituals. She writes: "I try to perform the 'blank spaces' that are formed when everything is taken away from people."³ Describing Abdul's work, Tamara Suarez Porras writes: "Performative actions, either performed by Abdul herself or groups of Afghan people, seem to gesture towards the externalization of the interiority felt in the return to a home in conflict."⁴

Much of my own work includes working with people. With *Gulalhi*, it is my desire to bring multiple creative voices into and around the space of the Cooley. *Gulalhi* makes reference to Afghanistan; the exhibition title is the Pashto name of a deceased soldier from the Afghan National Army, and the exhibition also includes the stories of Afghans I know living in exile in Europe. Abdul performs a version, or vision, of stories in the first-person of a lived experience that is both hers and collective. One of the things that is most striking in Abdul's films is the sense of collective space, whether in connection to memory, ritual, witnessing, or transgression.

Abdul's films address the act of witnessing, but do so in a way that is neither linear nor objectifying, but rather, fantastical, performative, and reparative. In *In Transit* (2008), the first text that appears on-screen reads: "I saw this" and then "I was sent as a witness." This is in the context of a group of children playing with an abandoned and decomposing Russian plane left over from Afghanistan's Soviet era. The children navigate the plane with strings reminiscent of a kite and shout "fly, fly." As a found object, the plane is described by Abdul as "an almost-skeleton," as something between a plane and a bird.⁵ According to the artist's gallery, the video was filmed outside of Kabul, where the landscape is littered with the debris of more than twenty years of war and bombings. The children proceed to stuff the bullet holes in the plane with cotton that they gather in armfuls,

in what appears as an act of repairing brokenness—both physical and psychological.

In *White House* (2005) Abdul films herself fastidiously painting white the remains of a government building knocked down by a US air strike. I am particularly curious about the man who appears at the end of the film. We see his movement in time as the film refuses to register him. Abdul writes:

When I was painting that house white there were a lot of people going by, and they thought that I was crazy. They were thinking, you are wasting all of this colour, this paint. I felt bad at the same time because many people in Afghanistan don't have enough to eat and I am painting this piece white, this rubble. It wasn't really necessary. There were some people who stood around for two or three days to watch the whole process, which was interesting because at the end they understood the project. For instance, the man whose back I painted in the film watched the performance for two or three days and I asked him to be a part of the piece. At the end he said that he understood.⁶

Abdul questions the efficacy and truth of monuments that are built of durable stone in cities from Kabul to London—monuments to wars that have been endured or are ongoing. In an interview she states: “They always cover things up.”⁷ She undoes the arrogance and ahistoricity of such monuments, ones that erase time, the body, and the effects of war.

Micheal Taussig, in a lecture entitled “Monuments Need to do Better” introduces the possibility of bodies becoming monuments. He asks the question: “Is the monument something that reminds, or enacts?”⁸ The man in *White House* who enters the space of the painting becomes a corporeal, fluid monument—along with the crumbling building—to everything that is unsaid. The monument enacted in *White House*, like the monuments in Abdul’s other films, is not an essential, abstract something, but movement, gesture, and effort—unfinished.

In my own work, I have always been interested in monumentality: in the scale of events and their repercussions, as well as how to *rendre hommage*, or in English, “pay homage” to an individual, history, love, or loss. The verb “rendre” in the French expression means to give back, restore, or render. While living within the architecture of the Brazilian favela, I was interested in a monumentality of scale that is at the same time intimate and connected to the human body, its gestures and its experience of being in collectivity. Living in the favela, I also became interested in history as experience, and how history can be recorded or performed in order to “render homage.”

Abdul’s work is distinguished from the media’s portrayal of Afghanistan as a representation of war and destruction, not only through the work’s performativity and ritual, but also through its sense of time and the improvisational, analogue

quality of cinema. Abdul works with 16mm film transferred to digital video. Her frames move in and out of focus, whether by choice or by chance. The imagery in Abdul's films doesn't freeze movement, but rather moves, in the same way as lived experience.

Abdul creates a space in her films that is slow, surreal, and not easily consumed. In her work, time—the time it takes to see, witness, experience, remember, understand, honor, recover, and rebuild—is completely insubordinate to capitalist time, in which history is erased.



1. Lida Abdul, *In Transit* (2008) 16 mm film transferred to digital video, 4'55." Courtesy of the artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery, Turin, Italy
2. Guggenheim Collection Online, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/lida-abdul>
3. Lida Abdul, Feminist Artist Statement, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/lida-abdul
4. Tamara Suarez Porras, "Memorial Ruin: On Lida Abdul's Once Upon Awakening," <http://contemporary.org>, (April 25, 2018)
5. Giorgio Persano, <http://www.giorgiopersano.org/en/mostra/in-transit/>
6. Candice Hopkins and Lida Abdul, "Between the Monument and the Ruin," *cmagazine*, issue 93, Spring 2007, p. 16 <https://cmagazine.com/issues/93/pdf>
7. Hopkins and Abdul, "Between the Monument and the Ruin," p.17
8. W.J.T. Mitchell and Michael Taussig. "Discussions in Contemporary Culture: Monuments, Monumentality, Monumentalization." *Dia Art Foundation*, December 6, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caGhHQT-9WYY&t=8002s>

