

A multiplatform project launching this month melds visual art and journalism to mark the cost of two decades of conflict in Afghanistan.

Twenty years on



“The Afghan war didn’t destroy the US Empire. Yet. It may still do so however, not by bankrupting it but by exposing its true nature.” — David McBride

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Antony Loewenstein

is an independent journalist, filmmaker and author whose latest book is *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs*.

Tia Kass

is an award-winning illustrator and artist based in Naarm. He’s also a member of the Workers Art Collective.

The body tumbling from the sky was a desperate moment. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August, local soccer star Zaki Anwari clung to an American cargo plane as it took off from Kabul airport and fell to his death. Aref Peyman, the head of media relations for Afghanistan’s Olympic Committee, told *The New York Times* the 17-year-old “was kind and patient, but like so many of our young people he saw the arrival of the Taliban as the end of his dreams and sports opportunities”.

Afghan artists, likewise, fear for their futures. Many are destroying their own art. According to Omaid Sharifi, the founder of ArtLords, a Kabul-based collective of artists who painted colourful messages of hope across the city, “Afghanistan is becoming black and white again. It’s losing its beauty, diversity and colours.”

Twenty Years, conceived by both of us in 2019 in collaboration with Afghans in Australia, Afghanistan and the wider diaspora, is an artistic and journalistic examination of the impact of two decades of conflict. At its heart is the role played by Australia and other Western powers that invaded and occupied Afghanistan. It centres Afghan stories and voices who are often ignored in the media and assesses the war’s impact on Islamophobia, refugees and civilians.

The human and financial toll of the “war on terror” has been startling. According to Brown University’s Costs of War Project, close to one million people have been killed in the past 20 years in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and other areas where the United States is engaged militarily. The cost is more than \$US8 trillion. At least 47,000 Afghan civilians, 66,000 Afghan national military and police and more than 51,000 Taliban and other opposition fighters have been killed and hundreds of journalists and aid workers murdered.

Twenty Years includes portraiture, paintings, audiovisual work, text, photography and journalism, with online events on October 7 and 8. A major exhibition at Sydney’s Blacktown Arts Centre in Sydney in 2022 will feature Afghan artists Khadim Ali, Elyas Alavi, Orna Kazimi and Najiba Noori, as well as Kass’s portraiture series and Loewenstein’s photographs of Afghanistan. Full details of the project can be found online at twenty-yrs.com.

A key component of *Twenty Years* has been the documentation of a range of voices through an ongoing series of artworks by Tia Kass. We established relationships with the four people portrayed here over 18 months. For them, the Afghan war isn’t an abstraction: it’s an ongoing conflict that will never end.

Dr Nouria Salehi (facing page, far left)

Nouria grew up in Kabul, moved to France in the 1970s to study nuclear medicine and immigrated to Australia in 1981 after the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. After visiting Afghanistan in 2002, she founded the Afghan Australian Development Organisation to support training and education for marginalised communities, especially women, in eight Afghan provinces.

“My aim as an Afghan Australian was to come back to Afghanistan and work for the Ministry for Education. When I went back to Afghanistan in 2002, the first thing I did was go to a small village and ask if I could start basic education for women. The elders in the village said it wouldn’t work because under the Taliban it wasn’t possible for girls and women to leave the house freely ... But I persisted.

“When I went back to the village for the second time, I said I could offer each girl who attended the proposed school \$US1 per day. The elders agreed because the girls would get \$US20 per month and be able to buy sugar and tea for their families. I started teaching basic literacy and numeracy for women in the village.”

Fatima Mohammadi (facing page, top right)

