

# ART & RECONCILIATION

Project Profiles

CONFLICT

CULTURE

COMMUNITY



ArtLords  
Afghanistan  
Street Art



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**Established** in 2015, ArtLords are a group of Afghan artists and activists using street art to promote messages of hope and peace. The lack of security in Kabul has led to the erection of many defensive blast walls, especially around high profile buildings, transforming the feel of the city. ArtLords want to reclaim these spaces and transform the negative psychological impact of blast walls on the people of Kabul into 'positive visual experiences'. They aim to create strategic pieces of street art to educate and communicate messages to the public, harnessing the soft power of art and its non-intrusive approach 'to pave the way for social transformation and behavioural change'<sup>1</sup>.

They started with an award-winning series of anti-corruption murals on prominent blast walls near government ministries<sup>2</sup>. The paintings of eyes, accompanied by the slogan, 'I See You', were designed as a warning to corrupt officials. In another series, 'Heroes of my city', they sought to celebrate everyday heroes such as municipal workers, teachers and nurses. The aim was to create an alternative narrative to warrior and fighter heroes who are traditionally celebrated in Afghan cultures<sup>3</sup>. In another series they sought to counter the culture of violence and war by painting pictures centred on hearts, representing the love that Afghans have for their country. Through their strategically placed pieces of street art they look to engage and educate Kabul's citizens on issues such as women's rights. One mural they put up on a blast wall near the area in Kabul where an Afghan woman was fatally lynched by a group of men after being falsely accused of burning the Koran. The slogan beneath the pictures says, 'A brave man supports women'.

Graffiti is rare in Kabul so the street art has generated significant attention. ArtLords conduct the mural painting process specifically to ensure the painting become opportunities for open-air public art workshops as passers-by are invited to join in and contribute to the paintings. The art is purposefully drawn using a simple paint-by-numbers design to enable anyone to be able to participate in the painting.

## Art and Reconciliation: ArtLords

Led by its co-founders Omaid Sharifi and Kabir Mokamel, ArtLords does not accept government money<sup>4</sup>. They want to retain ownership of their work while acting 'as a platform that allows for the use of the arts for specific tasks that measurably contribute to consent building on any given subject and that contributes to the positive transformation of society'.

They aim to promote critical thinking, transform the face of Kabul, introduce creative methods to affect behavioural change, to create a youth movement to hold the authorities accountable and address the culture of corruption and to use art to solve conflict, build trust and foster understanding based on knowing the other<sup>5</sup>.



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“ Our government, international organisations, and all of Afghanistan’s powerful people have made themselves safe inside these blast walls. Ordinary citizens, meanwhile, walk around the streets and see these ugly walls everywhere, walls that don’t protect them. For us, Kabul looks like a prison. So we decided we could at least put some colours on these walls, and at the same time, try to get some messages across.

Art Lords co founder Kabir Mokamel<sup>6</sup>

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**References**

**(1) Quotes taken from Art Lords website**

<http://artlords.club/>

**(2) 2016 news article**

<http://bakhtarnews.com.af/eng/culture/item/26502-art-lords-wins-anti-corruption-innovation-award.html>

**(3) 2015 Al-Jazeera piece and article**

<http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/asia/2015/08/afghan-graffiti-artist-strives-beautify-kabul-150826090658859.html>

**(4) See 2017 research interview with Omaid Sharifi**

<http://www.jgu.edu.in/researchcentre/centre-for-afghanistan-studies/pdf/Art-Lords-Interview.pdf>

**(5) See Art Lords website**

<http://artlords.club/>

**(6) Quote taken from interview**

<http://observers.france24.com/en/20150903-kabul-afghanistan-art-lords-murals-graffiti>