

The Galaxy I Hide in, the Pile of Debris I Return to

Artist and writer Pieter Paul Pothoven uses diverse media to tell stories, drawing on various materials' histories to imbue his work with an intimacy between substrate and historical context. He engages directly with the objects he displays, by delving into their political significance. Sometimes this concerns the economic value of the material, and at other times it serves to reactivate a forgotten function of a historical object. Pothoven's investigations into a given subject can span years, and he sometimes returns to a project in short intervals over a longer period. He recently paused one body of ongoing research, which created space for him to return to his lapis lazuli project (started in 2009) and consider it in another light.

To better understand my renewed look at lapis lazuli and my trip to Afghanistan in 2009, I think it's fitting to begin with my ongoing research into the history of the Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action (RARA). RARA was an activist collective working in opposition to racism, oppression, and exploitation in the Netherlands during the 1980s and '90s. I became acquainted with one of the core members of RARA in 2017, and since then I've been collaborating with several folks who were involved in the collective to create an archive for the international Institute of Social History (IISH/IISG) and a series of works. One of the people of RARA with whom I worked quite closely suddenly passed away in February 2021, I decided

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hunger worsened by Western sanctions—this recent history all weighs on me. Anxious messages arrive from the people I spent time with in Kabul who are now part of the diaspora and with whom I still keep in touch. Memories from my 2009 trip come flooding back: the American soldiers barking orders as they cleared a way through a traffic jam in their Humvees; the 'Not for Afghans' sign on the door of cafés where foreigners hung out and alcohol was served. My aversion to the Western presence in Afghanistan grew by the day, and yet I was there myself. What was my role and place as kharaji in Afghanistan with regard to the lapis lazuli in my studio in Amsterdam?

On one of my last days in Afghanistan, I cycled through the sandy streets of Kabul. My left hand was on the handlebars and my right held a 52-kilogram sack of lapis lazuli propped on the luggage carrier. My eyes were glued to the road, so as not to hit a pothole. It was less than ten minutes by bike from the trader to the Dutch embassy. During the first week, at the monthly reception organized by the embassy for Dutch persons in Afghanistan, I told the cultural attaché about my project and expressed that I wanted to take lapis lazuli back to the Netherlands. 'No problem, we'll get those stones to the Netherlands,' he responded, clearly drunk. But when I stood in his office with the sack of rocks, he was astonished by the sheer volume; 'Have you paid all the necessary taxes?' I cycled back to the trader, who—and I hadn't even mentioned the word tax yet—said: 'How much did you pay for the stones again? Four hundred and eighty-five dollars, was it?' An hour before, after a week

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to temporarily suspend the project and take a break, clean up my studio, and reorganize my archive. In this process I came across all kinds of old projects—including my work on lapis lazuli.

In 2008, I read about a complex of caves in north-eastern Afghanistan where lapis lazuli had been mined for more than 6,000 years. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Lapis lazuli is a deep-blue rock that is the raw material for the manufacture of ultramarine—the illustrious and valuable pigment used by painters such as Vermeer and Titian. The complex of caves I had read about is the source of the highest quality of this breathtaking blue color, and is situated in one of the most unstable regions of the world. In 2009, following a year of preparations, I bought a one-way ticket to Kabul and ended up staying in Afghanistan for seven weeks. This trip included a visit to the remote lapis lazuli mines at Sar-e-Sang in Badakhshan province.

After my visit to Afghanistan, I worked on various photographic series that drew on this research. In *Absentia* (2010) is a set of three photographs, each almost entirely black. I was only able to visit the mining region for a short time. In the two days I spent there, I took as many pictures as possible of the village of Sar-e-Sang, the miners, the valley, the Kokcha River, and the dust-filled darkness of the mine shafts. Back in the Netherlands, I was hesitant to show these pictures from 'over there'. Ultimately, I used just three images of the caves for *In Absentia*. This selection reflected a void that has emerged because 'we',

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of daily negotiations, I'd handed him a bundle containing considerably more dollars. A government official showed up and arranged the paperwork and collected a handful of tens in taxes. I biked back to the embassy and handed over the documents. With a parting 'It'll be fine' from the cultural attaché, I left the embassy. Two days later I boarded my flight. Months passed before I was told that the stones were on their way from the embassy in Kabul to the Dutch army base at Tarin Kowt. There they were loaded into a shipping crate and flown via Kandahar to Eindhoven by military aircraft. I picked up the crate at the naval base in Amsterdam—without further payment. Now a large part of that network has been dismantled; the army bases at Tarin Kowt and Kandahar, the Dutch embassy in Kabul, and even part of the naval base in Amsterdam, are gone.

