

Artist Khadim Ali (right) with a detail of the rug he has created for his show here, and his painting Transition/Evacuation 5 (left), which shows five nude women being burnt alive by dark demons. PHOTOS: ARNDT

Art rooted in war, conflict

Khadim Ali's artworks tell stories of loss and living under the shadow of violence in Afghanistan

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Arts Correspondent

Artist Khadim Ali's powerful artworks are rooted in the many turbulent journeys he has negotiated.

The 37-year-old artist belongs to Afghanistan's Hazara tribe, holds a Pakistan passport and now calls Australia home.

His family was forced to flee from their home in Bamiyan during the civil war, which saw the Taliban take over Afghanistan in the 1970s.

His parents eventually returned and, on Aug 31, 2011, their home in Kabul, where much of his art was stored, was blown up after the Taliban parked an explosive-laden vehicle outside. His parents were not injured in the attack.

In town for the opening of his solo exhibition Transition/Evacuation - New Works at Arndt gallery in Gillman Barracks, he gave no indication of the violence he had witnessed.

He says in a calm, gentle voice: "There is no other way to deal with the violence. I guess I stay calm thinking my parents survived. Entire families have been wiped out. Compared to that, we lost only a home and material things."

While he addresses the issues in a completely measured way during the interview, the stories of migration, loss and living under the shadow of violence and war take centre stage in his art.

This is visible in all the new works. There are paintings which are a mix of gouache, ink and gold leaf on fine Wasli paper - a handmade paper mostly used for miniature paintings - and several large works such as rugs using wool, cotton thread and ink.

The rugs, just like his paper works, are fascinating in the referencing of the place he hails from.

He says: "In Afghanistan, rugs are part of our culture. We do not have dining tables. Children are born on rugs. You find them in our homes, we play on them and we eat on the rugs. They are central to our life."

The scale of the rugs also allows him to create huge pieces, as large as 2.7m in height, in which demonic forms emerge larger than life. What is interesting also is his use of colour. Red is in almost all the pieces and this has something to do with his childhood memories.

His family escaped the Taliban massacres and settled in Quetta, Balochistan, in Pakistan, where he was born.

He recalls his grandmother saying: "That year, the poppy fields in Bamiyan were a deeper red because of the blood that seeped into the soil. The colour has somehow stayed with me."

