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Armita Raafat

By [Susan Snodgrass](#)  March 29, 2010 2:57pm[f](#) [t](#) [t](#) [p](#) [+](#)

Chicago-based Armita Raafat performs an archeology of memory in evocative mixed-medium installations that draw on architectural motifs from Iran, the country of her familial roots. Born in Chicago, she moved with her family to Iran in 1980 when she was four, then returned to the U.S. in 2003. The Iran-Iraq War, which she witnessed while growing up, serves as an important backdrop to the artist's multilayered works, in which personal and collective memory intertwine. Situated in the back gallery of [threewalls](#)'s newly expanded space were large wall reliefs and two sculptural pieces evoking severed columns, which together functioned as an integrated whole suggesting a mosque interior in a state of disrepair or damage.

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Raafat's untitled installation was based on a series of hexagonal cells derived from *muqarnas*, a three-dimensional Islamic decorative device often arranged in tiers and used in domes. The artist constructs hers from papier-mâché and plaster, and adheres them to the wall, forming weblike patterns in which she embeds Styrofoam, cardboard, mirror shards and bits of Persian fabrics. Smears of charcoal and lines of indigo and turquoise paint are added. Raafat builds her works in high relief and partially destroys them, breaking away parts so that fragments and pigment powder crumble and fall to the floor to create an impression of decay or destruction.

A similar work in the front gallery, created with Pakistani-American artist Haseeb Ahmed, employs many of the same materials, but here the *muqarnas* forms have been cast in polyurethane foam rather than hand-built, rendering them more geometric. The addition of turmeric to the surface lends the piece a light, yellowish tonality.

Occupying the territories of both painting and sculpture, the installation's fractured elements both rise from and disrupt the pristine flatness of the gallery wall. The tension created between absence and presence, ruin and restoration, becomes a potent metaphor for the sense of vulnerability Raafat experienced during the Iran-Iraq War, and for the strained relations between present-day Iran and the Western world. While rooted in Islamic culture and architecture, Raafat's work is also informed by interventionist strategies that critique the authority of the white cube. She inserts a Middle Eastern identity into the often hermetic spaces of the mainstream art world. Her methods also connect to those strands of feminist practice that privilege process over permanence and materiality over objecthood, as well as to artists, such as Doris Salcedo, whose evocations of loss through the manipulation of domestic artifacts offer catharsis. Like Salcedo, Raafat imbues her installations with a psychological resonance. Here, the past—the artist's and Islamic culture's—and present are engaged in a compelling dialogue that extends beyond the personally or geographically specific.

Photo: View of Armita Raafat's untitled mixed-medium installation, 2009-10; at threewalls.