I cleaned up my studio and discovered the shipping crate (which for years I'd schlepped from one studio to the next) and a shopping bag full of jars of pigment extracted from the lapis lazuli, ranging from faded gray to the purest blue. The color of peace, virtue, the sacred, the infinite, and the void—this material has held countless symbolic meanings and exerted a powerful attraction over people for thousands of years, myself included. It doesn't surprise me that people see it as a remedy for depression, perhaps because it's not difficult to lose yourself in this color. When I'm feeling down there's always a part of me that wishes to disappear. How does this 'healing blue' relate to the now uneasy memories I confront when viewing this crate from the present? So much has happened in the past years.

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foreigners, wanted what was 'there' to be 'here.' One could think of the darkness as a negative of all the blue that can be found in museums around the world: from Tutankhamun's death mask to the glistening, moistened lip of the Girl with a Pearl Earring. According to Jørgen Wadum, who restored the painting in 1994, Vermeer was a fervent user of ultramarine. He even utilized it as underpainting for his shadows.

Upon returning to the Netherlands, I investigated the postcolonial historiography of the mines. From John Wood, who in 1841 was the first European mapmaker to describe the mines and make a schematic representation of them (Shaft. Gallery. Drop.), to Karl Brückl, who in the 1930s was the first kharaji ('foreigner' or 'stranger') to take pictures at Sar-e-Sang. Seven photographs by Brückl accompanied the scientific article *Die Minerällagerstätten von Ostafghanistan in Neues Jahrbuch für Mineralogie* in 1936. He shot his images with the first commercially produced Leica 35mm camera. In my 2015 installation *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang*, I used slide projectors from the same brand to show a piece of rock that comes from the mountain Brückl photographed. In collaboration with the Geological Technical Laboratory of VU University in Amsterdam, I produced extremely thin slices from this stone that could be used as slides. Clicking through these 'slides' takes the viewer on a journey—so to speak—through a material that has played a key role in 'Western' visual culture, which comes from the far reaches of what is now known as Afghanistan and was created millions of years

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Through my political awareness—in part prompted by my research into RARA's anti-imperialist resistance—I've arrived at a very different perspective on this project, which I know understand as inextricably linked to the now-defunct foreign military infrastructure in Afghanistan.

For the work *Consignor Consignee (2021–2022)*, I repurposed materials that the crate is made out of—staples, dirty planks with woodworm traces, a polypropylene bag with holes, adhesive tapes, and a sealed packing slip with documents—as carriers for various pigments: from a fine blue-gray coming from the dust that swirls through the mine shafts and has been the cause of pneumoconiosis in miners for millennia, to the lauded warm reddish-blue that is so well known in art. I wanted to show these different colors, in relation to the transport by which these rare stones came to the Netherlands. How does one regard this material, this color, when the situation surrounding its procurement—the war, the military infrastructure that enabled the transport—is known? The immaterial significance of ultramarine collides with the qualities of the shipping crate that foreground the socioeconomic reality of this color, including the Dutch military infrastructure in Afghanistan, which seems to be forgotten all too quickly. There is always fresh cause to reflect on my time in Afghanistan and shift my attention from other, newer projects back to this one. Every time I pick up a piece of lapis, I gaze with a different awareness at this material that was named after the sky for its flecks of pyrite that sparkle like stars, and its traces of calcite that fan out

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ago by extreme pressure and heat. It is through this deep underground process that the ultimate blue emerges. In his book *What Color Is the Sacred?*, Michael Taussig names lapis lazuli the 'body of the color' ultramarine. Since the industrial production of synthetic ultramarine blue began around 1826, the experience of the color has become further and further removed from the lapis lazuli stone. The experience of the color was once inextricably tied to a rare and enigmatic material; if one encountered ultramarine blue prior to 1826, then they were dealing with lapis lazuli that originated from a place that no one could precisely pinpoint on a map. Indeed, ultra-mare—as seen from Italy—lies somewhere beyond the Mediterranean. Now that this color is endlessly reproducible both physically and digitally, it is difficult to imagine the effect on an observer in the time of Titian or Vermeer when they saw this purest of blues. In *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang*, I wished to create a physical experience of the color that would reconnect this ultramarine hue to its body, lapis lazuli, once more. I also wanted the project to reflect on the postcolonial historiography of the mines at Sar-e-Sang, and in particular reflect on the images resulting from the interaction between the exhausted body of the photographer and what appeared to him as an inhospitable landscape. I remember, with every step that I took, that the landscape breathed: You don't belong here.

The shameful exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the ensuing chaos, the Taliban's repressive policies, the

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like galaxies. The material—unchanged for millions of years—beckons the beholder to lose themselves in it, while the pile of rubble that surrounds it, caused by the rapid succession of catastrophes, grows skyward.

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This text is an adaptation of a conversation between Vincent van Velsen (curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) and Pieter Paul Pothoven, originally published in Dutch by the online literary platform DIG in 2022.

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