

Faig Ahmed interview transcript. Running time 13 min, 16 sec

Conducted via Zoom on December 21, 2021, by Curator Laura Blereau. Written interview transcription by Curatorial Assistant Alex Landry. Interview text and audio have been edited for clarity by Blereau and Landry.

My name: Faig Ahmed, and I grew up in and am still living in Azerbaijan. It's one of the regions that has very rich culture, heritage. I'm not talking about only Azerbaijan, but our neighbors. The borders in this region can be different, as the language again, as religion, as countries, as geography, etc.

The women in this area, they're actually who [are] keeping this tradition. So they are "tradition keepers", if I can say that. But the carpet is one of the old objects that's still a human being doing by hand with a stain technology, that's also important. And it's still again, something related with a woman power, because they're doing the carpet. It's actually a woman's work—and not only here. I travelled to different places in the world, actually. So most of the places, the textile making is related with a woman's work. So it's made with a woman intelligence, with a woman philosophy. And actually, it's still here--it's continued from grandmother to the mother and then from mother to daughter. So that's important knowledge.

So weaving, mostly it comes from the family. There's something that's existed thousands of years ago and is still here and still the same human mind working.

Because of Azerbaijan being part of USSR for 70 years. And of course, that's influenced Azerbaijan culture a lot. Because of communism, that was one of the ideas [to] start everything from the zero: forget about tradition, forget about culture, forget about religion, and even language somehow, but it's never happened, of course. So I can see, for example, as I'm researching, that many things been disappeared. And many parts of the culture, they still exist without complex understanding of it, because they somehow just disappeared during the 70 years. So it's [a] very unique, I think, historical situation, that not only Azerbaijan, but other traditional societies faced with that.

But now I see another country with absolutely another philosophy. For example, one of the traditional things--it's not only carpets, not only visual things, because all objects also related with a certain philosophy and the center of all societies is mostly religion. So at least it was for thousands of years. So right now we have another values, like human rights and democracy, capitalism for example, etc. It's new things for us. But

mostly our culture, like our cultural or traditional understanding of the world, somehow it comes from the core of any culture, which is religion actually.

Actually both my parents, also my grandfather and grandmother's from both sides, they've been scientists. Mother is a doctor, she is a medical doctor and the Father is engineer. So I grew up loving absolutely no religious family. I was never [taught] based on traditional values. And I think it was quite dangerous actually. Because if you don't teach in your home, in your family, in your society, that "What is the biggest thing as religion?", it can be serious.

The society, after USSR, it's become more secular. So that's also been influence to me because it's one of the questions, not only me as an artist, but also in society, that to understand how we have to define ourselves. So it's hard to say what tradition is, because tradition is something that people following for thousands of years.

As I start[ed] to meet [create] with computer, as it came to this country, and start to buy it, and cetera--because I'm an artist, I used to work in different design companies. So that's where I learned a lot of programs. Everybody got to computers and everybody got to work with different programs.

Actually the point where I started to work with the carpets--somehow it's two things connected with each other. Because I apparently learn this kind of new technologies and try to survive in this new world as a young man, and from another part I was very interested in traditional things, like religion again. And the carpet was there because I was interested in the symbols of carpet. So I did some kind of parallels between Buddhist Mandala, where it's very systematic pattern there. But in general, I was interested in ancient knowledge of finding yourself. It's [a] kind of process: you're visualizing it, you're drawing it, and then you're erasing it.

No, I don't consider myself as a craft man. It's something that only women can do. So technically I can do carpet, but I did it maybe [only] even 10 times. I know technology, I understand technology. I like to learn the principle, so then I'm using another system to this.

And freedom comes only from the inside, actually, revealing new or inspiration or whatever it comes from--because whatever is outside is old, actually. This is what we know.

"Door of Doors", for example, right? So it's something that goes inside with itself, just

copying itself. It's like a dream. When we're dreaming we see something that [does] not exist, of course--sometime it exists, sometimes not--but it's mostly a copy of this world.

