

An interview with the Jameel Prize winner

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S CAPTIVATING PATTERNS OF DRIVING INTENSITY

by **Valerie Behiery**, Islamic art historian, Ph.D.



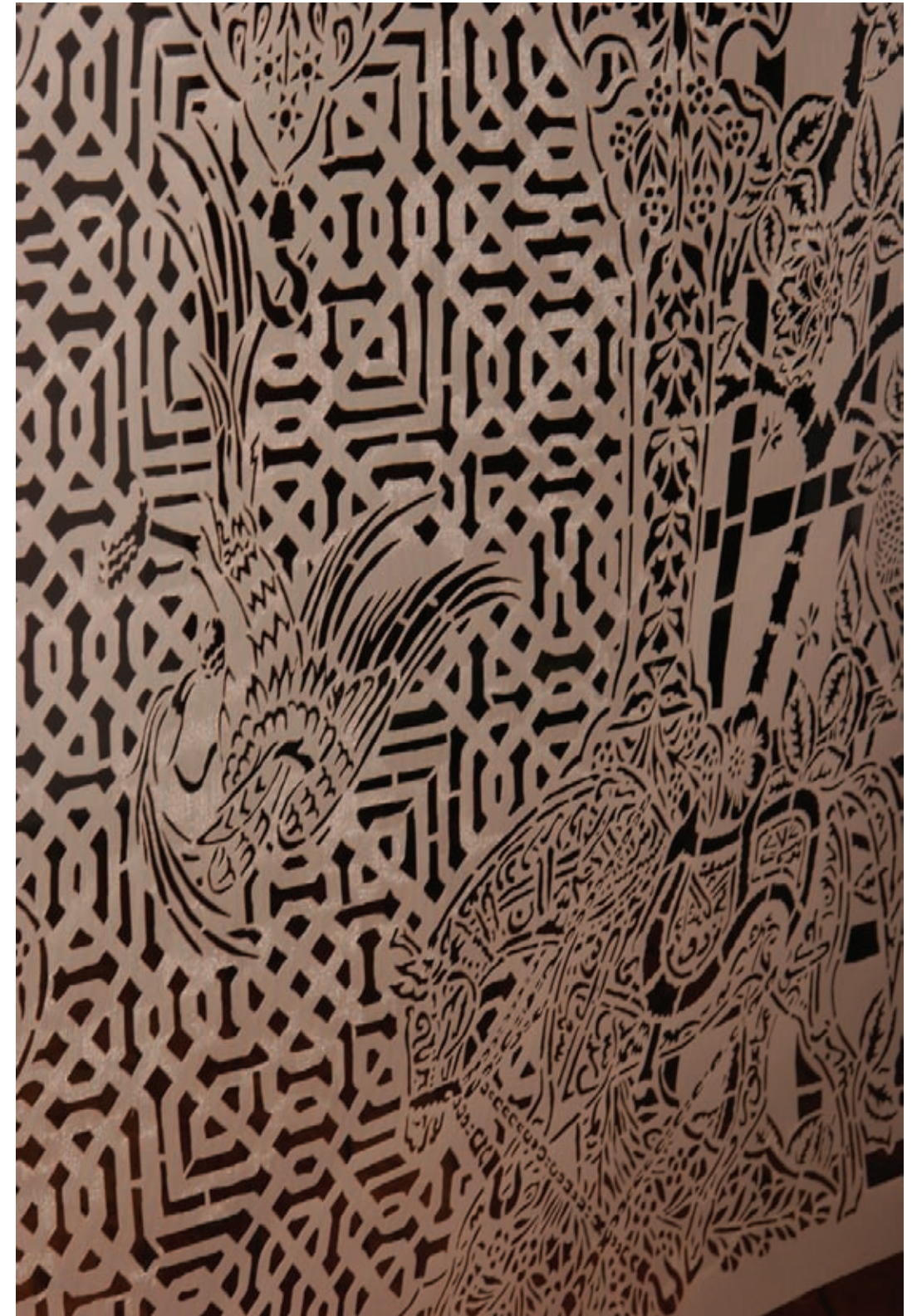
“Winning the Jameel Prize, and its aftermath, enabled me to become a working artist without having to worry about another job. This was something I always hoped for but never thought would actually happen.”

