



THE
ALLEGORY
OF THE
CAVE

AFRUZ AMIGHI

Anna Wallace-Thompson sits down with Iranian-born New York-based Afruz Amighi during her first exhibition in Dubai, and discusses the inaugural Jameel Prize winner's views on shadows, identity and the dichotomy of absence and presence.



Afruz Amighi has the sort of soft voice that compels you to listen to what she's saying. It's a kind of sensitivity, intelligence and delicacy that is evident in her works – particularly the three imposing 'shadow works' in front of us, gently wafting in the breeze of the gallery's air conditioner. The white space around, comprising delicate white woven polyethylene sheets, reminiscent of the *mashrabiya* patterns one finds in marble or stone in palaces or mosques, as well as clusters of aluminium chandelier-like creations, creates an aura of monochromatic calm – a lack of colour characteristic of her works.

MEDITATING ON MORTALITY

The delicate filigree works *Angels in Combat* and *Hallway*, like her Jameel Prize award-winning *1001 Pages* (the result of experimentations with light and dark), are monuments to the time and effort taken to first design and then cut out their intricate geometric shapes. At night, they are lit by bright spotlights and it is only then that one becomes fully aware of the extent of the images and patterns within them, as the lace-like sheets suddenly reveal themselves in stark shadowy contrast on the gallery wall: they are great Oriental carpets, but with a twist. "These three pieces are very much a meditation on health," muses Amighi. "Whereas much of my work in the past has been quite politically driven, this came from a much more personal place." Battling a serious illness and dealing with hospital bureaucracy and several frustrating dead-ends, the Iranian artist was forced to seriously question her own mortality. "Abstractly, we all know that one day we're eventually going to die," she says thoughtfully, "but when you're faced with it, suddenly it really comes home." The title, *Angels in Combat*, reflected Amighi's questions of whether God was kind and merciful, or vengeful. "I wanted to throw open that question, and for the first time, I felt that whatever is out there is both protective and dangerous; in life, there's always this peril just around the corner and I felt the need to represent something peaceful, restorative and comforting, yet which, at the same time, has suggestions of violence inside it." If Heidegger was right in asserting that one's awareness of death makes one aware of life, then the details in *Angels in Combat* are just such sharp reminders. Traditional Islamic geometrical forms are interspersed with syringes and angels carrying machine guns – and, rather like the dark angelic figures in Lara Baladi's (*Canvas 3.3*) *La Mère Noire*, act as poignant reminders of our mortality.

