

The Presence of Your
Absence Is Everywhere

AFRUZ AMIGHI

The child of a Jewish American mother and a Zoroastrian Iranian father, Afruz Amighi (born 1974) was three and a half years old when her parents brought her from her birthplace of Tehran to visit the United States. Iran at the time stood on the brink of seismic political changes. The Islamic Revolution occurred in 1978–79, diplomatic relations with America deteriorated after Iran’s pro-Western monarchy was overturned, and the Iran-Iraq War lasted from 1980 to 1988. Amighi’s family decided to stay permanently in the United States, and she was raised and educated here. She studied political science at Barnard College before earning a Master of Fine Arts degree at New York University in 2007.

Early in her artistic career, Amighi focused on her absence from Iran. In 2009, she won the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Prize—a prestigious international award for contemporary art and design inspired by the Islamic tradition—for her suspended hanging *1001 Pages* (fig. 1), a reinvention of the tales in *Arabian Nights*. The title refers to the artist's quest for information about her birthplace in a multitude of books. Using a pen-like stencil burner, Amighi pierced a large white sheet of polyethelene—the woven plastic used by the United Nations to construct refugee tents—with the kind of intricate motifs found throughout the Islamic world on everything from Persian prayer rugs to *mashrabiya* (latticework windows). Across the screen and through its voids, she orchestrates a tantalizing play of light. *1001 Pages* embodies fundamental and enduring characteristics of the artist's work, including a lyrical transformation of inexpensive materials, an iconography that connects personal and political issues, and the use of light and shadow to create dichotomies and intrigue.

Our exhibition traverses the past four years of Amighi's career—an intense and prolific period during which the artist has relentlessly pushed herself in new directions, beyond *1001 Pages* and other “shadowpieces” that are now in major art museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Restless and searching, she has been experimenting with a variety of media drawn from the industrial, urban environment of Brooklyn, where she lives and works.

Amighi's 2014 installation *Nameless* (fig. 2), the earliest work in this exhibition, marks a watershed in her career, when she worked out how to use steel with other materials and light. The graceful architectural forms are inspired by medieval Spanish buildings constructed as mosques and repurposed as churches as part of the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula (occurring from the eighth through fifteenth centuries). The artist says that she is drawn to shrines with multilayered histories, in which one culture or faith has been grafted onto another, because they expose the artificiality of sectarian

