

Artscope Online: March/April 2017

11 FOR 11: ROYA AMIGH

Thursday, March 2nd, 2017 // March/April 2017



Collision Response (Overview), 2015, mixed media (paper, thread, strings, wood, nails), 66" x 59" x 18"

IMAGINATION MEETS MEMORY

Elizabeth Michelman

I first met Iranian artist Roya Amigh on a July afternoon in a converted horse barn in Ghent, New York. I was visiting the open studios of Art OMI, an international artists' residency in the Hudson River Valley. The sweaty bodies and the mid-day heat were overwhelming, so I ducked into a dark stall to catch my breath. As my eyes adjusted, the scanty light revealed clouds of paper scraps — white, pale pink and rusty yellow — enmeshed in threads that stretched from floor to ceiling and across shadowy corners of the room. Next to a debris-strewn kitchen table stood the artist herself, at ease with her work.

Amigh came to Boston University from Tehran in 2010 for a second M.F.A. At first exploring luminous color under neo-expressionist painter John Walker, she soon turned to making gestural line drawings reminiscent of the Persian miniatures familiar to her childhood. Forsaking traditional drawing materials, she began to glue lines of colored thread onto translucent papers and cotton duck, building these into tenuous structures strung across interior spaces. For Amigh, these diffuse, delicate constructions are the gateways to the space where imagination meets memory, her true focus.

Her nomadic installations easily fold into a carry-on bag, but their whispers can fill a room, as at Amigh's one-person exhibition in February at the Iron Tail Gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska, "Like a Tale We Hear." She is scheduled for two more solo shows next year, at FiveMyles Gallery in Brooklyn in August-September 2017, and at IAO gallery in Oklahoma City in January-February 2018. Amigh's work will be seen locally in "Close To Home," an exhibition next fall at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, from September 2017 through January 2018 — a show I have the pleasure of guest-curating.

Amigh's work incorporates texts from Persia's medieval epics and romantic poetry, her own writings, visual quotations from 15th century miniature paintings and elements of "Kheimeh Shab Bazi," an ancient form of Persian puppetry. The mythical narratives of Persian cultural identity, however, are only a surface ploy for her to explore the subject that most moves her, the anguished tales of women friends who have survived sexual assault. Empathizing from difficult experiences in her own relationships, Amigh imports reflections and imagery from her personal diaries into her works. She composes fragmented narratives of "works within works" reminiscent of the traditional "stories within stories" she heard passed down in her family. Through these, she bears witness to the indignities and emotional pain of women whose cultures blame and ostracize them for the crime of being female.

Each action in the studio amplifies Amigh's expressive intentions. After gluing, peeling and re-gluing sheets of cotton, lace and vellum, she rips them open and attacks them with scissors and sharp knives. She nails colored strings from wall to wall and ties together skeletal forms of hoops and sprung rods from which ruffles of cloth and paper flutter in space. Whether hugging the wall, hovering in corners, or floating at waist level, her fabrications stir feelings of dissociation and disorientation.

ELIZABETH MICHELMAN: YOU'VE SAID THAT RECREATING YOUR DIARY IS METAPHORICAL. HOW IS THIS?

ROYA AMIGH: When I want to make work about a specific memory, I go back to read about it in my diary, then start making specific material in relation to the feelings it brings back. I started writing a diary after a difficult event; it was the only way I could cope. The reason for writing is, I didn't want to forget the terrible time I went through and the great pain I had. Our memory can get distorted during a traumatic time. I wanted to know exactly what had happened to me. "Collision Response" was the most direct work I made about it.

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