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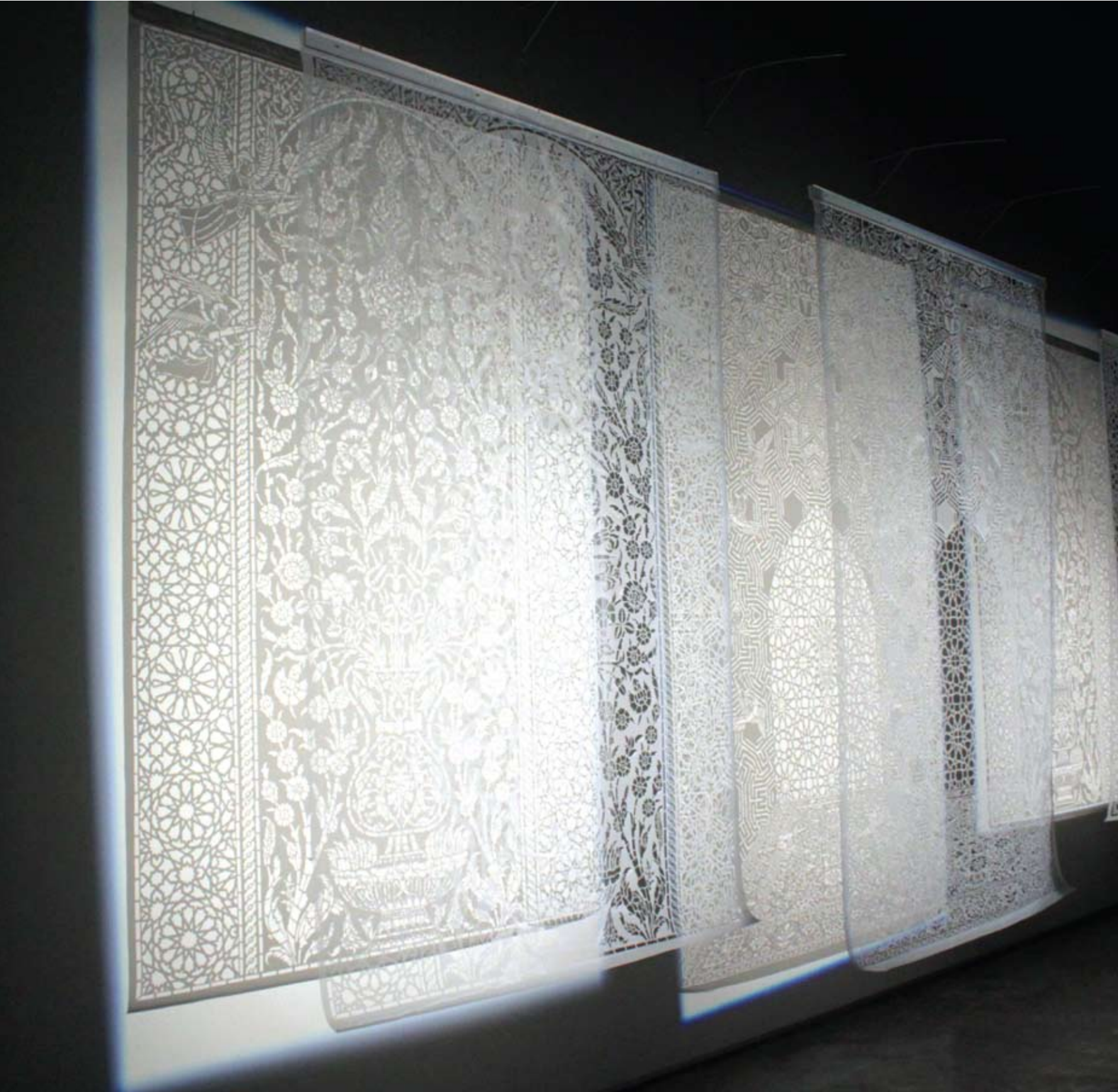
PROFILE



Opening spread: (Detail) *Angels in Combat I*, 2010. Pe-cap and Plexiglas. 251 x 165 cm.

This page: *Rocket Gods*, 2010. Aluminium sheet metal and base metal chain. 150 x 23 x 23 cm each. Overall installation size variable.

PROFILE



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In fact, it was during Amighi's illness that an interest in the Moorish Empire led her to investigate the extent to which Islamic scientific and medical learning had informed the European Renaissance. "It's very much taught in America that the Renaissance sort of happened by itself," says Amighi, "and I therefore found it very interesting that so many advances had their origins in the Middle East." Discovering that Islamic geometry is not merely decorative but very much a precise science, Amighi found her thoughts on mortality and Islamic pattern consolidating themselves. "Despite the religious symbolism of these patterns, in terms that they are infinite and can repeat themselves over and over again, just as God is infinite, the mathematics and science involved represented the sheer amount of learning that took place at that time," she says. "It was an interesting thing that coincided with me going through all these medical problems."

WAR GODS AND WARMTH

Cutting all of her pieces by hand, it is the small imperfections in her work that Amighi feels are vital. Rather like the old practice of tile setters of leaving one tile askew, she admits that people have suggested that she has her work laser-cut. "I feel that if I were to mechanise the production of this, it might lose some of the warmth," she says, "there's so much imperfection when you do it by hand, you can't help it, no matter how much you try to be careful. There will always be parts that aren't symmetrical and a bit odd and I think it makes it a little more human."

