

Art in America

Why It Took This Artist 5 Years to Ship American Soldiers' Trash Back from Afghanistan

By [Emily Watlington](#) | September 24, 2026 10:12am

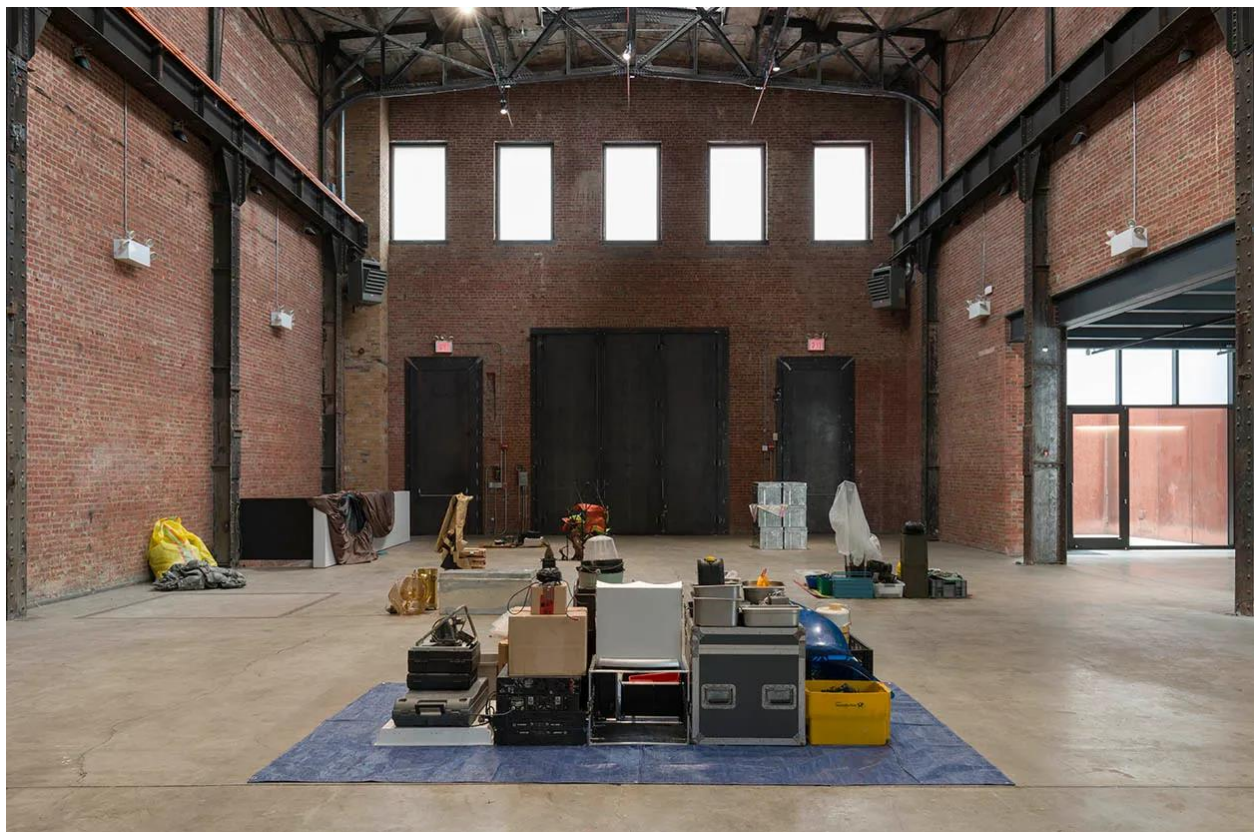


Knee pads and bags in the 2026 exhibition “Aziz Hazara: Coming Home” at SculptureCenter, New York. Photo Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist, Experimenter, and SculptureCenter.

America's longest war ended abruptly. After 20 years of fighting, in August of 2021, US troops withdrew from Afghanistan in a manner described as "disastrous" even by a congressional investigation. The Taliban's return to power was swift, though preventing it had ostensibly been the entire point of the decades-long occupation, the bombs, the hundreds of thousands of lives lost. Soon, millions faced famine as foreign aid was cut off, sanctions locked in, and Afghan assets were frozen.

This reckless negligence was palpable at Bagram Air Base, where troops left an ocean of trash in the wake of their messy departure. There, mountains of waste were visible as far as the eye could see. The artist [Aziz Hazara](#) documented as much in his video installation *I Love Bagram* (2025), commissioned for last year's Sharjah Biennial and named for the online military forum www.ilovebagram.com. Scenes show scrap workers sifting through wide views of seemingly endless detritus, played on monitors he reclaimed from the site.

Since 2021, Hazara has been trying to mail back some of the trash found on the base. SculptureCenter's director Sohrab Mohebbi had originally commissioned the work for his memorable 2022 edition of the Carnegie International, and I'd been anticipating the work's arrival ever since reading about it in the catalog, where Hazara was interviewed by curator Muheb Esmat. Finally, after five years of navigating sanctions and shell companies, the trash has arrived at SculptureCenter in New York, where it is on view through December 28.



View of the 2026 exhibition “Aziz Hazara: Coming Home” at SculptureCenter, New York. Photo Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist, Experimenter, and SculptureCenter.

