

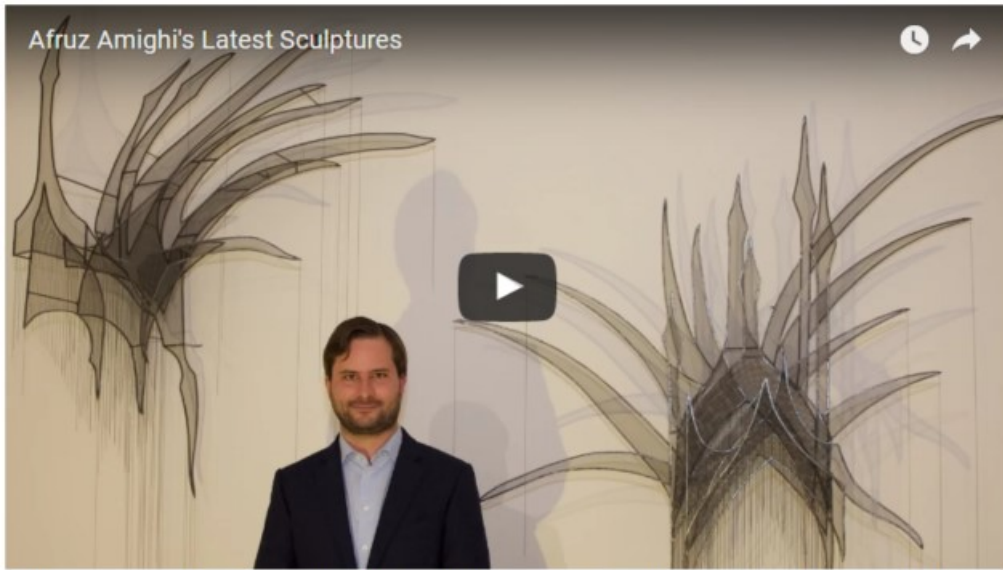
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Trump Election Inspires Artist Afruz Amighi As She Exhibits in London

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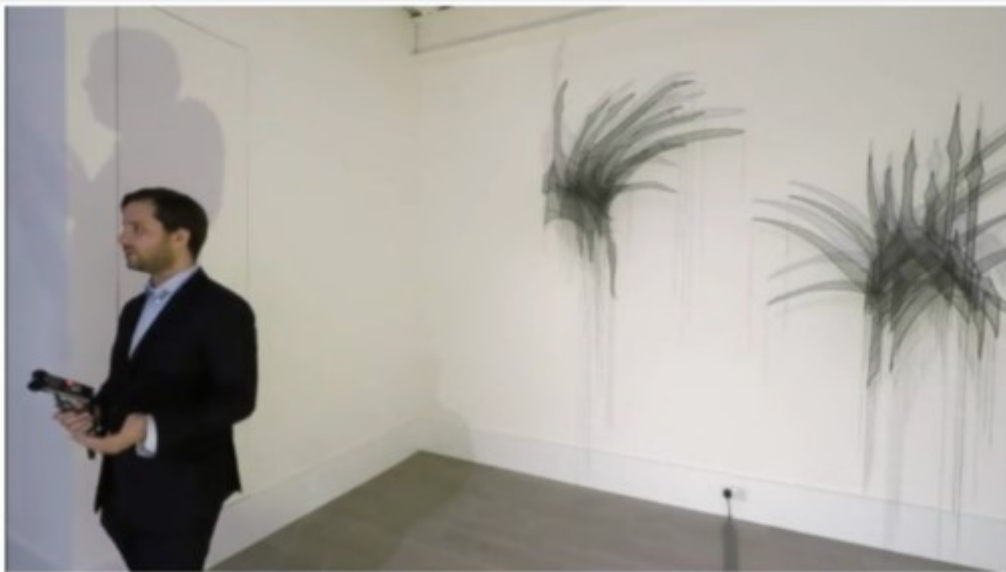


