

AFRUZ AMIGHINO

MORE

DISGUISE





# AFRUZ AMIGHI NO MORE DISGUISE

ESSAY BY CLAIRE BRANDON, PH.D.

22 JUNE – 28 JULY 2017  
LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.





‘ ... I COVER THEM WITH HEAD-  
DRESSES... TO PROTECT THEM,  
TO REVEAL THEM, TO HONOR  
AND RIDICULE THEM... ’

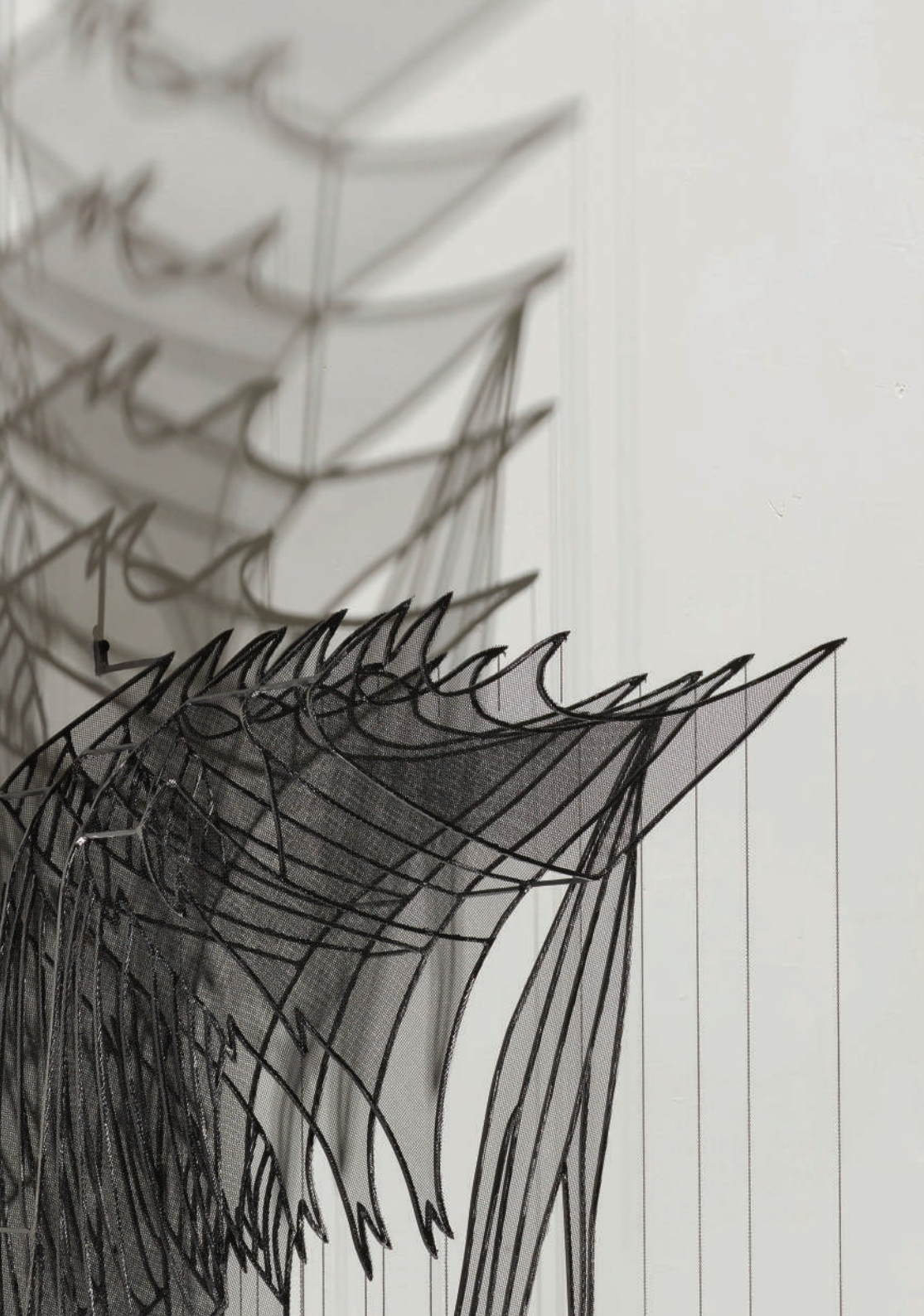
We are a country of civil war, and from the eternal divide, the ever-present rift, lifting their heads and making themselves known, faces emerge. I cover them with head-dresses I have made, to protect them, to reveal them, to honor and ridicule them.

The procession starts with the entrance of the Emperor, the Visionary. Elusive and detached, he hovers behind veils of unanswered questions, faceless behind a halo of feathers. He watches over us but does not judge, as we writhe and slither in our drunken acrobatics.

Five others follow him, but they are not obedient. They buck and grind, they love and hate, they are jealous, passionate, they are attached to the world. They too, lack faces, but are far from anonymous. The Empress, the Fool, the Warrior, the Beheaded, and finally, The Unborn. We all know them, we are all them. And the Emperor is the one we love in dangerous times.

Afroz Amighi  
Brooklyn, 2017





## IN PRAISE OF SHADOWS

Afruz Amighi's *The Headdress Series*

BY CLAIRE BRANDON, PH.D.

In the drawing for *Headdress for the Beheaded* (2017), an upright headdress oriented in a profile view floats within the blank space of graph paper. Far from a mechanical, diagrammatic rendition of a decorative object, this drawing is instead an anthropomorphic portrait of the headdress as it has taken on a life of its own. The sinewy curve of the creature's neck meets, on either side, with the draping suggestion of an apparatus made of thick cloth, metal, and ornate feathers from which hang delicate chains. Flanked by two long feathers, a delicate tripartite piece drapes down the center of the headdress and ornaments what would have once been the flesh of a human forehead. Its sculptural counterpart, *Headdress for the Beheaded*, collides into the white expanse of the gallery wall. With this transition into the third dimension, the sculpture enacts a material distinction from the drawing while the linear elements of the sketch echo in the shadows cast by the sculpture's finely crafted steel edges.

*The Headdress Series*, Afruz Amighi's most recent body of work, is comprised of six sculptures that pair with a corresponding preparatory drawing. Highly stylized, these graphite drawings bear a formal relationship with their sculptural versions. In fact, the synergies between drawn and sculptural renditions of the subject divulge Amighi's exploration of the theme in two media. The behavior and iconography of headdresses are the subjects of these works, and their forms integrate various aspects of decorative objects. Their serpentine curves, ornate metalwork, and careful craftsmanship recall the debauchery of Jazz Age America and the curving geometry and stylized lines of art deco jewelry, furniture, and architecture. Indeed, at stake in these works are the cycle of decadence and

depression and the perpetual state of civil strife that in part defines the United States, the artist's home for over thirty years.

