

When You Do Not Have Anything, Then Everything is Yours

Azerbaijani Faig Ahmed's artistic practice disassembles the complexities inherent in traditional eastern rug making, while his curation is based on forgetting the past and starting from scratch. **Ric Bower** talks to him about his art and his long-standing relationship with the arts complex YARAT, in Baku, and in an art scene that's developing its own distinctive voice.

Faig Ahmed has shown in New York, Paris, London, Berlin, Dubai, Moscow and Hong Kong. He was shortlisted for the Jameel Prize 3 and represented Azerbaijan in their first appearance at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, and again in 2013. He is now resident at YARAT (which means 'create' in Azerbaijani), founded in 2011 by Aida Mahmudova and a group of artists, where he continues his exploration of traditional craft and curating a new generation of practitioners.

Ric Bower: I can't get over that they let you sleep in the studios. There aren't many studios in the UK where you can stay past 10pm. How long have you had a studio at YARAT?

Faig Ahmed: I know, it's great. I have had a studio here for a year, and I was a YARAT board member before that; all those involved have different skills, which we have contributed to the project as a whole. The studios for artist residencies, where we are now, were inaugurated in 2014. The art centre, with the *Making Histories* show curated by Suad Garayeva, and the Shirin Neshat commission, *The Home of My Eyes*, they both open tonight of course.

RB: Where did you study?

FA: I studied in the sculpture faculty of the Baku Art Academy. It was a traditional Soviet school, geared towards social realism. They were good at teaching you the craft, how to do [things], but they did not encourage free thinking. The trouble was that in order to develop, of course, you have to think freely.

RB: Was the education you received there in any way useful?

FA: For the most part, no. After the USSR broke up, all of us who had been there had the feeling that we had lost a lot of time. We simply did not have access to the information we needed. Most of my contemporary art education came through my own travelling and just through looking. The younger artists, who have grown up after independence, now have the opportunity to learn about contemporary practice through YARAT's programme of education which includes workshops, lectures and external artists visiting the studio. Education comes first; when you know what is going on you can then build a practice.

RB: When you are looking to populate a show, as a curator, do you seek out just work or do you look for whole practices and narratives that surround them? I have heard an extraordinary array of stories since I walked into these studios.

FA: Artists are very strange beings. In general, I am looking for interesting people. I curated a group show called *Zavod* in conjunction with YARAT in 2013 featuring works by 29 emerging Azerbaijani artists. It was held in an abandoned ex-Soviet factory which made air conditioning units for all of the USSR. I remember saying at the time that these artists are conducting archaeological research, but through the medium of art. Some of the people I found were really raw, they had absolutely no experience in making art; they were studying at the medical university at the time. Their way of looking at things was interesting, though, and they were interested in the artistic process; they had their own vision and that is why I chose them.

RB: Do you encourage collaboration at YARAT – reflective and critical partnerships, that is?