Afruz Amighi. Photograph: Fariba Salma Alam

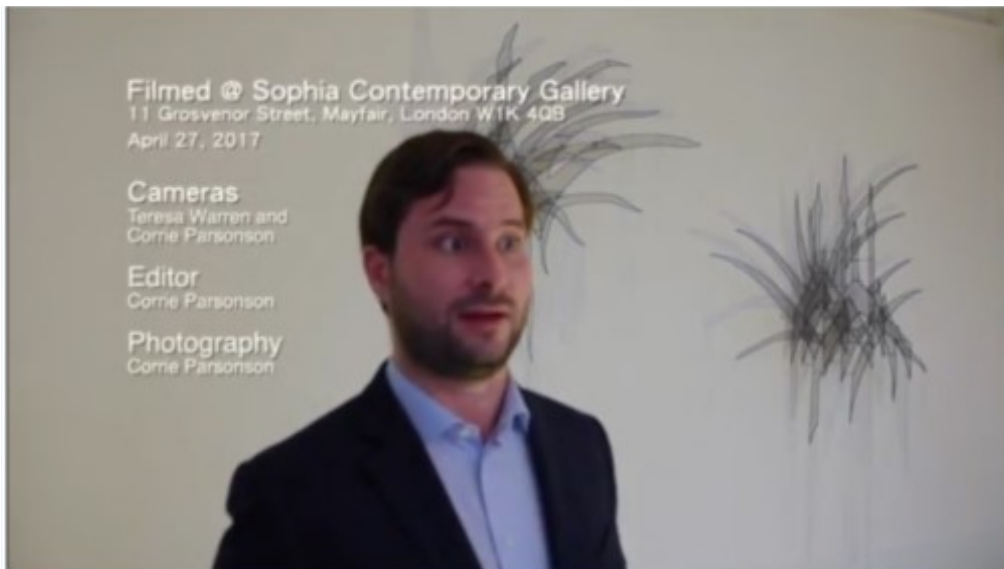


Gallery co-owner Vassili Tsarenkov talks to Kayhan London about "Shifting Landscapes" and the work of Iranian-American sculptor Afruz Amighi.

By Corrie Parsonson



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Afruz Amighi is renowned for her diaphanous and architectural shadow-based sculptures. Her work is now in a new exhibition, *Shifting Landscapes*, at London's Sophia Contemporary Gallery. The pieces on display are inspired by the recent election of U.S. President Donald Trump.

"Head Feather I" and "Head Feather II" are also influenced by Native American art, brought into sharp focus by the Dakota access pipeline controversy – and President Trump's decision soon after his election to reverse legislation stopping the oil pipeline cutting across Native American territory in the state of Dakota.

"I have always focused on history as a reference point, whether architectural history or social history," said the artist in a telephone interview from New York.



"Head Feather I" and "Head Feather II" at Sophia Contemporary Gallery's London Exhibition, "Shifting Landscapes". The two 2017 sculptures are made in steel, fiberglass mesh, light and chain. "Head Feather I" (left) is 145 x 122 x 51 cm (57 x 48 x 20 inches) and "Head Feather II" is 158 x 160 x 51 cm (62 x 63 x 20 inches). Photograph: Corrie Parsonson

Ms Amighi believes Native-Americans are: "a faded power, a lost power. Everything from totem poles to headdresses, feathered headdresses that were worn by certain tribes, made me think a lot about the origins of the USA – the very bloody origins, genocide and slavery – and how [President Donald] Trump has forced people to really think about what actually an American is."

As a virtual unknown, Amighi was the first recipient of the Jameel Prize for Middle Eastern Contemporary art, awarded by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, in 2009. Her work was commissioned for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. It is also in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, of the V&A, and of the Houston Museum of Fine Art in Texas.

