

## Hangama Amiri— *Henna Night/ Shabe Kheena*

by Kate Mothes

Like film stills from a continuous shot that roams around corners and from room to room, we find the interior of a house brimming with the energy of conversation and laughter. Gifts overflow from a textile-draped table onto the floor and jewelry glimmers in open boxes. The sound of dishes clinking and the aroma of lamb and rice enveloped in cumin and cardamom waft from the kitchen. Arresting in the power to make us feel a part of it, Hangama Amiri is an omniscient narrator who guides us along the fluid timeline of a gathering and a series of tender rituals.

Rooted in the artist's personal and cultural memory, the preparations underway observe a celebration—a wedding—in a space where women are the directors. Guests are ushered through as greetings and news are excitedly shared; groups break off into their own conversations and activities—preparing food, arranging gifts for the bride and applying henna to her hands, exchanging memories or whispering the latest gossip. We are warmly welcomed into a space to observe the nuances and relationships between social life, privacy, womanhood, personal identity, and rites of passage.

Amiri describes her approach to textile as painterly, applying swatches of fabric as if they are splashes of paint from a brush in a wide array of shapes, textures, and patterns. The shadows, reflections, and tricks of the light are rendered in a variety of overlapping fabrics and papers, which are sourced from a variety of places including shops she visits locally and on her travels, and from people she meets.

In *Tohfaha/Gifts*, hand-embroidered fabric from India gifted to Amiri by a friend is complemented by a hint of Central Asian Ikat print on a sleeve. Amiri combines numerous patterns by utilizing found fabrics, painting, inkjet printing, and sewing small pieces together like a puzzle. The latter can be a time-consuming process; the tablecloth pattern made from individual patches of fabric in *Still Life with Vanilla Cake* took the artist nearly three weeks to complete. Patterns are also a playful form of mimicry, such as in *Three Women Gossiping*, where brightly painted nails echo in the pattern of a green dress.

Hands direct us around the compositions in brightly colored sleeves and vividly painted nails that point our attention to gifts gathered in a display, or the way a woman holds the arm of another in *Two Seated Women* in comfort, affection, or momentary pause. The expressiveness of these women's hands signals where to look closer and emphasizes emotional undercurrents. Hands are the givers and receivers; many hands pass dishes around the table or are in motion in conversation; a steady hand applies henna designs to others that provide the canvas.

When the artist was six years old, she and her family left their home city of Kabul as refugees, escaping the Taliban and living for a time in Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, before settling in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 2005. Memories of her mother and her three siblings during this time are anchored by the extraordinary strength that her mother—and women like her—manifested through a period of intense transition and emotional strain. As male family members remained in Afghanistan, women supported other women within an unsettled community in order to cope and survive.

Again in control after twenty years, the Taliban's policies restrict women's access to education, employment, mobility, and expression. Private domestic spaces that are typically associated with family and security are places where women are confined as their liberties are defused. Indoors and away from the public sphere, women are made effectively invisible. The duality of absence and presence, and the nature of visibility, is woven through this body of work.

Within these spaces, however, is a paradoxical freedom to be themselves, enjoy their time together, and continue important traditions. Amiri examines the dichotomy of gendered private and public spaces and the ways in which women bond through togetherness, remembrance, and customs. The portrait of the groom perched on a table in *Photo of a Groom* is a visual reminder of the reason for the celebration, but it is also a reminder that men are not a part of this particular tradition. Viewed through the lens of celebration, female-centered rituals shine a light on a hopeful kind of resistance.

*Her Dressing Room* is the only piece in which one of Amiri's subjects meets the viewer's eye directly. She is in her bedroom, seated at a dressing table and glancing out at us as if surprised to have company, yet completely at ease. Portraits of family members dot the wall and are tucked into the sides of the mirror, and the rose petal pattern on the bedspread is reminiscent of a duvet that Amiri's mother had. Here is a moment of reflection and quiet repose before rejoining the festivities.

Amiri selects specific materials to reference different surface types, such as fabric with an iridescent sheen for drink cans in *Mahmana/Guests* and the gifts in *Still Life with Jewelry Boxes and Red Roses*. Layers of delicate chiffon partially reveal anything that is underneath, and where several pieces have been applied, the play of light and shadow presents an alluring degree of depth. In *Henna Painting* and *Still Life with Henna (Diptych)*, she uses acrylic paint to apply the henna patterns, mimicking the process of applying it carefully by hand. Paper and printed items like photographs and Bollywood postcards further add to the collage-like quality of these vivid compositions, constantly pulling us in for a closer view and seeking nuances in the stitches, edges, and layers.

Amiri's interest in the idea of home is underscored by a sense of displacement. Picture postcards of sites in Afghanistan and images of absent loved ones invoke nostalgia and longing — a way of remembering, and creating a sense of connection to a broad and dispersed community. These figures could be in Kabul, or they could be anywhere, in a dream of it. The skyline of the city printed on the chiffon windows in *Three Women Gossiping* and *Photo of a Groom* becomes what the artist describes as a geography that watches over the inside spaces, and subtly prompts us to wonder: Is this reality, in the present moment? Is this a memory? Is it a wish?