

From the Past, the Future

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Ani Afshar's artistic evolution over more than the past two decades is a demonstration of her lively approach to a variety of materials, almost to the point where it seems impossible to characterize her fabric constructions as belonging to any exclusive genre or point of view. Her earlier works, which are usually woven, blanket-like works or wall hanging, would seem to place her firmly among the fiber artists who rely very largely on woven pieces made on the loom. However these pieces of Afshar's loom-generated productions were frequently taken beyond the standard notions of ordinary work in this venerable technique by means of ornaments of many types, such as tufted border attachments, elements of beading, and knotting. In Afshar's practice these additions become not only decorative additions to the main or supporting fabric grounds, but also essential elements of the entire composition, completing them as much more than mere enrichments of these pieces. Their function establishes emotional tones, providing a sense of importance and significant feeling that give us an entry into the maker's artistic realms of imagination and creative energy.

Aspects of creative revelation and imaginative scope and depth are in fact integral aspects of all her work, whatever categories of artistic production to which we may try to assign to them. This creative focus of Afshar's work presents us with a variety of physical forms belonging to and between both two- and three-dimensional qualities, which explains the affinities among works of very different physical aspects. By establishing such a continuity of feeling between design and execution, this dimensional vibration among different forms and types is where the viewer can experience the subtleties and complexities of the artist's aesthetic worlds.

The variety of Afshar's work is connected to her study and love of Near Eastern fabrics, jewelry, metalworking, ceramics, antique garments of the Ottoman period, and different artistic

traditions from other parts of the world. Rather than acting as reminders—or what might be called “new souvenirs”—of aspects of these diverse artistic currents, Afshar’s sensibility allows her to become a part of them in a fresh and intriguing way.

There is a kind of pictorialism in some of Afshar’s work, which includes references to landscape elements such as trees, the sea, and the spaces of seas and skies. In these we note that some of the elements of this kind of imagery are either woven into the supporting fabric or attached to it by various means of beading, knotting, and cable-like braiding, which are not easily defined.

This parallelism between the suggestions of space—like that of landscape painting or pictorial tapestry—and the application of three-dimensional images of an idiosyncratic nature keeps our awareness shifting excitingly from one mode to another.

This multidimensional activity of the recent works, which are the main emphasis of *Woven Gardens*, *Shredded Shadows*, in many cases extends these spatial manipulations farther still by having the pieces, whether or not they have a fabric “ground,” float several inches off the wall by means of attachments of invisible nails and twists of string. Some works, such as *Gold in Black*, set forms of slightly bent metallic squares and blossom-like tulle against a very sheer tulle background that is suspended from the wall by a protruding wire bracket. This creates an intricate play between the fully dimensional individual elements and the slightly smoky surfaces of the tulle ground, which is allowed to hang down in its rippling length. The round blossom-like forms make a serpentine vertical cascade, along which float the metallic squares so that we make spatial variations between the sheer fabric “ground” and the wall behind it, the soft focus of the “blossoms” and the irregularly reflecting squares. A similar composition appears in *Shadows of the Alhambra*, where natural leaves (perhaps from the Moorish building’s gardens) form another curving cascade, among which the artist has placed shining, pinkish-red geometric shapes reminiscent of the architectural stone inlays of medieval Islamic Spain. The interaction of organic shapes, geometrical forms, and wavy transparencies of the background, seen hovering

before the flat white wall behind the hanging, establishes a visual shimmer and vibration suggesting the trees, flowers, and watercourses of the Alhambra palace-garden complex in southern Spain.

There is a suggestion of pictorialism in *Shredded History #2*, consisting of elements of fringed fabric. A bead-studded row of equilateral triangles with vegetal shapes suggests ears of corn placed at regular intervals between the angles of the bases of the triangles. A large dark blue and black floral form with a beaded center hovers above and in front of select parts of the triangles. As the title of this piece hints, the whole has the sense of a fragment of a larger entity, such as a carpet border, a decorative wall trim, or a section of a hemmed garment. *Shredded History #3* also presents this border-like quality, and rows of horizontals set with variations in the fringes or selvage add complexity in the gathered “floral” forms.

In the four pieces titled *Captives (1, 2, 3, 4)* constellations of square or triangular net or metallic shapes dangle above a tulle ground (itself placed in front of the wall behind). In these tumbling arrangements of rectangles (most not hung squarely) we find, except on the metallic foil shapes, assortments of diverse objects, including strung beads. Small loose elements that might have fallen off a necklace or a bangle, they present the effect of preserved parts of other, larger objects, most closely identified with jewelry. They return to the sense of historicity, an earlier, now disrupted past and function. In this context it is important to recall that Afshar has, throughout her career, made extraordinary jewelry. Many are complex necklaces, although there are quite a few that consist of a single element, perhaps a beaded ball or the like, suspended on a long string of fine beads or other small decorative details. These, the artist has named “Urban Leashes,” which gives them a political or at least sociological flavor, both amusing and with a tang of the critical.

Recently, Afshar has resumed an involvement with the necklace format notable in her piece *Forest of Shadows #1*. This work has a startling and somewhat unsettling anthropomorphic quality: it consists of numerous beaded strands to which are appended a number of the gossamer tulle floral forms. The beaded strings of the necklace hang from a nail in the wall, and their elongated curving lines suggest the form of a woman with long hair and who holds or is decorated with the gauzy, flower-like shape. The piece has an elegiac quality arising perhaps from the suggestion of falling flowers in its lower part. Despite its somewhat mournful air, the piece generates the sense of a living thing, vibrating with expressive emotion.

Afshar has used her crushed tulle “floral” elements in large adjustable arrangements from which one might pick a choice of evanescent blossoms. Here the themes of vanity decoration are ingeniously connected, giving the sense of what might be called an “allegory of feeling and awareness.” Both sensations reveal essential and fundamental factors in Afshar’s creative accomplishments, and in this way her work can be seen to illuminate a sensibility at the level of some of her distinguished colleagues, such as Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawny, Anne Wilson, and Claire Zeisler to name but a few artists who have equally compelling artistic vision, remarkable sensitivity to detail and painstaking execution.