

Faig Ahmed is an Azerbaijani contemporary visual artist who is best known for his surrealist weavings which integrate visual distortions into traditional oriental rugs. Ahmed graduated from the sculpture program at the Azerbaijan State Academy of Fine Arts in Baku. In 2007, Ahmed's work was included in the Azerbaijan's first pavilion in the Venice Biennale. While Ahmed has created artworks in multiple media, including sculpture, video, and installation, he is best known for his surrealist sculptural textiles, which apply optical illusions in the form of often psychedelic visual manipulations to traditional Islamic rugs. Ahmed's rug sculptures are held in notable public collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Seattle Art Museum, and RISD Museum.

Tell us about your early influences.

FA: As any other Azeri family we had carpets everywhere – on the floor, on the walls, in each room. I had a carpet in my room, too. I was always playing with the patterns of the carpet imagining there were roads, trees, dragons etc. One day when my parents left for countryside, I decided to change the places of the patterns and cut the carpet into pieces. Of course I never managed to gather the pieces together. I was waiting for my parents to come and punish me, but they didn't. They just took the carpets away from my room forever.

You are mostly recognized for your rugs. How did you decide to start working with rugs and what was involved in this process?

FA: I started researching ancient symbols and found a lot of similarities in different cultures all around the globe. We could call it anthropological research of cultures that have never been connected with each other, despite the symbols carrying similar meanings. I started finding these symbols in the carpets and each symbol has its own meaning so it's basically a language. A carpet is a kind of book which you can read if you know the words. When I made up my mind to work with a carpet as an art object it was very difficult because you can't make anything with a perfect and complete object like this. It was a complicated period of my life and I realized that I have to change myself to see these everyday objects differently. It has given the carpet either new life or a total death because the old meaning was destroyed completely but at the same time it's got a whole new meaning.

We featured your “It is what it is” series in CI’s current issue. Can you briefly explain about this project?

FA: In 2017, Bjorn Geldhof curated this project at Yarat Contemporary Art Centre in Baku. “It is what it is” is an old Azeri saying emphasizing a sense of imperturbability, an attitude of accepting things how they are and have been for many years in the past. It is a state of mind both fulfilling and reconciling with life how it is. The works in this exhibition draw from research into the social habitat of Azeri people living outside the capital Baku. They explore gender relations and social structures within traditional Azerbaijani communities and play upon symbolic gestures, rituals and objects specific to traditional Azeri communities. The exhibition investigates relations to sexuality and death, addressing social taboos and individual trauma. Through this show, I urged towards an understanding of a disappearing cultural practice. Stripped of any kind of melancholy the works register traditions as Eastern Practices taking place on the border between Asia and Europe, between East and West.

We have chosen “Virgin” one of the seven produced works for this project for the current issue’s cover. Can you explain more about this work?

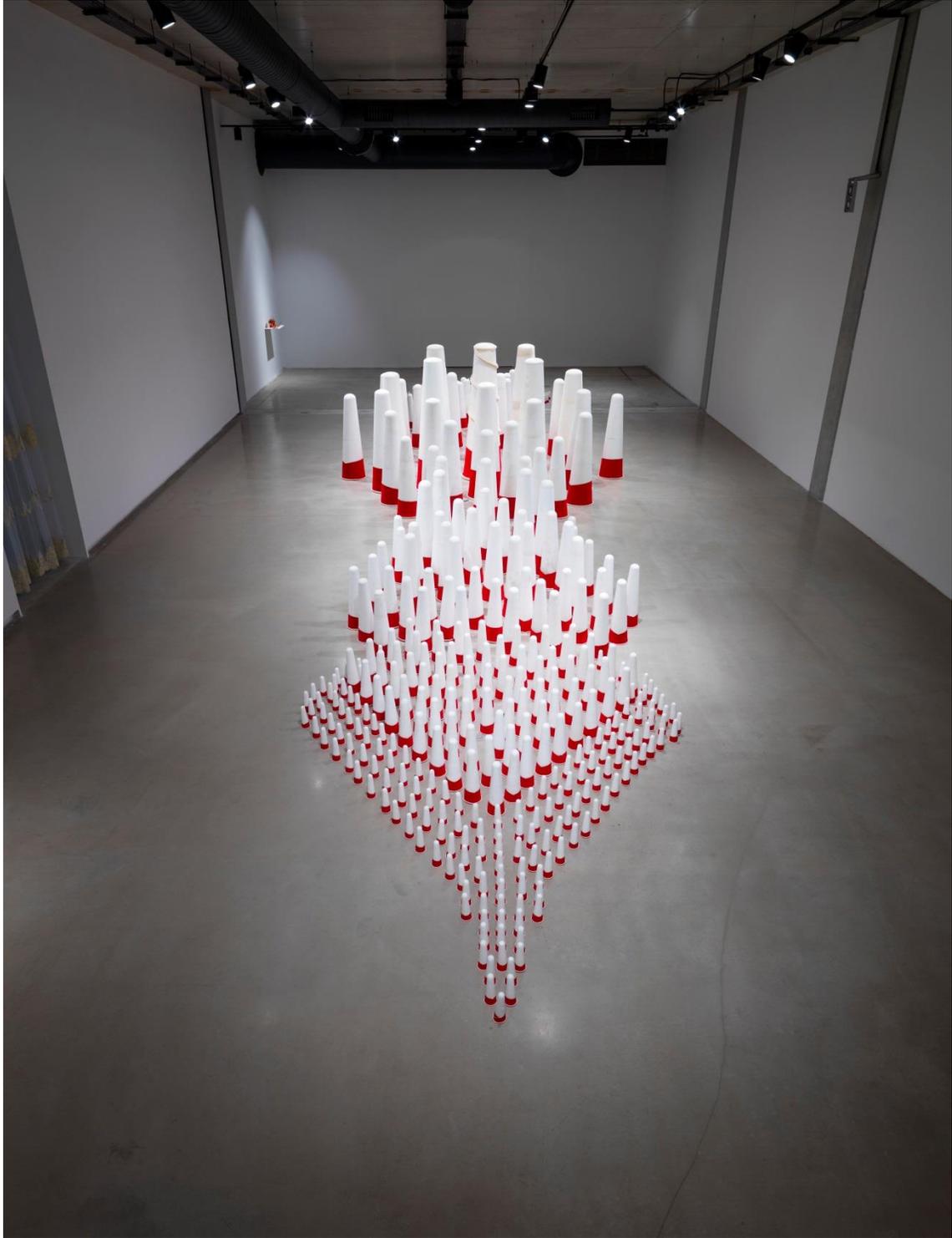
FA: A hand-woven carpet entitled Virgin (2016), stands in conversation with The Biggest. The titles alone are suggestive enough to understand the juxtaposition within the first room of the exhibition. Virgin is a hand-woven carpet with a traditional pattern that gradually transforms into a thick red mass. The work continues on a series of signature textile works by me and reveals unspoken local narratives on male-female gender relations hidden inside the crafts and artisanal practices. More specifically the work draws from the early practice of unmarried girls producing one exquisite textile as part of the treasure she brings into the marriage. In the other word it is suggesting the transition from a girl to a woman.