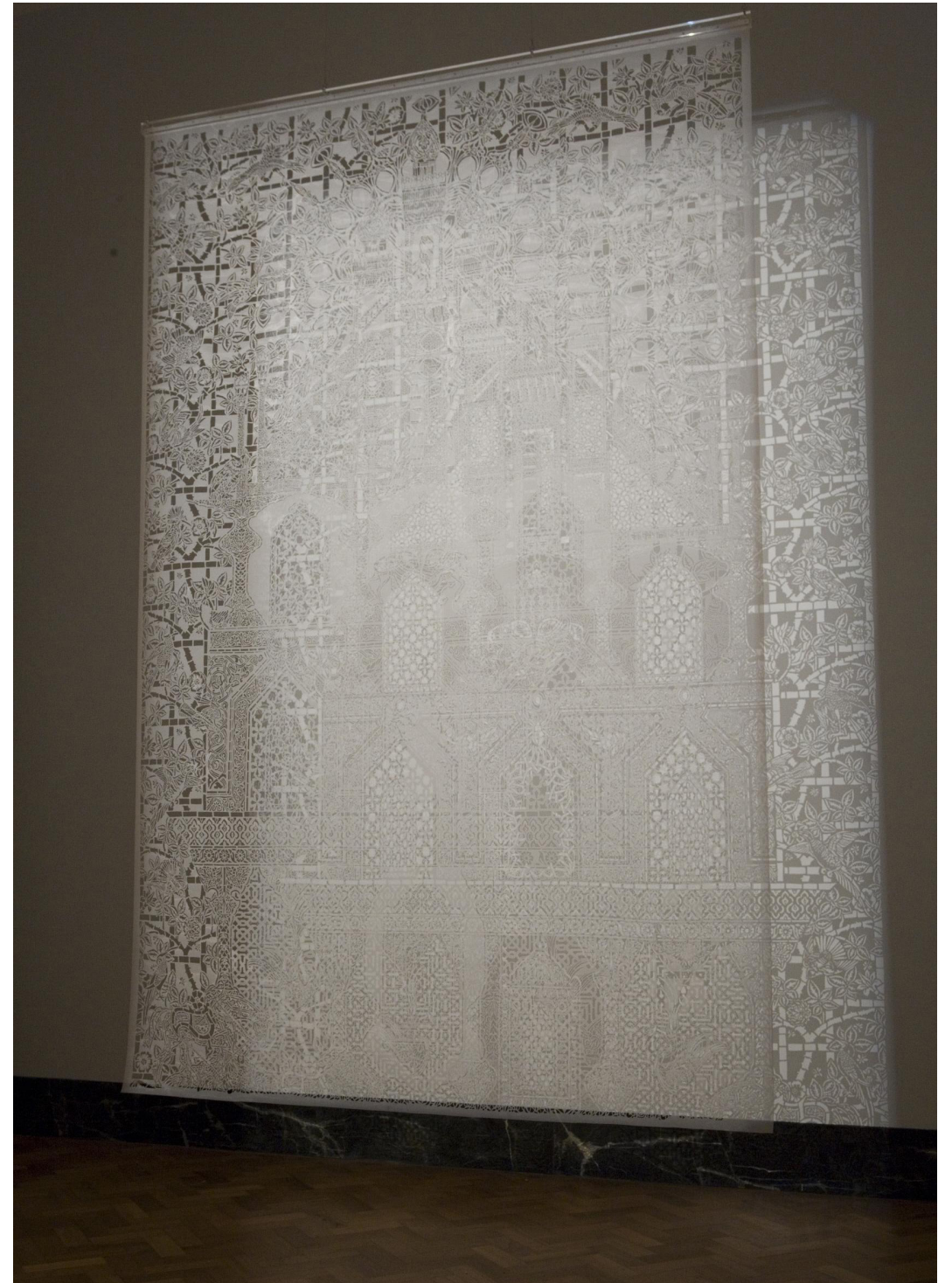


fig. 1



fig. 2

divides. Although abstract and ethereal, the motifs used in *Nameless* are recognizable as belonging to the shared language of Islamic and Christian houses of worship. Two towers that could serve either as minarets or campaniles flank an altar with a lantern, behind which rises a pointed Gothic arch, its shape suggestive of a stained-glass window. Lights activate the sculpture, give it an aura, and create a quiet meditative space around it.

As in the cosmic dualism of the Zoroastrian faith of Amighi's Iranian ancestors, good and evil are conflicting forces in her art. Although *Nameless* induces a sense of tranquility, the way the artist uplifts its towers evokes missile launches. Amighi often critiques the arsenals developed by Iran and the United States, which fuel tension between the two strongly nationalistic countries. Peace and violence stand in opposition, and diplomacy, which should act as a bridge, repeatedly fails.

Nameless became an elegy and acquired its title when Amighi was the first person on the scene of a hit-and-run accident that killed a young man

near her studio. The sculpture she had been making was thereafter connected to the memory of a person she had known only in death. For the first time, she employed fiberglass mesh used on the construction sites of tall buildings to catch falling debris, a material that had first attracted her attention because of the way light shines through it at night. The black netting serves as a funerary shroud. The artist likens this work to roadside memorials erected spontaneously to individuals killed in traffic accidents. *Nameless* is ultimately a site with multiple shrines nesting inside it—a vessel of many different sacred ideas.

Made in 2015, *Amighi's My House, My Tomb* (fig. 3) is inspired by India's wondrous Taj Mahal (begun ca. 1632). A monument to lost love, it was built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as the mausoleum for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, a Persian princess. The iridescent building, known as the Illuminated Tomb, is constructed of polished white marble encrusted with semiprecious stones. At dawn and dusk, the way sunlight falls on its distinctive silhouette—formed by a

