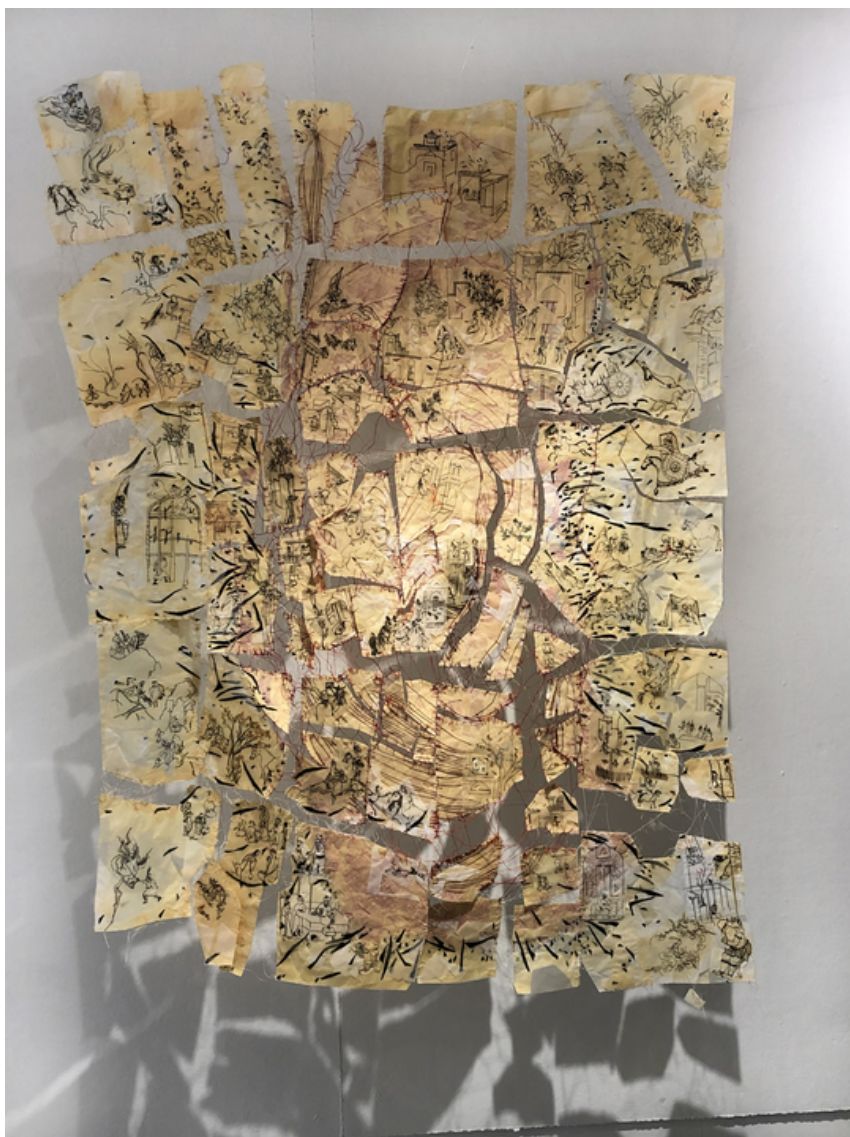


## Roya Amigh, *Resilient Fragilities*

Maryam Momeni



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Roya Amigh is a United States-based Iranian artist whose three-dimensional art grabs one's attention with its delicacy and literary engagement. Influenced by Persian miniature and Persian literature, Amigh's works are meandering, multilayered narratives that unfold through surprising combinations of material and mark-making. The artist doesn't use ink but draws with thread on surfaces of layered, translucent handmade paper that is sometimes made of dried dandelion and hibiscus petals collected from her neighborhood. As the artist states, "I am interested in discovering and exploring how simple materials can transform and metamorphose into stories." In this interview, the artist discusses her creative and healing processes and her commitment to addressing important issues, such as gender, sexuality, rape, and collective punishment,

issues that have emerged from her experiences as a woman and as an Iranian artist.

**When I saw your work for the first time, I was amazed by its narrative power. I thought I could figure out some story lines if I paid enough attention and followed certain figures, but then I realized it was not as easy as it seemed. Where do you get these stories from? And how did you become interested in weaving stories and literature into your visual art?**

Most of classical Persian poetry and the tradition of Persian storytelling influenced me because they are nonlinear. When I was a kid, my uncle would always read us poetry, stories which included mythology. In retelling these stories, you would add layers, your own stories. I was fascinated by the complexity of storytelling in Persian literature. The line of narration can go on and on, from person to person, from one recounting to the next and so on, inevitably creating stories within stories and fictions within fictions. Echoing the natural distortions of memory, I create my own version of these mythologies in my practice, featuring stories that happened to me or to the women I know.

**Your artworks are very delicate and sometimes translucent. I like the way you play with fragile materials and use threads instead of drawing with ink or other media. Can you explain how you select the materials for your work? And why do your pieces have so many layers, each going in a different direction in space?**

I am interested in discovering and exploring how simple materials can transform and metamorphose into stories. The simple materials I use help create delicate, fragile, and vulnerable works, which I juxtapose with Persian miniature and literature. Mostly, the imagery of my work comes from Persian miniature, which I select based on the concept of my own piece and then recreate the Persian miniature by gluing thread on paper. First, I put the glue with pin on paper, kind of drawing my imagery with glue, then I put thread over the glue. Everything in my work is thread, pieces of cloth, and paper.

I have also been using dandelions since 2015. Dandelions, the symbol of migration to me, are free to pass borders. They spread out their seeds and flourish far from their homeland. Holding on to the flower petals I collect from the streets can be intricate: one sneaky, strong wind and they are all gone in a flash. Observing the process amplifies the human will to control and intervene against nature.