Afruz Amighi’s work is, if often enchanting, always profoundly captivating. Her difficult to describe pieces *cum* sculptures for lack of a better term pulsate with purposeful intent and display a love of craft very rarely seen in contemporary art.

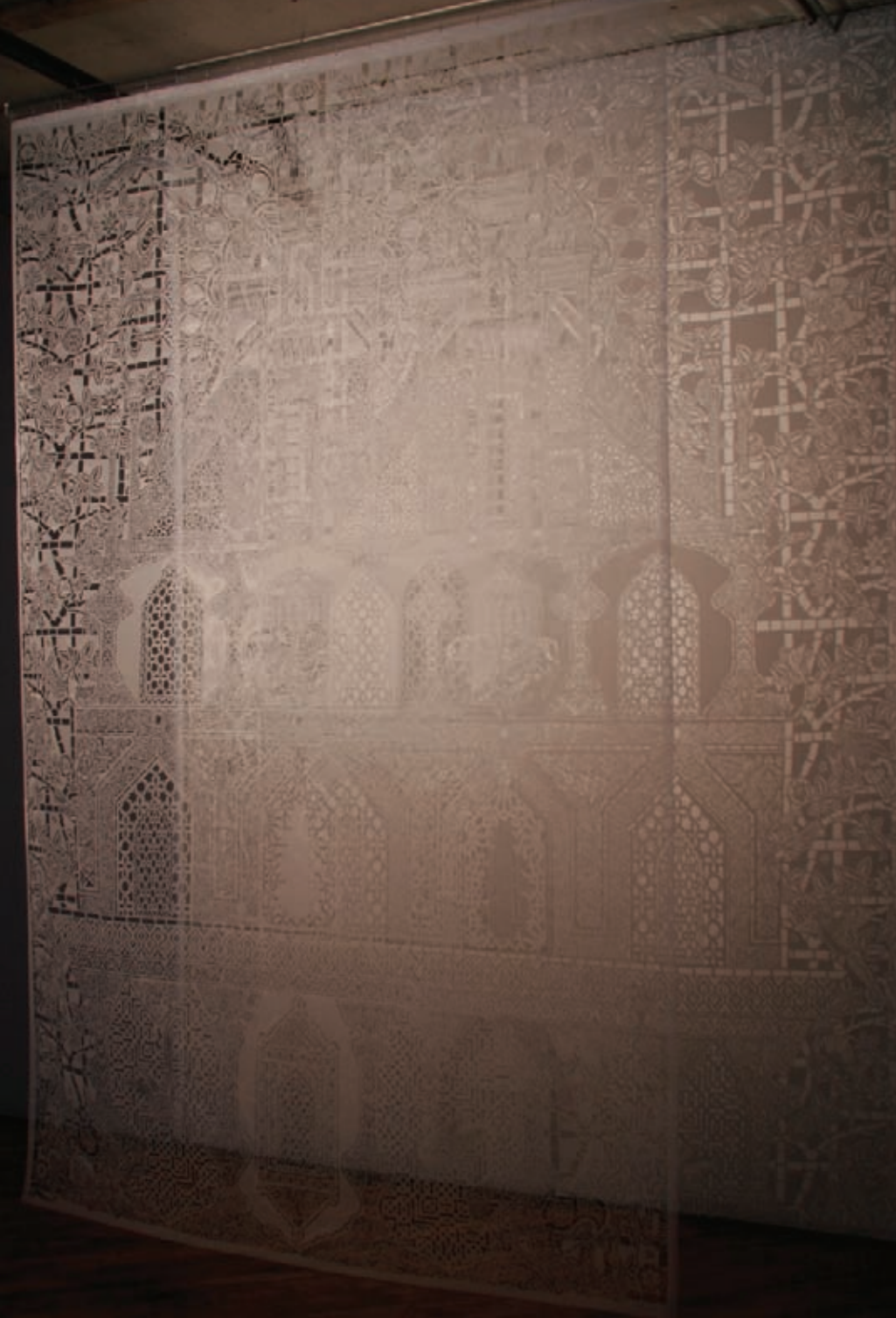
The patterns and forms that weave the work together, both delicate and powerful through restraint, all possess a poetic quality only heightened by the integration of light and space that proffer to the work a sense of ethereality. It is the magic operated by the sensation of immateriality and not only the com-

plex dizzying motifs and designs that echo the art of her native Iran. However, if the Tehran-born New Yorker’s work is fully premised on traditional Islamic art, the artist transforms it, giving it a contemporary inflection.