Amighi was born in 1974 in Tehran and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Borrowing from multiple disciplines, her practice weaves together elements of architectural history, philosophy, mysticism, literature, and sculpture. Her home and studio location of Brooklyn—the historically industrial borough bordering Manhattan's East River—is currently undergoing a mass gentrification process. As a result, new construction sites (and their concomitant scaffolding and building materials) line many of the streets of Brooklyn's Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods. It is this construction-site laden urban landscape from which Amighi repeatedly culls her primary materials: past media include epoxy, aluminum radiator banding, mosquito netting, plastic tarp, woven polyethylene, and base metal chain purchased at local supply stores. While she is drawn to such supplies as they exist in the urban environment, her sculptural practice transforms these industrial products into objects of a new kind. Employing synthetic objects in her extensive repertoire of sculptural materials, Amighi complicates the highly manufactured status of industrial equipment by pairing it with the organic elements of light and water. In contrast to the scale and construction-based source of materials employed in past works, the sculptures in *The Headdress Series* have been made with fine steel rods, fiberglass mesh, and jewelry chain. Amighi has implemented these metals to form various levels of solidity and transparency, of mass and empty space.

Amighi's use of light as a medium and shadow as a form is at the heart of the experiential element of her work. Moreover, it is the luster of materials such as jewelry chain and fiberglass mesh that captivates her attention: the ability of these materials to cast shadows, to refract or absorb light, and to suspend weight. For example, in *Headdress for a Warrior*, mesh and steel layers build up to gradually extend away from the wall. Unlike *Headdress for the Beheaded*, which is seen in profile view, *Headdress for a Warrior* has been made in full frontal perspective with extensions protruding laterally around the figure's head, as would the edges of swords, pointy implements, or wispy tails. These forms take on new life in the sculpture, as the drawing for *Headdress for a Warrior* renders these protrusions as delicate feathers in part resembling a Native American tribal costume. In other words, the sculpture becomes both an agent and a fabrication of its own environment: the shadows produced by the work's positioning vis-à-vis the light source appear to recede into space. This parallel movement plays with the dynamic between recession and procession. In fact, the processional was a key component of Amighi's initial conceptual framework for the series. She imagined "two very different types of processions, one solemn and one

festive. First, I was thinking of funerary processions (in the Euro-American world) and second, of the Carnivale, or more specifically the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans. The use of the black mesh and black chain is somber, whereas the feathers and crowns adorning each piece are regal and almost celebratory."<sup>1</sup> This juxtaposition of moribund and revelry is met with the material and immaterial aspects of the sculpture. Moreover, the fleeting presence of the shadow speaks to the ephemeral yet inevitable nature of both occasions. It is the time-bound nature of a processional that comes alive in these works as their flicking shadows bring objects such as *Headdress for a Warrior* immediately into the present.

The titles of the individual works in *The Headdress Series* refer to stock figures within the medieval court (the emperor, the empress, the fool or jester, and the warrior) as well as to enigmatic figures on either side of life (the unborn and the beheaded). Amighi's past work has drawn from Persian decorative objects including rugs and lamps, medieval illustrated texts, Sufi banners and shrines, Isfahan ceramics, Spanish-Moorish architecture and religious sanctuaries, Zoroastrian fire temples, the urban landscape of Tehran, as well as various sculptural practices in the United States and Iran from the twentieth century including art deco, minimalism, and *saqqakhaneh*.<sup>2</sup> Departing from these themes, the new work engages with Amighi's current home of the United States and identity as an American. While the built architectural forms of funerary monuments and intricately carved *mihrabs* are cast aside, the work still maintains a relationship to public spectacle and to the sites and occasions of mass gathering. The work "imagines the continuing American civil war in which characters of all political stripes dance, do battle, and reveal themselves after a period of years in which they were hidden or obscured."<sup>3</sup> In an evocative reimaging of the stereotype's staying power, figures such as the fool and the emperor refer to larger social archetypes that transcend history as well as to the persistent social dynamics that have been carved into the American psyche and that take their form in entrenched narratives.

The exhibition's title *No More Disguise*—the name of a song featuring the vocals of French-Iranian singer Lou Lou Ghelichkani—takes as its subject the operations at stake in costuming and masking the self. Carnival masks allow people to act in ways that upend social norms and furthermore act out of a place of anonymity in which disguise and role-playing cause people to let go of their humanity and to succumb to the desires of the spectacle. By mixing the language of armor and jewelry, these head ornaments adorned with feathers and *breloquets* are coupled with the chainmail suggested by the fiberglass mesh of the sculptures. This formal treatment of steel and fiberglass mesh in *The Headdress Series* recalls unconventional Americana: Native American headdresses, art deco decadence, and seventeenth-century slave shackles. In doing so, the works figure the inane

nature of the Puritanical fervor and the ongoing civil ruptures that characterize the history of the United States. At the same time, the head adornment suggests a crown, a symbol of power that is bound by dripping chains. Dualities between figure and ground, terror and ornament, positive and negative space, war and revelry, as well as between light and shadow ground the drawings and sculptures in *The Headdress Series*. These visceral works breathe life into the complex contradictions that continue to plague the American psyche, relentlessly and without fail.

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Brandon holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Recently Brandon served as guest curator at the Asia Society Hong Kong for the 2016 exhibition *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power* and edited the accompanying 332-page monograph featuring essays by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ayad Akhtar, John Seyller, and Nick Robins (Asia Society, 2016). Brandon has lectured at the Rhode Island School of Design, the School of Visual Arts New York, College Art Association, New York University, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Asia Society New York and Hong Kong, and Villa La Pietra Florence.

