



# Art Radar

*Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond*

## **A room of one's own: Iranian-American Afruz Amighi – artist profile**

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**Sophia Contemporary Gallery in London presents "Echo's Chamber", the artist's first solo show in the United Kingdom.**

Examining feminine archetypes and political precarity, the exhibition continues until 19 January 2018. *Art Radar* profiles the artist on the occasion of her latest show.



Afruz Amighi, "Echo's Chamber", 24 November 2017 – 19 January 2018, Sophia Contemporary, London.

Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

### **An artist straddling East and West**

Born in Iran in 1974, **Afroz Amighi** is a sculptor and installation artist based in Brooklyn, New York. Her celebrated sculptural wall pieces are composed of industrial materials and are influenced by Islamic traditions in art and architecture.



Raised in New York, Amighi completed her BA in Political Science at Barnard College at Columbia University and her MFA at New York University. The artist has participated in major international exhibitions, such as her commission as part of the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, where she presented an installation in the group exhibition "**Love Me Love Me Not**", alongside the work of 16 other artists of Central Asian origins.

In 2009, Amighi was the inaugural recipient of the **Jameel Prize for Middle Eastern Contemporary Art**, awarded by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, and will have her first major solo museum show at the **Frist Center for Visual Arts** in Nashville, Tennessee, later this year.



Afruz Amighi, "Echo's Chamber", 24 November 2017 – 19 January 2018, Sophia Contemporary, London.  
Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

### **Echo's Chamber**

For her first solo exhibition in London, "**Echo's Chamber**" at Sophia Contemporary, Amighi presents nine new sculptures made from her signature materials of steel, chain and mesh. These are shown alongside eight drawings that are both preparatory drawings for the sculptures and works in their own right, reflecting the reinvigorated role of drawing in her practice.

"Echo's Chamber" marks both a continuation of technique and departure in theme from her earlier practice. To create her sculptures, Amighi first produces detailed, almost mechanical drawings on Mylar paper before working the sketches into three dimensions.



Afruz Amighi, "The Arrow" (detail), 2017, steel, fiberglass, mesh, chain and light, 119.4 x 71.1 x 38.1 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

### Mixing cultures, tradition and modernity

Past works are decidedly abstract, revealing a complex mixture of architectural sources both Eastern and Western: the elongated minarets and geometric mosaics of Islamic mosques, the arches and ribbed vaults of Gothic churches, the ornamentation of Manhattan's art deco buildings as well as the urban landscape of Brooklyn.

Whilst recalling the abstraction of her earlier work, each of Amighi's new sculptures represents archetypal female forms drawn from different regions and periods of world history. For these most recent works, Amighi has drawn on a wide range of sources: historic texts and Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, medieval European art, Persian architecture, Native American arts and crafts, African art, and the Creole carnival culture of New Orleans.



On this recent shift in her practice, the artist noted in **an interview** with *studio international* in 2017:

*For the past 15 years, I have been doing very architectural-based work. So, previously, drawing was always a means to a sculpture. It was always in the form of a preparatory drawing. The drawing was always limited by what I thought I could realise in the third dimension [...] and, also, this is the first time since college that I have worked with the figure.*

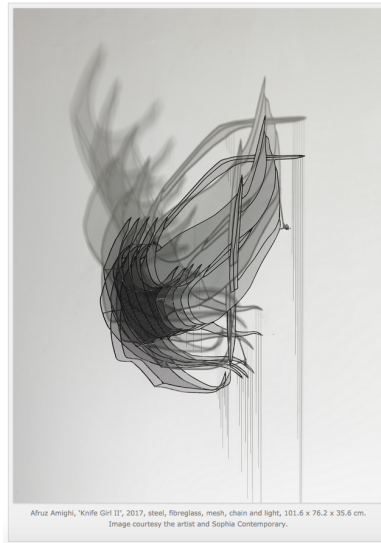




Afruz Amighi, "The Denier", 2017, graphite on Mylar, 91.4 x 60.9 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

Over the last 15 years, Amighi's relationship with her own personal history and identity has progressed. This has been reflected in the development of her practice, and its enlarged frame of reference – both aesthetic and political. As she continues in the same interview,

*When I was first making work, I was very interested in questions of identity. I was very much looking to the Middle East, to Iran in particular, in terms of history and culture. At the time, I was much younger, and I didn't realise that identity is not a fixed thing, and that it shifts as you change, as well as the way in which you see yourself in relation to the world. So my work shifted just as my identity references shifted. I got to the point where, after looking at the Middle East for a long time, I started looking at medieval Europe – Spain in particular – and I was really interested in that period of history. Then, after the recent election, I thought, you know what, I feel like it's really important for me to assert my American identity right now.*



Afuz Amighi, "Knife Girl II", 2017, steel, fibreglass, mesh, chain and light, 101.6 x 76.2 x 35.6 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

### **Dismantling "hypermasculinity"**

Responding to what the artist calls the "hypermasculinity" of the current socio-political climate of the United States, and the ongoing effort towards women's liberation in the Middle East, the sculptures in "Echo's Chamber" explore themes of femininity and the experience of women across history and geography, and engage with ideas of heroines, mythology and patriarchy.

Amighi's sculptures in the show articulate a dynamic form of tension between their weighty industrial materials and the resulting delicate compositions. They are meticulously layered upon the walls of the gallery, balanced and carefully illuminated by spotlights. Their fragility is both material and political – responding to the precarity of the position of women in both historical and contemporary contexts. In works such as *Knife Girl II* (2017), their liminal shapes are thrown into dramatic relief, creating frieze-like shadows that reflect and magnify the intricate patterning.



