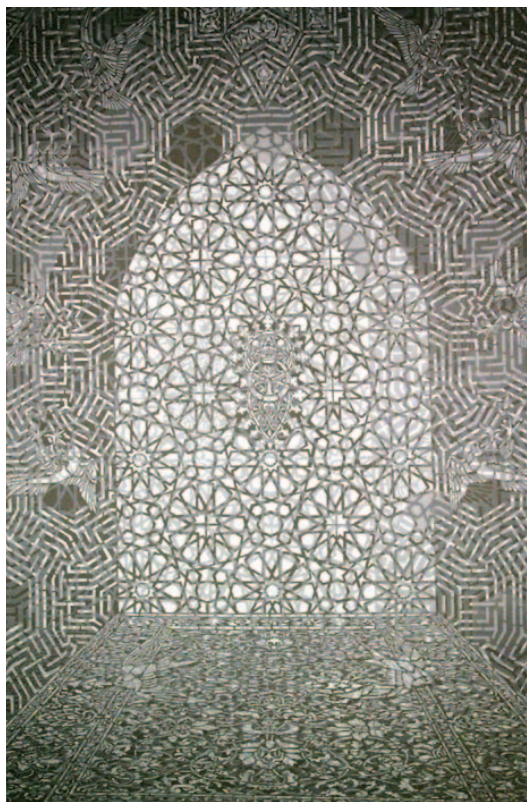


# VOLCANO BENEATH SNOW

MUHAMMAD YUSUF WRITES ON AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN ARTIST WHO USES ASTONISHINGLY DELICATE FORMATS TO SHOWCASE VIOLENT PHENOMENA



Afruz Amighi



Call it bad luck mixed with bad timing, but I had the misfortune not to meet Iranian-origin, America-based, Jameel Prize winning artist Afruz Amighi, after she had completed installing her works at Gallery IVDE, Dubai. The fact is that I met her for an interview even as she was putting up her works, and tore her away shamefully from her preoccupation, for an interview. Added to this lack of grace, I now have to admit that her show (Sept. 21–Oct. 20) is also over, even as this article on her exhibition is being published. Mea culpa!

But Amighi, who took the interview sportingly though it rudely intervened in her art space, is involved with more serious matters nowadays, giving her little time to pursue journalists who default on interviews. After a mind-blowing performance, which saw her winning the first Jameel Prize that is awarded for the best work for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition, she moved to IVDE for her Angels In Combat show.

In her exhibition, Amighi presented a series of three shadow works based on the projection of

light through large sheets of woven polyethylene. The plastic textile, used both in screen-printing and the construction of tents for refugees, were covered with complex and engaging patterns, painstakingly created by hand, with a stencil burner.

When projected through light, the polyethylene sheets took the shapes, forms, patterns and imprints of Islamic culture — though Amighi had updated them to be in tune with the Time of Twitter. One could sense and see the formats of prayer rugs, Islamic architecture, geometric and arabesque designs and floral and animal imagery in them. Struck by what she says was a near-fatal sickness during which she says “she felt her own mortality for the first time in her life,” Amighi had also infused medical symbols like syringes and Hippocratic entwined snakes, in her pieces.

“During my hospitalisation, I felt angels were fighting with each other and I with them,” she said. It was not the first time that a patient who thought he was terminally ill, felt so, of course. Some of Amighi’s angels were so wrathful that they were handling machine-guns.

But there was a positive side to the near-death experience too. Amighi said that on her hospital bed, she read lots on mediaeval Spain and the Moorish contribution to medicine, mathematics and science. This found reflection in her pieces.

She is therefore a person who takes things to heart and carries them to her art. With a facility of holding her head totally still as she speaks and with teeth like sparkling Roman columns (in perfection, not size), she was born in Iran. Hailing from a non-Muslim background, her mother is Jewish and her father is a Zoroastrian. But her non-Muslim background, far from immunising her to the Islamic ambience around her, actually inspired her. According to a wonderful catalogue on Amighi written by Tim Stanley, senior curator for the Middle East in the Asian Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, who is also involved with the Jameel Prize, Amighi has “mined the rich Islamic visual culture of her native land.”

But she will not rest at mere inspiration. Her art purpose is more scathing. She wants to take the aesthetics of Islamic and

Middle Eastern art into new worlds, away from the plane of decoration in which it has mainly rested or been made to rest. This, according to Stanley, is the “soul and will” of Amighi’s art.

Bestowing the title of a ‘Contemporary Virtuoso’ on her, he has eulogised her as someone who has virtuosity, contemporaneity, strength of purpose, refined skill, new ideas and an ability to show new experiences in her work.

Amighi invites and challenges viewers to decrypt the coded messages of her work. “The viewer should be active and investigate my work,” she said. “I like to leave things understated or hidden.” With an affinity for the colour white, her marble-like creations are entirely devoid of colour. She admits to sitting in her studio for long hours, hanging up her “canvases” and looking at them before deciding on how to do them.

The pieces exuded a sense of peace and calmness. And as the light played on them and the shadows responded, one could see the romance in Amighi’s classics, much as the authorities at Jameel Prize and Gallery IVDE also did.

Photographs: Nisham Manaf

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