

Artist's Statement

I am interested in how geography and personal or collective history can influence our identity. With this in mind can one ever escape one's given cultural, social and gendered identity and recreate oneself new?

This six month Artist in Residence project at Fremantle Arts Centre began with unwrapping two 19th Century Afghan prayer rugs, to see first hand the power of what I perceived to be cultural and historic artefacts.

I started the residency reading anything to do with prayer rugs, in particular the history and symbology of prayer rugs in Afghanistan. This led me to researching the history and culture of Afghanistan, Islamic religion and the Afghan Cameleers in Australia.

While reading, collecting and interviewing community members, I often found myself back at the place where I started; when I first saw the two prayer rugs, with their worn edges and obvious human markings left on the rugs, as a reminder of prayer. For me these human markings and the worn edges were as important as the rugs themselves. Like fingerprints the worn areas of each prayer rug was a physical and potent reminder of people in prayer.

During the residency I began to experiment with film and photography. Recording prayer rugs in different geographical locations of the WA bush. This was a way of linking the Afghan and Australian history together.

Two months into the residency I completed an installation of 17 identical sized and different coloured prayer rugs made from electrical tape, installed on the wooden floor of the studio. Then with the help of Joy Skinner, I began weaving two prayer rugs out of white feathers. Weaving the feather rugs brings together the art and craft divisions. The white feathers link back to the white doves of Hazrat Ali Shrine in Balkh Province in Afghanistan and the weaving of the feathers is a way of connecting to the calmness of meditation.

Over the following months I met and interviewed people from the Afghan community who taught me the significance and the sacred nature of prayer rugs in their culture. Their stories gave me a better understanding of the ancient and recent history of Afghanistan and the 7 ethnic groups that is Afghanistan today. I had the opportunity to interview people who lived, worked and travelled in Afghanistan, who worked alongside and knew Afghan Cameleers in Australia and people who escaped a war torn Afghanistan for Australia. It is these rich stories that influenced how I approached this whole project.

Fajr, like dawn, is the beginning of a day's journey filled with many stories about the Afghan people who have settled in Australia. It is an exhibition based on research, conversations, story telling, listening, feeling and remembering. Through the act of weaving, collecting, photography and film I hope to express what Milan Kundera called in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*. Fajr is my interpretation of what it means to live life marked by personal and collective history.

This exhibition could not have been possible if it was not for Brutus who while working in Kabul has been fantastic source of information. I thank Saliha and her family, Qais and his family's hospitality and for trusting me enough to allow me into their lives to share personal and often painful stories. Also Peter Underwood's recounting of travel through Afghanistan has been in-valuable as have Joy Skinner, Brian

McKay and Larry Folley's stories on the Afghan Cameleers in Western Australia. I would like to acknowledge Eva Fernandez who worked with me on the photographs in the show, Joy Skinner's knowledge and help in setting up the weaving loom, Debrah Hauswirth singing and Nic Montagu invaluable technical knowledge and editing skills.

Last but not least I would like to thank the staff at Fremantle Arts Centre specially André Lipscombe and Charlotte Hickson for their endless support.

Olga Cironis, 2011



Olga Cironis at her loom, 2011, Photo Olga Cironis

Cover Image: Olga Cironis and Eva Fernandez, *Saliha*, 2010, digital photograph, courtesy and © the artists.

Olga Cironis: Fajr

26 March – 15 May



Fremantle
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Government of Western Australia
Department of Culture and the Arts



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Amongst the breadth of objects held in the City of Fremantle Art Collection are two 19th Century Afghan Prayer Rugs. Rarely exhibited since their donation, these richly coloured and exquisitely designed woven textiles appear to have little relationship with the core strengths or priorities of the collection, and indeed might be considered at first glance to be more relevant to another community or museum setting altogether.¹

Now that perception has changed. Through the activity of visual artist Olga Cironis, a deeper understanding of the significance of these items can be revealed, for the artist's process has redefined the status and relevance of the prayer rugs to the City's Collection and the Western Australian community.

