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LASHAI  
AND HER  
ENCHANTING OEUVRE

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S  
UTOPIAN  
TOWERS

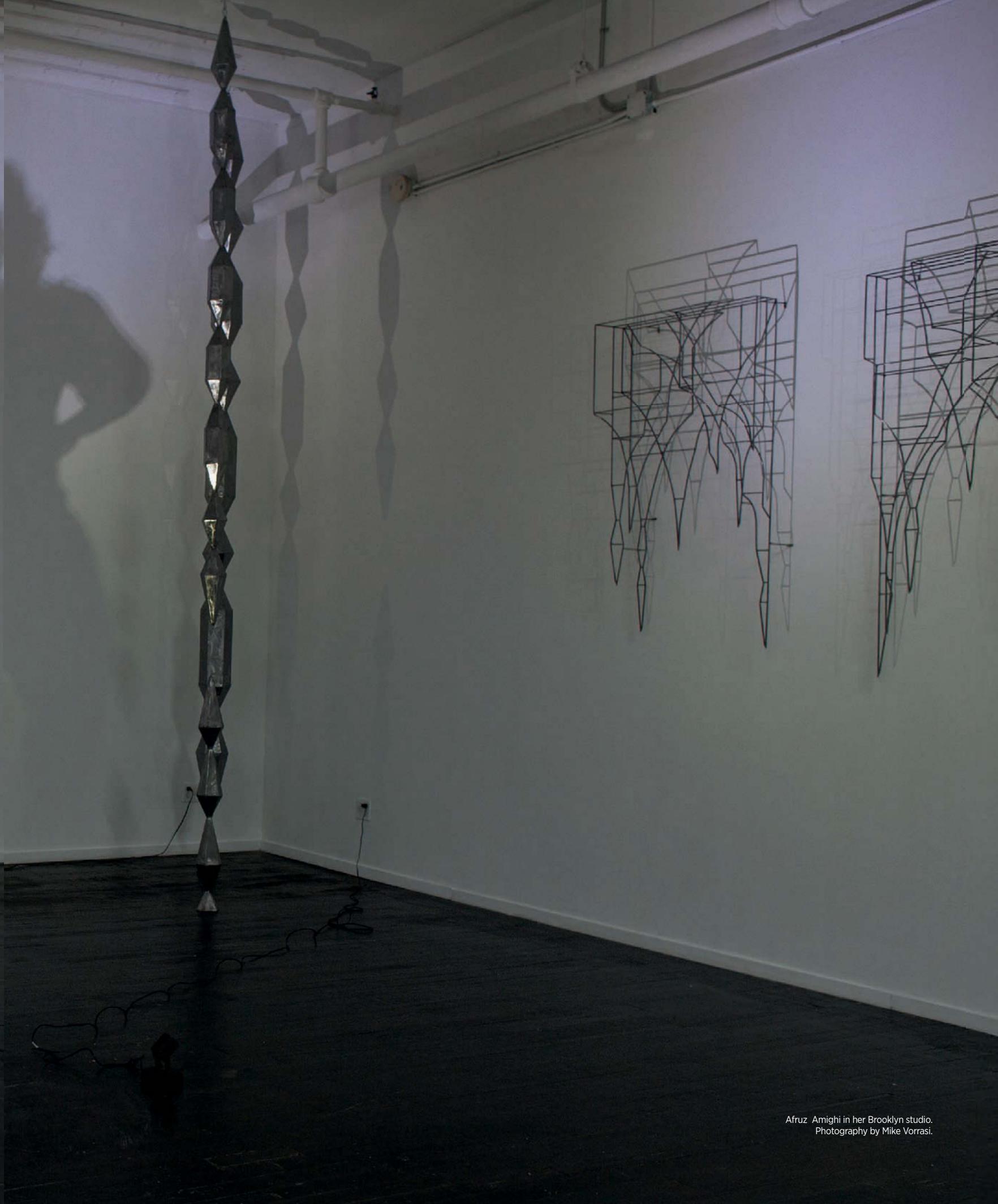
WINDS OF CHANGE  
MIDDLE EASTERN ART  
*at the* GUGGENHEIM  
NEW YORK

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# UTOPIAN TOWERS

*The elegant structures of **Afroz Amighi's** latest work play with architectural forms and their resulting shadows. Rebecca Anne Proctor meets the artist to discuss her enchanting sculptures as well as her particular medium of light*





Afruz Amighi in her Brooklyn studio.  
Photography by Mike Vorrasi.