Taking up to two weeks to design the drawing, Amighi then works with an electric hot pen to meticulously cut out the stencil, a process which can take up to a month, but which she finds extremely therapeutic. Some of her works have been inspired by a rug hanging in her fa-

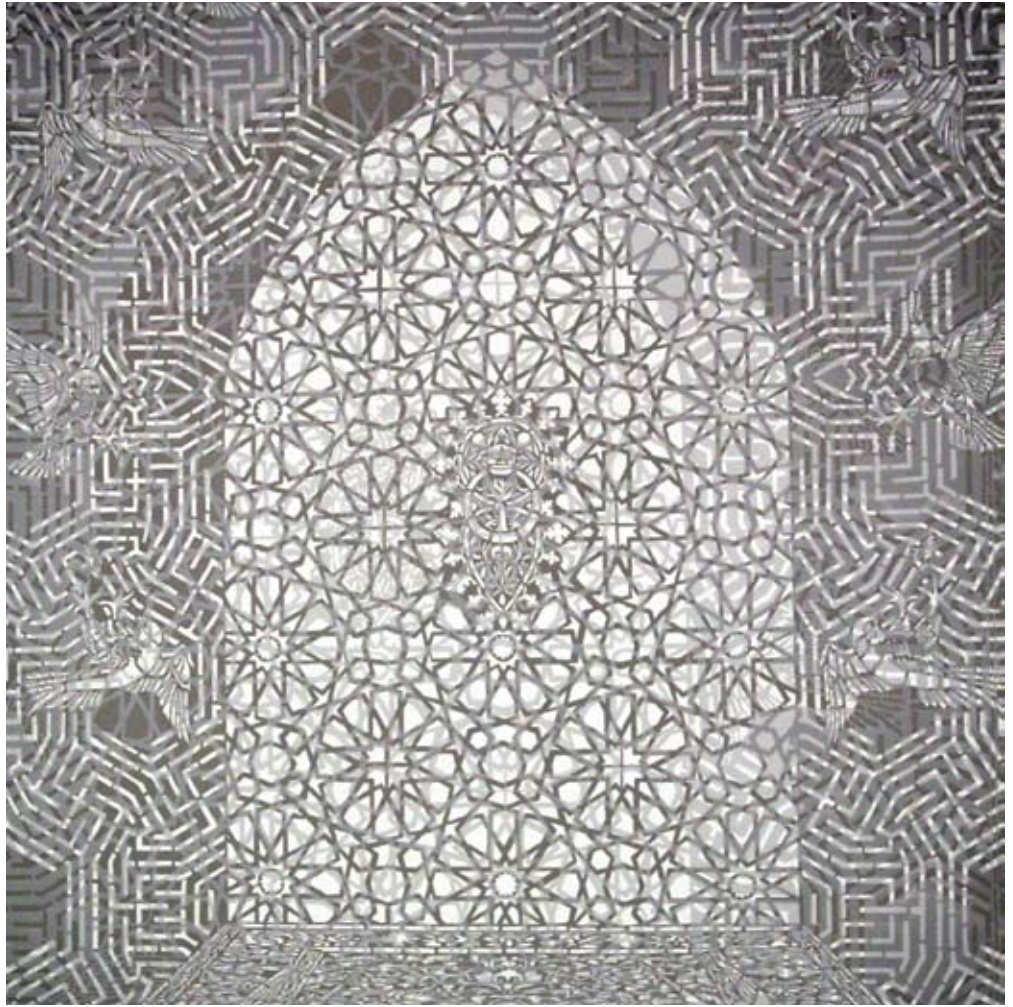
ther's apartment, allowing her to play with familiar symbolism and make it her own. "It was important to me that my work speaks to both passive and active viewers. I don't really like the word 'passive', but somebody could view my work without noticing the syringes and small details and simply get a sense of tranquillity from the works. However, if somebody is a little investigative, they can walk away with something else. There are many types of audiences and I wanted to allow everybody an experience. That was important to me – to have the aesthetic and the conceptual wedded together."