Cironis' positive response to the 'aura' of the rugs; their inherent material presence and the physical evidence of the rugs' use in prayer is what initially encouraged Cironis to accept an invitation to participate in the project.² Cironis has subsequently become deeply effected by the apparent unbearable 'weight' of the rugs' political and cultural significance for the Afghan community following insights into the appalling history of the treatment of Afghan Cameleers of last century and the continued internment of Afghan refugees in Australia today.³



Afghan Camel Drivers, 1897, Image courtesy of the State Library of South Australia. B47474

It was through meeting and establishing friendships with Afghan people, some of whom are refugees, that Cironis was able to sustain an extraordinary creative trajectory over a six month period to produce *Fajr*. This complex and sensitive exhibition is a product of an 'emotional and instructive experience' which has created an alternative context for speculation and visual interpretation of the rugs and their place in the collection.⁴

Cironis is drawn to working with artifacts of the past, particularly items that have been disconnected from their original owner, purpose or context and seemingly undergone a process of 'erasure'.

Cironis recognises that for the viewer, a significant cultural, emotional and memorial dimension of the rugs and association with communal prayer has been dismantled or removed altogether, now they have entered the realm of the 'museum'.

Responding to similar ideas, Cironis made artworks earlier this year which combined the unique qualities of second hand blankets and discarded photographs and picture frames to question the past and discarded histories, customs and traditions.⁵ It was this body of work that identified Cironis as a candidate for this project.

Through *Fajr* Cironis respectfully acknowledges the Afghan people she has met and who have assisted in the development of the exhibition. Cironis recognizes the continuing culture and resilience of the Afghan community and in particular that of Afghan refugees who from great hardship and without the support of their extended families are making new lives in Australia.

The connections made with the Afghan community during the six month residency have been instrumental in determining both the progress of the art making and interpretation of the prayer rugs. The resulting installation, which has been produced in consultation and with participation from the Afghan community to include cast sculpture, rugs made of feathers, portrait photography and an audio/visual element, collectively establish a new context for the interpretation of the prayer rugs.

Formal portrait photography in the exhibition, produced in collaboration with Eva Fernandez is considerate and respectful of participating community members, conjuring a powerful presence of each personality. These images are inspired by and reminiscent of striking portraits of Afghan Cameleers produced in the 19th century. Cironis also includes in the exhibition soil and rock samples and pottery shards sourced from sites in Afghanistan contributed by community participants.

In *Fajr* the collection prayer rugs are integrated into the installation by way of an elevated opaque display case which politely masks the rugs from public view while encouraging audiences to peer reverently into a centrally located peep hole at the top of each case. The prayer rugs in this context have been given a new role by the artist; set respectfully above the floor to remove the risk of foot traffic and integrated within an arrangement of fabricated objects, images and found materials, they establish a new and silent dialogue with the audience.

Background to prayer rugs in the City of Fremantle Art Collection

A prayer rug is a small woven rug produced specifically for Muslim prayer. Much of the veneration of prayer rugs is due to the fact that in addition to their aesthetic value they have long been an integral part of the religious experience of the Islamic world and Islamic religious symbolism is at the root of many of the most universal rug designs.⁶

The basic arch shapes of all prayer rug designs represent the physical area and focal point of the mosque or "Mihrab", the space recognized as the 'spiritual gateway to paradise'. This focal point locates the wholly city of Mecca necessary for prayer, the birth place of the prophet Mohammed and where Islam was proclaimed. The area of the prayer rug below the Mihrab which is knelt upon, is known as the prayer field, and symbolizes the floor of the Mosque.⁷

An orthodox Muslim is expected to pray five times a day in 'ritual purity' (on a clean place) enabling "Sujud" (prostration to God during devotional prayer). A prayer rug is a convenient way to ensure that this directive is obeyed while offering enough space to accommodate prayer itself, by kneeling at one end to bend down and place your forehead and hands on the rug at the other. The most 'realized' prayer is considered communal and conducted at a Mosque where carpets for mass prayer are provided. Consequently small prayer rugs are practical when conducting prayers away from a Mosque.