Is life in contemporary Azerbaijan changing? As an artist, do you feel that it is important to embrace the past, while breaking away from some of the possibly outdated traditions and stereotypes?

FA: You can't move forward without leaving some parts of tradition and culture behind, but it's tradition that observes and examines a country. Azerbaijanis are very flexible. We have been conquered many times and have been a part of different empires, spoken many languages and changed alphabets many times – from Farsi to Arabic, Cyrillic and Latin. At the same time, the majority of the people use traditional elements of home decoration – like carpets – to connect with some kind of cultural ground under their feet. It's a delicate balance. You have to be sensitive to changes while keeping your identity and remembering your roots.



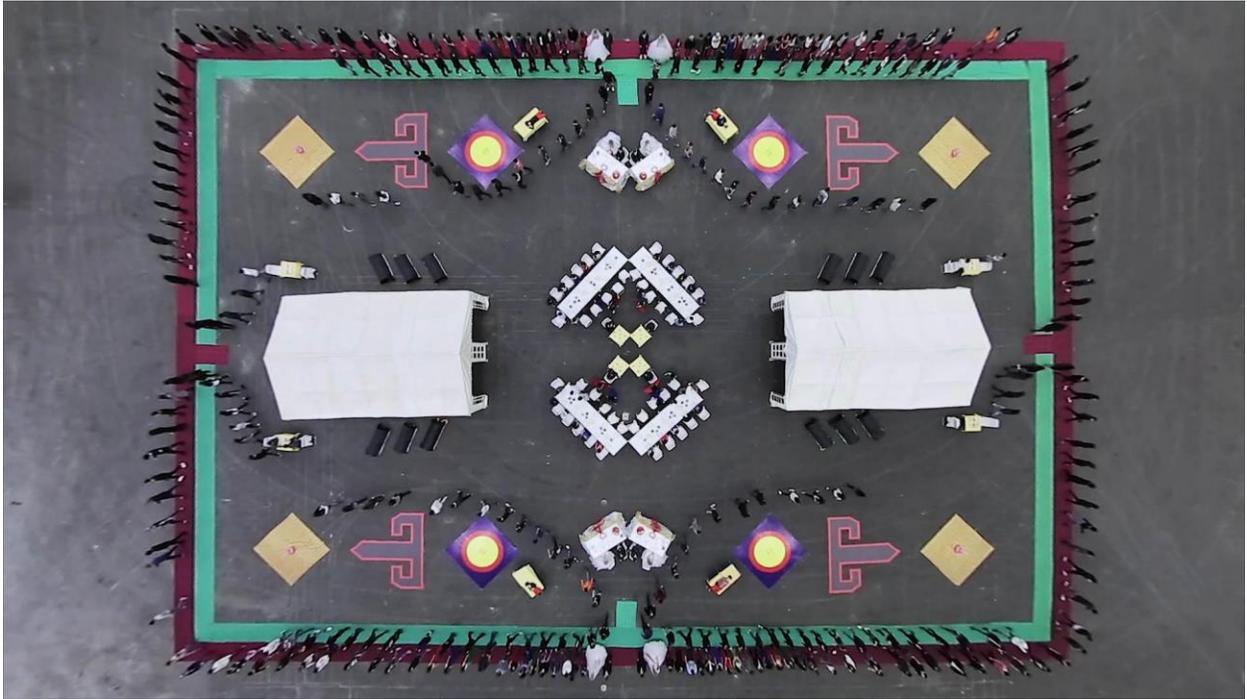
"It is what it is" series, Nine nights, 2016, Stuffed fabric, 350x250x170 cm, Photo credit: Patrick Verbruggen



"It is what it is" series, Azman (the sugar piece), 2016, Sugar cones, Dimensions variable, Photo credit: Patrick Verbruggen



"It is what it is" series, Silk way, Raw silk, silk scarf, hair, 250x100 cm, Photo credit: Patrick Verbruggen



"It is what it is" series, Social anatomy, 2016, Still frame from video, Video length: 08:37