

## afghan roots

[jeanno gaussi on her work at documenta (13)]

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Though the art world convened in Kassel last week for the opening of dOCUMENTA (13), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's exhibition reaches far beyond the town's borders. With outposts in Kabul, Banff and Cairo, this year's dOCUMENTA allows a selection of the nearly 300 artists to operate directly in the locations to which their work pertains. One of those artists is Berlin-based **Jeanno Gaussi**. Born in Kabul to parents of German and Afghan descent, **Gaussi's** work refers back to her roots, critically examining her varied cultural background and the limitations it creates. In Kassel, this takes the form of a series of paintings of Afghan men and women at the former Elisabeth Hospital, while her installation in Kabul focuses more directly on the recent military interventions and the subsequent changing landscape of her home town. For the *berlin art journal*, Dorothea Schöne spoke to the artist about reconnecting with her roots, the challenges of being the diaspora, and being a stranger to oneself.

**Dorothea Schöne:** You were born in Kabul and lived there for the first years of your life before moving to Berlin, where you have been residing now for over 20 years. Do you perceive yourself at all within boundaries of nationality?

**Jeanno Gaussi:** This is a question I can't really answer. I became aware of the fact that I am Afghan in steps and phases. There were moments when this didn't matter at all, for example during the years I lived in Delhi/India. I have more memories from those times than from my time in Afghanistan.

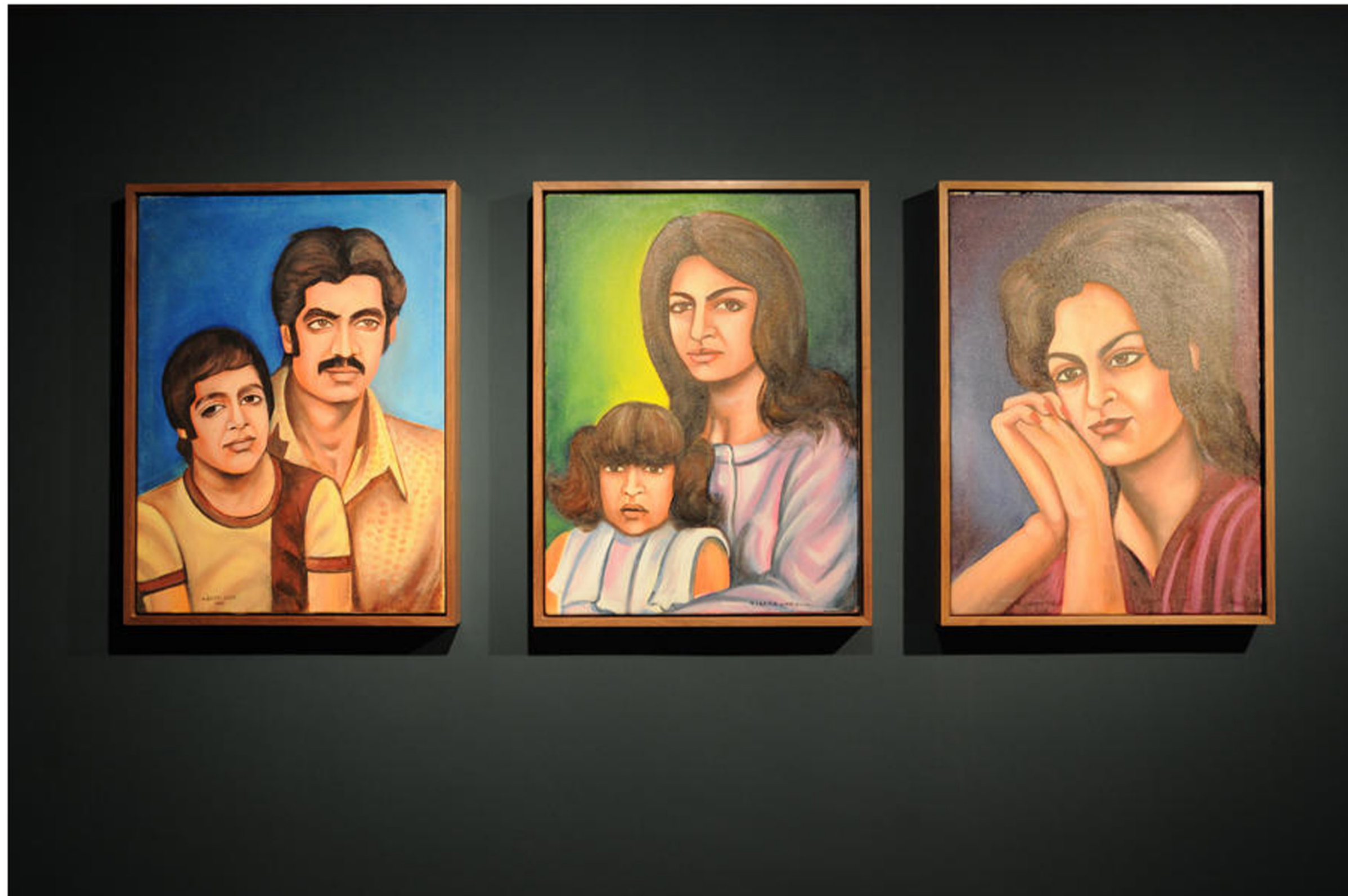
It began more recently, partly because I started going back to Kabul. I started to reconnect with the fragmentary memories of my childhood, to link them with what and who I am now. Only since then have I asked myself what may be Afghan about me and whether it is more a matter of personality and character than of nationality that defines me. My personal living situation and the number of times I moved to different places plays a major role here. I have been influenced by at least three different cultures—the German, the Indian and the Afghan culture—and I can't really take them apart and de-fragment them. I don't even think that I would want to do that. Instead I analyse particular moments, situations and contexts that have influenced me and that may have caused certain reactions in me.