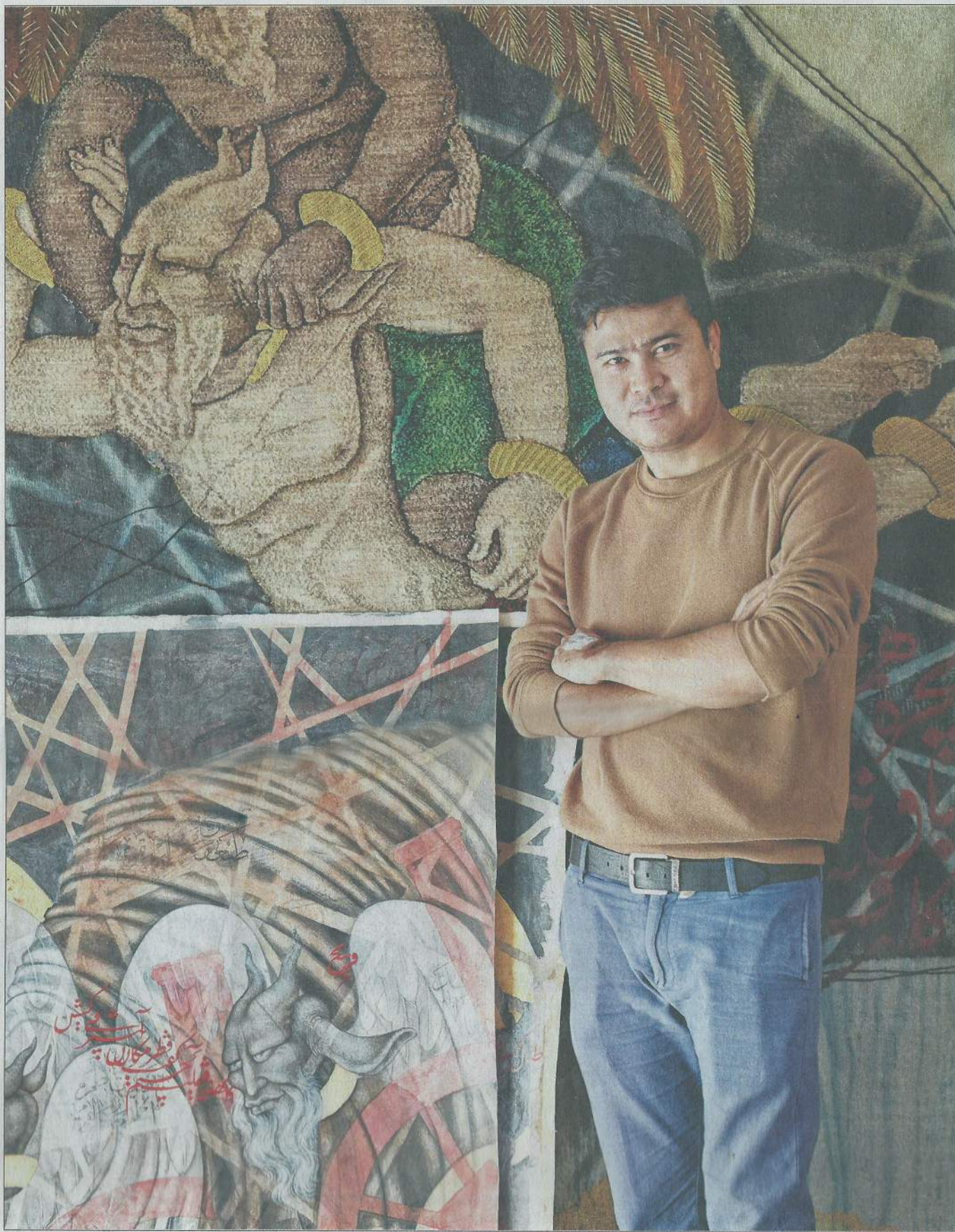
His grandfather was a teacher and a storyteller and the artist grew up listening to tales of warriors, demons and princes from 10th-century epics such as the Shahnama. These forms are clearly referenced in the works. The artist has long been enthralled by stories of bravery, betrayals, daring and deception.

Growing up, he took on many odd jobs, including working as a farm hand.

While in Quetta, he heard about the famed National College of Art in Lahore, where he sat for a test and earned a place in the fine art department. There, he learnt various techniques, particularly the art of miniature painting, under the tutelage of Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi.

His art is rooted in conflict and what is striking also is the absence of the female figure in most works. Only one painting titled Transition/Evacuation 5, shows five nude women being burnt alive by dark demons. Forms inspired by calligraphy in red are used to reference what he calls the "erasure of historical texts from the national archives".

Speaking about this piece, he talks at



length about male dominance in Afghan society. The piece was inspired by a barbaric act of the stoning and burning of a woman by a mob, egged on by a cleric.

Despite the grimness, intensity of the themes and the wrestling demons often locked in combat, there is something about his art that keeps drawing viewers back.

The re-visitations unravel new layers in each of the works, which the artist can take anywhere between two to three months to complete. The rugs take much longer, closer to six months.

In 2010, he was offered a distinguished talent visa by the Australian government, which led to his move to Sydney.

But he found it impossible to cut his ties with Kabul. He still has a studio there, where he works with several artists and traditional carpet weavers who help

translate some of his complex ideas for the rugs.

He has taken part in many solo and group exhibitions since graduating from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, in 2003. His work was part of the Contemporary Miniature Paintings From Pakistan exhibition at Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan the following year.

In 2013, it was picked for the Guggenheim Museum's permanent collection in New York and was part of the travelling exhibition No Country: Contemporary Art For South And South-east Asia. After moving to Australia, he got his Master of Fine Arts from the College of Fine Arts in Sydney.

While his lawyer wife and eight-year-old son are settled in Sydney, he admits to being confused sometimes. He says: "When I think of my own country, I get

confused between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is a whole lot of emotion attached to these works, emotions that refuse to go away, even though the place I call home has changed."

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View it

TRANSITION/EVACUATION - NEW WORKS BY KHADIM ALI

Where: Arndt, 03-21 Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road
When: Till Sept 6, 11am to 7pm (Tuesday to Saturday), 11am to 6pm (Sunday). Closed on Monday and public holiday
Admission: Free
Info: Go to www.arndtberlin.com or call 6734-0775