

The Startling Abstractions of Arpita Singh

For those who know only Singh's figurative paintings, this exhibition of 33 abstract works will come as a surprise in the very best sense.

By: John Yau | June 17, 2017



Arpita Singh, installation view (all images courtesy Talwar Gallery)

An admired artist in India, Arpita Singh rarely shows in America and that is our loss. In the winter of 2012-2013, she had a small show of watercolors at DC Moore that was favorably reviewed by Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*. Best known in America for her paintings of figures, often women, floating in an elusive space — what Cotter described as an “enigmatic, quasi-narrative mode” — Singh was born in 1937, the same year as Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990), whose work was recently shown in New York at The Met Breuer. And just as that show gave us the first comprehensive view of Mohamedi's work, particularly her delicately rigorous abstract drawings in pencil and ink, an inclusive, scholarly look here in America is merited for Singh's complex oeuvre, which consists, as far as I can tell, of at least four distinct phases.

Until that day happens, which I hope is sooner rather than later, we will have to learn about Singh's career piecemeal. Luckily for us, such an opportunity is offered by the exhibition *Arpita Singh: Tying down time* at Talwar Gallery (May 6 – August 11, 2017), which did memorable Mohamedi exhibitions in 2008 and 2013, both of which I reviewed.

After Singh graduated from the School of Art, Delhi Polytechnic in New Delhi, she worked as an artistic consultant for the Weaver's Service Centre, a government funded cooperative devoted to preserving and promoting the tradition of the handloom. Although Singh's job was

initially to look at shawls, she soon began, as she said, “studying the different traditions of making cloth, types of embroidery, and fabric structures of drapes.”



Arpita Singh, Untitled (1982), Watercolor, ink and poster paint on cardboard, 13.75" x 12"

Singh began exhibiting her work, which was influenced by different traditions of Indian folk art and miniatures, in the 1960s. In contrast to the Western tradition, which has wrestled with the distinction between high and low art, this was not a problem in India, as exemplified by the work of the great Indian modernist K. G. Subramanyan (1924 – 2016).

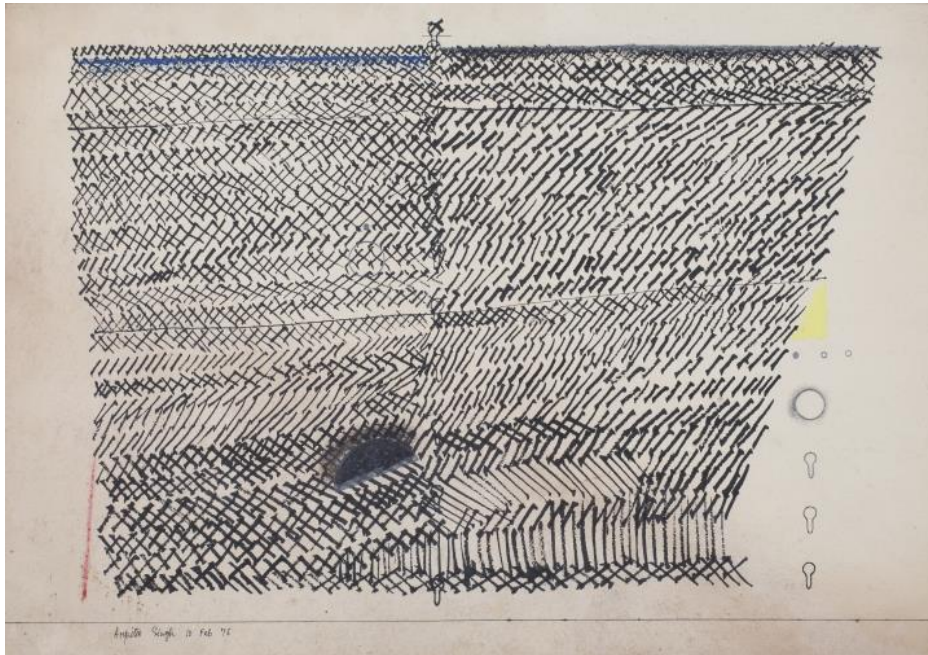
Like Subramanyan, Singh draws her inspiration from multiple Indian traditions, as well as from Western art, which, in her early work, includes Marc Chagall. According to the art historian Deepak Ananth, who has written a major monograph on Singh, Chagall’s ungrounded, floating figures played a role in Singh’s conception of the relationship between her figures and the surrounding space. It also seems to me that Singh’s ungrounded figures in an abstract space anticipate the work of Francesco Clemente.

