

# This terrible beauty

Lida Abdul fled war-torn Afghanistan but was drawn back by its haunting images, writes Megan Backhouse.

**L**IDA Abdul's parents stayed behind when, at the age of 11, she fled Kabul with her older brother. It was the mid-1980s, the Russians had invaded and the Afghan people were losing their legs and lives in bomb attacks. People were hanged from trees, she says, speaking during an interview recently conducted within the sleek angular walls of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Abdul and her brother settled in New Delhi for a couple of years and then flew to Germany where, being without passports and visas, they languished at the Frankfurt airport for a couple of weeks before being admitted into refugee camps.

"I couldn't go to school, I was not allowed to go anywhere," she says. "We were in a confined space with the feeling of a prison, there were a lot of eastern Europeans because of the Cold

War and the situation in Iran was really bad because of the shah. I was in the middle of this highly intense moment in history, I could feel it. On the news, I would watch people get killed in Afghanistan and everything was so personal even though it was such a global event."

When Abdul was almost 17, her parents (her mother was a teacher and her father, an intellectual under surveillance) and younger brother managed to leave Kabul and join her and her brother in Germany, with the family later given residency in the United States.

By the time Abdul was 22 she had studied philosophy, political science and political theory in Los Angeles and felt "completely lost". "But when I took my first photograph, that's when I decided, this is it, I am not going to do anything else but art," she says. "The way the photograph emerged it was so magical; it

wasn't the image so much but the process, a spiritual thing. All of a sudden, it connected the world for me and I was so disconnected. I was always an artist even in Afghanistan because I was drawing and painting as a child, but I just didn't know what to do with the energy, I didn't know what to do with the information."

As a young adult, she did her master's in art and now, at 32, has been making work for a decade. Last year, she represented Afghanistan at the Venice Biennale and those works, as well as an earlier piece made before she started going back to Kabul, are part of a group exhibition, *The Unquiet World*, which opened at ACCA last weekend.

The key Venice work is a 16mm film called *The White House*, which slowly and poetically unfolds across a wall at ACCA. In it, Abdul can be seen painting white the ruin of a once-grand residence related to the presidential palace. Fighting has reduced the place to cracked columns and dusty rubble and Abdul, dressed in billowing, ankle-length black with flimsy Afghan sandals, whitewashes the lot in rhythmic brush strokes

below a sublime cloudy sky. Vast mountains lie in the distance and there is the softest natural light.

"I am really interested in beauty," Abdul says. "I want a piece that is really, really beautiful and, at the same time, there is politics. I don't even have to speak about it. The ruins are like war monuments and I am trying to articulate what are ruins and what are monuments, and what is our relationship to them. How do we understand history after catastrophe and, as artists, how do we move on?"

The other film here that went to Venice has a man methodically hacking into the earth around a lush green tree, which is about to fruit. The camera pans the blue sky, the pretty foliage and the rugged landscape. "Our people were hanged from this tree," the man wielding the axe tells another man, who then asks why he doesn't cut it from the base. "Because I want to get all the roots out," is the answer.

Abdul is currently splitting her time between France and Germany and says that whenever she feels settled somewhere she creates a situation whereby she has to leave. But she has been

making regular trips to Kabul for the past five years and would like to live once more in Afghanistan. "The work that I can produce there I couldn't produce anywhere else in the world," she says. "The kind of connection I have to Afghanistan is part of my life. Everything becomes really natural, it's spontaneous. I can intellectualise it and theorise it, but at the end of the day it all happens there."

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LIDA ABDUL

On her forays into the country she drives around looking for places to use in her work. Not so long ago, she found a Russian fighter plane that had been shot down years ago and she is currently making a work that has young children stuffing the hundreds of bullet holes through its body with white cotton.

She also recently came across "miles and miles of tanks, there must have been over a thousand" that had been abandoned,

but she has been refused access to those. But she has already made a film of herself painting a tank white, another incorporating a military helicopter and one of men trying to pull ruins down with ropes.

When it comes to shooting her installations and performances, she prefers film to video because of its soft finish. "It's really feminine and like a painting almost." She always works with the same German cameraman, whose loyalty was sorely tested in Afghanistan a couple of weeks ago when the two of them were held at gunpoint and he had his passport taken away.

But Abdul insists that working outside the country of her birth doesn't have the same meaning: "I don't have the same relationship to these things like I did in Afghanistan; it's part of my history, part of my people and I can really feel the suffering. I internalised years of war and I think I am still dealing with it."

*The Unquiet World* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (111 Sturt Street, Southbank) until July 23.

LINK

▶ [www.accaonline.org.au](http://www.accaonline.org.au)

Lida Abdul with her work *The White House*, a 16mm film which unfolds across a wall at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

THE AGE  
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