

**Faig Ahmed - "Osho" - 2015  
Spotlight Paper - Bob Maietta, 2017**



- **Artist** - Faig Ahmed of Baku, Azerbaijan (1982 - present)
- **Education** - Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Art Sculpture Department, 2004
- **Art Movement** - International Contemporary Art
- **Medium** - Textile (Carpet) and Sculpture

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**Introduction**

I first saw Faig Ahmed’s “Osho” from far across the Chase Gallery as I stepped off the Museum’s elevator on my first day of docent training. I was immediately drawn to and compelled by it as I have always had a keen interest and appreciation for fine Caucasian carpets\* (see page 6). I had never seen anything like this work before. I was fascinated to learn just what the artist had done to transform the centuries old craft of Azerbaijani carpet weaving into a sculptural piece of art that was so original, so bold, and so contemporary.

**Background Information**

Faig Ahmed is a young artist who was born in 1982 and raised in Azerbaijan’s capitol city of Baku. He graduated from the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Arts, Sculpture Department in 2004. He remains in Baku and produces his artworks there focusing exclusively on hand-woven Azerbaijani carpets as sculpture. As a result, he has emerged as a notable new international contemporary artist who represented Azerbaijan at the 2007 and 2013 Venice Biennales. In addition, he was nominated for the Victoria and Albert Museum’s distinguished Jameel Prize 3 in 2013. His artworks are included in several important museum collections throughout the United States, in Europe, Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

Ahmed was fascinated with textiles and Azerbaijani carpets as a child. As a seven year old his parents left him playing in his room on a 150 year old family heirloom carpet that had belonged to his maternal great-grandmother. Ahmed was intrigued by the patterns in the carpet and began tracing them with his finger. It then occurred to him that the patterns might look better if they were arranged in a different way, so he took a pair of scissors and cut the patterns out to rearrange them into a configuration that pleased him more. When his irate parents discovered their son’s handiwork, which rendered the heirloom carpet completely unrecognizable, all carpets were soon removed from their family home so as to thwart any recreations of their fledgling young artist’s ideas.

As an adult, having recently graduated from college, he briefly explored the artistic media of painting, installation art, and video. But soon Ahmed found himself drawn back to his love of textiles, patterns, and Azerbaijani carpets. He has a great appreciation for their historical value relative to Azerbaijani history, traditions, and culture. The inspiration for his artwork stems from the fact that Azerbaijani carpets are iconic historical symbols of the region and its society. They show great stability in their symmetry, bringing enormous familiarity and comfort to those who live with them. He notes that these carpets have not

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changed in appearance over the four centuries that they have been woven. Faig Ahmed does not want to change history or these traditions, he just wants to look at the carpets differently to depict an alternate, more contemporary perspective on them. He says that the creativity for his artworks comes from an energy that emerges deep within his soul. *“I don’t want to change anything,”* Ahmed says, *“but at the same time I want to change everything.”*

**Technique & Methods**

So how does Ahmed accomplish this? For his first *“experiment”* (as he frequently terms his carpet sculptures) he bought an antique carpet that caught his eye and his heart. It was purchased through a gypsy broker and owned by an elderly local woman who treasured it as she had inherited it from her grandmother. It was the only possession she had from her distant childhood and she was very attached to it. She initially rejected the broker’s idea of selling it, but finally acquiesced when she learned that the buyer was an artist, which made her feel confident that he would take good care of it. However, Ahmed’s intention was to again cut the carpet up to transform it, to reimagine it, and create a new idea. But before he took his scissors to the carpet, he learned of the old woman’s story from the carpet seller and came to realize *“I just couldn’t destroy this carpet with my own hands.”*

Ahmed’s process for his sculptures starts with tracking down and purchasing 150-200 year old carpets. He initially crafted patterns for his imagined sculptures on engineering graph paper with each square relating to a small number of carpet knots. He now photographs these carpets and digitally alters the pictures with computer software such as Photoshop, 3D Max, and AutoCAD to create his patterns. With the digital patterns created, each pixel represents a carpet knot. He then submits these patterns to traditional Azerbaijani carpet weavers who craft his creations in the same manner that Azerbaijani carpets have been made for the past four centuries; they are intricately hand-woven.

Of note is the fact that when Ahmed initially sought traditional Azerbaijani carpet weavers to produce his creations he was met with great resistance. Such a creation was thought to be blasphemous and an insult to centuries of Azerbaijani history, traditions, and society. One weaver refused and warned him that if he took his request elsewhere *“he may get killed.”* He finally secured one woman to take on his task, but only if she could do so in absolute secrecy. Ahmed now works in the open with a team of 25 skilled carpet weavers who fabricate his sculptural designs while remaining true to traditional Azerbaijani carpet hand-weaving technique.

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**Relationship to Other PSAM Works**

Faig Ahmed’s “Osho” is a wonderful addition to the permanent collection here at the Palm Springs Art Museum. It was purchased at the the New York Art Fair in May of 2016 with funds generously provided by Donna MacMillan. It is presently on view in the Steve Chase Wing on the third floor.

“Osho” compliments other artworks in the Museum’s collection in two different ways. First, other works within the collection similarly demonstrate re-imagination of centuries old artistic techniques to create new ideas. For example, our Native American beaded baskets were woven for the tourist trade as opposed to traditional purposes of function. They are currently displayed along the north wall of the “Native American Basketry of the West” exhibition on the first floor. Other examples of this include Dale Chihuly’s innovative assemblage sculpture of blown glass “End of the Day 2” on the Mezzanine, and Helen Frankenthaler’s unique soak stain method of painting “April Screen IV” in the Steve Chase Wing on the third floor.