Afuz Amighi, "Impaler", 2017, graphite on Mylar, 91.4 x 60.9 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

Protruding from the walls, the sculptures push out into the viewer's space, generating a sense of volume and depth and an immersive, evocative atmosphere. All monochrome, the sculptures exude an ominous quality through their display that is reinforced by the explicit violence in the representation of a knife in drawings such as *Impaler*, *The Nun* and *Knife Girl I* (all 2017).



*Amazon* (2017) is inspired in part by Amighi's visits to the collection of Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York. In particular, the artist was fascinated with a work from the 1st-2nd century AD, a marble statue of a wounded Amazon – a larger-than-life representation of a woman with one arm raised above her head. In Greek art, the Amazons were a mythical race of warrior women from Asia Minor.



Afruz Amighi, 'Amazon', 2017, steel, fibreglass, mesh, chain and light, 99.1 x 81.6 x 38.1cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.

Despite her wound, the figure is posed gracefully, exuding strength, cool defiance and emotional restraint. In Amighi's sculpture, the Amazonian figure is equally enigmatic, as she transforms the marble folds of the warrior's tunic into steel and mesh.

Another sculpture entitled *Omen* (2017) instills the elegance and regal presence of female figures in sculptures and ritual masks from the MET's Africa, Oceania and the Americas collection into these materials. By drawing inspiration from such a wide array of historical and cultural traditions, both Western and non-Western, Amighi's practice asserts the role of non-Western cultures in art history, and their contemporary implications.



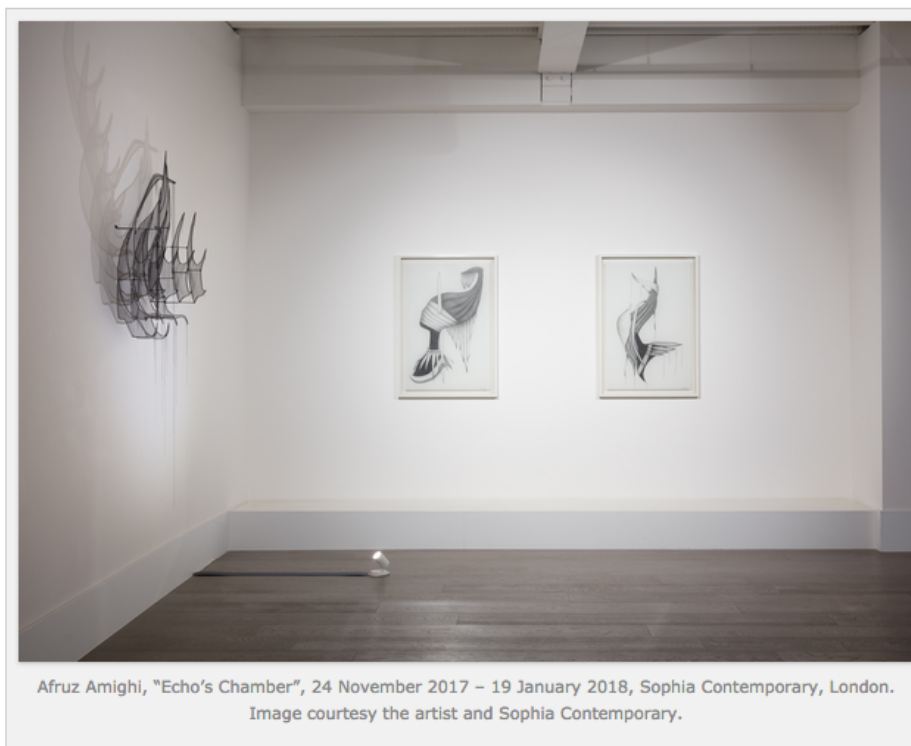
Afruz Amighi, 'Omen', 2017, steel, fibreglass, mesh, chain and light, 81.3 x 40.6 x 22.9 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary.



## Transcending the Echo Chamber

The exhibition's title, "Echo's Chamber", hinges upon this idea of multiple voices – and stresses the importance of polyphony in contemporary art and politics. Reminiscent of the homogenous and undifferentiated voice of the chorus in Greek tragedy, an echo chamber is an enclosed space for producing reverberation of sound. Following the artist's investment in American politics, the idea brings to mind its contemporary resonance in forms of media that only serve to reaffirm one's pre-existing notions or beliefs.

In ancient Greek mythology, Echo was a nymph who lived on Mount Cithaeron. Jealous of Zeus' relationship with the nymphs, his wife – the Goddess Hera – cursed Echo and left her only able to speak the last few words spoken to her. Echo was left tragically unable to declare her love for Narcissus.



In the artist's terms, Echo's inability to speak is linked to the absence of female voices in art history and their subservience in contemporary debates. Using this myth as a conceptual and symbolic reference point, Amighi advocates for greater inclusion, empowerment and agency.

From her early architectural influences to current figurative expression, Amighi uses her art as a mode of communication. Following the feminist imperative of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), with this exhibition and in her practice more widely, Amighi provides the feminine Echo with a space for the expression of her voice, both literal and figurative.

**Jessica Clifford**

**"Echo's Chamber" by Afruz Amighi is on view from 24 November 2017 to 19 January 2018 at Sophia Contemporary Gallery, 11 Grosvenor Street, London W1K 4QB.**

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