Having graduated in 2007 with an M.F.A. from New York University, Amighi’s career was fully launched two years later when she won the prestigious Jameel Prize operated by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and funded by philanthropist Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel. The purpose of the biennial prize is to recognize and



1001 Pages, 2008, pe-cap and plexiglass, 125 x 80 inches (275 x 176 cm)



promote contemporary art or design inspired by Islamic traditions of craft and design. The show of finalists has since travelled to several locations across the Muslim world, and Amighi has had her very first solo exhibitions, one in New York at the Nicole Beauchene Gallery, and the other in Dubai at the Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde.

I sat down with Afruz to discuss her art.

Hello Afruz. What did winning the Jameel Prize do for you as an artist, not only in terms of the international visibility it has given you, but also in terms of how it affected the course of your work, if it did that is?

Winning the Jameel Prize, and its aftermath, enabled me to become a working artist without having to worry about another job. This was something I always hoped for but never thought

would actually happen. In terms of the course of my work, the way this has unfolded is, as usual, a mystery to me and usually makes sense after enough time has passed. I didn't make an "Islamic" type of piece for the Jameel Prize, I just entered the work I was making, and since then I have continued to make what has come naturally.

You won the Jameel prize with your work, 1001 Pages (2008), which is representative of an important body of your work in which you carve out Islamic style tessellations and patterns in large plastic sheets, and through which you project light so that the beautiful patterned shadows become an integral part of the work. The shimmering dematerialization of the piece which gives it a spiritual aura echoes the aesthetic experience of much Islamic art. Discuss how you are inspired by Islamic art.



I think it would be more accurate to say that I am informed and inspired by Middle Eastern art and architecture, rather than specifically by Islamic art. Even things seen as exclusively Muslim, such as the mosque and shrine, were the aesthetic culmination of thousands of years of civilization and culture. What inspires me most about Middle Eastern art is its ability to contain dizzying detail amidst an overall feeling of vastness. I would describe it almost as a minimalist sensibility. The result is a kind of precarious elegance.

That is indeed an accurate description and it's funny not many people see the minimalist aspect of Islamic art. The visual and technical execution of the designs in 1001 Pages and your other shadow works demonstrates an equivalent mastery to Muslim artisans who have studied, designed, and rendered

such drawings for years. How do you come up with the overall designs? 1001 Pages seems to reference architectural decoration. Do you work from specific buildings or models, or do you combine motifs from different sources into a new design?

The designs for my shadow pieces usually start as a rough sketch on paper where I map out different symbols that I want to incorporate into the overall visual image. In order to bring this drawing to life, I use a combination of images gleaned from books, photographs and the internet. After scanning these images into my computer I create a design from them using Photoshop. The end result may not appear as such, but was born from what began as a giant collage.

I am intrigued by the actual process of your work especially as it is rare that what may be considered, rightly or wrongly, a craft



process be reconfigured into global contemporary art. How do you set up your drawings on(to) the plastic and how do you go about cutting them out?

After much trial and error I eventually found a method to facilitate this process of transferring my design onto the plastic sheeting. At first I simply drew with graphite pencil onto the sheet, but this proved to be very messy and time consuming. Now I simply print out my design in large format and place it under the plastic sheet so that I can use it the way one would use a stencil.

What is a stencil burner exactly? And how time consuming is it to work with? Are you involved in a type of modern 'lace-making' or other traditional craft in which the time and process of making involve a meditative dimension?

A stencil burner is like a hot pen. It is a thin piece of metal



Angels in Combat, 2010, pe-cap and plexiglass, 99 x 65 inches (217,8 x 143 cm)

that gets plugged into an outlet. It heats up and can be used to cut out designs from any kind of plastic material. It is kind of like using a pencil, except that it must be guided over the plastic much more slowly, so that it burns through and allows for the negative shape to fall away from the sheet. Although the process has nothing in common with lace making, the end result shares the same feeling as lace. Rather than join pieces of material together, I am cutting pieces out from a whole. This process definitely is a meditative one. I have to focus completely on each detail without thinking of the end result. This emphasis on the present moment gives way to an extraordinary sense of tranquility.

Your titles are also evocative. We all know "1001 Nights" but what do 1001 pages refer to? Of course, pages in Arabic often signify the Qur'an...

