

FRIEZE

OPINION

Aziz Hazara Sends US Military Waste Home

The artist traces tonnes of war rubbish back through the machinery of supply, consumption and disposal

BY AHMAD AZIZY | 04 AUG 26



This piece appears in the columns section of frieze 261, 'Detritus'

I had seen the object before, in photographs of one of Aziz Hazara's earlier shows. It was handed to me during a gathering at his Berlin apartment one evening in late October 2024, so I could take it to New York for his forthcoming exhibition at SculptureCenter. The apartment was filled with people, the usual mix of artists and friends who circle around Hazara in Berlin; the object passed through several hands before reaching mine, each person reacting in a manner only a butt plug could evoke. Hazara explained he had found it – along with 19 others – in a shipping container he purchased, filled with US military leftovers from the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. I found myself thinking not about its history but about something more practical: would carrying a butt plug through airport

security be embarrassing? Later, I put it in a small plastic bag and tucked it in my luggage between some clothes. In the end, nobody said anything. Objects, it turns out, travel more easily than the discomfort they sometimes elicit.



Aziz Hazara, *Coming Home*, 2026, process documentation.
Courtesy: the artist

A few days after arriving in New York, I contacted Sohrab Mohebbi, the director of SculptureCenter, to arrange the hand-off. Hazara had only told him that I was bringing an object for the show. Mohebbi asked about the size and weight, presumably to figure out where to place it, or whether he should come and help carry it. I told him it was small, around 10 centimetres long, easy to carry. The first object from Bagram to complete the journey back to the United States had arrived: a butt plug in a small plastic bag, handed off at SculptureCenter. What it had been used for at Bagram, by whom and under what

circumstances, is completely unknowable.

This delivery is a minor part of the supply chain underlying Hazara's *Coming Home* (2020–26) project. *Coming Home* returns tonnes of Bagram's abandoned military leftovers to the US, with a demand that the country confront what it left behind and take permanent ownership of its waste.



Aziz Hazara, *BagramPlug*, 2024, from the 'Coming Home' series, 2021–ongoing.
Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Abbas Aliyar

To understand what Hazara is returning, we need to understand what was sent to Bagram in the first place. Supplying Bagram and other military bases in Afghanistan during the NATO war from 2001 to 2021 – and at the war's peak requiring thousands of trucks every month – consumer goods and equipment arrived by sea to Karachi and travelled overland through Pakistan along two main corridors: one entering Afghanistan through Kandahar in

the south, the other through the Khyber Pass and then to Bagram airbase near Kabul. The Pakistan route was insecure. In response to this, in 2009 the Northern Distribution Network was established, starting in Riga on the Baltic Sea and traversing Russia and Central Asia – via the routes used in the 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan War – before reaching northern Afghanistan. Weaponry was shipped from both US and European NATO bases to US military installations across the Middle East and Persian Gulf, before finally being flown into Bagram.

What arrived at Bagram was immense in its volume and variety. Not only did the US military import enough weapons to sustain a 20-year war, but they also constructed something like a US suburb, encompassing fast-food outlets, a bus system, a shopping street, swimming pools and a post exchange stocked with consumer goods from the US and beyond. The occupiers brought their full material culture – something that would eventually require disposal. During the 2014 partial drawdown alone, the US military destroyed more than 176,000 tonnes of equipment and vehicles, demolishing the material before selling the remains by weight to Afghan scrap dealers for US\$46.5 million.

Hazara grew up in Kabul during the US-led NATO war. Since the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan had been shaped at the level of ordinary daily life by the objects of foreign armies, each conflict depositing its own material layer: Soviet artillery shells repurposed as cooking vessels; US military rations sold as street food; the blast wall and the Humvee as unremarkable features of the urban landscape. Hazara did not encounter Bagram's material world from outside. His practice, however, requires him to look at it again, to ask of each object where it came from, what it was made for and what violence it carried into Afghanistan. When, in 2021, he began sending tonnes of military rubbish from Bagram back to the US, he also began carefully documenting every possible leg of the supply chain.

