

“There is so much more the world should know about Afghanistan”, says Omaid Sharifi, co-founder of ArtLords

Interview by Xin Lin und Luzie Mayer on October 2nd 2019

Omaid Sharifi is a pioneer Afghan activist and one of the co-founders of ArtLords, an artist association which has been attracting widespread international attention in recent years. Sharifi and the group painted over 1,700 murals on the blast walls in the cities of Afghanistan in order to call for unity and empathy, gender equality as well as promote open discussion and critical thinking in the society. This year ArtLords was nominated for 2019 Freedom of Expression Awards. We talked to Omaid Sharifi about their approach of using street art to empower people to raise their voices and claim the city and future of Afghanistan back into their own hands.



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How did you start your career as a painter and artist?

I am not an artist. I call myself an “activist.” We combine art with activism. What we do is not really art or activism only: it is a mix of both. We are using art for a purpose. We are using art as a tool for social change, for critical thinking, and as a tool to change attitudes and behaviors. We are using art to fight corruption, and to counter violent extremism. All of that is sort of a new medium for artists and activists in Afghanistan, especially using street art, like theater, murals, graffiti, music. Five years ago I started this “activist” movement with a couple of friends. some of them have left the country, but some of them are still here.

We co-found this organization called ArtLords, when you study Afghanistan you come across terms like "warlords," "drug lords," "corruption lords" a lot, because

those words have been associated with our country for a long time. What we decided to build is an organization which uses brushes and paint and music against the guns and violence. I lived all my life in Kabul, just like my parents and my grandparents, and we have never been refugees, even during the time of Taliban. I started working at 12-years-old, selling cigarettes on the street. I remember this city being a beautiful capital with fine architecture. But over the last decade the government built big, ugly concrete blast walls in the city. It feels like they have taken space which belongs to me and to every citizen of Kabul and made the city look like a prison. so we decided to go out there and reclaim our space by painting these big blast walls.

One of the campaigns from ArtLords is called "Heroes of the City." You portray everyday heroes on the blast walls. What is this about?

If you look at Afghanistan's history, the heroes of Afghanistan always had guns, swords and all of these heroes were violent men. We have very few women heroes in our history. Those violent figures are not my heroes, which is why we decided to introduce a new narrative. No one has to follow an imposed hero. we invited people to choose heroes themselves.



Heroes of my city (#myhero)

For me, for example, my hero is an afghan soldier who has the commitment and bravery to stand up against global terrorism and protect the Afghan citizens, though he is only paid a couple hundred dollars a month. My hero is a municipality

worker who cleans up Kabul city, which has over five million people, with only a hundred dollar a month salary. my hero is a woman, who teaches at a remote area of Afghanistan with very limited resources and salary. my hero is an historian, my hero is an artist. These are the new heroes we are introducing to the people.

Ethnic conflict is considered to be a crucial social problem in Afghanistan. What are your thoughts on this and do you approach ethnic conflict in your work?

I do not think that we have an ethnic problem. we have not been in this conflict for a long time. Afghanistan is a very diverse country, over 22 tribes or ethnic groups live here. They have lived together mostly in harmony since a long time ago. The least I can say is that they respect each other and they know that everybody is a reality in this country and that they have to tolerate and compromise. The conflict what is happening, like when it comes to attacks against Shia or other religious groups, it is something imported from other countries and by terrorist groups. We have many murals which encourage people to compromise, to stand in unity and for empathy, love and kindness.



To emphasize the importance of gender equality, ArtLords presents the mural "We represent ourselves!"

Much of your work is in Kabul, but ArtLords is also painting murals in other cities. Do the people in other cities react differently?

We have an office in Kabul and in four other provinces of Afghanistan. But we have worked in 20 provinces and done over 1,700 murals, covering almost 60 percent of Afghanistan in total. We have been to the most dangerous provinces in this

country, and people there were able to see for the first time that there is art happening and they can be part of it.