Hall Way, 2010, pe-cap and plexiglass,
115 x 76 inches (253 x 167,2 cm)

"1001 Pages" is a reference to two things. For one, it refers to the "1001 Nights". The second reference comes from the process I went through in order to make the piece. I had been in an artistic rut for a few months and all I could do was read. I thought at the time that what I was going through was fruitless. But in the end all of those pages culminated in this project that became "1001 Pages".

That is such a nice story or experience to help us appreciate the piece, that's why it is so useful to hear the artist's words about his or her art. If your work excludes the serenity of traditional Islamic art, it also contains a darker shadow or fearful aspect. For example in 1001 Pages, you have inserted a large spider in a scene funnily enough reminiscent of the scarab and solar symbol in ancient Egyptian art. In Poppy Garden (2007), a stunningly

beautiful work showing a Persian carpet style lavish tree of life motif, you have woven in syringe designs. Does beauty harbour a dangerous element for you? Does the absolute beauty of Islamic art seem too idealistic for the imperfect world we live in? Or is it a "yin and yang" type of thing? And are these elements personal signs? So many questions and that might in fact be the point...

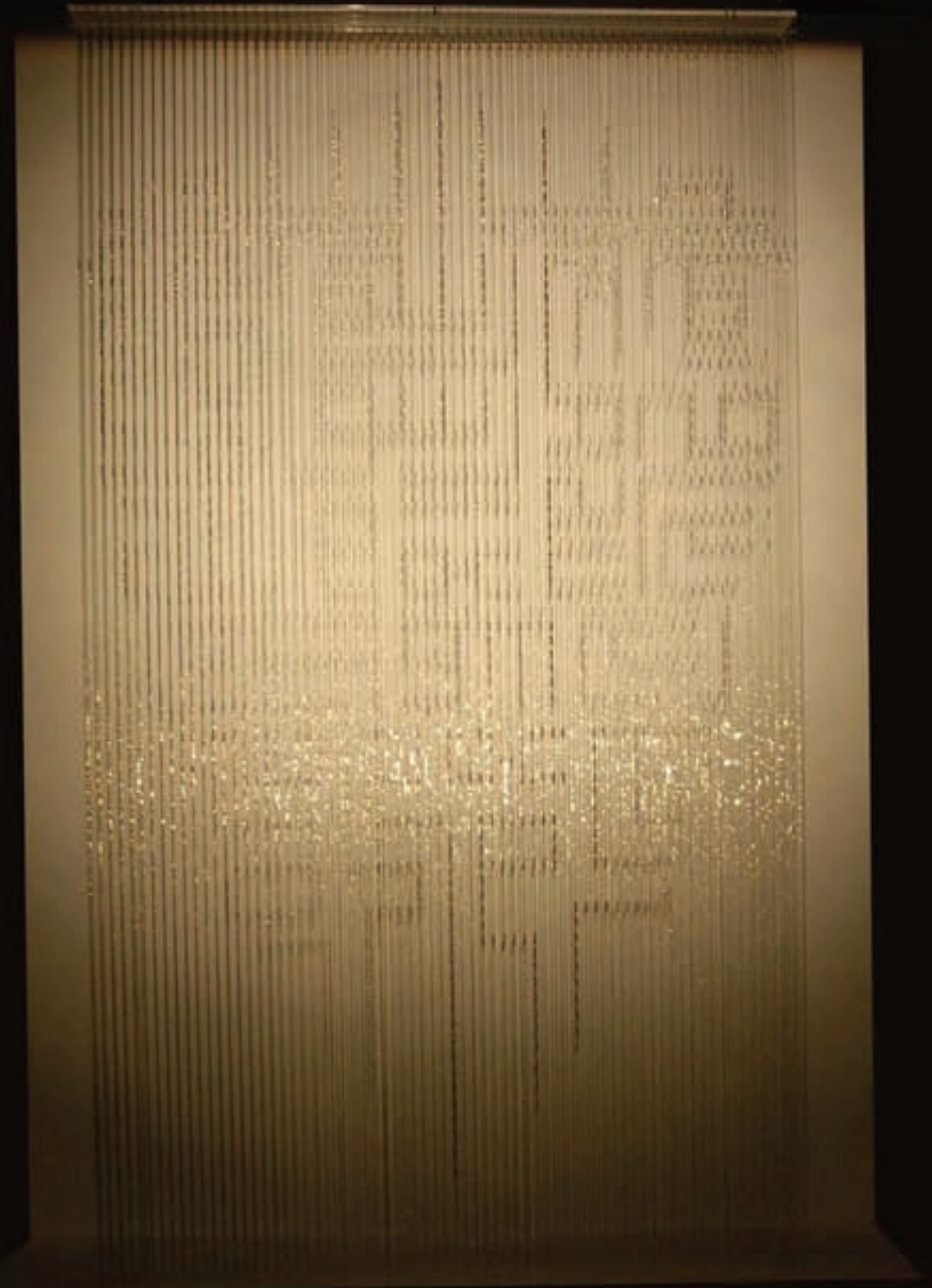
The dangerous and violent symbols in my work come from contemporary reality. They are both personal and political. I do not see the coexistence of beauty and violence as a yin and yang phenomenon, with the implication that they both need and balance each other out. The extreme violence in our world is far from necessary. I work with imagery that was often used in the past to describe paradise. My inclusion of danger is simply an attempt to bring this paradise down to earth.