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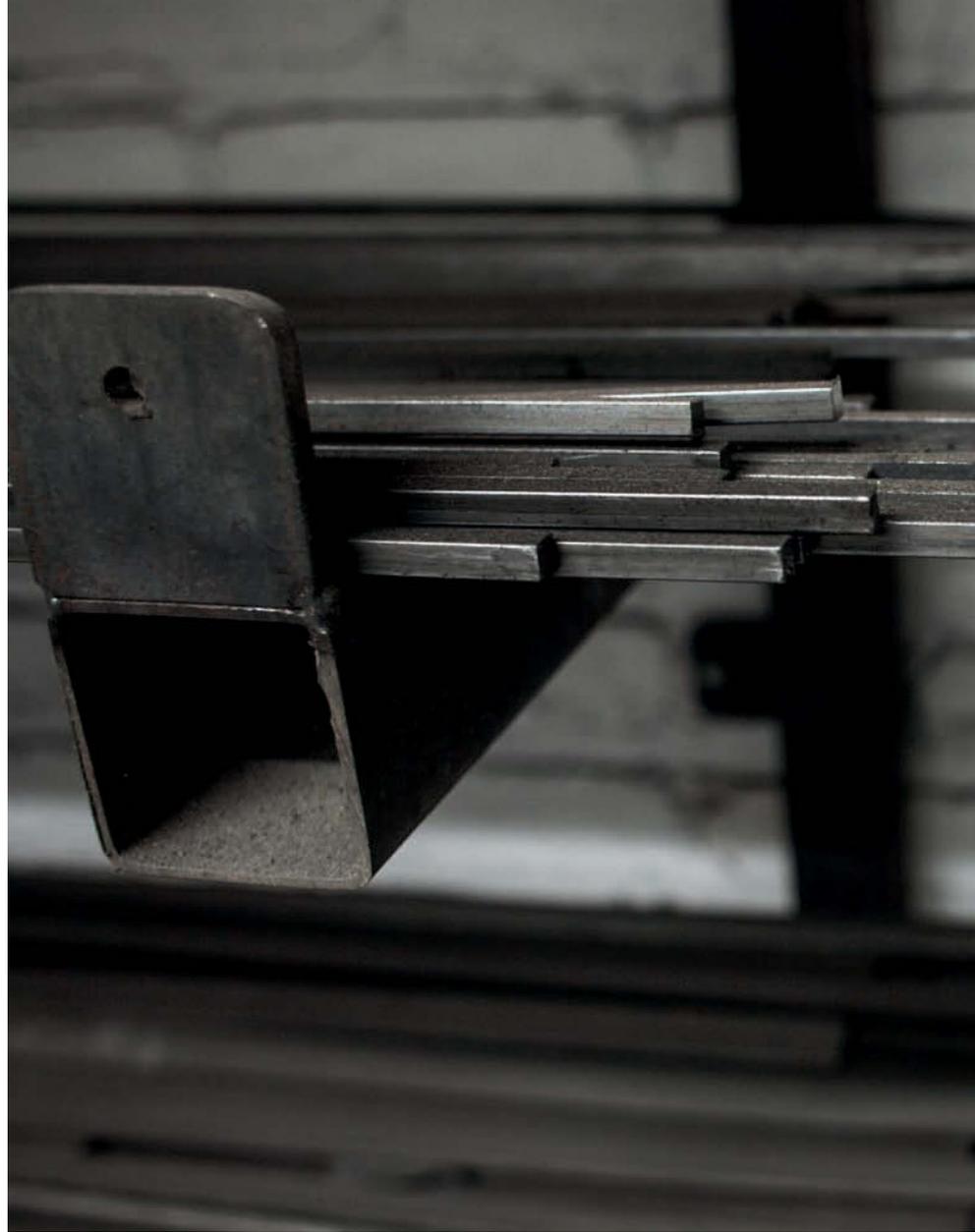
tep inside Afruz Amighi's Brooklyn studio and one will behold many shadows on the wall. Like the gentle light that emanates from a flickering candle, the shadows are but mirrors of the artist's architectural installations. They ever so gently reveal forms that replicate those of monumental edifices, thus appropriating aspects of major historical structures that continue to look down upon humankind. But there is also a spiritual feeling here as one walks

around Amighi's sculptures—almost akin to the experience of going into a church or a mosque. It could be either. It is an intimate and deeply personal moment that resonates only with the viewer. These innovative objects and forms that emerge from Amighi's installations play with the light that glistens upon them, transforming her studio or the gallery space into an enchanted and highly personal odyssey of light and matter.