Some of the work, it's more like metaphors--very simple, like code of something that you can use for different situations, different processes. But there's some works, they have very, like straight, histories and stories, like "Virgin" for example. The "Virgin" is actually directly related with a traditional mentality that they're talking about, like importance of virginity. So it's something that exists in many, many cultures, of course, and in Azerbaijan, too. And somewhere it's criticizing, the things like the family value, so it's related with a virgin somehow or not, and cetera. So because it's been a part of another project, actually, the "Virgin" and the video work, the "Social Anatomy", that was a part of the project that talked about Azerbaijan sexuality actually. So it's one of the hidden, you know, topics that you can talk about. So you're not even talking about this with your friends most of the time, in Azerbaijan. So it's not right to talk about these things. So that's why many works have been related with something that exists but nobody talking about this.

If I will talk about the "Social Anatomy"--I think that was the kind of base of this project, where, in this case, I tried to use a cultural object. So we can say now, traditional culture objects that relate with certain cultural rituals actually. I choose something very important starting from first sex actually, from birth to marriage, because there's certain processes for men and for girls, even biological process. So for men, for example, it's circumcision, one of the traditional ways, not only here, so it's Islamic, and many Jews actually going through this ritual in different ways. For example, some do it as boys is born, some do it about seven years old, some do it even more late. So but anyway, it exists. From my point, it's an important personal point. It's very traumatic, psychologically, it's traumatic.

The "Social Anatomy" was kind of a way to look to society in a very systematic way, like how everybody can be related with each other. And the two different stages starting from sex to different stages for man and woman, to marriage, and then to death, actually. So one of the elements in this video is death. So it's kind of whole, like circle of life, from birth to death, and how it's happened in society, and what was the element, what element exists there?

So in general, it's rituals with human behavior. In this case of this video, I use Azerbaijan cultural elements. But again, as a metaphor of, in general society, you can take this work and try to look to this work to another society and see other structures. So that was a kind of idea to see human behavior in some structure. So it's not chaotic.

It's not about, again, the things like free will and cetera. It's more systematic, it's more related with each other system.

That was the idea of this work. And actually, I use real people there who really know what to do. I didn't teach them; that was kind of experimental. I just put some these elements that everybody knows, everybody used to see, like what is the circumcision? What is the funeral ritual? And everybody knew this; that was kind of--I mean, for me, it was more interesting to see how people just knew [what] to do, they know how to behave, or how to follow, etc.

"Invert" is also one of the experimental works. It's metaphorical--I use there two types of threads. One is super natural; it's dyed with a natural dyeing, with the natural plants and minerals. The other is synthetic, the way of coloring is just synthetic threads. But it was interesting to see this, today's material with the all-technological way, actually. One is kind of disappearing and another is becoming. So something is changing very radically again. It's like you're directly losing here like technological things of wool, like your traditional technological elements, in this case, because I'm using a synthetic. So it's not disappearing, but transforming one to another, because you still have the pattern there. It's the same pattern, but with absolutely another technological process. It's more about our way to think, our way to think today, how we're visualizing the things that can't be visualized in the past.

"Impossible Viscosity", it's actually the impossible viscosity of traditional society or tradition in general. When you're trying to stretch it, it's not disappearing, it's transforming. Where is the border of this stretching? What is the border of this? Again, as I said, it's question, so this is what I'm asking. I'm not making a statement, it's not a manifesting of any idea. It's just questioning what will happen? It will stretch. It's something that really exists now. So somehow it can also look beautiful. But at the same time, we see it's in the tension. So whatever will happen with the old way of thinking, maybe traditional or conservative thinking, right? It's what happens when you are trying to change conservative thinking of society. But it's not only society; it's also personal, of course. Because society is starting from personal perspective, from personal feelings. Or if you possibly expand, then you become something else. Then you shouldn't be relying again on tradition, on conservative thoughts, or partly rely and partly be flexible to change. So, again, I'm asking it as a question. Is it possible? And which way is it possible? But we don't see like the system of society. We get safeguards like some statistic, we can see some numbers, but we don't see society itself.