The Sophia Gallery exhibition focuses on contemporary American abstract art and how it has been changed by artists such as Amighi. "At a time when the U.S. is becoming more inward looking and more nativist, [we wanted] to show the importance of other cultures and how they really influence American culture and in particular American abstraction," said the gallery's co-owner Vassili Tsarenkov in an interview.

Amighi, who is based in Brooklyn, New York, was only three years old when she left Iran in 1978. Her family was on a holiday in the U.S., visiting her American maternal grandparents, when events back home in Iran forced them to stay.

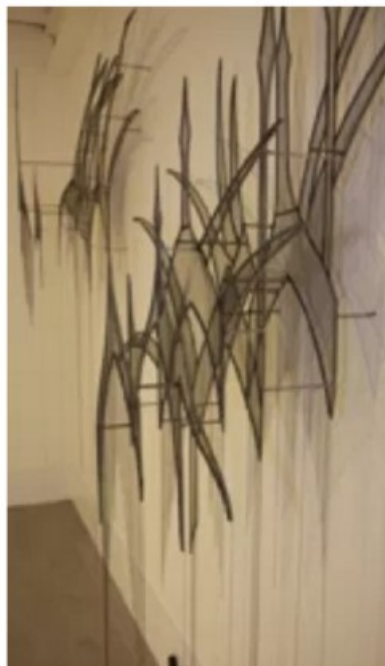
"I used to spend a great deal of time wondering what it would have been like if we'd stayed [in Iran]," she said.

The artist has one sister, now a schoolteacher. Amighi herself has a degree in political science, and comes from a family of academics who thought the visual arts were impractical.

"I didn't have the tenacity or courage to say, 'No, I'm going to study art.' But I'm glad I didn't, because I studied and learned a lot of American history and Middle Eastern history while I was in school," the artist reflected. "I found out later, when I was in an arts graduate program, that a lot of the other students didn't have much of a grasp of social history."

What was the spark that gave her the courage to jump into the life of an artist? "There was no singular moment," she said. A series of "mindless" jobs gave her the time and freedom to pursue art vigorously in her spare time.

"I'd rush home after work to my makeshift studio, and that's where I'd spend most of my time," she recalled. "So it became my way of life – unavoidable. At some point, I said: 'Well, let me go to school and get an art degree so that I can perhaps teach,' because that's one of the ways you can scrape together an existence as an artist."



Side view of "Head Feather II" with "Head Feather I" at rear. Photograph: Corrie Parsonson

In the 1990s, "before the Internet had completely or nearly strangulated the printed press," she worked as a freelancer for a series of music, hip-hop and black culture magazines, where she was "basically a fact-checker. It was the type of job where there was no emotional investment. You did it. You didn't take it home with you. So it was perfect for me".

Her breakthrough came after graduate school, which she attended from the age of 29. "I was probably the oldest one in my program, and shortly after graduating I won the Jameel Prize, which is what really lifted me out of total obscurity," she said. "I started working with a gallery in New York, and exhibiting work internationally."

That experience lasted six years. "While I was doing very well commercially, artistically I was experiencing what I would call a spiritual death, because I had been making these shadow-based, very intricate cut-out pieces, and I was so bored," she noted. "It became formulaic to me. I'm one of those artists that doesn't do variations on a square for 1years. I'm constantly changing my materials, I'm constantly working with different concepts."

"I would say that every two years, I start afresh. Usually it's the assimilation of a new technique or the discovery of a new, incredible material that forces the new work into being."

How does being Iranian infuse her work?

"When you're from a country that has been labeled by your own government – or one of your previous administrations – as a member of an 'axis of evil,' [a country] that has been demonized over the past few decades, it forces you to really think about identity, it forces you to think about race," said the artist. "It made me question things in a way that I [otherwise] might not have. I think it's really informed the way I look at American history."

"Shifting Landscapes" is at the Sophia Contemporary Gallery, 11 Grosvenor Street, Mayfair, London W1K 4QB, until Friday, June 23, 2017.

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