

**'Their soul listens':  
A Sociology from Art Praxis in Kabul**

by  
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Doctor of Philosophy.

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# Declaration

I, Bilquis Ghani, declare that this thesis titled, *'Their Soul Listens': A Sociology from Art Praxis in Kabul* (ETH17-1357), is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney and that the PhD thesis is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes.

To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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# Abstract

Working through the legacy of war and the daily potential for violence, young *Kabuli* artists carve out moments of peace in Kabul's streets and galleries. This thesis is a qualitative study of how young artists in Kabul are using their art practice to navigate and negotiate their sociocultural contexts and leverage the creative process to impact change. In doing so, they make change possible by suturing ruptures caused by conflict and actively responding to local challenges. The empirical data consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with sixteen artists based in Kabul, male and female, in late 2017 and early 2018. The thesis presents themes from the empirical work in three parts, each consisting of two chapters.

The analysis combines a sociology from art praxis with a Southern theory approach in which artists construct and explore new ways of being through a dynamic creative process. Artists offer complexity and nuance about their contexts by envisioning ways of being that are specific to their locale, and which exist outside reifications such as modern and traditional, rational and emotional. The research approaches the artists' art praxis as forms of knowledge, and employs Southern theory as an approach to theorise the necessity of art.

The thesis first explores the affective impact of art as a common human attribute and its linkage to social change and social cohesion. Given that artists' use of social media formed a key avenue for distribution of their works, the thesis also explores how social media presence can act as a form of alternative media in the contemporary context. By leveraging the online space, artists are able to bridge difference across time and distance, as well as create opportunities to self-narrate.

The thesis then focuses on gender as a key construct of identity. The analysis argues for a feminism which raises feminist praxis over the label of feminist, a position which is responsive to a context in which 'feminism' is associated with Western incursions on society and culture. The chapter raises the question of liberal feminist teachings' applicability in a context like Kabul. Challenging reified tropes of masculinity, the analysis also complicates conceptualisations of Afghan men as warlord or warrior and argues that men in Afghanistan navigate difficult and rigid cultural expectations. A code of honour limits both men's and women's movement.

Finally, the thesis seeks to humanise and demystify the artists discussed in the thesis. The thesis makes a case against reductive orientalisising caricatures of Afghan men, women, and culture by presenting their subjectivities. As artists practicing in volatile environments, they have in-depth and nuanced understandings of their situations which they navigate. Kabul, the city in which they practice their art and from which they distribute their work, becomes the protagonist of the final chapter. By practicing art in public spaces in Kabul, a form of public pedagogy creates a public termed the incidental-ephemeral public with whom the affective residue of the art and the art scene travels.

In keeping to the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, weaved through the thesis is the author's own position as a former refugee and Afghan living in diaspora.

*For my father*

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## List of Acronyms

ANIM	Afghanistan National Institute of Music
AWWP	Afghan Women's Writing Project
FWW	Free Women Writers
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
UNAMA	United Nations Assistant Mission in Afghanistan

## Authorship attribution statement

Findings from this research have been included in two articles:

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