Second, other works in the collection demonstrate comparisons of shapes, lines and colors. Shape comparisons are seen in Anselm Kiefer’s “L’Ascension” with its ascending angelic figure rising from the ashes and in his “Nossis” with its winged book atop a fanned out and puddled dress with vertical folds in the north Chase Gallery on the third floor. Line and color comparisons are made with Morris Louis’ “The Stripe Number 2-00” with its parallel vertical bands of color seen immediately adjacent to “Osho”.

**Analysis & Interpretation**

Ahmed began making his carpet sculptures during *“a difficult period in my life in general and the carpet marked my transition from one condition to another.”* The result of Ahmed’s works is the re-imagination, reconstruction and reinterpretation of traditional, iconic and historical Azerbaijani carpets. In his creative process he is deconstructing Azerbaijani tradition and stereotypes through his innovative re-imagining of these time-honored carpets. He takes these carpets off the floor and puts them onto the wall, creating sculptural works of art.

Ahmed compares himself to other contemporary artists who also explore new ideas, among them the graffiti artist Banksy who frequently shows a different perspective on looking at the familiar. For example, there is Banksy’s graffiti-drawn image of Queen

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Elizabeth II with a Ziggy Stardust lightning bolt making its way down her forehead which appeared in Bristol, England in honor of her Golden Jubilee.

Ahmed's carpet works show alteration and distortion of traditional patterns. He sometimes applies paint to his carpets to create shadowing effects. He has in fact cut up some of his own creations to exhibit 3D effects of the carpet, while others have a 3D illusionary effect woven directly into the fabric of the carpets themselves. He also creates sculptures involving carpet paired with plastics that occupy large 3D volumes in space (see images on page 8). Ahmed notes that, *"In contemporary art it was difficult to find a medium that had not yet been touched and I saw that Azerbaijani carpets now offered something familiar to me but new to the art world."* As such, Ahmed has left a significant impact on the art world. All of his contemporary sculptural forms challenge our perception of tradition within an art historical context. They push the envelope and force us to look at these traditions in a new way, thereby creating bold and truly innovative, unique art. But, in his works he always keeps a traditional, recognizable, and familiar portion of the original carpet as a reference point back to where the work originated in its historical context. There is no other artist known to be doing such work with traditional hand-woven carpets at this time. The final outcome is that his artworks move from the traditional to the contemporary.

The title of the artwork "Osho" likely harkens back to an extended time that Faig Ahmed spent in India in 2014. Osho was an Indian Mystic who lived from 1931 to 1990 that created a controversial movement in India based on hostility toward traditional values. After the founder's death in 1990 the movement gradually moved into more positive favor in India. Osho also refers to a type of Indian yoga and spiritual practice.

In "Osho" we see images of dripping paint, melting wax, and puddling oil. There is a kinetic quality and sense of slow motion as it appears to melt and pool onto the floor. It is a 3D tapestry, a psychedelic sculptural illusion. It resembles Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, or even an exotic garment Lady Gaga might wear to ascend the steps for her entrance to the Met Ball in New York City. "Osho" takes us on a fanciful magic carpet ride through our imaginations.

Despite Ahmed's word of caution against an excess of interpretation regarding his artworks, interpretations will inevitably be made. When viewing "Osho" one is presented with the dilemma of whether the narrative of this work flows from the top down; or does it flow from the bottom up?

Analyzing "Osho" from the top down, it becomes a reflection of old cultures that change into something new - a movement away from tradition and into modernity. Steeped in

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history, Azerbaijani culture was once insular and isolated, both before and during USSR rule. People rarely left their local villages in an economy dependent upon the export of traditional hand-woven Azerbaijani carpets. The top portion of “Osho” reflects this ancient tradition; while the bottom of the piece morphs into a fluid, mobile Azerbaijan that is more heterogenous, integrated, and cosmopolitan. It’s economy is heavily dependent upon the exportation of oil - oil that can be seen in “Osho” dripping into puddles on the floor where it refracts light in many shades of the color spectrum.

If interpreted from the bottom up, the lower portion of “Osho” may be seen to evoke Azerbaijan’s recent history of political upheaval, civil unrest, ethnic wars, and human rights abuses after the breakup of the USSR. Rising toward the upper portion of the work there is transformation toward a more ordered and stable government with societal contentment evocative of Icarus ascending, Phoenix rising from the ashes, or the 2nd century BC Hellenistic marble sculpture “Winged Victory of Samothrace” - the Goddess of Victory.

There are many possible interpretations of Faig Ahmed’s “Osho,” but the one that mattered most to me was Ahmed’s himself who I recently contacted to pose the question of whether or not he had a message in mind when he created “Osho.” In closing, here is his response:

*“All of my artworks are metaphors of an exquisite structure and order on one hand, and complete chaos and void on the other. But there is a third part of this fundamental dualism - the consciousness. It makes dualism holistic. As a metaphor of consciousness we can observe knots of a carpet laying on a single base with the base being the same both for the structure and for the chaos. This metaphor can be used for both social and personal processes.....And now our consciousnesses are united on the carpet of the universe.  
Love and Peace, Faig”*

\* “Caucasian carpets” is a term commonly used by rug collectors and merchants. It refers to the region surrounding the Caucasus Mountain Range which extends from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea and includes Azerbaijan.

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Other Artwork by Faig Ahmed:

Parallel to Chul-Hyun Ahn's "Tunnel"



3D Sculpture:

