

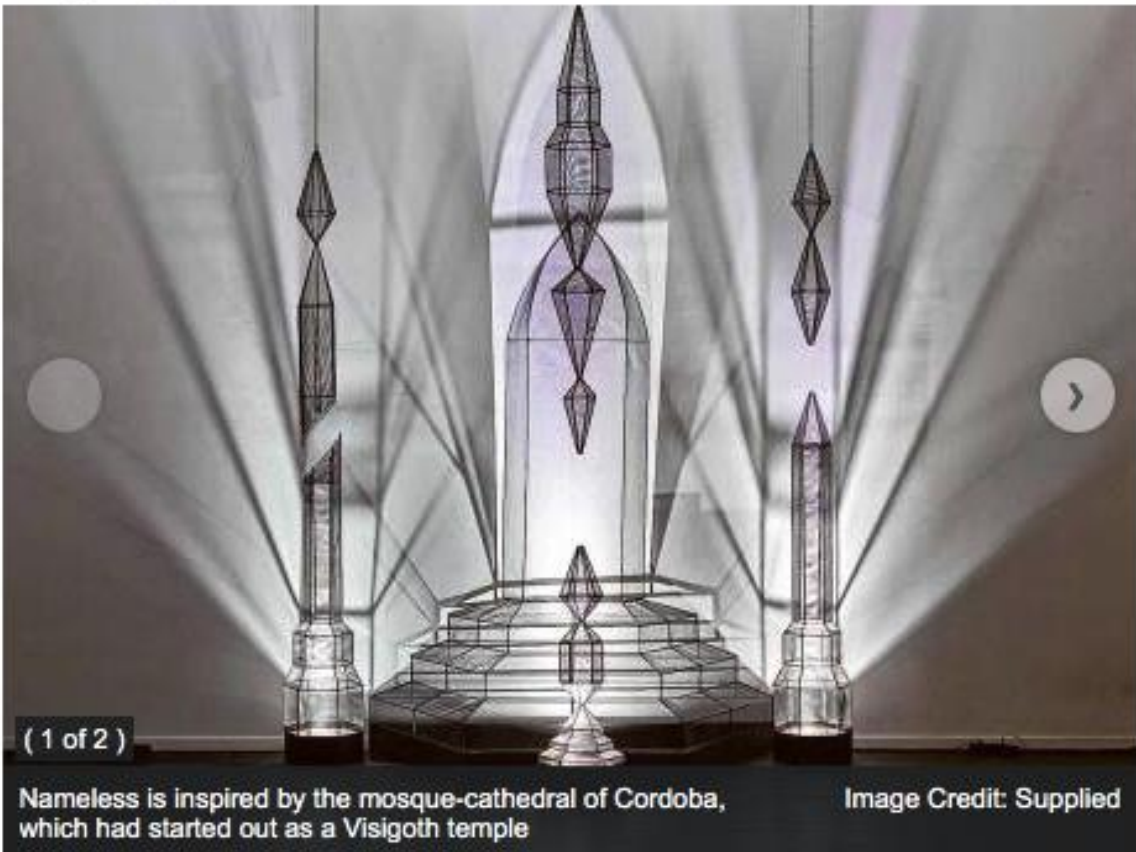
LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Kalsi, Jyoti. "Reflections on belonging and displacement." *Gulf News* (May 25, 2016).

GULF NEWS   
**ARTS**

# Reflections on belonging and displacement

**For her latest show, Afruz Amighi has created sculptures inspired by architecture to speak about loss of identity, yet offer a sense of tranquillity**



( 1 of 2 )

Nameless is inspired by the mosque-cathedral of Cordoba, which had started out as a Visigoth temple

Image Credit: Supplied

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Light, reflections and shadows are key elements in the work of Afruz Amighi. In her previous exhibition in Dubai a few years ago, the Iranian-American artist had cut patterns inspired by mosques and palaces on sheets of woven polyethylene — usually used for making refugee tents, and illuminated them to cast shadows on the wall, speaking eloquently about the experience of displacement.

