

# THE NEW YORKER

## IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

### Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's Leader, Is an Expert on Failed States. Can He Save His Country from Collapse?

In the July 4, 2016, issue of *The New Yorker*, in “The Theorist in the Palace” (p. 32), **George Packer** reports from Kabul, where, through extensive interviews with the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, plus current and former members of the Afghan government and U.S. officials, he profiles a leader who has eschewed the traditional politics of Afghanistan and is fighting to save his country from collapse. A trained anthropologist who spent years doing field work for the World Bank and taught at Berkeley and Johns Hopkins, Ghani has been in and out of the Afghan government ever since the overthrow of the Taliban, in 2001. In 2002, former President Hamid Karzai named Ghani Minister of Finance; Jelani Popal, a deputy in the Finance Ministry, tells Packer, “The golden period of the Karzai rule was when Ashraf Ghani was Finance Minister.” Packer writes, “This was the blank-slate phase of post-Taliban Afghanistan, and Ghani became the most effective figure in the new government.” Ghani ran for President in 2009 but received only three per cent of the vote; he ran again in 2014 in a highly contentious election which prompted American officials to negotiate a deal between Ghani and his closest challenger, Abdullah Abdullah—Abdullah would accept Ghani as President, and Abdullah would be named Chief Executive Officer. Ghani’s inauguration was the first peaceful transfer of power in Afghanistan since 1901. But Ghani came to power after a hundred and twenty-seven thousand foreign troops departed the country, setting off economic collapse, soaring unemployment, and a mass exodus of Afghans, and power struggles between Ghani and Abdullah have continued to unfold. The paralysis in Kabul has so concerned Washington that President Barack Obama, in a videoconference call in March, chided both leaders and told Abdullah, “The political agreement that you signed with President Ghani, as far as we know, did not give you veto power.” Ghani told Packer there is a “double failure” in Afghanistan: a failure of imagination by the international community and a failure by Afghan élites “to be the founding fathers—and mothers, because there are some—of a new state.”

As President, Ghani all but ignores the traditional politics of Afghanistan, such as tribal networks, patronage systems, and strongmen. “His abiding concern has been how to create viable institutions in poor countries overrun with violence, focussing on states that can’t enforce laws, create fair markets, collect taxes, provide services, or keep citizens safe,” according to Packer. Ghani lives and works in the Arg, a complex of palaces inside a nineteenth-century fortress in central Kabul, where he works killingly long hours, writes his own talking points, does his own research on visitors, and wakes up before five and reads for two or three hours. He trusts so few people that he could find nobody to hire as his spokesman, nobody to be mayor of Kabul. Packer writes, “Ghani is a visionary technocrat who thinks twenty years ahead, with a deep understanding of what has destroyed his country and what might yet save it.” One senior official tells Packer, “He’s incorruptible. He wants to transform the country. And he can do it.” But Ghani faces what may be insurmountable obstacles: American spending in Afghanistan went from eighty billion dollars in 2012 to half that amount last year, and the Afghan Army had to assume full responsibility for fighting a resurgent Taliban, with fewer weapons. Ghani, whose approval rating has plummeted since he took office, has few admirers in the State Department, and in Kabul officials don’t hide their contempt. “They call him an arrogant micromanager and say that he has no close friends, no feel for politics, that he is the leader of a country that exists only in his own mind,” Packer writes. Many observers don’t expect Ghani to complete his term, which ends in 2019. “This is the year of living dangerously. He’ll either make it or he won’t,” Scott Guggenheim, an American adviser to Ghani, tells Packer. The former head of intelligence, Amrullah Saleh, says, “For me, the pain is that as people see very little being delivered by this government, by this President, it will not only mean the failure of Ashraf Ghani. It will also mean the failure of technocracy in Afghan politics.”

### Loïc Gouzer Has Made Millions for Christie’s by Subjecting It to Greater Risk

In “Swimming with Sharks” (p. 42), **Rebecca Mead** profiles Loïc Gouzer, a specialist in contemporary art at Christie’s New York and a pioneer of themed sales, which are curated stand-alone auctions that typically fetch tens of millions of dollars—sometimes hundreds of millions—and break industry records. Gouzer, who worked at Sotheby’s in London and New York before joining Christie’s, tells Mead, “If you start putting works around another work, they give each other meaning. Each of the works are in dialogue, and they help each other.” Gouzer dislodges works from collections through dogged persuasion, sometimes with substantial guarantees backed by Christie’s or by a third party, which promise a minimum price at auction. He says, “I am not a good courter. I am more of a torturer. I will make your life miserable until you give up.” Gouzer’s boss, Brett Gorvy, the international head of contemporary art at Christie’s, tells Mead, “Loïc has a tendency to be emotional and petulant, like a child. You want to slap him across the face, in a way. It’s part of his charm.” Mead writes, “Today’s collectors of contemporary art, having made their fortunes in the tech industry or in hedge funds, are more entrepreneurial. They are less beholden to art history, and often less cognizant of it. Gouzer is their peer, generationally and culturally.” Gouzer, who is close friends with Leonardo DiCaprio and Paris Hilton, tells Mead, “It is not even cool to be a billion-



aire anymore—there are, like, two hundred of them. But, if that same guy buys a painting, suddenly it puts you in a whole circle. . . . It is the fastest way to become an international name.”