The other material I use is hibiscus petals I collect from the streets. Through an extremely time-consuming process, I turn the petals into a skin-like surface/texture. The repetitiveness of the petals creates a skin that is holding on to all the memories and stories of the displacement of the petals. My drawings on the surface add another level of narration to these already existing stories.

**Are there any specific figures or symbols that recur in your work?**

I employ characters from Persian miniatures, furnishing them with my own feminist interpretations of symbols, and interweaving mythical beings with events that I know firsthand. For me, Persian poetry and storytelling are not only a treasury of stories, myths, and symbols; I am also inspired by their structure, that of meandering, multilayered storytelling. That's one of the reasons I started layering translucent paper in my work.

There are my female heroines: I have Homa, a bird who never lands. No one can catch Homa, so it is a very strong female symbol for me. Another would be the Pari, supernatural creatures in the Avesta. Also, Ghulah, coming from old Arabic folklore, is a female character who eats other creatures, usually deluded men. I use horses and camels as well, which in Zoroastrianism are appearances of the god of war. The repetition of my female symbols is a ritual to me, and it is the healing side of my work process.

**Gender and sexuality are other issues around which you create art. How do these issues appear in your work? Is this preoccupation also influenced by Persian literature, or does it come from personal experience?**

It comes from both. Let me give you an example. Liberation of female sexuality in the piece, *Welcome and entertain them all*, is partly informed by my study of the story of “Yusuf” [Joseph], in the twelfth chapter of the Quran, from a gender and sexuality perspective. I started this work by recreating some parts of several Persian miniatures, creating drawings that consisted of lines made by gluing and composing threads on paper. Specifically, I locate the recreated imagery of the miniature “Zulaykha and Yusuf”, by Kamal al-Din Behzad ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf\\_and\\_Zulaikha#/media/File:Yusef\\_Zuleykha.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf_and_Zulaikha#/media/File:Yusef_Zuleykha.jpg))(1488), in the middle of my piece. Behzad is inspired by Jami (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jami>)’s poem, in which Zulaykha and Yusuf are both looking for true mystical love. Feminine guile is at the core of this poem. I examine the representation of female sexuality and the gender-centered storytelling in this piece by recreating Zulaykha and Yusuf’s imagery. I juxtapose it with the other myths centered around female power, such as Pari and Ghulah. Then, I create the stitched fragments so that they shape a vagina structure.

Another piece I worked on is called *The Coerced Contact*. Since 2016, I have started making works about rape because of what happened to one of the people I love. When she shared her story with me, it was very difficult for me to even think about it and process it. The first step was how I wanted to visualize it, how I wanted to represent it. In the work *The Coerced Contact*, I tried to balance off her pain with her strength and beauty. So, I used Homa to show the strength in her, and I quoted Rumi’s poetry so that the work would also be healing. But visually, it was like shredded cloth. You realize that something has happened to her. Around the piece, I then scattered these triangle forms/shapes because it is the strongest shape for me. You cannot break it down; it is aggressive. These little black triangles can be seen as flies. When people see the work, from a close distance, it is beautiful, but from far away, when the triangles come into view, they feel disturbing.

**Your recent work was an exhibition you curated in July 2019 in Boston, called *Collective Punishment*. What did you mean by that? And how did you come upon the idea for this exhibition?**

The United States imposed its first sanctions on Iran a few years before I was even born; I have been living through them my whole life. The subject has recently been back in the spotlight, though reading the news has shown me how sanctions have been normalized, even praised as the “humane” strategy.

Through symbolic, mythic, literary, and embodied experiences, *Collective Punishment* aimed to turn the audience’s attention to the imposition of systematic vengeance on “the other” under the guise of human rights and national security. Artists shared their ineffable, visceral experiences and invited the audience to look at the intersection of race, nationality, class, and gender in this so-called humanitarian enterprise.

We worked on the project *Collective Punishment* since November 2018. At the beginning, I invited just Iranian artists focusing on sanctions as the theme. Then, I realized we needed to expand our perspective and include other kinds of collective punishment imposed in different communities, such as the African American community. My hope was to exhibit collective punishment in a variety of mediums like drawing, painting, printmaking, installation, sculpture, video art, and animation, and to bring in a wider audience. ♣


#### Read bio

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**Roya Amigh** earned an M.F.A. in Painting from Boston University, 2012. Her solo exhibitions include those at Babson College, Massachusetts, 2018; FiveMyles gallery, Brooklyn, New York, and Iron Tail Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2017. Group shows include Shiva Gallery at John Jay College, CUNY, New York, 2018; Yangpyeong Art Museum, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, 2018; the Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, Rethymno, Greece, 2018; Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 2017; The Art Complex Museum, Duxbury, Massachusetts, 2017; Edward Hopper House Museum, Nyack, New York, 2016; Katonah Museum of Art, New York, 2015; and Macy Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 2014. She was artist-in-residence at Assets for Artists | MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, Art Omi, Ghent, New York, and the Millay Colony for the Arts, among others. She lives and works in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Maryam Momeni** has an M.A. in English-American Studies from the University of Vienna, Austria, and a Master of Information (MI) degree from Rutgers University, New Jersey. Her translations from English and German into Persian as well as her own writings, including short stories, poems, and articles on literary criticism, auto/biography studies, and feminism, have been published online and in print, mostly in the Iranian press such as *Zanan*, *Zanane Emrouz*, *Shabakeye Aftab*, *Hamshahrie Dastan*, *Shahrivande Emrouz*, *Andisheye Pouya*, *Khabaronline*, *Alef*, *Ajam Media*, and *Davat*. She is also a Digital Archivist and Librarian currently living in New Jersey.

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