**DS:** How do you react, when your art is labelled as Afghan or even as migrant art?

**JG:** If somebody called my work Afghan, I would think that this person hadn't looked closely enough or hadn't fully thought through what I could have meant, because this is exactly what my work is not about. I try to re-contextualise and analyse certain fragments of cultural material. Thus, one cannot really call me a diaspora artist.

If you look at the work I did during residencies in Pakistan, Jordan, Palestine and the United States, or even here in Berlin, you quickly realise that I look into the situations and particularities of each place and context. In Jordan, for example, I was living in a small village with 100 inhabitants—all in their 80s it seemed—and I completely immersed myself into this place. The result was the project *Home Sweet Home*, which I did in collaboration with the Lebanese artist Youmna Chlala. In this piece we addressed various aspects of the topic "home," focusing less from a geographical point of view and more by what a home is defined by.

Generally speaking, I do see that there is a whole generation of artists who are living in the diaspora and who aim to overcome this narrow geographical definition and the boundaries of a national background. Most of them, including me, are multi-cultural, act globally and reject national categories as modes of defining and analysing their work.



**DS:** Partly due to your multi-cultural background, you have been invited to show at this year's dOCUMENTA (13). For this you have been commissioned to make two artworks: one for the main venue in Kassel and the other for the additional venue in Kabul. Can you explain what these works are about?

**JG:** When I was five years old my mother thought it best that I live with my aunt in Germany because of the Russian-Afghan war. My parents and brother stayed in Kabul and were only able to join me three years later. When they got the opportunity to leave Afghanistan for good, they had the chance to collect a few belongings and 30 family images out of our many albums.

When we were reunited, I felt that I was a stranger to myself and to my family; I forgot my mother tongue and their reappearance confused me. Today, I still feel there is a gap in my understanding of my family history.

The description of how my family talks about these images lacks clarity or continuity. Their resort to a nostalgic narrative does not help me figure out the puzzle of my early childhood years.

In 2008, during my first trip back to Kabul since 1978, I met a painter in who still manages to make a living by painting commissioned pieces, signs and billboards. In his shop, which is close to the neighbourhood where I was brought-up, we talked about his life during the war and how he managed to survive the trauma through painting. I decided to work with him and make him my mediator—a decoder or an investigator—through painting a selection of these 30 images. The slow process of painting brings more details and clues to the surface.

After he finished painting each photo, we conducted an interview. We concentrated on his observations, his native eye and his knowledge. I asked him to share with me his neutral point of view. Since he was not a family member, he was not as personally affected by the images as I was. By way of the interview, a link is thus created between my photographic and painted history.

**DS:** What are you showing in Kabul?

**JG:** The work I created for the space in Kabul is called "*Peraan-e-Tomba* (pants and shirt)". I had the idea for it whilst repeatedly visiting the country in the last four years. I realised then how military and police forces characterise the city more and more. Kabul is dominated by traces of security and war. Everywhere you face blocked streets and convoys of big, bulletproof cars. Streets are packed with high numbers of men wearing various types of uniform. Their uniforms carry many indefinable military insignias. I have no idea about their rank or function. After being at the old Bazaar, close to Kabul River, I bumped into several small shops where everyone can easily buy all these insignias—which I did. *Peraan-e-Tomba* is an installation of six to eight examples of traditional Afghan men's clothing—a combination of loose pants and knee-length, wide shirts. The shirt often has embroidery in various designs around the chest. The costumes are made from fabric, which is usually used for military and police uniforms. After the embroidery work was done I designed and added a pattern, which is a variation of the insignias.

A group of traditional Atan dancers wore these dresses and performed their dance, which I filmed. Atan began as a folk dance and is now considered the national dance of Afghanistan.

Due to the strong military and security presence in Kabul in recent decades, the townscape and living space has changed significantly. This affects society and the question of national identity as well as one's own perception of culture and tradition. *Peraan-e-Tomba* is a piece that refers to the socio-political situation in Afghanistan.

[Images: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, photographed by Nils Klinger. "Family Stories," 2011–12, Jeanno Gaussi, Afghan painter commissioned by the artist: Ustad Sharif Amin; courtesy the artist, commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13), photographed by Matthias Grobe]

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