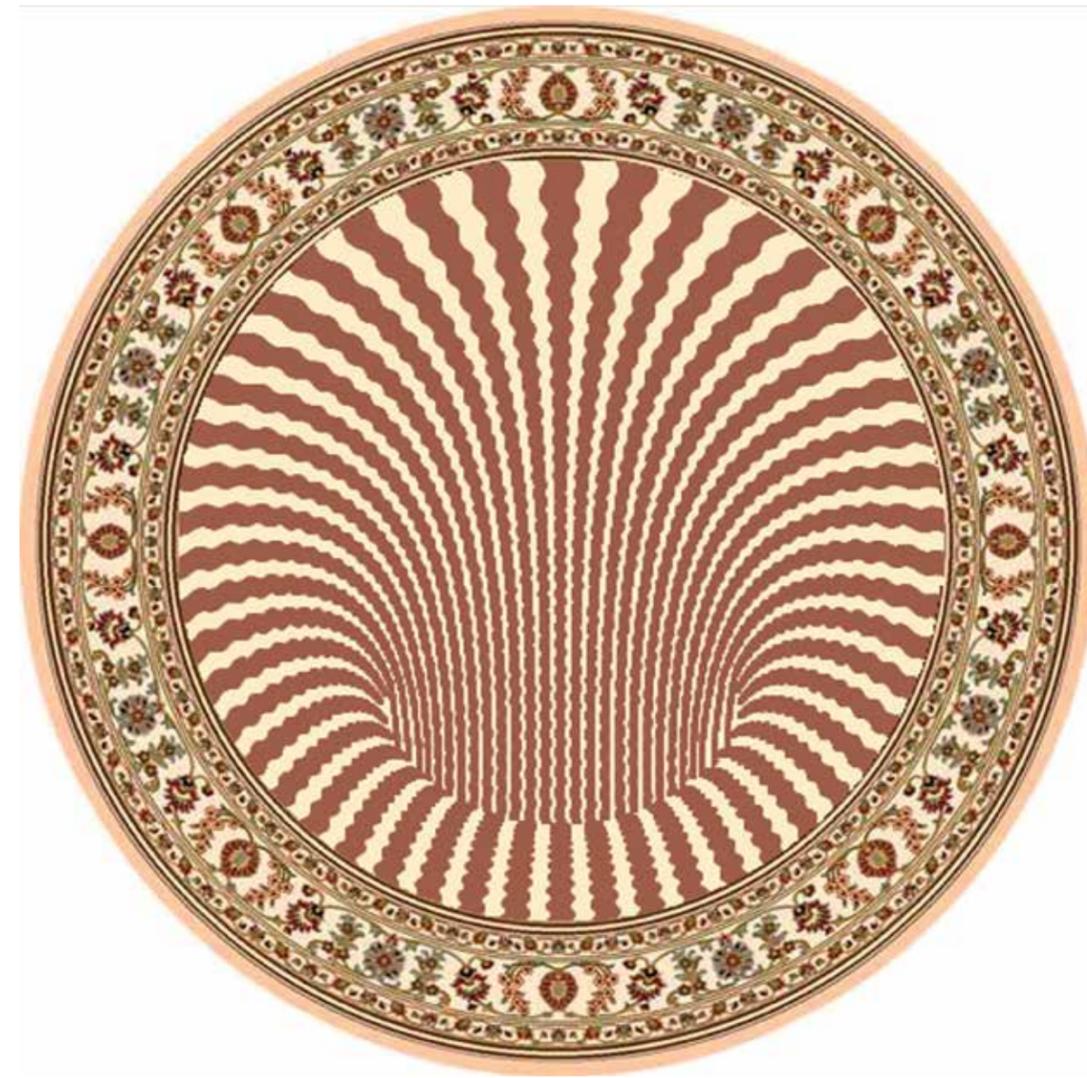
FA: Collaboration is the hardest thing, and I do not mean working with curators. Curators are like glue in the art world, they bring together people who have different modes of thinking; they bring an overview. I, personally, do not want to collaborate at present.

RB: Tell me about your own practice then.

FA: I have little interest in modernism. I am drawing upon a time when art was not something separate but instead it was a part of everyday life. The carpet-making process, and the symbols within the carpets, become part of my own personal explorations into life. I have been involved in a number of different religions over the years – Christianity, Islam, Krishna and Sufism; for me they are all ways of exploring myself. I used to think of my art as something that I did on the side, but I came to understand that it did not work like that.

RB: So you do not view your artistic development as being separate from your development as an individual?

FA: Indeed. It started as a personal journey for me, but for the next step I must destroy what has gone before. I think that anything, if it is to move on, must be prepared to do this. I often subconsciously understand what I am doing; it starts from the subconscious and then becomes something visual. What interests me most at present is working directly with the carpet-makers, being involved in the process, when the hand and the head come together in the material. I do not consider myself an artist really, more an explorer. I have no sympathy with artists who seek self-expression. That is bullshit. We are all human together and that is what matters.



RB: How does selling work to decorate the walls of the well-heeled tie in with your and YARAT's agendas?

FA: I have to sell to live. It comes down to energy, though. When you give of your energy you should be suitably recompensed for that. The gallery deals with the sales of the work which, in itself, can be problematic; they want an artist to do more of that which they know will sell, which can end up spoiling them. I am always keen to work with any institutions; I have more connection with the people I am working for than. I am doing a commission for free at the moment for one. Personally, I do not need a car or stuff like that. I even like to make sure

that I share my studio with other artists; I do not want to feel that I have something that I might then become worried about losing. When you do not have anything, then everything is yours. —**CCQ**

Faig Ahmed's solo exhibition Omni Mutantur, Nihil Interit was at Montoro 12 Contemporary Art, Rome, Italy 12 March – 24 April 2015
faigahmed.com

Hole, Faig Ahmed, 2011
Woollen handmade carpet, 100 x 100cm
Courtesy of the artist and Yay Gallery