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Your recent show at the IVDE Gallery entitled Angels in Combat featured three shadow works, the actual piece Angels in Combat (2010), which seems to be inspired by Ottoman Iznik designs, displays amidst the designs angels wielding machine guns. The discourse in the press around the work puts forth that these are related to a near death experience you had. Can you say a few words about this?

I was very sick and I nearly died. I did not come away with any life affirming revelation as happens in the movies. I came away with a greater sense of vulnerability, not simply in regards to my existence, but in regards to human life in general. This has not led me to include more violent imagery in my work than previously, but rather I can feel the implications of that imagery in a way I could not have felt before.



99 Names, 2007, chain, bead and plexi glass, 120 x 70 x 10 inches (264 x 154 x 22 cm)

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The sensitivity that you show to Islamic art and aesthetics is astounding. How many years did you spend in Iran as a child, and do you go back regularly? Or does this sensitivity come more from within and from your plural self-identity so to speak? As a contemporary artist, as a New Yorker, out of all the modes of visuality that could have chosen, you chose this one ...

I was only 3 years old when my family came to the United States from Iran. I was too young to have taken much in. What did influence me was growing up in homes that looked very American on the outside and completely Persian on the inside. I think this is the root of my sensitivity to the Persian aesthetic. It was never a choice I made, that is, to make Middle Eastern looking art work. It is intuitive. It is just the way I transform material.

*The Muslim world historically was both multicultural and multid denominational, and as such many objects that we classify as Islamic art were fashioned for the Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, or Hindu communities living therein. But normally these objects do not evince any overtly Islamic symbolism. However, although you are not of Muslim descent, religious inscriptions interestingly find their way into your work, for example the kufic words in the star at the top of the mihrab shape in the piece **Hall Way (2010)**. A more overt reference is to be found in the work made of chains and beads **99 Names (2007)**. Do these references make their way into the work intuitively, are they about bringing different traditions together, or something else?*

Interestingly, *99 Names* was inspired by my father who is Zo-

Poppy Garden, 2007, pe-cap and plexiglass,
126 x 90 inches (277,2 x 198 cm)

roastrian. He spent an entire summer amassing beads from which he made hundreds and hundreds of prayer beads (*tasbee*). He swore on their soothing powers and proceeded to hand them out to both his students and friends over the course of the next few years. I relate this anecdote simply to show the extent to which “Islamic” traditions have been influenced by and embraced by the various religious groups in the Middle East. So, my inclusion of Kufic script or a mihrab, functions in a similar way.

I like your focus on the places where different cultures meet rather than differ. Just as an aside, I don't think the work really images the 99 names of God found in the Islamic tradition... Another aspect of your work that I admire and again mirrors historical Islamic art is the way you use very humble materials only to transform them into something unabashedly beautiful. The shadow pieces are constructed out

of the same plastic used to make refugee tents as well as less poignant industrial objects. Your metal pieces, including 99 Names, use generic metal chain to create the most lyrical formations. Is this aspect important to you?

My choice of materials comes largely from the fact that I am inspired most when trolling down the halls of giant hardware stores. I especially love plumbing and electrical equipment and am always looking for ways to manipulate it into something different. I enjoy the transformation of the ordinary into an object of veneration. Not only is it an inexpensive way to work, but it gives me great satisfaction to place items from a hardware store that I see as beautiful into a realm where others are kind of forced to acknowledge their beauty.