However, for those who know only Singh’s figurative paintings, often in bright colors, the exhibition at Talwar will come as a surprise in the very best sense. For one, these entirely abstract works, which were done between 1973 and ’82, further confirm the restless, experimental current running through her art. In the thirty-three works in the exhibition, she explores what she can do with a short, often repeated strokes of ink or poster paint.

I do not know if there is a monograph dedicated to this decade in the artist’s career, but there should be.

During this time, working with a pen or brush to apply ink and/or poster paint to paper, which often has a rough tooth, Singh never settles into a mode or style. Paradoxically, the works are

circumscribed and remarkably open. The lines can be thin and delicate or thick and dense. They can be short or almost dot-like. Sometimes they are clustered together to form a deweave, other times they are straight, delicate lines repeated to form a linear, architectonic structure. Again, Ananth's insights are useful, as he cites Paul Klee's instructional essay, "Drawing is taking a line for a walk," as an influence. Singh seems to be guided by Klee's exhortation: "DRAW AS MANY DIFFERENT LINES AS YOU CAN."



Arpita Singh, Untitled (1976), Ink and pastel on paper, 18.75" x 24.75"

In "Untitled" (1976), which the artist has dated February 10, 1976, horizontal rows of small, dense x's span most of the paper, which are interrupted by a vertical column of linear, key-like shapes stretching from just above the first row to just below the last.

The drawing can be divided into left and right partitions, with the vertical column functioning as a loose border or axis. The artist underscores this separation by drawing a blue pastel line across the left side, stopping near the middle, just below the top row of x's, and a black pastel line on the right that intersects it. Two horizontal lines, drawn at different points, further section the drawing. The change from one side to the other or from one section to the other is not mechanical. To these markings, Singh adds a series of diagonal lines extending across the axis.

While one of the inspirations for this and other drawings in the show is Singh's study of stitches, embroidery, and the underlying structure used in weaving, she also exceeds the boundaries of patterning. The lines drift across the page. They cluster together. They suggest letters and writing. In some works, the lines end in a dot, while in others the dots are scattered throughout. She varies the thickness of the line, and how close or far apart they are. Always remaining attentive and focused, the artist works her way across the paper, line by line, and dot by dot. The drawings are her way of marking and shaping time.



Arpita Singh, Untitled (1981), Poster paint and ink on paper, 26.75" x 34.75"

When Singh makes thick, overlapping lines, the spaces between them become equally important. The dense black strokes can evoke architecture, crowded urban street plans, grids, or even sculpture.

In "Untitled" (1980), done in poster paint, the clusters of x's reminded me of a murmuration of starlings. Another work, "Untitled" (1975), done in ink, pastel, and poster paint, brought to mind a rushing river and the unseen currents below.

In at least one drawing, "Untitled" (1975), which is covered with a dense black ground, she scratches back into the paper, making vertical lines marked by dots reminiscent of beaded embroidery and scarification. In an earlier work, "Untitled" (1974), which is hung near nearby, she seems to have worked the paper so hard that it partly tore down the middle. She has taken the pieces of this "damaged" drawing and affixed them to a larger sheet. In the last drawing in the show, "Untitled" (1982), done in watercolor and poster paint on cardboard, Singh uses line to draw a table, a swan emerging from an abstract form, and an arched window with open shutters. Each thing occupies its own space and yet they all feel connected.

She could not have gotten to this place without the drawings she made over the previous decade. In those works she was impulsive and rigorous, her lines at once concentrated and meandering. This body of work, which is being shown for the first time in America, is a singular achievement. On one side are the hallucinatory ink abstractions of Henri Michaux, while on the other side are the radical graphic works of Pierrette Bloch. Singh's drawings are stark and sensuous, bleak and overflowing. They evoke joy and tragedy, purpose and purposelessness. I found them deeply moving, even if I could not give a name to what I was feeling.