Even amid a seven per cent decrease in global art sales last year, Gouzer’s themed sales break records. In 2015, the themed sale “Looking Forward to the Past,” brought in more than seven hundred million dollars, including the sale of “Les Femmes d’Alger,” a Picasso painting that sold for almost a hundred and eighty million dollars, the highest price ever paid for a painting at auction. In addition to the Picasso triumph, the sale established seven other records, including that for the most expensive sculpture sold at auction: Giacometti’s “Pointing Man,” for a hundred and forty-one million dollars. In May, Gouzer’s “Bound to Fail” featured “artists whom Gouzer admired but whose work had not been doing well at auction; or artists who drew on failure as a theme; or works that were prone to degrade, because they contained nontraditional materials,” Mead writes. It brought in just over seventy-eight million dollars and set seven new world records for individual artists. Some of Gouzer’s peers are critical of the practice; Todd Levin, a prominent art adviser in New York, tells Mead, that unlike most auctions—which are limited to consigned art works that fit a specific category, like Chinese porcelain, for example—“with a ‘curated’ sale, anything goes. In essence, it’s just a garage sale of art works that are largely presold.” Although Gouzer is not the first specialist to curate themed sales, nor did he invent the practice of offering guaranteed minimum prices, he “has been unusually aggressive in challenging industry conventions, and has emerged at a moment when the sums being spent on art have become absurdly high,” Mead writes. Steven Murphy, the former C.E.O. of Christie’s, tells Mead that Gouzer “has a safecracker’s touch for what the atmosphere is like for the buying audience.” Gouzer relates his work to spearfishing, a passion of his, telling Mead, “You don’t know why, but you know that if you dive *now* the big fish is going to come. When you’re at the surface, you don’t see anything, but you just have this instinct that it is going to happen. In art, it is the same thing—this instinct sometimes that I know a painting is going to move.”

### Revisiting Nan Goldin’s “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”

In “Dark Rooms” (p. 26), **Hilton Als** profiles the photographer Nan Goldin, whose best-known work, “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” was the seminal photography collection of the eighties, capturing the era’s lawless bohemianism. A slide show and exhibition of photographs from the series opened this month at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. “What interests Goldin is the random gestures and colors of the universe of sex and dreams, longing and breakups,” Als writes. The images that make up the work capture various relationships playing out in bedrooms, bars, pensiones, bordellos, automobiles, and beaches in the places where Goldin, who left home at fourteen, lived. A tumultuous family dynamic made Goldin’s older sister, Barbara, feel lost and desperate for approval. She acted out and was committed to mental hospitals for long periods of time. “Barbara said, ‘All I want to do is go home,’” Goldin tells Als. “She was fifteen. And my mother said, ‘If she comes home, I’m leaving.’ And my father just sat there with his head down. That is to me the most tragic scene in a person’s life.” Barbara committed suicide when Goldin was eleven. Unlike her sister, Goldin created a distance from her family that, she feels, saved her life. “The one good shrink I’ve had says I survived because, by the age of four, my friends were more important to me than my family,” she says.

“We were really radical little kids, and we did cling to our friendships as an alternative family,” the performer Suzanne Fletcher, who met Goldin when she was fourteen, tells Als. “Even at the time, we could have articulated that.” Fletcher remembers Goldin’s “passion to document.” She photographed her friends dancing on the dunes in Provincetown, partying in her loft on the Bowery, cooking dope, living their lives. She set her slides to a soundtrack, and the collection became “The Ballad.” One of the most harrowing images in the volume is a 1984 self-portrait that captures Goldin one month after being beaten by her lover. “He went for my eyes, and later they had to stitch my eye back up, because it was about to fall out of the socket,” she tells Als. She was physically afraid of men for a long time after the beating, and her drug use, once recreational, became less and less controlled. In 1989, she went to rehab. After getting out, Goldin sold “The Ballad” to several museums, including the Whitney and MOMA. “In the process of leaving my family, in re-creating myself, I lost the real memory of my sister,” Goldin writes in the introduction to “The Ballad.” “I don’t ever want to lose the real memory of anyone again.”

**Plus:** In “How to Steal an Election,” **Jill Lepore** examines the history of Presidential conventions, which were created to make our system less “rigged” and more democratic—but more democracy is very often less (p. 20); in Comment, **Jelani Cobb** considers the congressional inaction on gun legislation, and examines why the current debate is focussed on unpredictable gun violence—mass killings committed as acts of terror—when those shootings constitute two per cent of gun homicides in the United States (p. 15); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Jack Handey** imagines his favorite varieties of fireworks (p. 25); **Thomas Mallon** reads Jean Edward Smith’s new biography of George W. Bush, which exposes the mysterious confidence behind the former President’s greatest failures (p. 60); **Alex Ross** reads several books on using music as a weapon (p. 65); **Hua Hsu** listens to Blood Orange’s third album, “Freetown Sound” (p. 70); **Emily Nussbaum** considers how Season 6 of “Game of Thrones” felt perversely relevant in this election year (p. 72); **Anthony Lane** watches Roland Emmerich’s “Independence Day: Resurgence” and Susanna White’s “Our Kind of Traitor,” based on the novel by John le Carré (p. 74); a Sketchbook by **R. O. Blechman** depicts the future of the New York City skyline (p. 49); and new fiction by **T. Coraghessan Boyle** (p. 52).

**Podcasts:** **Evan Osnos** joins **Dorothy Wickenden** to discuss the changing politics of guns in the wake of the Orlando massacre; **Joshua Rothman** speaks with the hymn writer Carolyn Gillette about balancing hope and sadness; **Ben Lerner** reads **John Berger’s** short story “Woven, Sir,” and discusses it with **Deborah Treisman**; and **T. Coraghessan Boyle** reads his short story.

**Digital Extras:** A selection of images by Nan Goldin and poetry readings by **Nicky Beer** and **Stephen Dunn**.

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**Press Contacts:** Natalie Raabe, (212) 286-6591, Erica Hinsley, (212) 286-7936, Adrea Piazza, (212) 286-4255