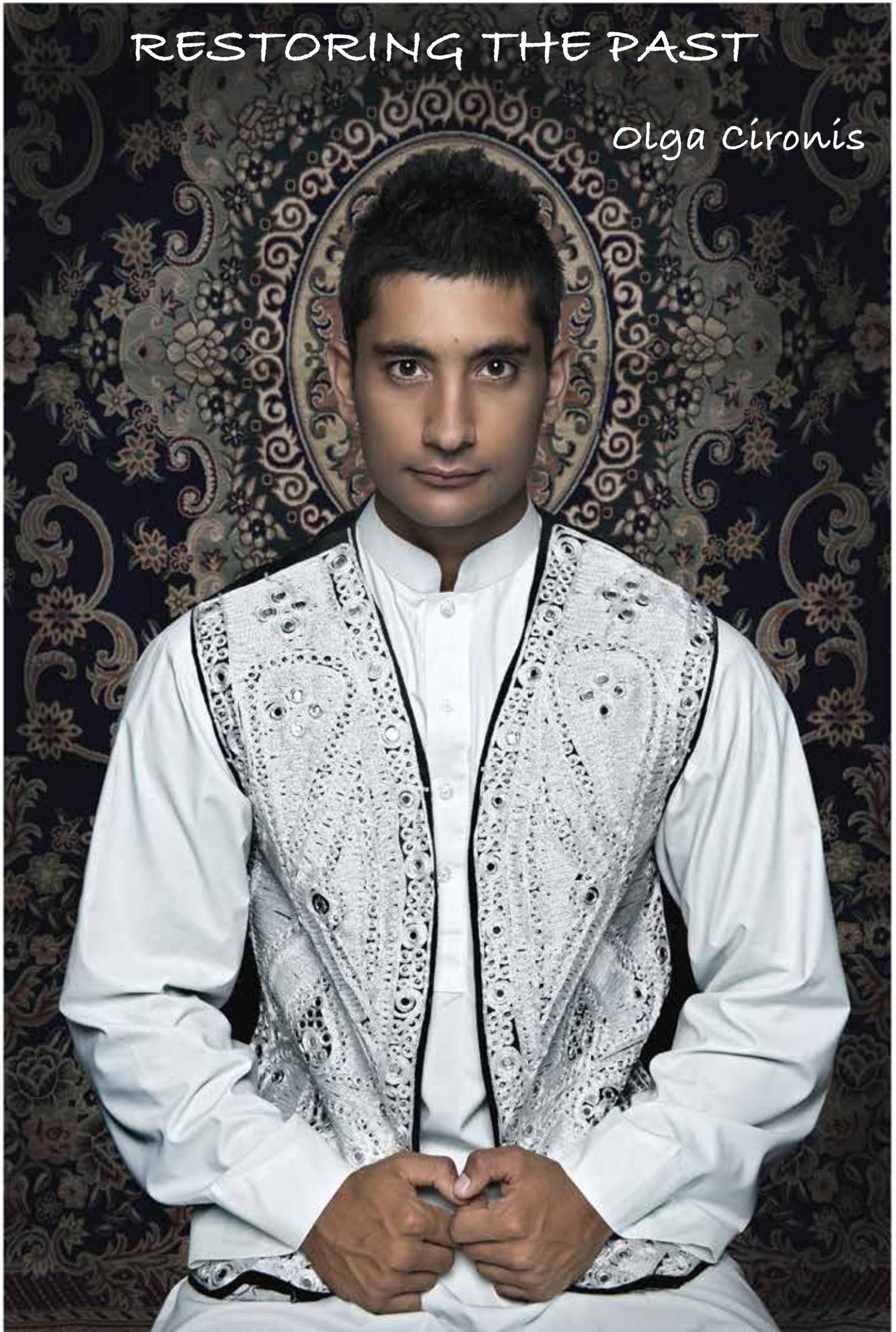


# RESTORING THE PAST

*Olga Cironis*



Photography Olga Cironis with Eva Fernandez, 2010



Opening the two Afghan prayer rugs which began the residency

An artist embarking on a residency approaches the project very much as an anthropologist might: researching, observing, asking questions, participating, being part yet apart. When OLGA CIRONIS set out on a six-month residency at Fremantle Arts Centre in 2011 to interpret two items from the Fremantle Art Collection she began with a question: *can one ever escape one's given cultural, social and gendered identity and recreate oneself new?*