In terms of the reactions, in Kabul and the most populated areas like Nangarhar, Kandahar and Herat, which are more exposed to internet, social media, TV and radio, they are more open, and I would say they are more aware of what murals and graffiti are and have more understanding of what we are doing. But it is different in remote areas where they do not have access to a lot of information. There is the province called Zabur in the very far corner of Afghanistan, we went there and painted a mural about Polio vaccinations people must get for their kids and invited community members to also be part of the mural. Although the people in remote areas understand less of our work, they are still very keen and curious and try to understand our approach. In short, the reaction is varying, but people love it, they want to be part of it and we experience tremendous support from all the citizens of Afghanistan.



People watch a mural about letting children to receive the polio vaccination

Your work is very progressive and it might even be understood as provocative as well. Have people or even Taliban tried to destroy your murals?

The work we do is unique and very new, and it always takes time for things to work out. Whatever new things you are testing out in Afghanistan, it always needs a while for people to accept it and to cherish it. I think we are very lucky that our work is appreciated and accepted by the community. But on the other hand, we always face challenges because we are living in the most dangerous country in the

world. We have forty years of war, there are at least twenty-two terrorist organizations in this country and people die by the hundreds every single day. so it is not without its challenges. Yes, we do receive hate messages. some people label us, call us infidels, CIA spies, anything to discredit us. Sometimes people claim what we do is against the Sharia law. But these are the realities of Afghanistan. It might only be a very small portion of the population who react like this. We will continue our work because we believe in our work.

The recent movement of ArtLords, "Letters of Pain," received a lot of responses from young people. Can you tell us your motivation behind this?

We started the "Letters of Pain" campaign because I think most of the younger generations in Afghanistan do not have any voice in what happening in this country. But we are actually a country where the majority of the population is very young. We are the second youngest country in the world, but this young population feels irrelevant and not engaged. so we thought, the best way to engage them and to hear their voice is to encourage them to write. Those who cannot read and write can send their voice messages to us, just to make sure we can hear them. We incorporate their ideas, their suggestions for solutions, their fears, and let the government, the international community, and everybody hear those voices. I led the project in Kabul in seven locations. it went very well, we received more than 300 letters, and now we are deciding to do this in seven more provinces.



ArtLords paints tulips to honor the victims of the war

There were many discussions and security concerns before the presidential election on September 28th this year. You were one of the supporters of the election. you even painted a mural to encourage people going to vote. What are your thoughts on this election?

For me, the bottom line is the republic and the Afghan constitution. In the last 18 years, we have lost so much. we have sacrificed so many human lives to have these achievements, to have this constitution, to practice our rights for democracy. And these achievements have not come easily. although they might not seem like much, we have paid a massive price for these achievements. That is why we have to continue this process. One of the main elements of this democratic process is election. Before the election's day, we painted a big mural to encourage people to come together, to accept each other, to embrace each other, to have empathy for each other, and then go and vote with love.

Myself, I woke up in the morning, and despite the direct threats from the terrorist groups against polling stations and the people who were going to vote, I went out, I drove my car, I voted, and I encouraged other people to vote as well. I think voting is a responsibility. The election commission now has the responsibility to make sure our votes are counted with transparency and accountability.



A mural reminds citizens to #Votewithlove before the presidential election

Are you concerned about the potential withdrawal of the US forces?

Well, we are concerned, because the Taliban and the Americans are talking. The Afghan people and the Afghan government, we didn't know anything about it,

until president Trump tweeted. It is always concerning, because it is about the future of a nation, it is about millions of people. We want a peace process which is owned and led by us, by Afghans, because we have been suffering in this war more than anybody else. The consolation process takes a long, long time and we will be the ones who will carry out the possible options. We are concerned, but at the same time, we understand this is the process and we hope that it finds a solution for this country.



Mural painted with university students from Herat to denounce human rights violation

Do you feel safe and free to do art right now in Afghanistan?