"For me these structures are nearly all abodes," says the artist of her recent body of work *Māngata* that showed at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. "Whether they reference cathedrals, mosques, tombs or shrines, they are places of refuge, solace. They are idealised homes I build for myself to live in for a time, and then walk away from." In *Nameless*, the elongated and towering forms akin to the shape of minarets stand determinedly erect while other sphere-like forms dangle from above. The 2014 work done in steel, fiberglass mesh, Wenge wood, ultra suede, invisible thread, gunmetal chain and LED lights, references the aesthetics of both the cathedral and the mosque. The installation evokes a grandiose feeling of a monument that has held significance over time—an idea which it references by recalling a phenomenon particular to Southern Spain whereby churches were transformed into mosques during Moorish rule and then turned back into churches again after the Reconquista. "The repurposing of monumental structures is very interesting to me," she says. "People use the same sites—a new power comes in and goes to where the old shrine was, it likes to repurpose it or obliterate it and then build on top of it. There are these sites that have all of these different shrines inside of them."

Amighi is interested in the power of a shrine. It disrupts the space with silence and interrupts time. Through form, medium, light and shadow, she desires to recreate such a sensation. "The two main influences in my work are Islamic art and architecture and Gothic art and architecture," says Amighi. "I think the Gothic comes from having travelled and seen a lot of cathedrals at a very young age. I remember feeling very drawn to the drama of Catholicism and especially churches. I love the idea of going inside these cathedrals; there's the smell of the incense and there's the robes that the priest wears. It's so theatrical—like a soap opera." In terms of Islamic architecture, it is the sense of symmetry and beauty in the proportions used that influence her the most. "There's a sense of verticality," says Amighi. "So my work is very tall and slender for that reason."

While these serene installations pull attributes from such ornate architectural structures, Amighi sticks with very simple materials to make her art. "All of the stuff that I am looking at is made from very precious materials—like marble and alabaster,"



she says. "The Taj Mahal used to be encrusted in gem stones! I, on the other hand, am working with very simple materials. The fanciest I get is maybe wood." The artist, who originally studied architecture for a short time at the beginning of university, is very aware of the materials she uses and how they affect the overall structure. Most of the materials she gets are from hardware stores. The works displayed at Leila Heller Gallery incorporate a soft black mesh. "I was coming back from JFK airport one night and saw all of these buildings that were draped in black mesh with big construction lights shining from inside," she recalls. "The mesh was there to keep the debris from falling onto passer-by's. Then I noticed that it was everywhere in the city. So I ordered it." And that's usually what happens. "I see something in a construction site. I buy it but don't know what to do with it, until a few years later it falls into a piece of work somehow." It's all a part of her creative process which sees the artist working six to seven days a week and for long stretches at a time. "I am a glutton for routine," she says. "If I don't have this routine I get really depressed and anxious. My work is very methodical."

