

November 15, 2016

‘VEILED REFLECTIONS — ANILA QUAYYUM AGHA’S ALCHEMY AT AICON GALLERY’

By Harbeer Sandhu



Anila Quayyum Agha
Shimmering Mirage
2016
Laser-cut black steel and bulb
36 x 36 x 36 in.

A sheer veil or curtain reveals as much as it conceals, or begs a closer look at the very least. We strain to catch a glimpse of the bride’s face — does she weep or grin? Who among us can walk past a brightly lit window on a dark night without peering inside? And when that gaze is stifled — when, because of the angle or some unfortunate interplay of light and shadow, our curiosity is not satisfied — the same porous curtain inflames the imagination, revealing more about the gazer than the gazed upon — veil as mirror.

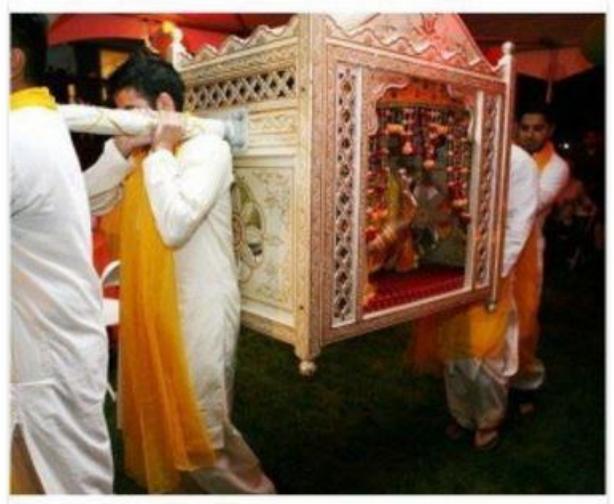
The veil provides a fitting metaphor to view Anila Quayyum Agha’s exhibition, “Walking With My Mother’s Shadow,” at Aicon Gallery through November 26. Whether in her signature floating cubes or her lesser-known embroidered paper works, Agha’s lacy snowflake designs, layered in translucent piles, draw in the viewer’s eye and won’t let go. There is just so much to feast upon — the sharpest lines cut in material as rigid as steel and as gossamer as paper, precisely aligned leaves of the thinnest paper stabbed hundreds of times and stitched with sharp thread pulled taught in complex patterns, beads like transistors on a circuit board, layers upon layers upon layers.



Material transforms in Agha’s hand — steel acquires a buoyancy, levitating, transforming the space with light and shadow, and paper takes on an impossible hardness. Delicate, organic floral patterns sit beside precise geometric patterns, laser-cut in rigid metal and gossamer paper alike...And everywhere, those oh-so-sharp lines, curving gracefully to denote a stem or petal, or the broken staccato dashes of stitched thread.



The black cubes evoke an obvious association with the Kabba stone of Mecca, but seeing the red “All the Flowers Are for Me” — the height at which it hovers — I am reminded also of a doli, a traditional South Asian conveyance for a newlywed bride. Like the veil that may hang before a bride’s face, dolis, too, obscure the bride behind ornate lattices and curtains. (“Plus red is the bridal color,” Agha adds.)



Apart from her mother’s passing (hence the show’s title, “Walking With My Mother’s Shadow”), Anila Quayyum Agha has had a great couple years, starting with her winning the 2014 Art Prize in Grand Rapids, Michigan and earning international fame thereafter, with her iconic cubes captivating audiences from Mumbai to Dubai to Houston and New England. Her first solo New York show sprawls over three galleries at Aicon without a single redundant or underwhelming piece. With less than two weeks until it comes down, do yourself a favor and catch this show while you can.

Read my reading of her very first light cube, “Intersections,” below.



Art Star Returns to Houston, Triumphant

The effect of this ornate black cube defying gravity, its weight captivating visitors’ attention, mouths agape, with its gravitational pull propelling audiences into a centrifugal orbit, bathing them in light and shadow, is indeed sublime.