I have two thoughts about this question. First one: Yes, I feel free. I feel empowered to do my work. I think when it comes to freedom of expression, is Afghanistan the most free country in the region. we have one of the best laws and if you compare Afghanistan to all the other countries in central Asia like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, or even Iran, Pakistan, and China, we have freedom of media and expression. I am very proud of it. I feel free to do whatever I want to, I criticize the president, I criticize ministers, and I do criticize things and people through my art.

Secondly, do I feel safe? I do not feel safe. The moment I get out of the house, I feel I may not come back alive. Because the level of insecurity is such that at any moment an explosion can happen, an attack can happen, a rocket can blow up, and you never know which street, which office, which school, which mosque, which wedding-hall will be attacked. No place is safe. Safety is not here at all. All of us, all of

the citizens of this country, they all know somehow in the back of their minds, they may die soon. This is the level of pressure every one of us endures in Afghanistan.

Have you ever thought about leaving Afghanistan? If the situation deteriorated, would you consider leaving?

There are days I hate everything and everyone and I just leave. And I have days I am back in love with and committed to what I am doing. There has been at least a hundred times that in my mind I want to leave for a whole number of reasons. Because of the lack of trust, because of the insecurity, the corruption, the lack of resources, and so on. There are so many challenges: the weather, the air pollution, the water pollution, traffic. There are a thousand reasons which might force you to leave this country. And I would be lying if I told you I'm not thinking about it. I am thinking about it. But at the same time, I have a very strong sense of responsibility. I have been in this war for the last three decades of my life, I am not sure if I will be able to leave this. Because if I leave, who will do this work? The generations before me, they abandoned Afghanistan, they abandoned us. When I was growing up, there was nobody to ask questions to. There was nobody who I could ask, "What were your mistakes, what were your achievements? What can I do to make this better?" There was nobody. And I do not want the next generation, or for my kids to be in the same position. We are in a very anxious situation. we desire a normal life, to not be afraid of being killed every day. Yet, we are also motivated by the desire of making a difference to our country. Most of people working and living in Afghanistan like me are living in this kind of a limbo.

You mean you have this sense of responsibility to stick with your people and try to make changes. Is it correct?

I am just trying to do my part for the people and for this country. I have the option to leave and live anywhere else. But I consciously decided to stay here and I will do it as long as I can. I will continue this because it is paramount, because it is important. We continue encouraging people to have empathy, we continue

encouraging people to heal, to love, to be creative, to do something different because we need a break from all this violence and terrorism. Afghan people need a break.

After being displaced and having suffered for years, there are many people who chose to leave Afghanistan for Germany or other countries, how do you see this in general?

I do not have any judgments against the people who leave, because everyone has the right to live their lives. We can never put ourselves in their position. It is very hard for them to leave this country, but at the same time, the threats are so serious. Almost all of the people who have migrated to Germany, they have lost their family members and friends, they have lost so much, and they feel sick. And they need help - they have been through so much violence and conflict. I hope they do their part there by being a good member of society in Germany, and we do our part by being here and bringing changes to this country.

Now you are becoming increasingly famous in the art and activist scene in Afghanistan, with many people inspired and moved by ArtLords, what changes has this brought in your life?

That is an interesting question, thank you. The work makes me happy. it makes me feel gratitude and satisfaction and I feel I am making an impact. And I think that is extraordinary experience. When I see people on the street and they come and hug me and thank me for the work that we are doing, these are the best moments of my life. And when I travel outside Afghanistan, I present work which shows a different side to this country. We are becoming sort of ambassadors for this country, I think this brings a lot of pride and joy and I am happy I'm doing this.