In her latest body of work, “Mångata”, Amighi has used her welding skills to create three-dimensional sculptures with industrial materials such as steel, chains and mosquito netting. The forms of these sculptures are inspired by architecture, and once again the artist has used the interplay between the solid surfaces, the reflection of light on them and the shadows they cast on the walls in the darkened gallery to create captivating installations that speak about belonging, displacement, loss of identity and the memories embedded in architecture.

“Mångata” is a Swedish word that describes the glimmering road-like reflection created by the moon on the water. It is an apt description of the magical and ethereal experience created by Amighi’s artworks, because despite being crafted from industrial materials, the works have a lightness, softness and a sense of tranquillity.

“I always hope that viewers will find a sense of quiet with my work. And I think this quiet can be channelled with materials such as concrete and steel, which are often associated with urban sprawl, frenzy and oppressive containment. I usually work these materials to their physical limits, to the point where there is so much negative space that the material itself becomes almost nonexistent, and appears fragile. I use light and shadow in my work to create proximity. Somehow their interplay softens the lines between subject and object bringing the viewer in closer,” Amighi says.

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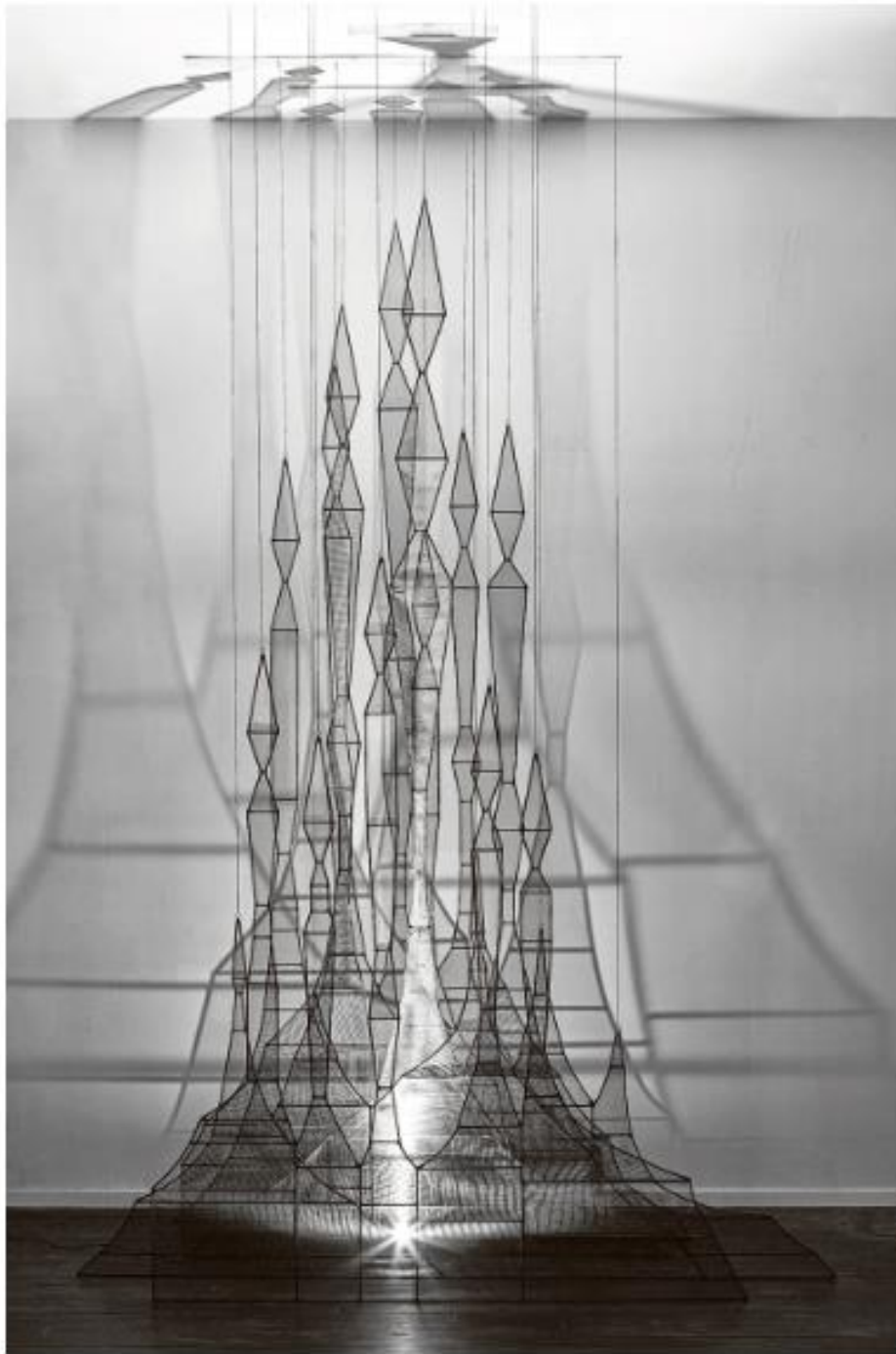
The artist is the first recipient of the Jameel Prize for Middle Eastern contemporary art awarded by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. She was born in Iran in 1974 and raised in New York by her Jewish mother and Zoroastrian father. Her work reflects her eclectic and secular upbringing. Most of the works in the show are based on architectural structures that have been repurposed over time.