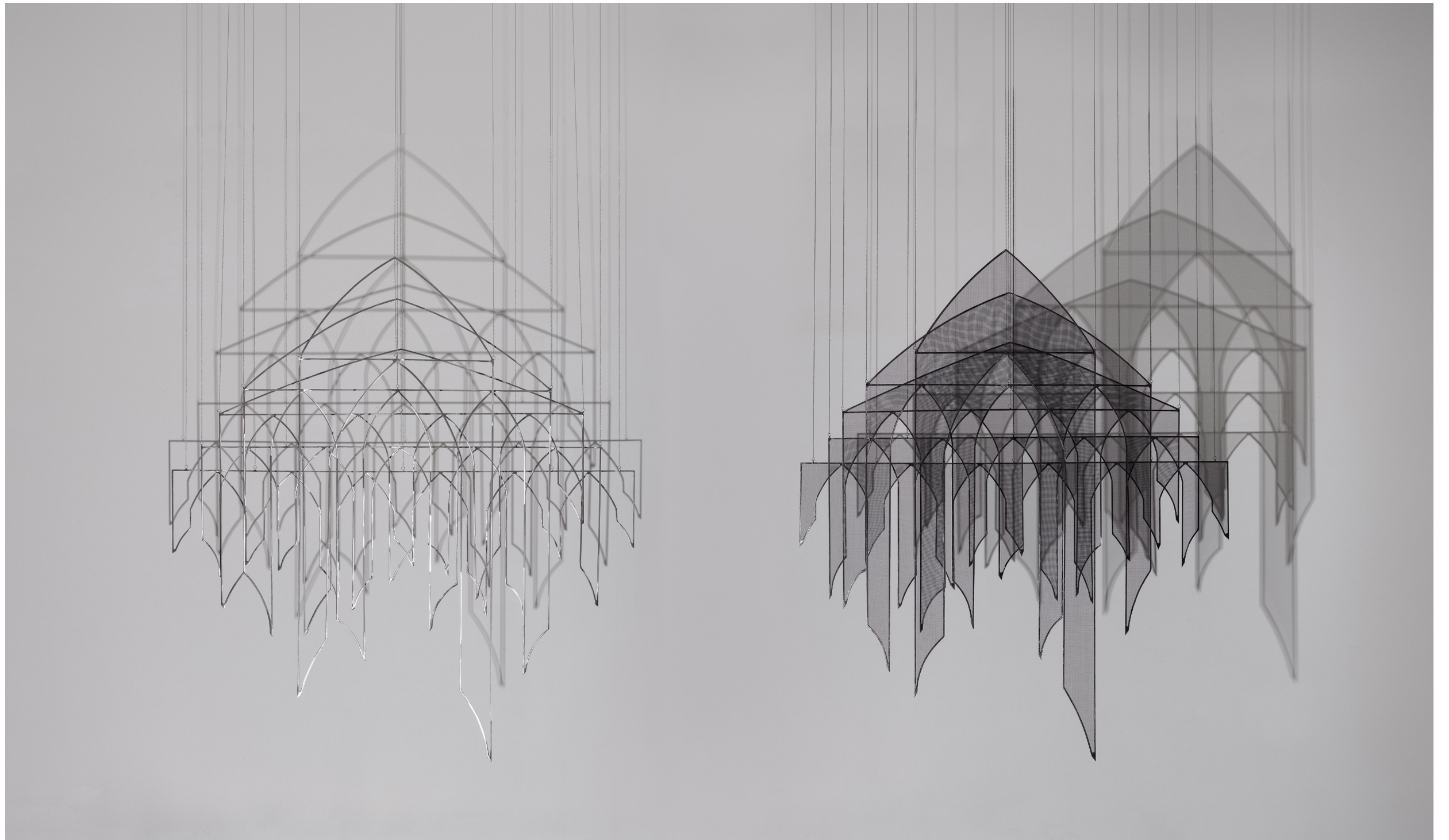


fig. 3

central onion dome with symmetrical arches, cupolas, and minarets—softens its contours. In the early morning mist that rises from the nearby River Jamna, the Taj Mahal looks as if it is floating in the sky. An artist deeply interested in myths, Amighi envisions the monument as a diptych, together with the Black Taj Mahal, which some say Shah Jahan wanted to build across the river as his own tomb. Hung by chains from the ceiling, Amighi's two miniature steel edifices appear weightless. Below the central domes are tiers of pointed arches that seem to melt at the bottom like icicles. Shadows, created by lights placed on the floor, embower and amplify these forms. Fiberglass mesh distinguishes one sculpture as the Black Taj Mahal and transforms it into a mirage. In this ghostly installation, the two lovers separated by death are reunited.

The crown, a symbol of power and decadence, is a leitmotif in Amighi's work; for her 2017 series *No More Disguise*, she designed headdresses for a procession of motley characters, each rendered as both a steel sculpture and a graphite drawing plotted on

graph paper with precision. Four of the drawings are presented in this exhibition: *Headdress for the Unborn*, *Warrior's Headdress*, *Fool's Headdress* (fig. 4), and *Headdress for the Beheaded*.

