

Carnivals

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

AYK: What was your reaction to the presidential election?

AA: Initially, I felt as if I were in a period of mourning.

AYK: And now?

AA: Once Trump became president, I was ready, as were tens of thousands of others, to break out from that feeling of paralysis.

AYK: What do you think Middle Eastern artists living in the US need to do about this?

AA: All artists have a role to play, but it's not by virtue of being an artist that you're automatically going to have a political position.

AYK: Has your art changed as a result?

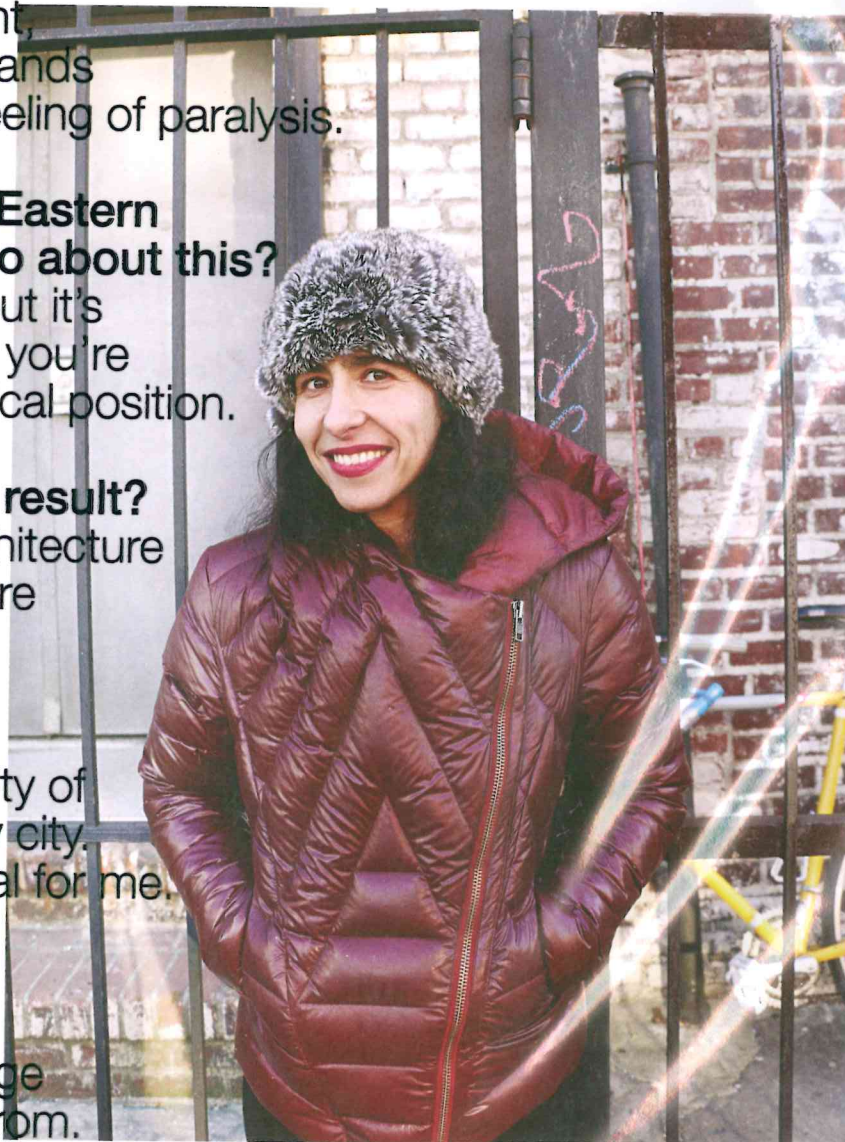
AA: I've shifted from inanimate architecture to, all of sudden, people. Figures are entering my work.

AYK: What does this mean?

AA: I think it represents the proximity of what's happening, right here, in my city. So that's a shift that's been very real for me.

AYK: Have you thought about moving elsewhere?

AA: No. I feel an obligation to change things where I am, and where I'm from.



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afruz amighi
#aboutamerica





afruz amighi

Born in Tehran in 1974. Lives and works in New York

I want to ask you some questions about the times we are living in now. What was your reaction to the presidential election?