---

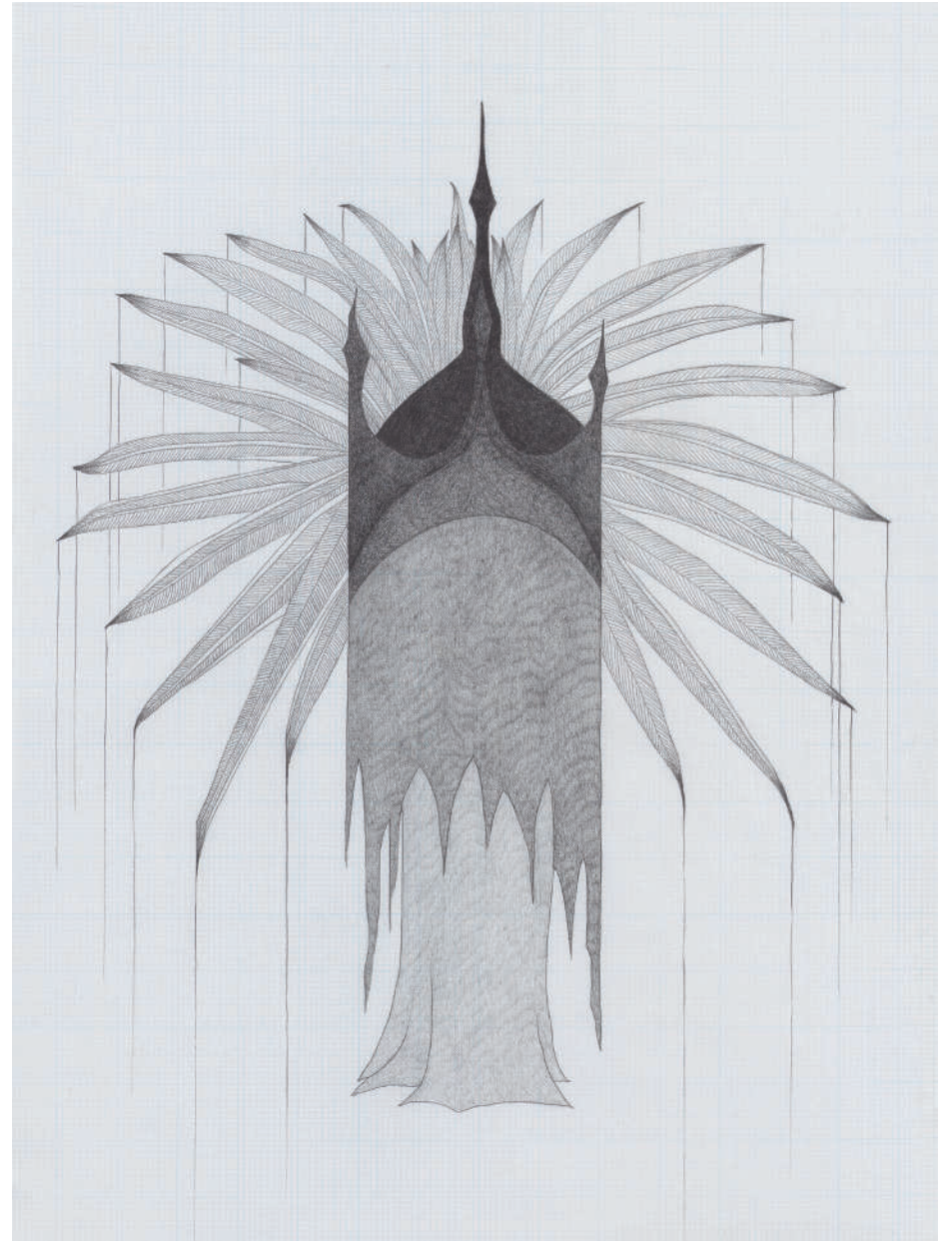
<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the artist, 9 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Around 1960, critic Karim Emami assigned this term to the work of Parviz Tanavoli, Faramarz Pilaram, Massoud Arabshahi, Mansour Ghandriz, Nasser Ovissi, Jazeh Tabatabai, and Sadegh Tabrizi after the public water fountains/shi'ia shrines found throughout Iran. *Saqqakhaneh* was soon used to refer to the artistic movement that draws on pre-Islamic metaphysical symbols, the hand of Islamic martyr Hazrat Abbas, imagery from the shi'ia grave cult, Qajar dynastic objects, and ornamental forms.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the artist, 9 May 2017.

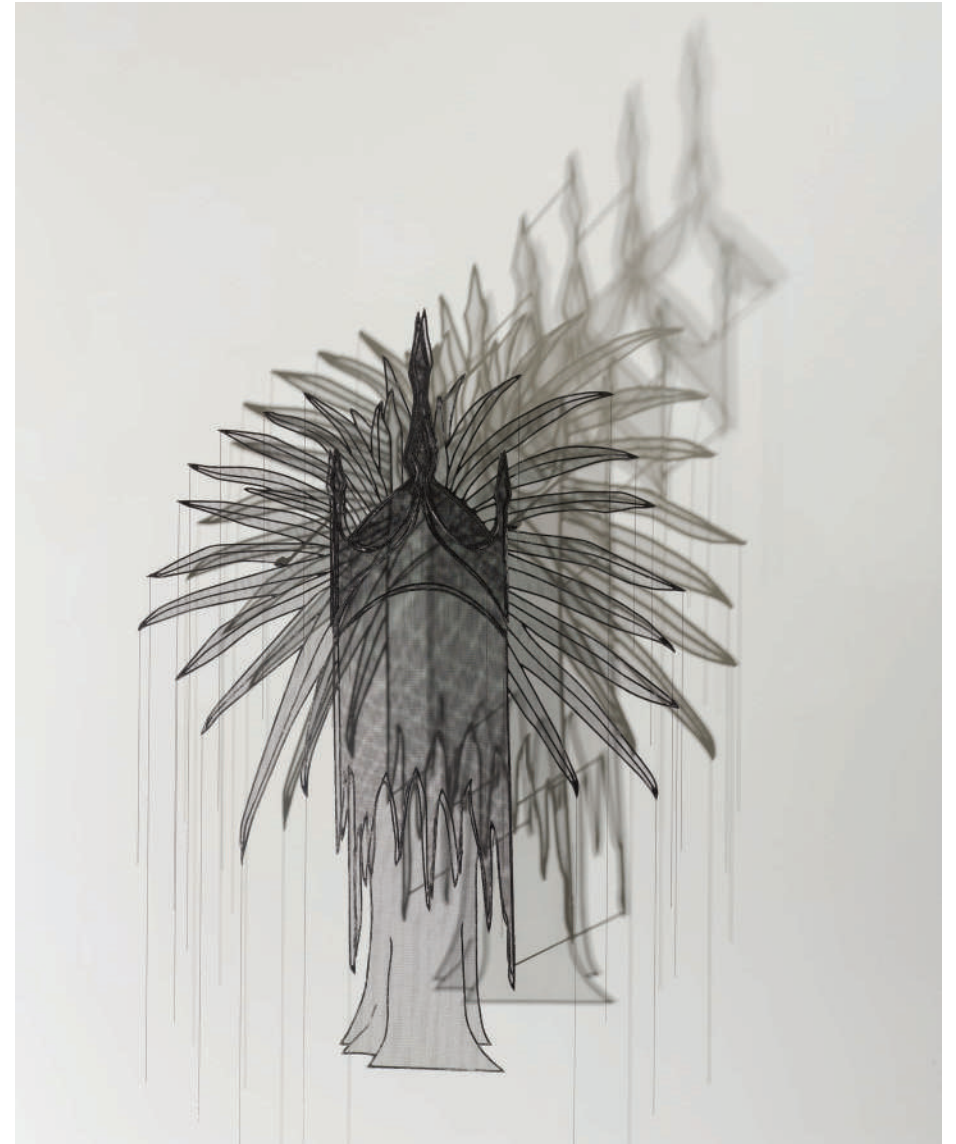


EMPEROR'S  
H  
E  
A  
D  
D  
R  
E  
S  
S



*Emperor's Headdress* (drawing), 2017  
24 x 16 in (61 x 41 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper

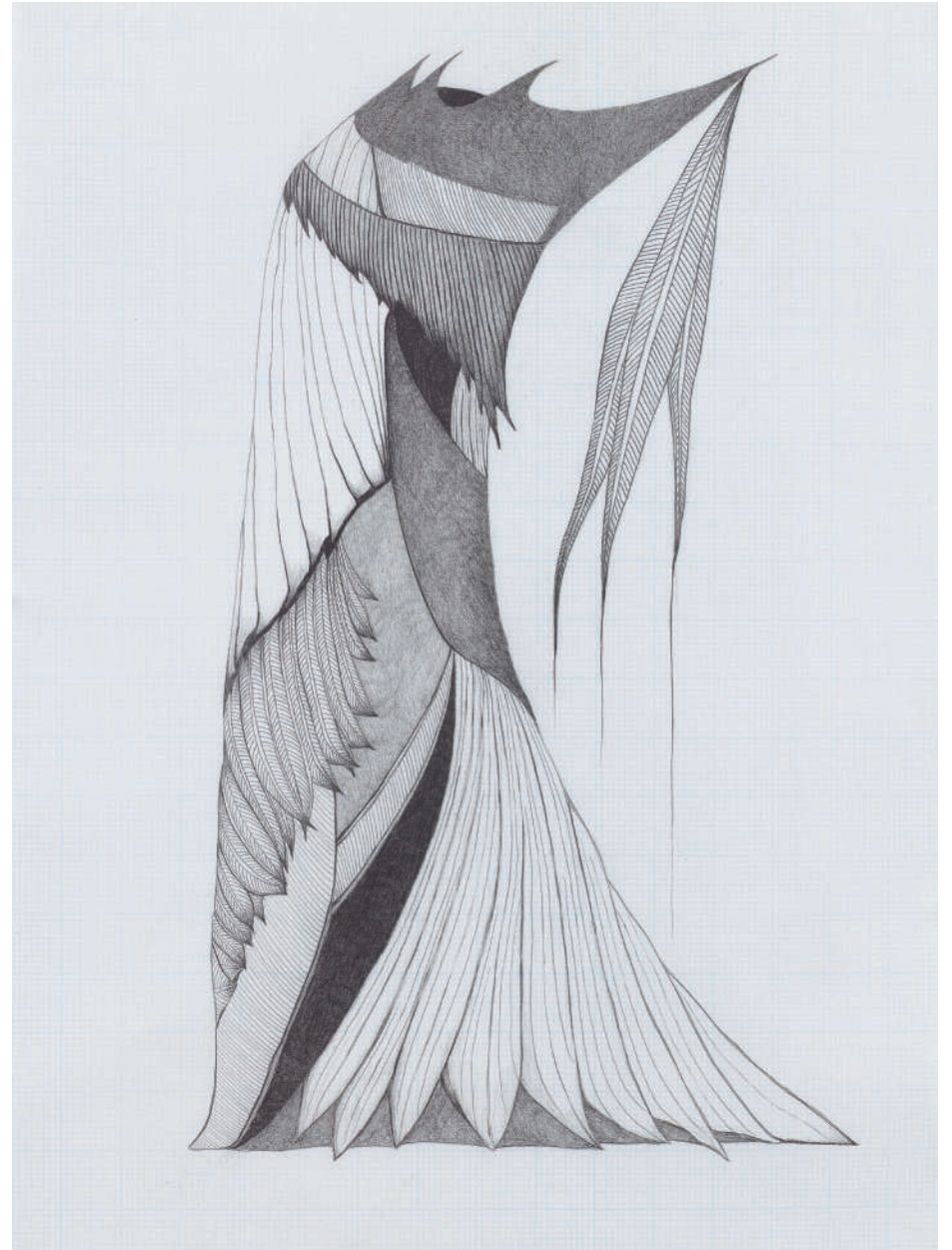




*Emperor's Headdress, 2017*  
 50 x 39 x 14 in (127 x 99 x 36 cm)  
 Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, light



HEADRESS  
F  
O  
R  
  
A  
N  
  
E  
M  
P  
R  
E  
S  
S



*Headdress for an Empress* (drawing), 2017  
24 x 16 in (61 x 41 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper

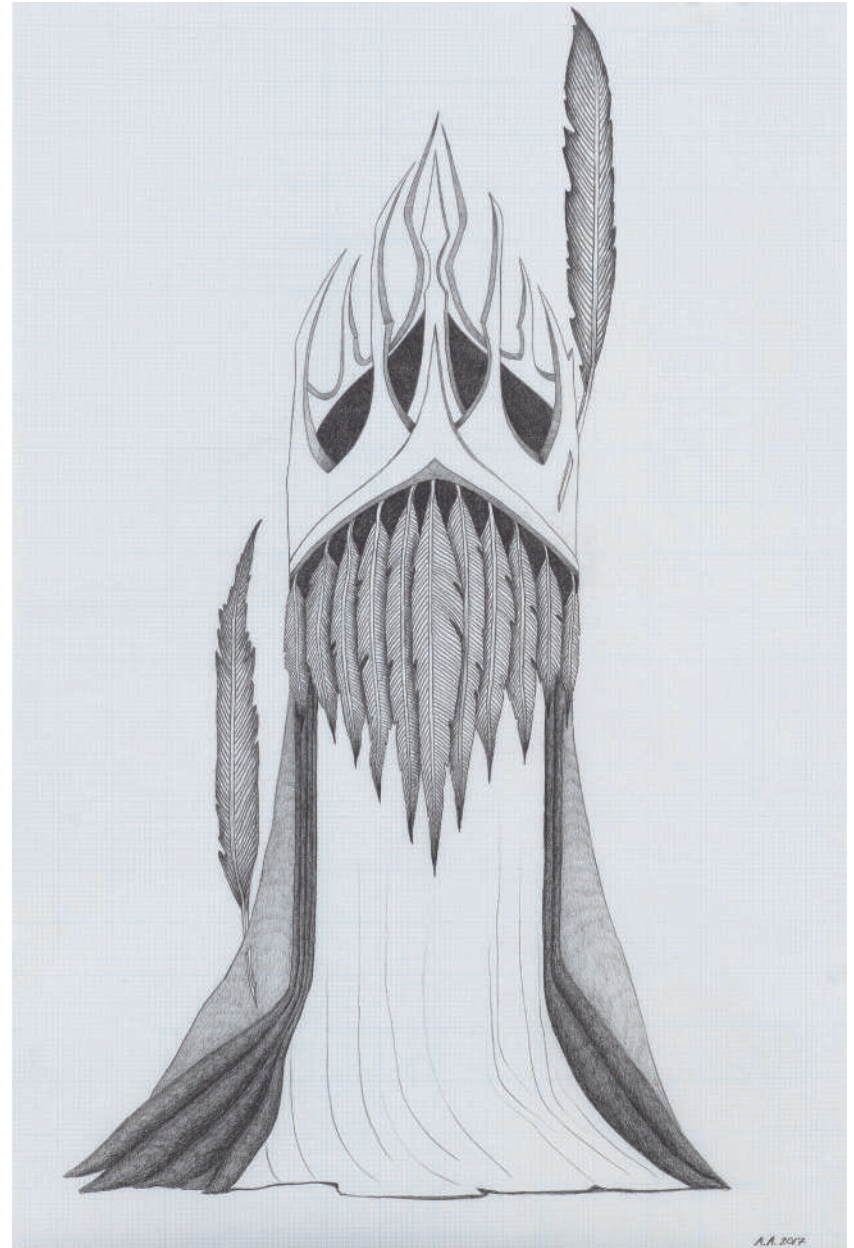




*Headdress for an Empress*, 2017  
46 x 28 x 14 in (117 x 71 x 36 cm)  
Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, light