Cironis arrived in Australia as a child with her family, people of Greek origin. She retains a strong interest in this inheritance, the culture and the artefacts of Catholicism, the crafts and customs of her forebears, the language and the food. Her immigrant experience is one common to a large part of Australia's population, many of whom, as generations grow up here, are all too conscious of the loss of their earlier



*'Into the Woods Alone' reveals the tragedy of civil war*



Olga Cironis, *Into the Woods Alone*, 2013

*'it seems that the world overall remains focused on diluting and whitewashing cultural differences to create a manageable uniformity'*

roots. One can sense her empathy and her curiosity when embarking on a journey with people who have come from a different direction to be part of the same multicultural melting pot.

Cironis's interest in and involvement with members of the Afghan community in Western Australia, descendants of the early cameleers, invites a very interesting comparison. Although Afghans are reported to have reached Australia as early as 1838, the first cameleers (just three men) arrived in Melbourne in 1860 with 24 camels which would join the Burke and Wills expedition. In 1866, one hundred more camels arrived, this time with 31 Afghan cameleers, and so began a long and not always pleasant relationship for these new arrivals. In addition to the hardships of life in outback Australia, they experienced discrimination because of their religion and their appearance. Nevertheless, over time members of the Afghan community began to prosper and were able to create settlements and build permanent mosques, in Adelaide in 1888 and in Perth in 1905.

For many immigrants, links to one's homeland gradually become tenuous and disappear, leaving only a remnant such as a name, but for a war torn land which Afghanistan has been for centuries, the links with Afghans here, even over generations, are still strong and close. It is those who have refuge in safe countries who seem to offer a lifeline to those who remain, as yet to escape, to recreate themselves anew.

Cironis was given two prayer rugs with which to embark on her journey, 19th century Afghan prayer rugs with worn edges and the wear marks imprinted by their use five times a day for decades, perhaps generations, often in the open on the bare earth. 'For me these human markings and the worn edges were as important as the rugs themselves. Like fingerprints the worn areas of each prayer rug was a physical and potent reminder of people in prayer,' she says.

Cironis's final exhibition of her residency was titled *Fajr*. *Fajr*, she explains, like dawn, is the beginning of a day's journey filled with many stories about the people from Afghanistan who have settled in Australia. *Fajr* 'is my interpretation of what it means to live life marked by personal and collective history'.

The photographs shown in *Fajr* are portraits of the Afghan friends Cironis made while on this journey, Saliha

and her family, Qais and his family, Australians of Afghan heritage who shared with her their personal and often painful histories. In generations to come, such portraits made in the early part of 21st century Australia will be as revelatory to those who see them as 16th century Dutch portraits are to us today.

#### **Delving into the generations, this time on a personal voyage of discovery**

In 2012 Olga Cironis travelled to Greece on a personal journey to learn about her own family's experiences during the Greek Civil War (1945-49). It is said that every generation writes its own history. It is nevertheless the victors whose stories rise to the surface to become the accepted narrative of the new reality.

Cironis's resulting exhibition, *Into the Woods Alone* (held at Turner Galleries in 2013) brought together a collection of memories, stories, photographs and objects to reveal the tragedy of civil war when neighbours and former friends turn on one another, betray and kill each other. In order to survive and heal and build a new society often the only way is for people to suppress their worst memories, and try to forget. Is this possible?

Many Greeks took refuge in the neighbouring Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Albania and from those times in the 1940s to the recent unification of Europe and 'the subsequent political and financial collapses, it seems that the world overall remains focused on diluting and whitewashing cultural differences to create a manageable uniformity' (Paola Anselmi, 2013). Cironis's self portrait with stitched lips expresses this cruel self censorship.

One of the most poignant objects collected by Cironis was a bound handwoven blanket, found in a cabin in the Gramos Mountains in Northern Greece, the last refuge of the partisans. It may have belonged to a shepherd or to a partisan and it may well contain personal or precious possessions, but Cironis has chosen not to open the bundle, believing that 'objects like this blanket are cultural DNA and a link in a shared collective consciousness which remains unbroken through time and distance'.

#### **References**

*Into the Woods Alone*, catalogue essay Paola Anselmi 2013  
*Fajr*, catalogue essay 2011  
[www.olgacironis.com](http://www.olgacironis.com)