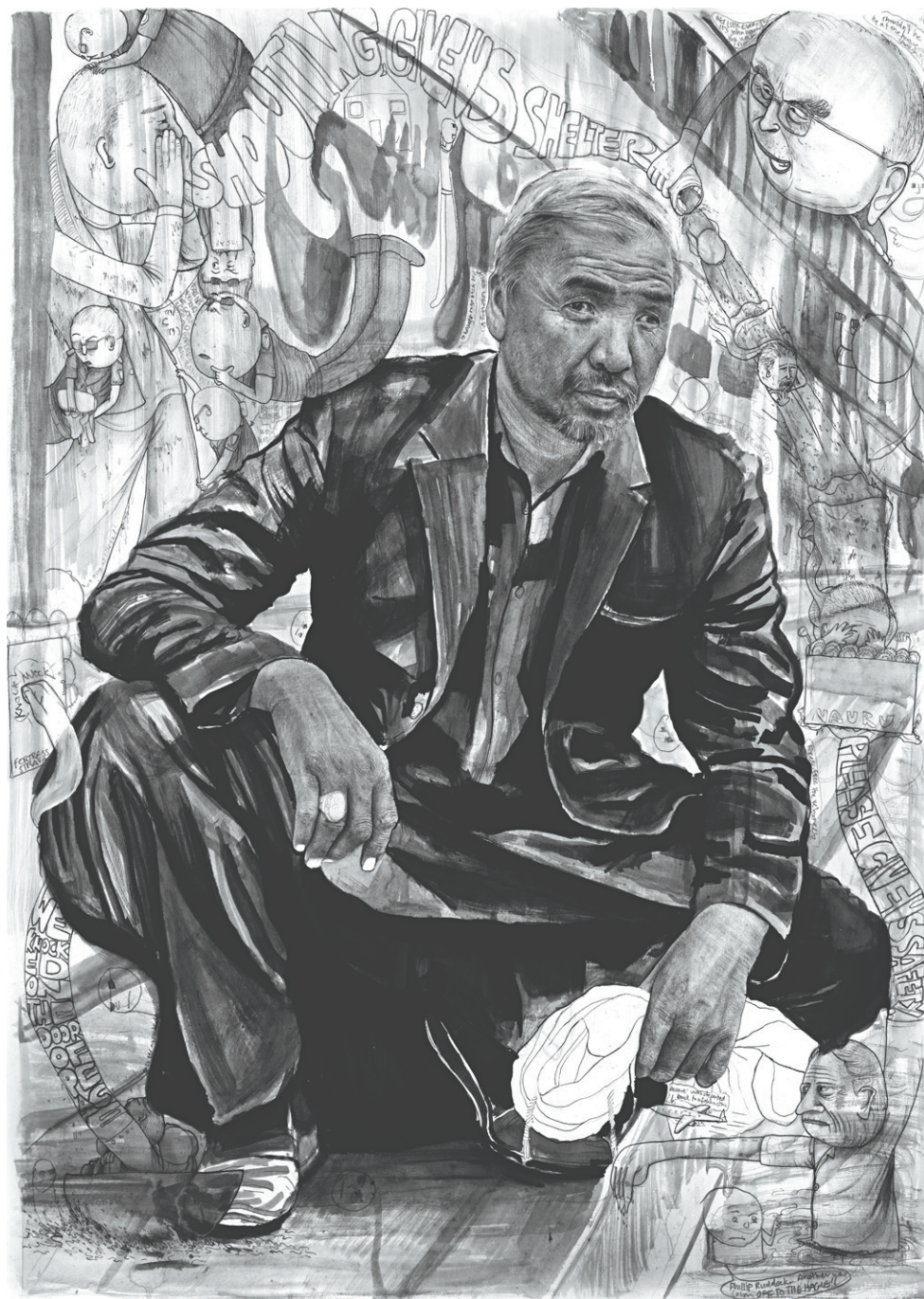
Fatima was a member of the Kabul-based art collective ArtLords. Founded in 2014, it was a group of Afghan artists and activists who painted Kabul’s grey blast walls with colourful and striking imagery before the Taliban takeover. She died in a terrorist attack in June this year.

“Since I was the first girl in my whole family to study art and painting and select art as a career, my relatives used to tell me to stop this and try to study another major because in Afghanistan no one accepts art as a career, especially for girls. Afghanistan is my country and my real home. With all the problems and difficulties we face in Afghanistan, I still love my country. Afghanistan has an ethnic structure that, if there is no unity and compatibility, will collapse.”

David McBride (facing page, bottom right)

McBride is a former British Army major who joined the Australian Army as a lawyer. While in Afghanistan, he heard allegations of war crimes being committed by Australian special forces. After making complaints internally and being ignored, he leaked classified information to the ABC, which formed the basis of its 2017 stories *The Afghan Files*. He’s now facing life imprisonment for releasing information about Australia’s involvement in Afghanistan.

“There was a case in 2011 where some Australian special forces soldiers were going on a mission to capture a Taliban fighter but the person they were meant to be capturing wasn’t at the house. So they went to a different house and burst through the doors with explosive charges. Someone fired back at them, which is a perfectly logical thing to do. It’s legal to have weapons in Afghanistan. They [the Australians] just continued to fire on him. They approached a room, threw in a grenade and heard the screaming of children. Then, inexplicably, they threw another grenade. Children were dead. The Afghan war didn’t destroy the US Empire. Yet. It may still



do so however, not by bankrupting it but by exposing its true nature.”

Mohamad Karim Rezaie (above)

Rezaie is a member of two minorities, Hazara and Isma’ilism, a branch of Shiite Islam. In the late 1990s, when the Taliban took over his province, he fled Afghanistan, leaving his family. He ended up on the *Tampa* in 2001 with 432 other refugees and spent three years on Nauru. He was eventually told that he could either stay indefinitely on Nauru or be sent back to Kabul. He returned to Afghanistan and now lives in Kabul with his wife and five children, desperate to leave.

“We knocked on the door of peace [in Australia], asking to be given shelter, but nobody opened the door. We were pushed back into the hell of Nauru, the place of criminals where there wasn’t enough water or facilities. We washed our bodies in the

rain. Mosquitoes bit us every night. We didn’t have any experienced doctors or translators. Australia told us that Afghanistan was safe and Canberra had spent a lot of money there. I was promised a job and house in Kabul. It was a lie. The Taliban are terrorists. They killed a young boy of 14 years old for supposedly stealing a bike in my street [since the Taliban takeover in August]. We’re not good because the Taliban took our freedom, happiness and laughter.” ●