

Paola Pivi

It's me

08.11.2022

16.11.2022

One of my favorite places on the High Line is a small grove of maple trees growing through the wooden floor of the park's Tenth Avenue Square. In the summer, when the tree canopy is full and lush, the grove feels like a hiding spot, just barely removed from the eponymous Tenth Avenue. Through the leaves and branches, one can glimpse a surprising view above the rushing traffic below: the Statue of Liberty, a silhouette backed by the low shadow of Staten Island. Since 1886, the statue has stood in New York Harbor on its high pedestal, welcoming hopeful newcomers, maritime workers, and visitors and tourists, to the waterways of the Hudson and East Rivers.

Today, along this same view stands a second Statue of Liberty—a double of the Lady Liberty in New York Harbor—standing 5 meters tall to the original's 93 meters, and 7 kilometers closer. This is Paola Pivi's *You know who I am*, a sculpture commissioned by High Line Art, the public art program presented on and around the High Line. Paola's statue wears a cartoonish mask, a stylized portrait of an individual whose personal experience of freedom is directly connected to the US. Several masks alternate on the statue, swapped every few weeks, and each representing an individual whose story is explained on a sign near the sculpture and on High Line Art's website. The artwork began with Paola's own connection to the Statue of Liberty, as a mother looking for a way to bring her son home. Paola's son Norbu adopted her and her husband Karma when they were in India in 2012, after a sudden and emotional first chance meeting. After four exhausting years of legal battles, finally, Norbu, Paola, and Karma were able to return to their home in Anchorage, Alaska. Throughout this time, the Statue of Liberty remained a beacon for Norbu, a symbol of the freedom and possibility he could find in the US. The first mask on the statue at its inauguration was a cheerful portrait of Norbu.

For some Americans born in the US and accustomed to news cycles about the country's horrendous immigration conditions, it can be difficult to believe stories about the US as a beacon of hope and freedom. We hear many versions of this story that are broken promises, lies never intended to be made good on. And yet, in this artwork, Paola Pivi opens

up a place for these stories to be told one by one, outside of the news, by individuals each telling their unique story. On Pivi's artwork at Pièce Unique, and on the High Line from October – December 2022, is the portrait Mahnaz Akbari, a woman who came from Kabul, Afghanistan to the US in August 2021, during the US military's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite having worked alongside the US military for ten years, Mahnaz is still in the process of applying for asylum to be able to stay in the US. Her story is one of impossible decisions and dreams put on pause, of the bureaucratic loopholes that expand into indefinite waiting and uncertainty for thousands of people. Mahnaz's story is included below, as well as in an audio interview at the link [here](#) or via the QR code below.

The Statue of Liberty itself is a story of doubles, of multiples, and of shifting identities. Its sculptor, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, originally planned the sculpture for the entrance to the Suez Canal in Egypt. After the project was canceled due to insufficient funding, Bartholdi transformed the robed peasant woman of *Egypt Carrying the Light to Asia* into *Liberty Enlightening the World*, the gift from France to the US now known as the Statue of Liberty. Bartholdi created multiple studies for the work, and even shipped fragments of the statue to New York City to be displayed in public to raise funds for its final realization. And now, walking down Canal Street, Times Square, or another other busy tourist hub in New York City, you see countless copies of the statue, in miniatures, t-shirts, keychains, magnets, snow globes, foam crowns, and more.

The Statue of Liberty is always multiple, in its origins, its reproduction, and as a circulating symbol that has come to represent the city of New York as a whole. In her project, Paola Pivi taps into the potential of this multiplicity to imagine that any one of us could be the Statue of Liberty, and to invite [Norbu](#), [Marco Saavedra](#), Mahnaz Akbari, and many others to share their portraits and their stories through her image.

- Melanie Kress, High Line Art Associate Curator

Mahnaz Akbari was born in Mashhad, Iran in 1985, to an Afghan refugee family, and lived in Kabul, Afghanistan from 2011 to 2021. Mahnaz was among the limited number of Afghan women who were evacuated in August 2021 after the withdrawal of the United States military from Afghanistan. Mahnaz, along with her two nieces she managed to evacuate with, are currently in the process of applying for asylum in the United States.

Mahnaz is the second youngest of five children. When Mahnaz grew up in Mashhad, her father had a grocery store and her mother took care of the house and raised her and her brothers. At age 16, Mahnaz wanted to be a surgeon and later wanted to be in the army. She worked as a calligraphy instructor and a supply chain manager at her friend's clothing store.