No More Disguise has clear affinities with ancient royal friezes in Persepolis (sixth century BCE) and medieval illuminated manuscripts of the *Shah-Nameh* (Persian Book of Kings), yet Amighi says that American historical and contemporary sources played a far more meaningful role in her thinking about this project. In doing so, she articulates a major shift in emphasis within her work. The artist was formerly obsessed with her absence from her birthplace of Iran during a difficult time in its history and made architectural sculptures haunted, rather than inhabited, by people. Now she recognizes an urgent need to address the current political moment in the United States, the place that has been her home since she was a small child. To express this desire to be present in the here and now, she has begun making work that is figural. Amighi associates the stylized characters in



fig. 4



fig. 5

her parade with the costumed men and women of Mardi Gras, celebrating and acting on illicit desires before Lent in New Orleans. More ominously, the characters suggest white nationalist groups, whose members long hid their identities behind white sheets and masks but now march openly on American streets. Amighi made this series against the backdrop of the Dakota Pipeline protests, and the feathers adorning the crowns reference the headdresses of Native American



fig. 6

chiefs, whose power has been undermined by American imperialism and capitalism.

The artist borrowed the title of her series from a 2014 song by the American electronic music duo Thievery Corporation, featuring the Iranian American singer LouLou Ghelichkani. The seductive song, set to a *bossa nova* beat, begins, “No more disguise, open my eyes.” Amighi has often lamented her own naïveté

about the ways of the world and has described how a rude awakening often precipitates a burst of artistic activity. The fool’s headdress in *No More Disguise*, she says, is for herself.

For this exhibition, which is Amighi’s first solo museum show, the artist made two drawings and a sculpture. All depicting women, they explore gender issues and reenvision the deepest, most universal aspects of life. The drawings, *Love Story* (fig. 5) and *Ghost Story* (fig. 6), were conceived as a pair, and together their titles recall a phrase that recurs in the writings of the American author David Foster Wallace: “Every love story is a ghost story.” Each drawing shows the bust of a beautiful female whose head is tilted back at an unnatural angle and wounded by knives. With Amighi’s characteristically eloquent use of materials, she drew the figures on scratchboard, a delicate and unforgiving medium. The lines, once incised by a sharp tool, cannot be erased—a metaphor of both love and trauma.

The metal sculpture, *We Wear Chains* (fig. 7), represents a series of

women, their bodies now rendered in full, beneath a rolling thunder cloud. Bursting with energy, the unbalanced and asymmetrical composition is a striking departure for Amighi. Expanding her visual lexicon more broadly than ever before, the artist cites ancient Greek vases and Roman statues, depictions of chained slaves in American antebellum engravings, African and Oceanic sculptures, and art deco style as sources. Bound together and pierced by arrows, the lithe women are otherworldly, bearing features of both angels and demons, humans and animals. This new procession calls to mind the recent Women’s Marches around the world, but Amighi’s disparate women are not united in a common cause. She describes them as having no known origin or destination. With this sculpture, Amighi looks beyond both the past and the present to ask, what is our future?

Trinita Kennedy
Curator



The curator and the entire exhibition team would like to thank the artist for the many conversations about her art and ideas we have had over the past year as we prepared this show.

Use of the line “The presence of your absence is everywhere” adapted from a letter by poet Edna St. Vincent Millay to Llewelyn Powys, April 20, 1931, from *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. Allan Ross Macdougall (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 1952), courtesy of Holly Peppe, Literary Executor, Millay Society, millay.org

fig. 7

Illustrations

COVER: *Love Story* (detail), 2018. Scratchboard, 36 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi.
Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Fig. 1: *1001 Pages*, 2008. Polyethelene with hand-cut design made using a stencil burner, 125 x 82 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Fig. 2: *Nameless*, 2014. Steel, fiberglass mesh, Wenge wood, ultrasuede, invisible thread, chain, and light, 168 x 132 x 96 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi.
Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Fig. 3: *My House, My Tomb*, 2015. Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, and light, 168 x 90 x 70 in. each. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi. Photo: Matthew Lazarus

Fig. 4: *Fool's Headdress*, 2017. Graphite on graph paper, 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi.
Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Fig. 5: *Love Story*, 2018. Scratchboard, 36 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi.
Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Fig. 6: *Ghost Story*, 2018. Scratchboard, 36 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi.
Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Fig 7: *We Wear Chains*, 2018. Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, and light. 144 x 160 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Afruz Amighi. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges

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