

HONORING HONAR: Afghan Mural Art in Brattleboro, Vermont.



Photograph by Josh Parr.

▲ **Artlords** at BMAC
Pop-Up Exhibition,
October 17, 2022,
courtesy of BMAC.

BY TONY
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PHOTOS COURTESY
OF TAPE ART UNLESS
OTHERWISE NOTED.

For two weeks during August 2022, a series of 17 remarkable wall murals greeted passersby at several locations in downtown Brattleboro, Vt. Sponsored by the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center (BMAC), the murals were the brainchild of Kirsten Martsi, the museum's Manager of Education and Community Engagement Programs. Martsi assembled a team of five Afghan refugee artists and three Rhode Island Tape Art masters to create a tribute to "honar," which means "art" in the Afghanistan language, Dari, and more specifically, "mural art." This project had the intention of preserving culture, helping to manage the pain of displacement for an exiled community, as well as communicating and connecting with the artists' most recent neighbors in the Brattleboro community.

Tape Art is defined as the use of colored vinyl tape to create temporary wall images that can be easily removed. In Brattleboro, green and blue tape was used to fasten an entire mural to the wall and to create images that incorporated photographic fragments from murals the Afghan artists had made in Kabul.

The five Afghan artists—Marwa, Negina, Meetra, Zuhra and Abdullah (only first names are used to protect relatives still in Afghanistan)—are members of a worldwide organization called **ArtLords**. Beginning in 2014 in Kabul, they, along with 50 of their talented and dedicated colleagues, painted more than 2,000 murals on **blast walls**, a series of concrete slab barriers that were deployed to protect public buildings in the city from terrorist bombings. These walls had become depressing signs of war. For the ArtLords, the murals were a way to use the “soft power of art” to call for peace and to advocate for social justice (especially the rights for women).

When the Taliban came to power in 2021, they whitewashed the blast wall murals, viewing them as a threat to their authoritarian regime. Many ArtLords fled to other countries, and those five found their way to southern Vermont, with about 100 other Afghan refugees. Here, the BMAC was able to link them up with the Tape Artists. Their unique methods made it possible to fuse photographic representations of the original blast wall murals with tape designs to create new, temporary murals that resurrected and transformed the original images.

The series of exhibits began on the north retaining wall of the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center with a mural representing, with green tape, the five

ArtLord muralists creating two piercing eyes, original photographic fragments mounted on vinyl from a blast wall mural they had made in front of the spy agency in Afghanistan. The title for the display, “I See You,” is the same as it was in the original depiction. This was the case for every wall display in the Brattleboro series. Each included a composite label consisting of a replicated

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photograph of the original mural, along with texts in two languages. Difficult as it is to discern the intent of the artists in this reconstructed

version, we can imagine that the eyes are not so much prying as they are bearing witness to the rebirth of Afghan cultural expression.

The integration of materials and imagery in these murals was remarkable. The ArtLord artists selected the subject matter, created the composition and much of the visual material for every mural. They were shown how to engineer the tape applications by their Tape Art collaborators, who also assisted with the murals’ fabrication. Green and blue tape was used on site and also in the museum to create some



▲ **I See You**, at Brattleboro Museum and Art Center.

▼ **I See You** (Kabul mural), ArtLords celebrate the completion of their blastwall mural



▲ Thank You, Albania,
Brooks Memorial Library,



Photograph by Kelly Flechter.

◀ Thank You, Albania,
Brooks Memorial Library,
ArtLords artist creates
wheelbarrow image with
green and blue tape using
photograph of original
blastwall mural as a guide,
courtesy of BMAC.



▲ My Country, I Shall
Build You Again, BMAC.

of the more detailed imagery. The museum elements were fashioned on *tulle*, a cloth that allowed for tape application on the walls.

The art professionals showed a great deal of respect for one another. Commenting on their collaboration, Tape Artist Michael Townsend said: “As muralists, [the ArtLords] think big and are used to executing quickly, making magic out of thin air.” His colleague, Leah Smith, added: “It’s been really great having five people here—jump in, try a new medium—going out in public on the first try.” ArtLord artist Abdullah responded: “This is a new experience for all of us. It is very interesting and fun.” The local community also had the opportunity to witness the installation of the murals and to observe their creation from start to finish.

The Brooks Memorial Library, on its north, exterior wall, featured a parade of tape figures trailing a wheelbarrow carrying the country of Afghanistan depicted by a map. The wheelbarrow and map, photographic reproductions on a vinyl banner from the original mural, were worked with green and blue tape to blend into the picture’s composition. The joy of freedom celebrating the arrival of new neighbors is infused into an earlier welcome that was given to Afghan refugees when they came to Albania. Hence, the title “Thank you, Albania.” Now the wheelbarrow, a safe haven, has a new home in Vermont.

At the BMAC, another mural called for a new Afghanistan that will be rebuilt through the inclusion of women. The mural, “My Country: I Shall Build You Again,” shows a woman from the original version embracing a familiar shape, the map of Afghanistan. It is indeed her country, too. The Brattleboro version amplifies the reconstruction theme and provides two tape figures, one a man, the other a woman, bringing stones to help complete the job. Not only is the rebuilding brought out more dramatically, but the participation of men is now seen as part of the process. The mural suggests that the task is one that all people everywhere must support.

A high wall on the side of the Latchis Theater carried a heart-rending image of an American C17 plane leaving Afghanistan while young Afghans [represented by broken hearts] are still holding onto the plane’s wings and tires trying to escape the Taliban. Green figures stand below, arms upraised to say “good-bye” to those onboard the aircraft as well as lament (blue hearts) for the people left behind. “The Betrayal,” is a chilling one for viewers. The ArtLords “see us” as well. But, by giving voice to the voiceless their art opens people’s minds to new prospects, growth and healing.

The weight of loss is compellingly presented in another BMAC mural, “Patient Stone.” The caption under the photograph of the original object, a large stone coated in blue, tells the story: This stone witnessed one of the most terrible terrorist incidents

when a school was bombed. The stone was covered in blood. ArtLords painted over the stone with the names of the women martyred. One father described the sorrow of losing his daughter as a crushing weight, which is the inspiration for the tape artwork, a heart-rending reminder of the need for connection and compassion.

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not useless anymore, or maybe hopeless anymore. My country, my culture is still alive there [in those murals] not dead." Negina said the murals have helped her communicate common values and shared concerns and made her feel welcome in her new home: "In [Afghanistan] we speak Persian, but the common language that we have in Brattleboro and Vermont, is our art. So we can speak very well through our arts with the community that we have here."

Martsi is delighted with the response the mural project has generated and would like to see more community engagement through similar endeavors. She believes that "Art is a great communication tool, and a great platform for people to come together." Martsi spoke about the value of public art, especially street art, to reach out to a broader audience, to raise important social issues, to engage community response, and to move toward a resolution of concerns as elaborated in the ArtLords' mission statement.

The ArtLords state: "Creating a relationship between people and art, by bringing art to the people, allows for a much-needed psychological shift that opens up people's minds to new prospects. ArtLords will thereby act as a platform that allows for the use of the arts for specific tasks that measurably contribute to consent building on any given subject and that contribute to the positive transformation of society." ✖

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Special recognition is given to Kirsten Martsi, Erin Jenkins, and Danny Lichtenfeld of the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center for their help and support.

▼ The Betrayal, Latchis Theater



▲ Patient Stone, BMAC