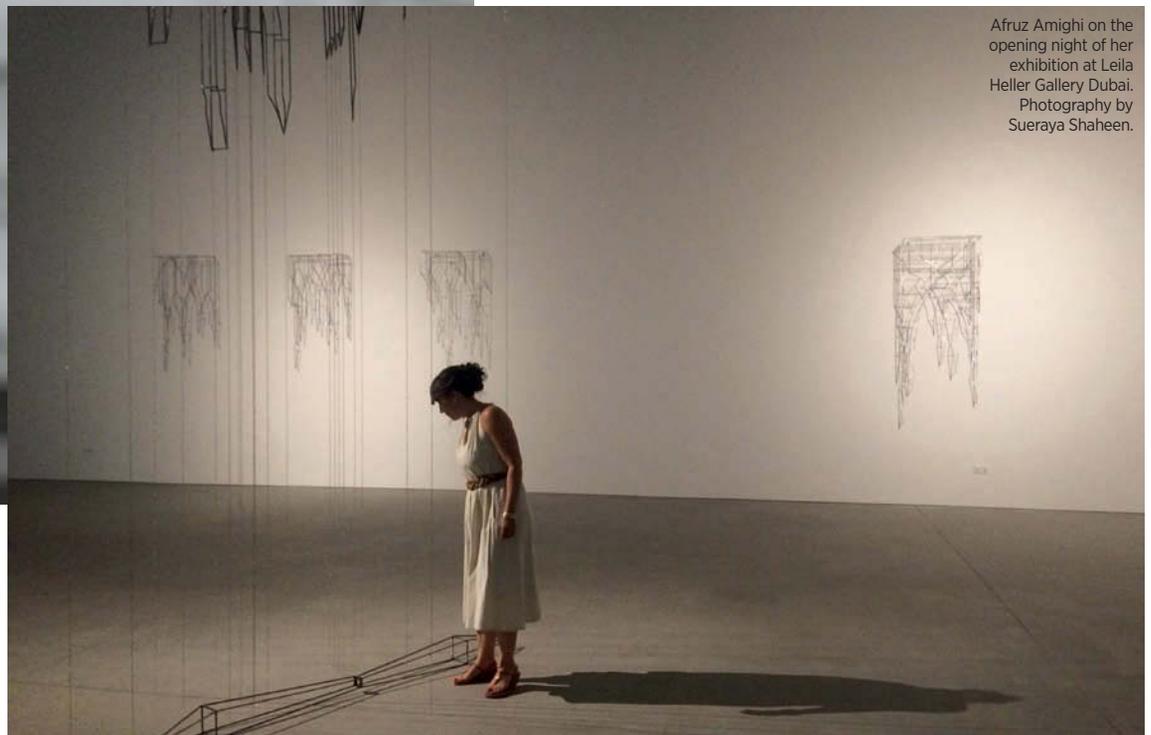
Though Amighi's Persian heritage is not an element central to her *oeuvre*, references to the structures of Iran make themselves intuitively apparent. "I didn't realise how referential my work was to Islamic architecture and prayer rugs—it was just there," she says. "I am now more aware of it and now I am more consciously drawing on those particular elements. Even so, I think identity is something everyone is conflicted about. Moreover, the strict divide between Western and Islamic art is blurrier than we imagine, more a modern imposition onto the present that we have projected back onto the past." Amighi



A view of the materials in Amighi's Brooklyn studio. Photography by Mike Vorrasi.

“IDEAS OF SECTARIANISM AND PURITY DON'T REALLY EXIST IN ARCHITECTURAL FORM. I TRY AND CREATE STRUCTURES THAT WORK TOGETHER”

*Afruz Amighi*



Afruz Amighi on the opening night of her exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai. Photography by Sueraya Shaheen.

remembers her childhood home in Southern Iran where she lived with her grandparents and also the last time she went back to the country when she was around 25 years old. “The first time I visited Iran I was 25, I hadn't been there since I was a child and I felt a deep connection to the physical landscape. I spent a lot of time wondering ‘Who would have I been had we stayed?’ I used to think about it a lot but then these questions faded over time.”

While Persian references can be found throughout her work so can many other elements. In *Forest* and *Veins* the elongated lines of Amighi's installations are found grouped together in unison. Very much akin to that of group of trees or of the imperfect web-like make-up of human veins, these two works were made in the aftermath of ISIL's bombing of the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra, Syria, a temple built in devotion to the Canaanite god of the heavens in the 2nd century. Then, as Christianity gained ground in the 5th century, the Temple of Baalshamin was transformed into a church. It was built in the Roman architectural tradition and contained ancient Syrian and Egyptian elements. Existing from the pagan Roman era, through Christian and Islamic rule, it functioned like a vessel for collective memory. “Everything in this world has been melded together,” says Amighi. “By labelling it as Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist we differentiate a building from other structures. But there isn't much difference. Ideas of sectarianism

and purity don't really exist in architectural form. I try and create structures that work together.”

This merge of history, form and thought brings cultures together through similarities and differences. But there's also a beauty in something that one can't fully translate. Like Amighi's structures, with no specific way to read them or ascertain their historical influence, the exhibition's title is one that is not wholly translatable in English. The Swedish word *Mångata* is a description of the glimmering, road-like reflection of moonlight onto water. This acts as a reflection as to how light and reflection create personal experiences through the artist's body of work. “This body of work is all about existing in the night-time without any light except for very specific light that is directed at the work,” says Amighi. “It is about how moonlight hits the water. Sometimes it sparkles and sometimes it is dull, and that is very much how I feel this work looks like when it is lit.” And there's a beauty and mystery in that—like Amighi's sculptures that merge past with present as well as other cultures and religions, the moonlight caresses us all. ■

*Mångata* is on until 15 June at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai. [leilahellergallery.com](http://leilahellergallery.com)