Morehshin Allahyari's 3D-printed project pushes back against 'digital colonialism'

It sometimes seems like technology is at odds with the art world — a tension between brain and heart. But plenty of artists, from Da Vinci to Cory Arcangel, have proved that's not true, and continue to prove it as technology evolves. In Technographica*, we explore how contemporary artists are using technology in unusual and unexpected ways.*

The Iranian artist and activist Morehshin Allahyari is currently working on a project that transcends continents and centuries. Using ancient illustrations of Middle Eastern dark goddesses as her source material, Allahyari is producing 12 sculptures through a process of 3D modeling, scanning, and printing. The result is *She Who Sees The Unknown*, an attempt by Allahyari to reclaim ownership of traditional mythologies, and fight against "digital colonialism," which she says is a recent trend that allows corporations to profit off of cultural artifacts of others.

Currently on display at The Armory in New York City, *She Who Sees the Unknown* explores the "forgotten histories and narratives" of female figures in the Middle East and North Africa. "It's a meaningful archive that's focused on these kind of dark female figures in the Middle East," Allahyari tells *The Verge*. "We don't have that archive at all."

Allahyari at the Upfor Gallery booth at the Armory Art Fair

Allahyari with source materials outside of her office at the School of Poetic Computation.

She Who Sees the Unknown is a series of sculptures, but Allahyari is not actually a sculptor. “I wouldn’t know how to do that,” she tells *The Verge*. Instead, she uses computers and 3D printers to create her work.

“The first time that I saw an object getting 3D printed… I was really fascinated by this idea of seeing a digital file, a digital model from a platform becoming a physical object,” she says. “It blew my mind actually watching that process.”

According to Allahyari, “digital colonialism” refers to when, say, a startup goes to cultural sites in Middle East and attempts a reconstruction project, but doesn’t make the data available to the public. By using open source software, Allahyari is hoping to reclaim and redistribute forgotten cultural artifacts.

Allahyari preps the file for her Aisha Qandisha sculpture for 3D printing at New York University’s LaGuardia Studio with the help of Dhemerae K. Ford.

“I want to offer another method to re-situate power,” she told *The Verge*, “through researching dark goddesses, monstrous, and jinn female figures of Middle Eastern origin, poetic-speculative storytelling, re-appropriation of traditional mythologies, collaging, meshing, 3D scanning, 3D printing, and archiving.”

The process for creating *She Who Sees the Unknown* was multi-step. First, it involved researching and archiving information from Middle Eastern ancient texts to make the figures accurate. Then Allahyari created a scan each sculpture, and 3D printed it in resin with the Stratasys J750 printer. Each statue has a storytelling component, or a video essay that connects the power of the goddess to a particular modern source of oppression. Lastly, Allahyari will host a series of "intimate public performances" known as Ha'm-Neshini, or sitting together, in collaboration with other artists, scientists, and activists from the Middle East.

For Allahyari, this project, like most of her work, is personal. Allahyari, who has lived in the US since 2007, grew up in Tehran and has a US green card. Last year, after President Trump banned visitors and refugees from majority-Muslim countries, Allahyari was stuck in Berlin for 10 days after attending a conference there, because she had an Iranian passport.

Allahyari hopes the 12 sculptures in the series will appear as if they are "an army of dark goddesses." She has completed four sculptures so far, including Huma, "a jinn that brings heat to the human body," Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj, two gods who represent chaos, and Aisha Qandisha, a Moroccan jinn known as "The Opener," who creates a crack in the male body that opens up a space for other demons.

"In this whole body of work, these figures and retelling their stories, is the idea about what it means to embrace monstrosities, and to take this power that these jinn have and use it against the powers that oppress," Allahyari says.

Detail of the Ya'Jooj and Ma'Jooj sculptures. The figure is part of the project, She Who Sees The Unknown*, which "recontextualizes goddesses and female Jinn of Persian and Arabic origin" and "explores ancient myths as they relate to digital colonialism, oppression, and catastrophe."*



3D printed in resin, the Huma (2017) sculpture stands at 12 inches tall. Huma is said to "bring heat to the human body and is a symbol of high temperature, madness and hallucination."

Sculptural pieces and video works from Morehshin Allahyari's project, She Who Sees The Unknown, *on view at the Upfor Gallery booth at the Armory Art Fair in New York City.*

https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/24/17147826/morehshin-allahyari-she-who-sees-the-unknown-3d-printing-sculpture