Mahnaz and her family returned to Kabul, Afghanistan, after the Soviet-Afghan war had long ended, when she was 25 years old. Mahnaz attained a Bachelor's degree in Political Science at Kabul's Gawharshad University. She joined the Afghan National Army in 2011. She quickly excelled as a soldier and was selected to serve and command the first Female Tactical Platoon (FTP) of the Afghan Special Operations in the Afghan National Army. She worked on missions alongside US soldiers across Afghanistan from 2011 to 2021. Recently, just before fleeing Afghanistan, Mahnaz had accepted a higher ranking position as a Coordinator Officer and had started her Masters degree in Sociology at Kabul's Kateb University.

Following the military withdrawal of the United States and other nations from Afghanistan, the subsequent fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban occupation of Kabul in 2021, Mahnaz suddenly found herself in life-threatening danger. She and her two nieces spent three days at the Kabul airport before being evacuated with other FTP members and some of their families on one of the cargo flights that were visible in the media. They arrived at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, where they spent the next two months living in a military barracks, before finally settling in Riverdale, Maryland.

Despite working with the US army in Afghanistan for over ten years, Mahnaz is not eligible for the protection of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program that the US has provided since 2009 to Afghan nationals who assisted the US government. The program offers admission to the US, resettlement services, and legal permanent residence for approved applicants and their family members. Since Mahnaz was not contracted by the US government she does not qualify for the SIV program and therefore is caught in a precarious position. Mahnaz was granted humanitarian parole upon her arrival in the US, which allows her to stay in the US for 2 years. During this limited time, she and her nieces must go through the difficult process of applying for asylum in the US, a complex procedure that requires legal support. Finding a lawyer and organizing the asylum application is especially difficult for those who have had to suddenly flee and leave behind all possessions and funds, and cannot readily access records which may be needed as evidence for their asylum cases.

Mahnaz has also received a temporary employment authorization and is currently working for a non-profit organization, Immigrant ARC, as an Afghan Reassessment Project Manager to help other Afghan refugees resettle in the US. Her goal is to one day create an orphanage or a non-profit organization back in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that Mahnaz is grateful to have been able to flee the current situation in Afghanistan, she experiences daily anguish and distress for her family and community who were not able to leave Afghanistan.

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Bronze cast

164 × 64 × 64 cm / 64 1/2 × 25 1/2 × 25 1/2 inches

Paola Pivi

Born in Italy in 1971, Paola Pivi's artistic practice is diverse and enigmatic. Commingling the familiar with the alien, Pivi often works with commonly identifiable objects which are modified to introduce a new scale, material or color, challenging the audience to change their point of view. Animals are often cast as protagonists in Pivi's world. She draws upon their perceived characteristics and instills them with human mannerisms. In Pivi's art, Polar bears practice yoga, hang from trapezes, and engage with one another. Sprouting multicolored feathers, the artworks are both life-sized and miniaturized as baby bears. Spanning sculpture, video, photography, performance and installation, Pivi's practice trespasses perceived limits to make possible what before seemed impossible. Zebras frolic in the arctic, goldfish fly on airplanes, and in her 2012 Public Art Fund installation, a Piper Seneca airplane was lifted on its wingtips and installed to constantly rotate forward.

Pivi has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions including *We are the Alaskan Tourists*, Arken Museum, Denmark (2020); *World Record*, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Italy; *Art with a view*, The Bass Museum Miami Beach, USA (2018); *I did it again*, Savannah College of Art and Design, USA (2018); *I am tired of eating fish*, LaRinascente, Italy (2017); *Ma'am*, Dallas Contemporary, USA (2016); *Tulkus 1880 to 2018*, FRAC Bourgogne, France (2014); *You started it ... I*

finish it, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia (2014); *Share, But It's Not Fair*, Rockbund Art Museum, China (2012); *How I roll*, Public Art Fund New York, USA (2012); *It's a cocktail party*, Portikus, Germany (2008); *It just keeps getting better*, Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland (2007); *My religion is kindness. Thank you, see you in the future*, Fondazione Trussardi, Italy (2006).

Pivi has exhibited internationally at institutions including Palais de Tokyo, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Centre Pompidou, France; Fondazione Prada, Biennale di Venezia, Italy; Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Germany; Whitechapel Gallery, Tate Modern, United Kingdom; Malmö Konsthall, Sweden; MOMA PS1, USA; Yokohama Triennale, Japan.