ترازو و تراز بلند برادران ناصری
Nasari Brother Digital Weighting Vehicle Scale

مجهز به سیستم کمپیوتری
 وزن نمودن دیجیتال، هر نوع موتورهای باربری، تیلر، ده سلند
 چکله، دینا، تانکرهای گاز مایع و تیلر با معلوم نمودن ثقلت آن

درجه ثقلت:
تاریخ:
سریال نمبر:
نمبر عراده جات:
اسم دریور:
اسم پارتنی ترانسپورت:
تشریحات مال بار شده:
وزن اول:
وزن دوم:

DUPLICATE SLIP
 DATE : 30-07-2022
 TIME S : 18:00:31
 SERIAL NO. :
 VEHICLE NO. :
 DRIVER NAME: KHAN
 PARTY NAME : KABAL
 DESCRIPTION: 8/5/1401
 1ST WEIGHT : 7200 Kgs WITHOUT DRIVER
 2ND WEIGHT : 3530 Kgs DATE: 30-07-2022
 NET WEIGHT : 3670 Kgs TIME : 18:00:31
 RS : 0 OP'S SIGN :

ترازوی تراز بلند برادران ناصری شناسنامه شده در وزن اساسی برای خریدار و فروشنده

0 9 - 0 89267 ناصری،
 ادرس: دسپچری بگرام

Aziz Hazara, *Weighbridge receipt*, 2022, from the 'Coming Home' series, 2021–ongoing.
 Courtesy: the artist

One of the foundational documents of *Coming Home* is a contract in Dari Persian, handwritten on a sheet of notepaper bearing the logo of an Austrian office supplies company called Office Discount. On stationery designed for meeting minutes and shopping lists, the contract records the sale of 3,530 kilograms of US military waste near Bagram, at US\$1,500 per tonne, for a total of US\$5,295. It is signed by buyer and seller, witnessed by a man named Hassan. The goods are described as 'usable and non-usable American things'. Hazara imposed a constraint on *Coming Home* that transforms it from a gesture into a systematic investigation: the shipments must partially retrace the same logistical routes that originally brought the goods to Bagram. The same networks, the same cargo infrastructure, now running in reverse. The payments moved through *hawala*, the informal money transfer network that has carried Afghan wealth across borders for centuries and is now the financial nervous system of the Afghan diaspora. From his Berlin studio, coordinating with contacts in Kabul, Hazara paid for the purchase, cleaning and packing of the first shipment.

One of Hazara's formal transactions involving US army waste is recorded on an Ariana Afghan Airlines cargo waybill. The waybill documents its contents with the economy of a form that considers nothing remarkable: 93 pieces, 2,000 kilograms, departure KBL, destination DXB. The national carrier of a country flying the occupation's remnants from Kabul to Dubai.

In Dubai, the shipment passed through a cargo company operating under the name Universal Express XXX. The firm is registered in a free trade zone designed to facilitate the smooth movement of goods across jurisdictions, and its invoice, dated 18 March 2024 and addressed to Hazara's Berlin home, is worth reading slowly. Under 'Description of Goods', it lists: 'Ladies' clothes (Gand Afghani). Mattress cover for bed. Dry fruit: pistachios.' *Gand* refers to a traditional style of women's dress that is widely exported for the millions of Afghans living abroad. The shipping company, fully aware of what was in the boxes, produced paperwork that places military detritus within the most mundane category of Afghan domestic life. The items travel under a borrowed identity because the world has decided that things from Afghanistan, like people from Afghanistan, require special handling at every border.



Aziz Hazara, *Bagram Dispatchery*, 2021, from the 'Coming Home' series, 2021–ongoing.
Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Zaker Mandegar

This is not unique deception. It is standard practice, the everyday adaptation of Afghan exporters to a system that has treated goods from their country with the same suspicion it has applied to their fellow citizens since the so-called war on terror began. When the shipment arrived in Berlin, German customs sought to levy import duties on the declared goods. Empire's rubbish, reclassified as traditional ladies' fashion, subject to European trade law.

In the years since Hazara organized the first shipments, some of the items have toured further, following a variety of art logistics routes to Melbourne, Beirut, Milan, Berlin, Bombay, Dubai and Sharjah. Sometimes, Hazara and I joke that the rubbish has completed the *hajj* before we have.

A few tonnes' worth of the Bagram detritus is now on view in New York. The city is, in a structural sense, downstream from the base that generated this rubbish. Hazara has been following the physical remnants of the war across three continents, each object meticulously documented, photographed and archived. What was sent out from the United States is being sent back.

Hazara himself cannot travel to New York for the exhibition because he has an Afghan passport, which is currently banned. The ladies' clothes, the mattress cover and the pistachios made it home.

'Aziz Hazara: Coming Home' will be on view at SculptureCenter, New York, from 19 September until 28 December

This article first appeared in frieze issue 261 with the headline 'Left Behind'

Main image: Aziz Hazara, Bagram Pick up, 2021, from the 'Coming Home' series, 2021–ongoing. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Zaker Mandegar