For instance, "Nameless" is inspired by the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba. This building started out as a Visigoth temple and was turned into a mosque during Moorish rule. Later it was split into two halves serving as a cathedral and a mosque. It went through a further transformation to a mosque and then back to its current use as a cathedral.

Amighi has used steel, fibreglass mesh, wood, suede, barely visible thread and gunmetal chain to create an installation where floor-based and suspended steel arches, minaret and pillar-like structures that seem to be split, and LED lights are precisely placed, forming an amalgamation of sleek shapes, soft shadows and shimmering surfaces.

The work evokes the serenity, the spirituality, the power and the timelessness of a shrine. But it also alludes to the traces of one architecture upon another, the imposition of history on to form, and the memories of being a house of worship for so many different people that are embedded in the architectural layers.

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**Forest (Algibol) is named after the ancient semitic lunar deity**

Another work, "My House My Tomb", takes inspiration from the Taj Mahal, the magnificent white marble tomb that Mogul Emperor Shah Jehan built for his beloved Persian wife Mumtaz Mahal on the banks of the Yamuna river in Agra, India. Legend has it that the emperor wanted to construct an identical tomb for himself in black marble on the other bank, but was overthrown by his son before it could be built.

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Amighi has attempted to actualise this myth by creating a diptych representing the existing monument and the imagined mirror image of it. One part of the work features steel archways and domes suspended from the ceiling with delicate chains, that cast shadows upwards on the white wall behind evoking the perfect symmetry of this famous monument. The other part is almost identical, but draped in black mosquito netting. The shadows cast by this imagined tomb are skewed at an angle, disrupting the notion of symmetry.

Two other installations in the show offer tribute to the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra, Syria, which was bombed by the Daesh (the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The temple was built in the second century for the Canaanite deity of the heavens. In the fifth century it was turned into a church, and in the 1980s it was used as a camping ground by Bedouin nomads. The shrine had thus existed from the pagan Roman era through Christian and Islamic rule. Amighi's sculptures, titled "Forest (Algibol)" after the ancient semitic lunar deity, and "Veins (Malakbel)" after the sun deity recall this lost heritage of mankind. The steel panelling and layering of the sculptures references the stained glass windows of cathedrals and the slender forms rising upwards from the floor or pointing downwards from the ceiling mimic the lines of a minaret highlighting the continuity between different traditions across time.

"We humans forget things so easily, but when we build things our experiences become imprinted on them. Shrines are like vessels of collective memory, so when Daesh destroyed the Temple of Baalshamin, a piece of human memory was obliterated," Amighi says.

In other works, Amighi has used forms from various homes that she has lived in, both in Iran and the US, to speak about the transient and ephemeral notion of home, and used organic hexagonal forms to express her desire of living in harmony with nature.

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

"Many sculptors are engaged in a process of digging and unearthing artefacts from the future — structures that have a relationship to the past but have not yet been realised. For me these structures are nearly all abodes. Whether they reference cathedrals or mosques, tombs or shrines, they are places of refuge and solace. They are idealised homes I build for myself to live in for a time, and then walk away from," the artist says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"Mångata" will run at Leila Heller Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, until June 15.