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By Randiah Camille Green

Levon Kafafian weaves their story of a post-digital collapse in thread

Their MOCAD exhibit 'Portal Fire: Shrine of the Torchbearer' is based on a graphic novel that, so far, only exists in costumes



Levon Kafafian spins a yarn through the weaving of cloth.

One thousand years into the future, all digital media has ceased to exist. In this post-digital world, without the interference of technology, magic has resurfaced. The unseen has become again seen as spirit beings have re-emerged from the land. But without access to historical archives or texts, humanity just may be doomed to repeat the catastrophes of the past.

This is the backstory of Azadistan, a fictional world set in Southwest Asia created by Detroit-based Armenian American artist and weaver of worlds Levon Kafafian. Their latest exhibit, *Portal Fire: Shrine of the Torchbearer*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), gives us an immersive glimpse into the world of Azadistan.

The show is part of the MOCAD's fall season of exhibits, which celebrates 100 years of surrealism. It runs alongside Chris Schanck's *A Surreality*, ASMA Collective's *Wander + Pursuit*, and collaborative works from Clare Gatto and Kara Gut in *Magic Circle*. You'll find *Portal Fire* in the Mike Kelley Mobile Homestead, and all the exhibits are on display until February 23, 2025.

Portal Fire is the name of Kafafian's graphic novel set in Azadistan. Here, there exist 12 clans in a supposed egalitarian society, each with its own brand of magic and colors they are allowed to wear. But the Dragon Clan has decided to exert dominance over the other 11 with their perceived superiority, suppressing all other forms of magic. When you put it that way, it gives, "Long ago, the four nations lived

together in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked,” Avatar: The Last Airbender style.

But there is no physical text or illustrations where the Portal Fire graphic novel exists. Instead, Kafafian presents their fantasy world through costumes, hand-woven and dyed fabric, and cloth sculptures that show us how the inhabitants of Azadistan dress.

At MOCAD, a hallway of tie-dyed drapes inscribed with protection spells leads to an altar holding an “eternal flame” (a sculpture made of leather and beads) where the story’s two main characters stand dressed in jackets, pants, and scarves Kafafian has hand woven on the loom.

“Coming to the story as a weaver and making costumes, and objects, and cloth first, and coming up with narrative text later, is something that pulls deeply from my paternal lineage,” they tell Metro Times. “My grandmother and great grandmother were primarily needle workers, bead workers ... the pieces that I have from them carry so much information and carry the story of my family’s lineage, of the tradition of craft, and of a movement through space and time. So when I come to working in sci-fi and fantasy storytelling through cloth, I am pulling that tradition forward into the future.”

Kafafian has been weaving since 2010 and their appreciation for textiles began when they worked at Hagopian World of Rugs.

“In working there, I came to understand that there was so much more encoded into every piece of weaving, that there was a story in the symbols and the motifs, the colors and the materials chosen, and that the village weavers have their own tales that they can weave,” they say. “So when I started the project of Portal Fire, the story set in Azadistan, I knew, not having as much experience with writing or illustration, that my form of storytelling needed to be in cloth.”

The MOCAD exhibit is a snapshot into the main character’s first call to action. An orphan named Maro and their best friend Hro are running through a market when they stumble upon this bizarre shrine carved into the mountainside and activate an ancient magic when they find themselves in a prohibited area.

MOCAD visitors enter the cave where Azadistan’s sacred relics have been enshrined. Under the watchful eye of two mysterious and lavishly dressed fire cleric guards, sits a tome and a wall inscription detailing Azadistan’s digital collapse. But behind the wall, which is hidden from characters in the story but not from museum-goers, lies a secret prophecy for a future outside of the Dragon Clan’s rule.

“Within the 12 clan system, each group has a different set of colors and fabrics that they can wear, and this also extends beyond that to what kinds of personalities are expected of those groups, what ideals, values, and what kind of professions are available to those people,” Kafafian explains. “And this harkens to the Ottoman millet system, where different minorities were expected to wear specific identifying items, or specific colors ... to separate them from other groups. So a lot of this is like looking at Ottoman and pre-Ottoman era lifeways in multi-ethnic Anatolia.”

Kafafian’s inspiration to create Portal Fire and the world of Azadistan came when they realized the lack of sci-fi and fantasy graphic novels written by and for Southwest Asians.

Following a 2016 Detroit sci-fi generator session where participants were tasked with imagining Detroit’s future, Kafafian found themselves swept in wonder at the world of fantasy graphic novels. They rushed to Vault of Midnight, in search of Southwest Asian stories, but the only book the clerk could recommend was Craig Thompson’s Habibi. Thompson is a white male and many consider Habibi orientalist and problematic in its depiction of Arab and Muslim people.

“I asked befuddled, ‘Do I have to be the one to write this story!?’ And the 10 people in the store in unison said, ‘Yes, you do.’ So that was my call to action,” Kafafian says. “In envisioning the world of Azadistan and coming to that point, I really wanted to build a future world where the various ethnic groups of

Anatolia, the Armenian Highlands, and Southwest Asia in general, could live in relative harmony with each other outside of imperialist governance.”

Instead of fantasizing about a future without technology as a return to “simpler times,” Kafafian presents a post-digital society with its own set of problems.

“That doesn't mean that things are any less complicated or difficult or, to be frank, fucked,” Kafafian says. “So a question that I bring up is, is the lack of digital information technology better, necessarily? I don't think so. It's just different, and it brings different questions and problems to the table, than say, a future imagining AI takeovers, for example.”

Kafafian was a 2023 finalist in Envision: The Michigan Artist Initiative, which saw their intricate costumes displayed alongside [Bakpak Durden](#) and [Parisa Ghaderi \(who ultimately won\)](#) at the University of Michigan Stamps Gallery. They were a 2019 artist in residence at Dearborn's Arab American National Museum and co-led a seven-week weaving program in partnership with Trapholt Museum for Modern Art and Design in Denmark in 2022. They hold a bachelor of fine arts in fiber from the College for Creative Studies and a bachelor of arts in anthropology from Wayne State University.

Portal Fire: Shrine of the Torchbearer is on view at MOCAD until February 23, 2025. For more information, [visit mocadetroit.org](http://visitmocadetroit.org).