I completely get that especially as I have a weakspot for hardware stores as well! The metal pieces are as intense and poetic as the shad-



Poppy Garden, 2007, pe-cap and plexiglass, 126 x 90 inches (277,2 x 198 cm)

ow pieces. I really like Floorpiece (2010) which is a work of utmost simplicity. I appreciate it because it is ephemeral, maybe nomadic might be a better word as one can pick it up and take it with one. What also pleases me about it is that the motif is evocative of embroidery, jewellery, or even henna patterns, in short art forms often associated with women who are so often left out of Islamic art history. In addition the design is less culturally specific and can thus be suggestive of many artistic traditions...

The *Floorpiece* actually started out as a silver earring I made when I was bored in the studio one day. I became fixated on it and over the course of a few weeks it grew into a giant earring better suited for an Amazon. As I was making it I was thinking of the lace patterns Venetian women used to weave, incorporating motifs about the ocean and sailing. In the end the piece reminded me more of one of those enormous Nazca designs made

in ancient Peru that can only be discerned when looking at them from a plane high in the sky.

The other metal pieces evince a similar minimalist power but they are three dimensional and incorporate negative space and shadow as part of the work. They are multi-levelled whimsical bird cage and chandelier like structures suspended in space from the ceiling. However, although the aesthetic is seemingly delicate and the artefacts apparently frail, there is nonetheless an extraordinary power to them. As in all your work, it is as if holding back condenses and multiplies its visual potency. Take Locket (2010), the title suggests a delicate piece of jewellery and yet the work is too long, too oddly shaped, and too fully present to be experienced only as 'delicate.' As in the shadow pieces, there seems to be a tremendous unknown or hidden power to beau-

ty. Is this a comment on gender or on the "less is more" philosophy of minimalism, or else something that simply makes its way into the work unconsciously, reflecting both your process and intent?

In these metal works I was thinking a lot about nationalism and the cages it places people in, cages that are both destructive and comforting, annihilating and seductive. I was thinking about all the structures we create for ourselves and we find ourselves in. We often wonder whether we had any role in their construction because they seem to have materialized so quickly and definitively before our eyes like magic. I am interested here in both blame and responsibility.

In some of the works, there is a reference to present day political events and situations where the lockets clearly become rockets,



Hall Way, 2010, pe-cap and plexiglass, 115 x 76 inches (253 x 167,2 cm)

commenting, as in Rocket Gods (2008), on the American arms-based economy, or on the contrary, as in Cages (2009), on Iranian weaponry, the latter piece said to replicate the number of missile tests recently launched by Iran. What I find fascinating about these pieces is the fact that you can both espouse and criticize different positions because of your bicultural outlook. I often think that those of us with complex plural identities can be the best ambassadors or mediators...

It does make it a lot easier to make criticisms when you have the so-called "legitimacy" of your nationality, regardless of how absurd that actually is. However, the impetus for these works, cages and rocket gods, did not come from any initial desire to criticize, but rather from the desire to feel closer to the invisible pulse that



keeps our economy strong, that of weapons production.

It seemed that the arms economy was the main factor that kept the American economy from crashing deeper into a full on depression. I wanted to mimic that production in my studio, to echo the process, however disgusting, that was responsible for putting food on our plates. In the way that ancient societies very literally worshipped fertility gods for

their harvest, I set out to create a set of idols that looked like bullets, missiles and rockets for people to pray to.

This said, whether there is or not a political aspect to certain pieces, your work retains all its visual poetry; it is not so to speak what is often referred to as 'political art' as it seems to be concerned with bringing things together. As such, a work like

Hall Way, 2010, pe-cap and plexiglass, 115 x 76 inches (253 x 167,2 cm)

Cages is just as evocative if the viewer remains unaware of its political dimension.

I'm happy to hear you say that. I often struggle with how many visual clues to embed in my work, or with whether to place an accompanying text on the wall explaining the conceptual content. But in the end, I always opt for less. I feel that the experience of the work will exist on different levels for different people and that sometimes its meaning will unfold over time.

It has been a veritable pleasure speaking with you and hearing what you have to say about your art. I wish you every success and greatly look forward to following the evolution of your work. Thank you very much.

Thank you.