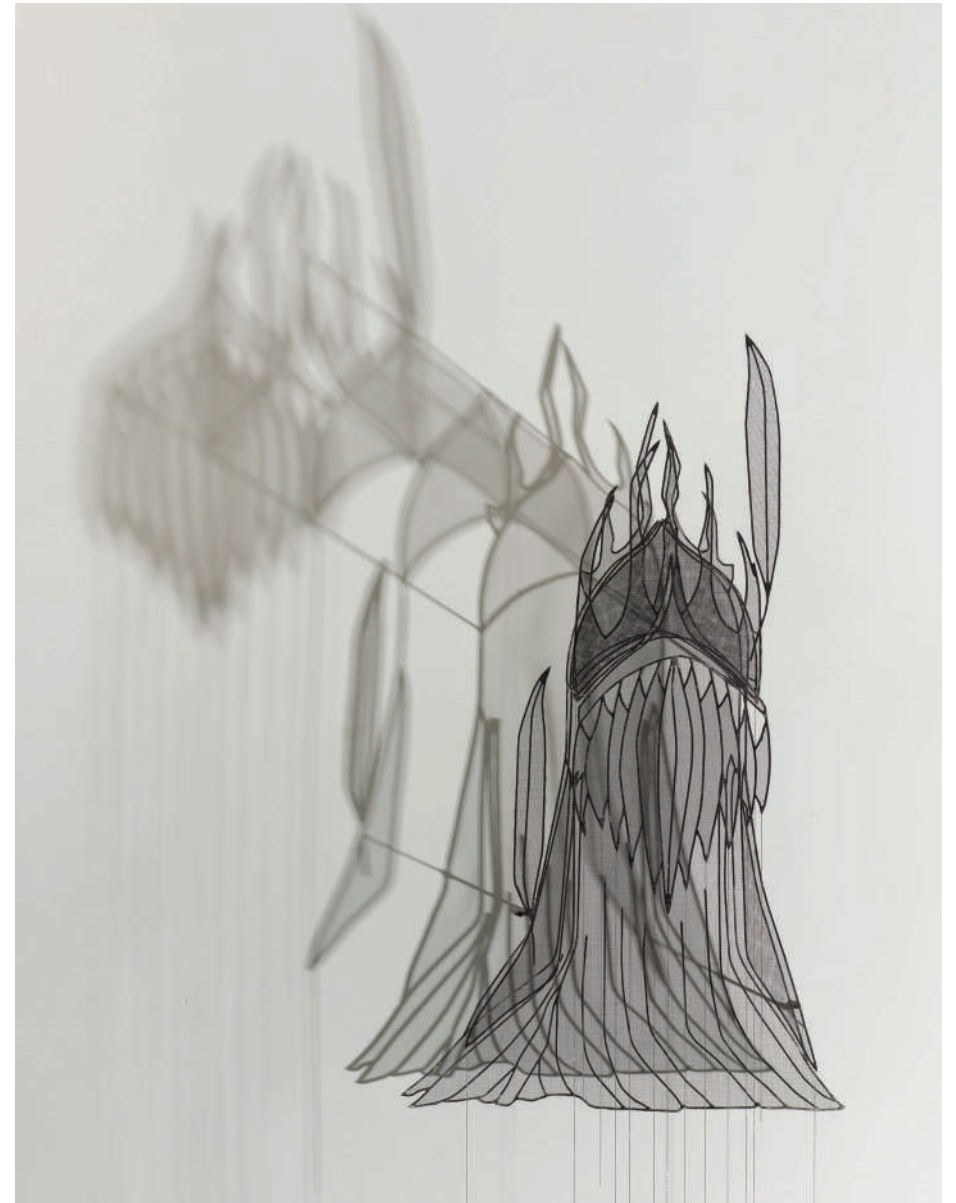
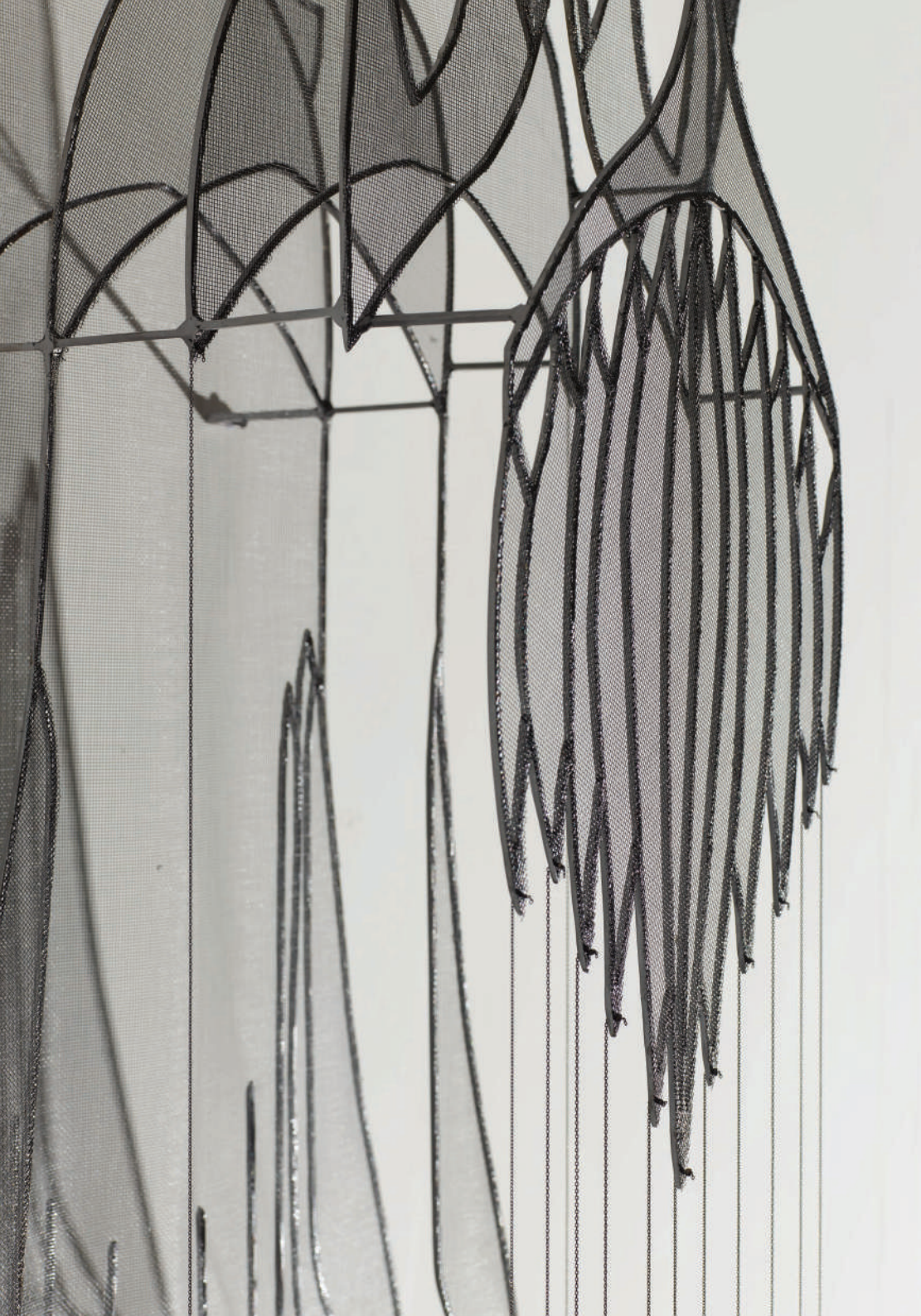