Other works which have a dual nature include *Rocket Gods*, shiny aluminium chandelier-like pieces which hang, like strange distended bird cages, from the ceiling. "Basically, 99 per cent of my time is me alone in my studio," smiles Amighi. "I was working on these as the economic crisis was really starting to bite in the USA and I felt very disconnected from it. Every day I would

Facing page left to right: *Angels in Combat I*. 251 x 165 cm; *Hallway*. 292 x 193 cm; (Detail) *Angels in Combat II*. 251 x 165 cm. All works dated 2010 and made of pe-cap and Plexiglas.

Below: (Detail) *Floor Piece*. 2010. Metal bead and chain. 280 x 280 cm.





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go to my studio as usual, yet I had friends who were getting laid off from their jobs. It felt very strange.” Musing on the industries that nourish countries such as the USA, Amighi found unlikely inspiration in arms manufacturing. “I began to think about what the heartbeat of the economy was – what it was that was keeping the recession from turning into a full-blown depression; the answer, at least in part, was the permanent arms manufacturing sector, which employs so many people. It’s an industry that relies on war to prosper, which is horrific.” Amighi created ‘missiles’ that would not be out of place hanging above a family dining-room table. “Before monotheism, many cultures created idols or gods with very specific roles,” she explains. “In some ways, it was a little more honest, so I thought of wealthy families, sitting down in their fancy homes with chandeliers hanging over the middle of their table, and replaced that chandelier with a more honest symbol: my own god of war.”

While *Rocket Gods* are shaped like missiles,



Amighi admits that “some people see a minaret or Moroccan lamp, so in some ways I’d like to leave the door pretty open to interpretation”. This is evident in works such as *Floor Piece*, an intricate pattern consisting of metal beads she had collected years earlier, reminiscent of the ancient Nazca lines etched into the Peruvian landscape. Or *Tent*, a graphite piece depicting refugee tents – abodes which are made of the same material as her shadow pieces, polyethylene. “I had read some books on architecture in Dubai,” she explains, “I was impressed, because in Dubai there has been enough wealth for people to realise things that elsewhere weren’t possible. Yet, simultaneously, there was this disaster happening in Pakistan, with floods displacing 20 million people who were now basically homeless.” Part of her recent *Angels in Combat* exhibition at Dubai’s Isabelle Van Den Eynde Gallery (IVDE), the piece poignantly brings “a kind of abode that is reality for millions of people in the Middle East” to the midst of the luxurious architectural landscape

of Dubai; in essence, *Tent* embodies the very essence of Amighi’s work – at first glance it appears the one, stark “newsy” piece jarring the viewer, until one realises that each and every other element, beyond its aura of calm and beauty, also belies a harder message.

THE LONG WAY FORWARD

For Amighi, the act of working is therapeutic in its ability to allow her to engage with the material and empty her head. In fact, art and craft has always been a part of her life. Born in Tehran but raised in New York from the age of three, the child of Iranian immigrants, Amighi was brought up in an eclectic household – her mother was an anthropologist and her father a mathematician. The family celebrated “every holiday in every religion, anything with a crafty element,” keeping the young Amighi engaged until the age of 17, surrounded by philosophy, art and writing, when, about to embark on her university edu-

Facing page: (Detail) *Hallway*. 2010. Pe-cap and Plexiglas. 292 x 193 cm.

Above: (Detail) *Tent*. 2010. Graphite on paper. 100 x 127 cm.