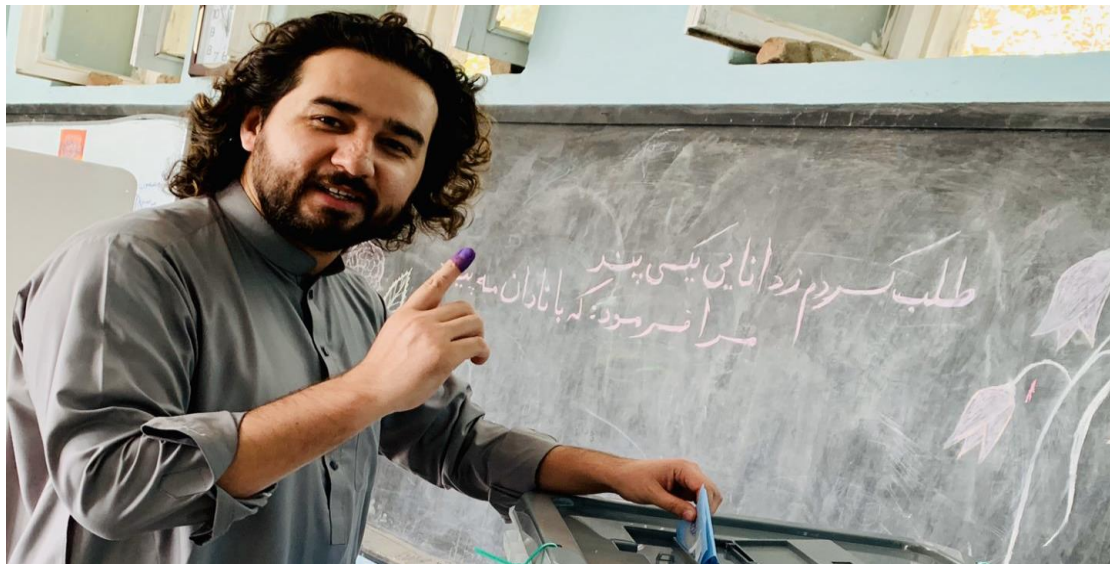
Can you give us an example for what affected you the most in the past five years?

One of our co-founders Rawail Singh was killed last year in an explosion and that was devastating. I still have pictures of him, painting walls, doing murals all over

the city. There is always a pain in my heart. I remember him every time I come across his murals, or I listen to the music he loved. But there has also been the joy I spoke about earlier: when I am on the streets and people come up to me and show love and empathy and kindness.

What are the short-term and long-term goals of ArtLords?

ArtLords is opening a new gallery in Kabul, and we are trying to open new spaces and galleries outside Afghanistan as well. Afghan art is not well known to most and Afghan artists deserve an opportunity to exhibit their work outside Afghanistan, and to sell their work outside the country. We are hoping to open up a couple of galleries, maybe in Washington or Toronto. We are also trying to help other artists. For example, we have a new company called "Wartists"(War+ Artists). "Wartists" is a company that helps artists on the front line of war, for example for those in Syria, Libya, and in other dangerous places where people are still producing art. We are trying to do advocacy for these artists and share their stories with the world.



Omaid Sharifi voted on the Afghanistan's presidential Election Day

Have you pictured the future of ArtLords in 2030?

Yes. I know what ArtLords is going to be in ten years' time. I hope I am alive to see it happen, but I hope I am not here when ArtLords is 20 years old because I really want to do something else. (End)

Afterwords

Afghanistan is a country which has gone through 40 years of war and conflicts. Nevertheless, people continue to live their life in hope of an end to the violence and lasting peace. During the protracted ongoing peace-making process in Afghanistan, the power of civil society seems to have been forgotten, especially among young people. They actually consist of the majority of the population yet are rarely included in the decision making for the country's future. Afghanistan has so many sides we are not aware of. it's time to drop the one-sided story about Afghanistan, and to hear the voices from the people themselves.

In recent years, many young Afghans started to show their determination for peace and their vigor in the reconstruction of Afghanistan despite the shadow of terrorism. ArtLords is one of the most well-known young activist and artist associations in Afghanistan and plays an important role in inspiring people to restore their confidence in the future, and to form a new Afghan society with love, unity and kindness.