HEADRESS  
F  
O  
R  
  
T  
H  
E  
  
U  
N  
B  
O  
R  
N



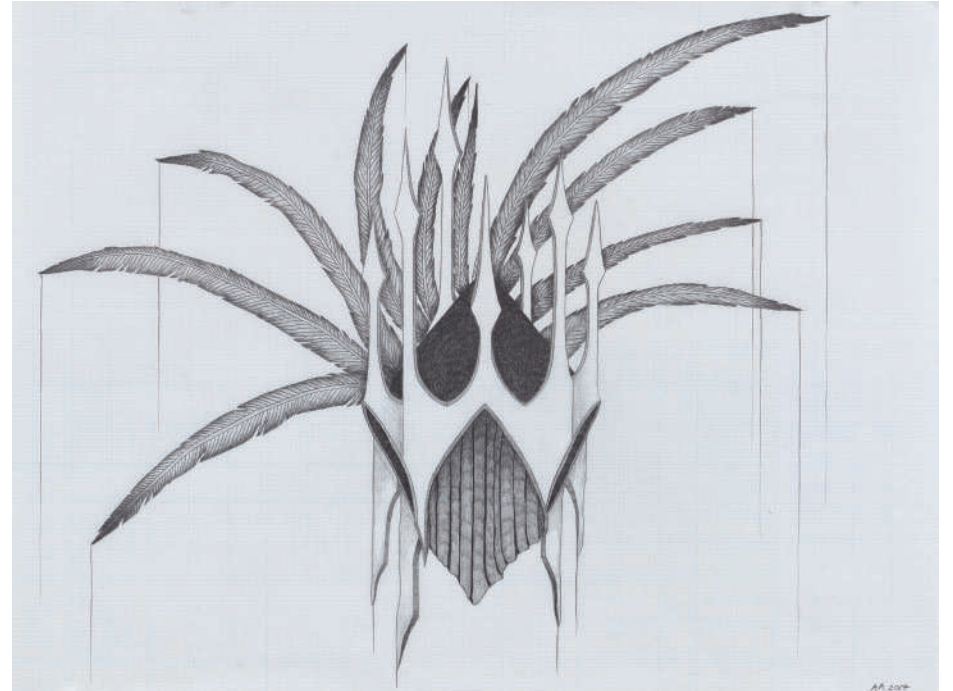
*Headdress for the Unborn* (drawing), 2017  
24 x 16 in (61 x 41 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper





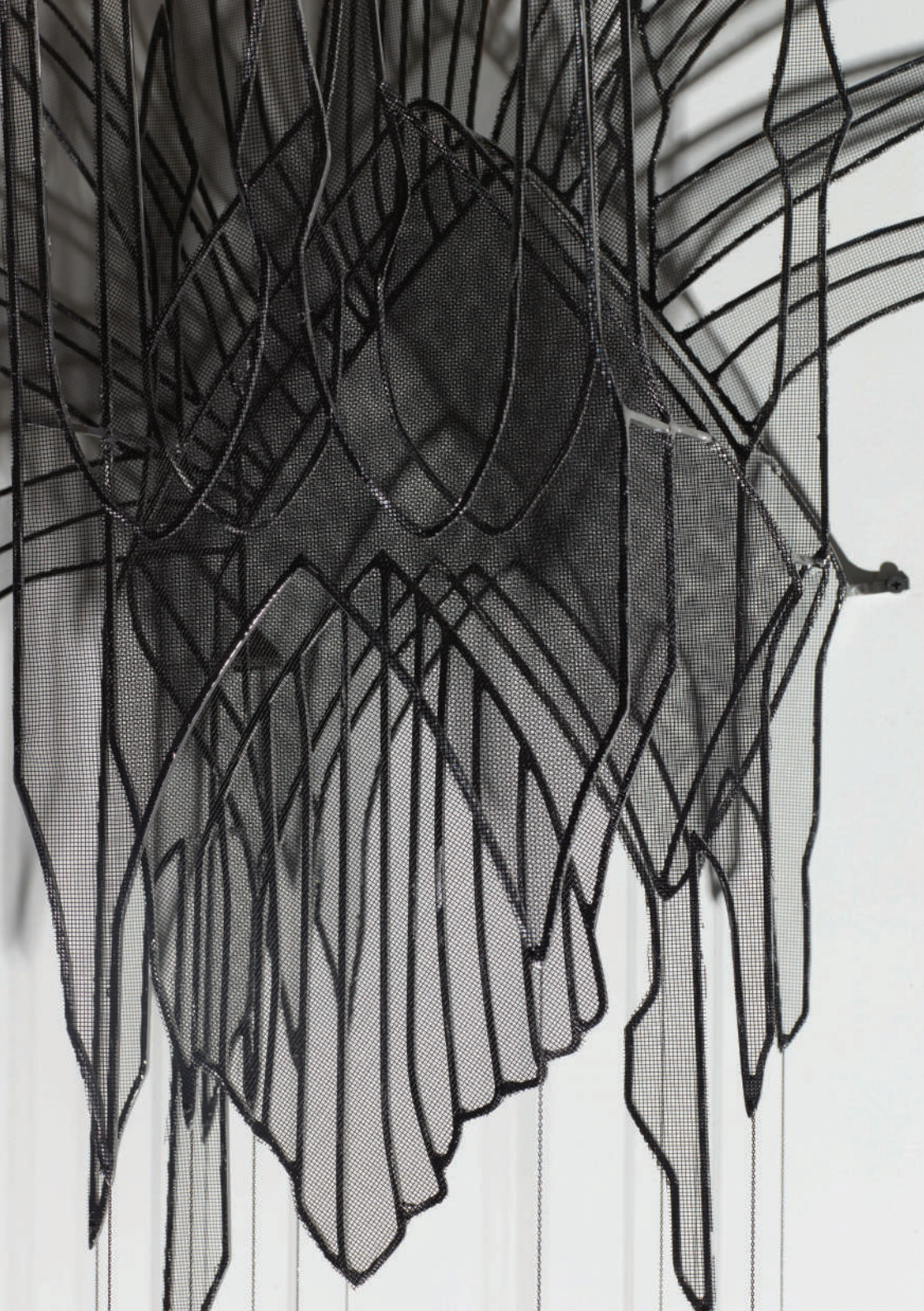
*Headdress for the Unborn*, 2017  
46 x 28 x 14 in (117 x 71 x 36 cm)  
Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, light

# WARRIOR'S H E A D D R E S S



*Warrior's Headdress* (drawing), 2017  
18 x 24 in (46 x 61 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper





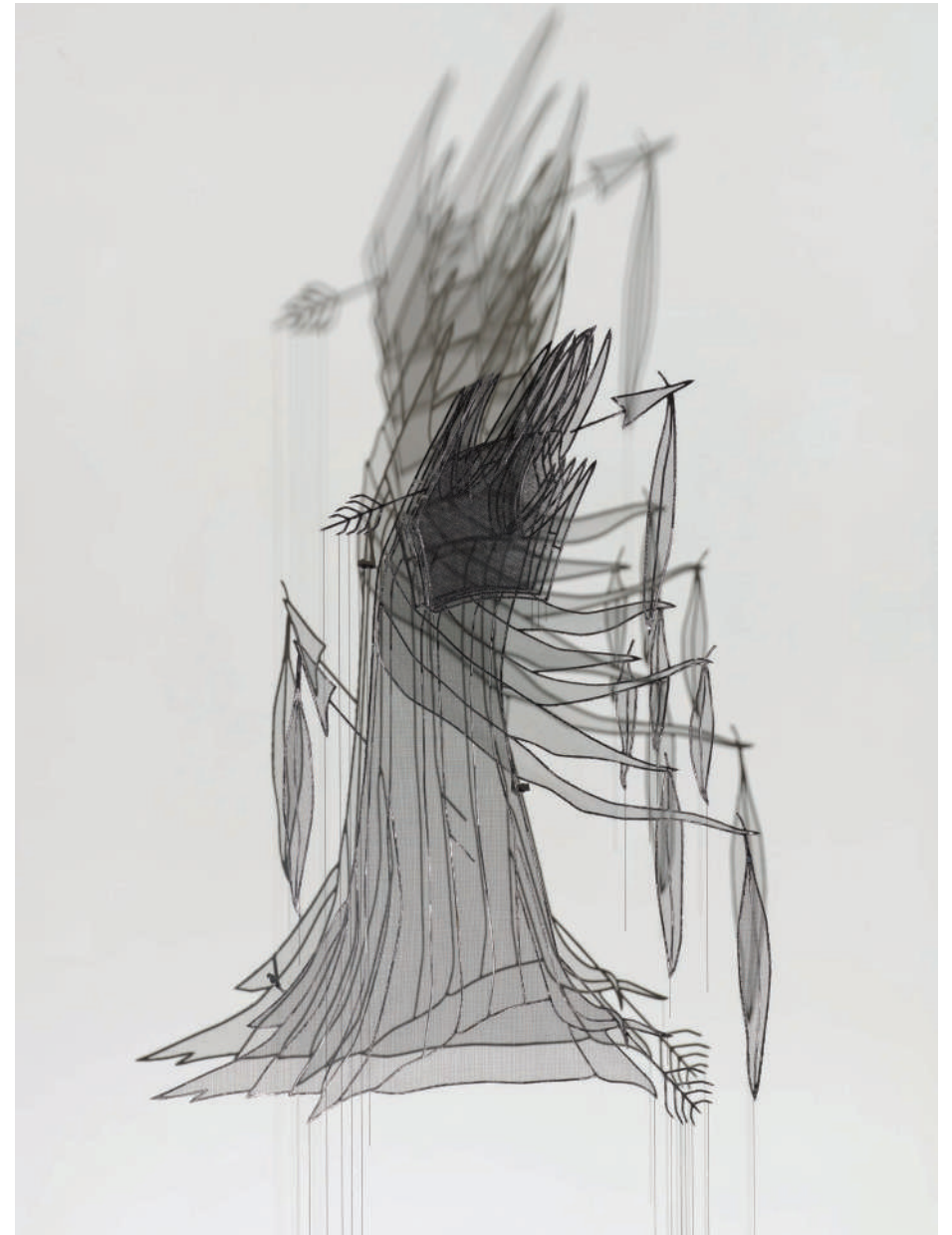
*Warrior's Headdress*, 2017  
38 x 44 x 14 in (97 x 112 x 36 cm)  
Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, light



FOOL'S  
H  
E  
A  
D  
D  
R  
E  
S  
S



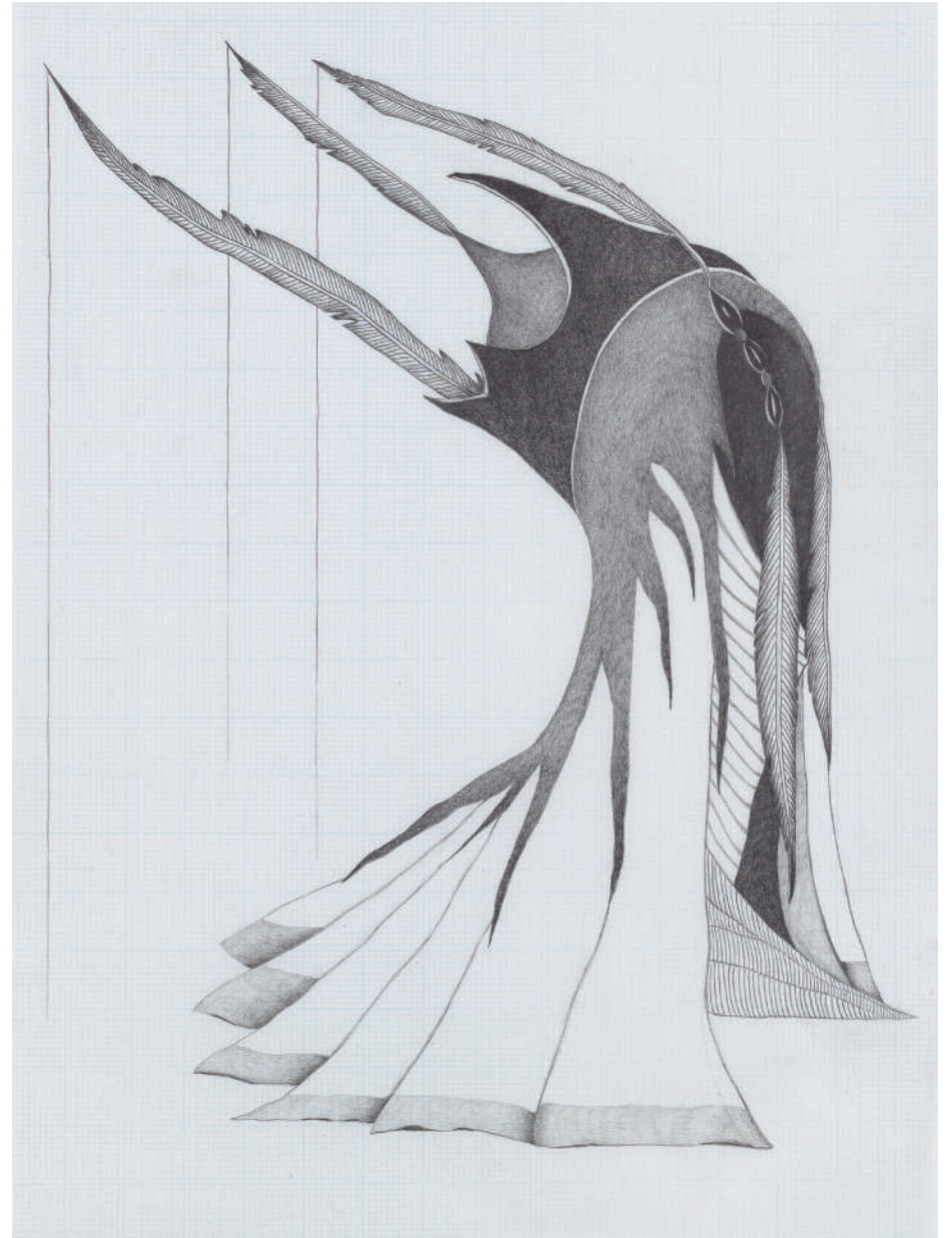
*Fool's Headdress* (drawing), 2017  
24 x 18 in (61 x 46 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper



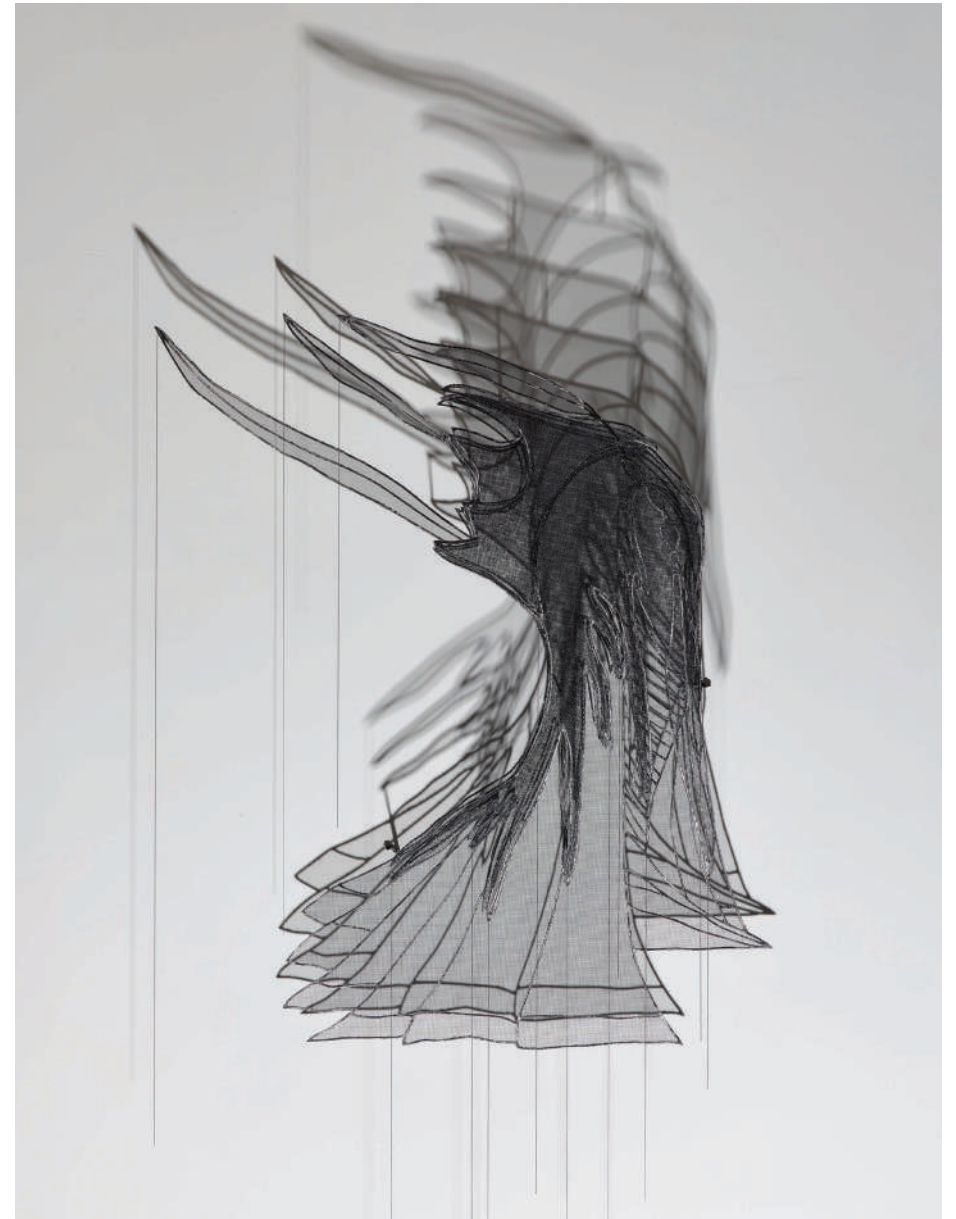
*Fool's Headdress*, 2017  
 48 x 35 x 14 in (122 x 89 x 36 cm)  
 Steel, Fiberglass mesh, chain, light



HEADRESS  
FOR  
THE  
BEHEADED



*Headdress for the Beheaded, 2017*  
24 x 16 in (61 x 41 cm)  
Graphite on graph paper



*Headdress for the Beheaded*, 2017  
 45 x 36 x 14 in (114 x 91 x 36 cm)  
 Steel, fiberglass mesh, chain, light



# AFRUZ AMIGHI

Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York (b. Tehran, Iran, 1974)

## EDUCATION

- 2007 MFA, New York University, New York, NY
- 2002 Summer Studio Program, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY
- 1997 BA Political Science, Barnard College at Columbia University, New York, NY

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 Forthcoming solo exhibition, Frist Center, Nashville, TN
- 2017 *No More Disguise*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2016 *Māngata*, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- 2014 *Far from God*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY
- 2012 *Suspended City*, Bloom Projects, Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA
- 2011 *The Hidden State*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010 *Angels in Combat*, Isabelle Van den Eynde Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- Cages*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians*, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada
- 2016 *Far from God*, Art Expo Chicago In/Situ Outside, Jane Addams Memorial Park, Chicago, IL
- Wondrous Worlds: Art & Islam through Time & Place*, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
- 2015 *New Ways of Seeing*, Dorsky Gallery, Long Island City, NY
- 2014 *Far from God*, Fields Sculpture Park, Art OMI International, Ghent, NY
- The Language of Human Consciousness*, Athr Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
- Past Tradition*, Exhibit 320, New Delhi, India
- Love Me, Love Me Not*, Heydar Aliyev Center, Baku, Azerbaijan
- 2013 *Love Me Love Me Not: Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan and its Neighbors*, The 55th International Art Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia, curated by Dina Nasser-Khadiji, Venice, Italy
- 2012 *Doris Duke's Shangri-La: Landscape Architecture and Art* touring

exhibition, The Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI; Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV; Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, HI

- 2012 *Doris Duke's Shangri-La: Landscape, Architecture and Art*, Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY
- Contemporary Iranian Art in the Permanent Collection*, The Hagop Kevorkian Fund Special Exhibitions Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
- Making Tents*, Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Ketchum, ID
- That Sinking Sense of Wonder*, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2010 *Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
- Structures within an Intervention*, The Guild Art Gallery, New York, NY
- Tehran – New York*, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- Jameel Prize Exhibition*, Sakip Sabanci Museum, Istanbul, Turkey;
- Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, United Arab Emirates;
- Beiteddine Palace, Lebanon; National Museum of Damascus, Syria;
- National Gallery, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- 2009 *Jameel Prize Exhibition*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2011 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Sculpture
- 2009 Jameel Prize Winner, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK

## RESIDENCIES

- 2010 Doris Duke Foundation, Honolulu, HI

## SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK  
Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX  
The Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, India  
The Bristol Museum, Bristol, UK  
Yarat Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India  
Newark Museum, Newark, NJ



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

**AFRUZ AMIGHI:**  
**NO MORE *DISGUISE***

Image Credits:

All Images Courtesy of the Artist.

Photographic documentation © Jeffrey Sturges

Editor: Brooke Lynn McGowan-Herzog

Editorial Assistant: Nicoline von Finck

Catalogue design by Nadine Nour el Din

**LEILA HELLER PUBLISHING .**

568 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001

[www.leilahellergallery.com](http://www.leilahellergallery.com)

Publication © 2017 LEILA HELLER GALLERY, New York



LEILA HELLER GALLERY.