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cation, she had a rude shock. “Suddenly my parents were like, ‘OK, this phase of your life is over. You had fun as a kid and now we want you to go and study something practical. If you study art, you’re on your own,’” she says wryly. Coming out with a BA in Political Science from Barnard College at Columbia University, New York, in 1997, Amighi continued to work on her art, doing odd jobs here and there to get along. “It never crossed my mind that I wouldn’t be doing art full time,” she confesses, “but it’s only in the past two years that it has become feasible for me, and that I’ve started selling work. It’s sad that money has that effect, but that’s the world we live in – you start to be materially stable and so you become more confident.”

With her first solo show in 2003 at New York’s Cave Gallery, Amighi has since gone from strength to strength, completing an MFA at New York University in 2007, and as winner of the 2009 Jameel Prize, her work has toured the Middle East. Two solo shows in 2010, at New York’s Nicelle Beauchene Gallery and IVDE, have continued to keep her busy. While she enjoys her time in the studio, Amighi admits that she finds audience interaction just as much a part of the production process as the actual making of the work. “Exhibiting can be a bit of a weird experience, as I spend most of my time in social isolation and then all of a sudden there are all these people and all this feedback, and it can be hard to relate,” Amighi smiles. “However it’s very rewarding. I’ve never had a negative experience with showing my work – I’ve had negative reactions, but I think the break in isolation that a show permits is like oxygen. You take it all in and then you need to go back and shut the door again.” Working hard to help keep herself evolving and developing, a recent residency at the Doris Duke Foundation in Honolulu is part of Amighi’s plan to travel more widely. Mosaic works earlier in her career were the result of a trip to her native Iran and the realisation that “public art can be some-





thing that isn't detached, but rather something very intimate". Working in different materials – "I painted for a while, but quite frankly I'm not very good with colour," she says with a sheepish grin – Amighi admits that she gets bored if she works too long with the same thing. "How long can you keep exploring until you hit a wall and can't break through again?" she asks with a smile.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

And then there is of course the elephant in the room – her background. A New Yorker by upbringing but an Iranian by birth, Amighi has spent her life being pigeonholed. "I was once asked if my work was a result of my Iranian identity," she says, "and it's a common question and I completely understand it, but I feel that so much of my work is actually about my disassociation from my country of birth." This is reflected in her use of shadow, which, like her Iranian/American identity, is intangible. "My identity is a combination of complete detachment as well as intimacy," she says. "I find myself looking at my Iranian heritage from afar; to an extent perhaps I can be accused of exoticising it as well. At the end of the day, I'm not Iranian or American, I'm just an artist – but if I were to have a label I feel it would be as a New Yorker, as it's such a cosmopolitan city."

So where next? "I'd like to be in academia," says Amighi. "Teaching keeps you inspired – be-

ing around young people who are experimenting and doing all sorts of crazy things keeps you fresh. When you have a milieu where you can talk about things and discuss them, it also gives you a social context to cut through some of the isolation that you're in danger of when you only do your artworks." In addition to travel, Amighi also hopes to see her works grow in scale, encouraged by their acquisition by major public collections such as the V&A and the Houston Museum of Fine Art. Amighi looks at *Angels in Combat* and then turns back to me, her voice earnest yet commanding: "Sometimes criticism can be hard, it can be very damaging, but it's always been productive in the end. I think the more true it is, the more hurtful, because you recognise the truth in it and don't want to change. At the end of the day, I'm very excited for people to see my work – I love it when people come up to me and tell me what they think. It's like eating dessert, just total pleasure." We sit together on the bench and the late morning sun filters through the pieces in front of us and their revelations of mortality remain embedded as inescapable truths. Rather like Plato's shadows on the cave wall, Amighi's works belie a different reality to what would otherwise greet the eye; and once you've seen it, you can never go back. 📍

For more information visit www.ivde.net and www.afrozamighi.com

Facing page: *Labyrinth*. 2005. Glass mosaic. 127 x 119 cm.

Above: *Sorur*. 2004. Glass mosaic. 86 x 117 cm.

All images courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde.