Review: The Other Kabul: Remains of the Garden


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Published as the catalogue for the eponymous 2022 exhibition at Kunstmuseum Thun in Thun, Switzerland, The Other Kabul: Remains of the Garden seeks to both document the exhibition and delve somewhat deeper into the show’s unifying concept of the garden as a metaphor for, well, the world. In addition to descriptions and photographs of the works in the exhibition, The Other Kabul also features a number of essays (by Haleh Anvari, Taqi Akhlaqi, and Robert Pogue Harrison) and additional photographs—most notably Latifa Zafar Attaii’s haunting images of daily life in Afghanistan and photo excerpts from Oriane Zerah’s ongoing project Roses Under Thorns—that help ground the artwork in the context evoked by the show’s title. All text is presented in both German and English.

As the back cover blurb states, the show reflects on “the garden as a microcosm of the entire world. The garden incorporates all the beauty and wonder of human life in the company of plants and animals, without ignoring the crises of the past and present.” It’s an ambitious project. Perhaps to narrow the field somewhat, the show links the metaphor specifically to Kabul’s historic Bagh-e-Babur (Babur’s Garden), laid out in the sixteenth century and subject to amendment, alteration, destruction, and reconstruction over the last five centuries.

Artworks range from Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi’s large neon flowers to Jeanno Gaussi’s banquet table settings bearing Dari inscriptions; to Monica Ursina Jager’s abstract chlorophyll-derived watercolors; and Parastou Forouhar’s chilling calendar prints, Domestic Suicide for All Seasons. Drawings, paintings, photographs, sculpture, mixed media, and video installations are all represented in matte finish with excellent textual descriptions.
As a paperback *The Other Kabul* lacks the durability of a hardcover, but the very reasonable price may compensate for this, and the value of having a reference for the work of 17 lesser known artists—most from central Asia and working in exile—is high, especially for institutions looking to diversify their collections. The volume lacks a table of contents or an index, but features a limited number of bibliographical references and an appendix with biographies of the authors and a detailed list of the works in the exhibition.

While the central idea of the show and this catalogue—described in the foreword by Helen Hirsch, director of Kunstmuseum Thun, as “the garden as a space where things happen and experiences are had”—may be too diffuse to ever completely address, *The Other Kabul* generously bestows the gift of exposure to the work of a number of exciting artists who have not yet shown in North America. For that reason, it is recommended to all individuals and institutions interested in global contemporary art.