The show, titled “Coming Home,” was hardly hampered by the logistical delays. Instead, the objects accrued more and more meaning as they traversed various systems. Initially, I interpreted the gesture as saying something like *here, I cleaned up your mess*. But Hazara’s is not only a clever return-to-sender gesture: It’s a brutal portrait of life under sanctions, and of the complex network of supply chains and shell companies that war leaves in its wake. “The empire is basically made up of containers and subcontractors,” Hazara quipped when we spoke over Zoom from his studio in a former GDR Central Intelligence building in Berlin.

Initially, Hazara purchased the trash from a market—called Bush Bazaar—that the American troops had set up to sell odds and ends. “It’s where you’d go if you wanted to buy something like hot chocolate,” he explained. At SculptureCenter, he is showing some of what he bought: encrusted tea kettles, dated scanners, and camo knee pads.

Since much of the world does not recognize or cooperate with the Taliban, it has been extremely difficult for anything to enter or leave Afghanistan since 2021. In turn, the waste accrued more value. Doing laps around it all with Mohebbi, I came to recognize more and more objects I’d initially clocked as simply “trash”: a bundle of rods for hanging clothing, a refugee housing tent folded up like a tarp. It was a reminder that you’ll look at objects differently when you are in material need.

Though eager for the arrival of the trash, I admit I had taken the work as a potent, if simple, conceptual gesture that one didn’t necessarily need to see to buy into. But finally traipsing among the trash last week, I found the work much more sculptural and strange than I could have anticipated. Walking through the museum, one gets a small sense of life under occupation, with the threat of militarized violence so constant it comes to feel almost banal, and this makes it not less chilling but more. “Ortho gauze” bandages join coasters with inspirational messages as two worn, insulated body bags dangle near an array of computer monitor stands. “Outside of Afghanistan,” the wall text duly notes, this conflict “was primarily experienced through images.” And indeed, experiencing its remnants in 3D is another thing altogether.



View of the 2026 exhibition “Aziz Hazara: Coming Home” at SculptureCenter, New York.
Photo Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist, Experimenter, and SculptureCenter.

For Hazara, “supply chains”—arguably his main material—“are a very imperial thing, so how do you subvert that?” His answer was, in a sense, to navigate them backward, reverse engineering some of the routes and shell corporations that brought American goods to Afghanistan in the first place. In the process, he hopes to offer a peek inside the black box.

Hazara has subverted tools of empire in other projects, too: For his work in the most recent Whitney Biennial, he donned night-vision goggles, a technology that came into its own for Operation Desert Storm, in an effort to photograph the moon—that famously uncapturable celestial orb.

As part of his installation for the Sharjah Biennial, he showed documents he says trace shell companies that were set up to serve the American military for the Bosnian War if not earlier, and continue today in Ukraine. Often, to avoid the bad branding that comes with war, they’d repeatedly change their names. Mimicking their gesture (and for his own legal protection), Hazara changed the companies’ names once more for the documents included in the Sharjah installation. “It’s like what Julian Assange said,” he explained before quoting the WikiLeaks founder: “The goal is to use Afghanistan to wash money out of the tax bases of the US and Europe through Afghanistan and back into the hands of a transnational security elite. The goal is an endless war, not a successful war.” Indeed, the last time the United States experienced a multiyear break from armed conflict was 1935–40, meaning few Americans have ever known peacetime even if most of us have been spared life in a conflict zone.

The first object to make its way from Bagram airbase all the way to New York was easy to smuggle in a carry-on: A butt plug whose playful shade of purple is hardly visible through all its crusty grime. Other refuse made circuitous routes via Pakistan and Dubai, or else the Baltics and

Central Asia, eventually landing in Hazara's new home, Berlin. Hearing some chuckles during our chat (and not only when the butt plug came up), I asked Hazara about humor. He replied: "How can you deal with it except by making fun of it?" and described Kabul as a "pretty funny city." The joke when the Americans arrived, he said, was: "These settler colonists are coming here to teach us democracy."



The boxes Hazara purchased and shipped his wares in. Photo Charles Benton. Courtesy The Artist, Experimenter, And SculptureCenter

Getting a sense of his wry wit, I asked him too about an interpretation I'd read of his work: that there might be a glimmer of hope in repurposing the trash left behind into something new. He balked: "We cannot make a life out of American garbage." Indeed, he shows the trash as-is, not transformed.

Many Americans have the privilege of putting trash into a receptacle never to be seen again, but it does not disappear. Instead, much of it is shipped off to the Global South to be repurposed and/or to pollute. Hazara wants to shatter this delusion of disappearance—which is something like a metonym for other problems the US exports—stipulating that the trash stay in "Uncle Sam's house" and never be sent back.

In Afghanistan, tons more of the troops' trash still festers in the landscape. On the last nights of the occupation, troops burned more than 400 tons of waste in open air burn pits, ostensibly for security reasons. They did not spare hazardous materials like batteries or paint, which crusted the earth in carcinogens and produced thick, toxic smoke. Hazara says that now, "in every Afghan household, someone has cancer"—but due to devastating healthcare shortages, it's difficult to get hard numbers as cases go uncounted or worse, undiagnosed. "And we're the ones who get the lecture on human rights!" Hazara exclaimed, eyes rolling, before he clarified: "This is not a project from the position of victimhood... it's about pointing out the hypocrisy."