The collection prayer rugs presented in *Fajr* are considered 'authentic' and were made by the traditional village rug making communities who used them, rather than produced, in the 20th Century for entirely commercial purposes. Traditional rug making has been influenced by cultural exchange, trade and migration across the regions, which also slowly eroded the ancient exclusivity of rug making communities. Consequently traditional compositional and design models changed through this interchange of visual ideas, permeating the weaver's art and altering the underlying character of rug design.



Afghan (Buluchistan) Prayer Rug, c 1870, wool & cotton, 116 x 90 cm, City of Fremantle Art Collection, Photo Victor France

The non figurative geometric design of some rugs has resulted from interpretations of the "Hadith" by different Muslim sects.⁸ Orthodox Muslim beliefs forbid the depiction of representational or living forms and geometric designs for this reason are favoured by some rug making communities including the nomadic peoples of Afghanistan.

The geometric 'head and shoulders' rug design drawn from the collection and included in this exhibition has its origin in the arid mountainous region of southwestern Afghanistan known as Baluchistan/Buluchistan/Balochistan.

This particular 'Balouchi' rug is identified as being of Doktor-e-Ghazi design; a form commonly associated with the nomadic peoples of Baluchistan. The Afghan prayer rug which is also exhibited here and includes a representation of a mosque in its design is attributed to influences by Turkoman rug making traditions of Turkmenistan.⁹

Wool rugs are aesthetically significant to the rug maker's output by the virtue that each rug design is made by hand knotting individual coloured wool fibres (known as wool pile) to a cotton and wool foundation. The predominantly red wool rugs exhibited here are made from lamb's wool and vegetable dyes which are synonymous with Afghan rug making.¹⁰ Traditionally Afghan rugs are 'sun washed' after manufacture to bleach or mellow the colours so to emulate the aging process to make what is known as 'the primary stage of mellowness'. Commonly in contemporary Afghanistan rugs are weathered in the streets permitting vehicles to repeatedly drive over them, so to soften and wear the fibres evenly.

Acknowledgements

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1 The City's Afghan Prayer Rugs were donated to the City of Fremantle through the Commonwealth's Cultural Gifts Scheme in 1990 at a time when the City was gaining prominence as a collecting organization and Persian rugs were considered valuable investments and traded internationally as commodities.

2 Cironis was Artist in Residence at the Fremantle Arts Centre for six months working with the collection.

3 'Afghan' Cameleers were the indentured migrant labour brought to Australia to drive the camel teams which underpinned the exploration and development of inland Australia. Established in 1860 the program saw over 2000 Cameleers arrive in Australia in the next 40 years, many of whom saw work in Western Australia. From 1900 the role of the Cameleer began to diminish with the advent of rail transport and impact of discriminatory policy that saw many Cameleers refused resident status and deported from Australia at the cessation of their work contracts.

4 Fajr is the Muslim dawn or first daily prayer. Cironis feels that the project has profoundly changed her understanding of the WA Afghan community and her own family's refugee experience, interview with the artist.

5 Catalogue essay by Paola Anselmi accompanying Cironis' exhibition *today I will be what you what me to be*, Turner Galleries, May, 2010.

6 Persian rugs have been collected and highly sort after in the west since Victorian times.

7 However prayer rugs are not mandatory for Muslim prayer.

8 Hadith are the recorded sayings attributed to the prophet Mohammed.

9 See persiancarpetguide.com for more examples and information about Afghan prayer rug design.

10 Lamb's wool brings softness and strength to the rug and vegetable dyes are sourced from animal and mineral sources such as Madder root or scale insect Coccus Cacti – known as cochineal.