Well, initially, I felt as if I were in a period of mourning, a sense of paralysis and feeling bereft – I think a lot of people felt this way. Once Trump became president, I was ready, as were tens of thousands of others, to break out from that feeling of paralysis, especially once he had signed the executive order. The response, and the immediate protests at JFK and other airports across the country, were so heartening to see.

Did you participate in the protests?

Not those ones, but I went out for the Women's March just the week before. It's almost like this has created a rift in this country in which the most ugly and most beautiful things are coming out, side by side. I've been trying to focus on exquisite resistance, as opposed to dwelling on the fierce directives that are coming from the top.

Were you waving a placard?

I just walked and chanted, taking part in the protest. What I really appreciated about the march was that there were a few black women who came with signs that were critical of it, but they were still taking part and engaging in dialogue that was constructive and critical. I thought that was really cool. I was also walking for my mother, it felt like I was doing it for her, for all women really, and for all the humans in my life.

That's very touching. For all humans, as if it were something against all humanity, not just American women, or women in general. It's a bigger picture, yes?

Absolutely. If anything, Trump has succeeded in uniting very disparate groups of people who otherwise would not form an alliance between themselves but now do. We need to see if that lasts, but at the moment it's very powerful.

What do you think Middle Eastern artists living in the US need to do about this?

I think all artists have a role to play, but I don't think that by virtue of being an artist, you're automatically going to have a certain political position. There are artists who have leaned towards fascism during certain political periods but I think that I can speak for myself and I would say that right now, there's an urgency that I feel towards my studio work, towards my practice, that I didn't feel a few months ago. In fact, back then I was in a weird place, very lackadaisical and disconnected from what I was doing. That changed, and though I don't believe it necessarily has to manifest itself in an outright, dogmatic form in my work, you know, it does creep in sometimes, in really subtle ways.


Has your view of America, and Americans, changed as of late?

I would have to say no. The only un-hyphenated Americans in this country are the Native Americans. This country has had a very bloody birth, what with the extermination of the people who were here, the stealing of Africans and the bringing of them over to basically build the empire. Am I shocked? No, not at all. But when I say the words 'Trump' or 'Muslim ban', it feels weird. Saying them out loud is terrifying and makes me feel dirty.



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Has your art changed as a result of the recent wars in the Middle East?

I'll answer you in a roundabout way. Over the past ten years, my work was very much responding to wars in the region, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or the civil war in Syria. My response was to reference a lot of the regional architecture. While this is a region that is my birthplace, it is not my reality. So it was a very detached response and there was a reason why I was relating to the architecture, and that's because it's inanimate. I think what has changed, now that the hard brutality of Trump has been driven home, is that I've shifted from inanimate architecture to, all of sudden, people. Figures are entering my work. And I think that represents the proximity of what's happening. It's not something that I'm reading about necessarily, or something taking place far away, it's happening right here, in my city. So that's a shift that's been very real for me.

Have you thought about moving elsewhere?

No. I feel an obligation to change things where I am, and where I'm from.

How close are your ties to Iran these days?

I think that my connection to Iran has transformed over time. There was a period when I was quite a bit younger, in my 20s and early 30s, when I was pretty obsessed with imagining what my personality and life would have been like had I not left Iran as a child. That was driving a lot of my work. This has shifted and in the last couple of years, I feel more that Iran exists for me purely in the realm of memory.

Do you visit often?

The last time I visited was about five years ago. When I first visited as an adult, it was a very emotional and visceral experience. I felt extremely connected and I even told my parents that I didn't want to come back to the US. I wanted to live in the mountains with some goats and make wood carvings. But that didn't pan out, obviously.

What are you working on at the moment?

My current work has been extremely influenced by the recent American presidential election. I have been creating a series of sculptural headdresses for the heroes and villains that are emerging in this new sociopolitical landscape. Some of the headdresses are designed for people I know intimately and others for more distant figures. What they share is that, although they are all figurative, they're faceless and possess an anonymity. Some sprout halos of feathers and others drip with fine jewellery chains. Some are made for warriors, others for empresses and executioners. It feels like I am creating a masqueraded parade of characters, whose moral integrity is unclear, fluid and often contradictory.