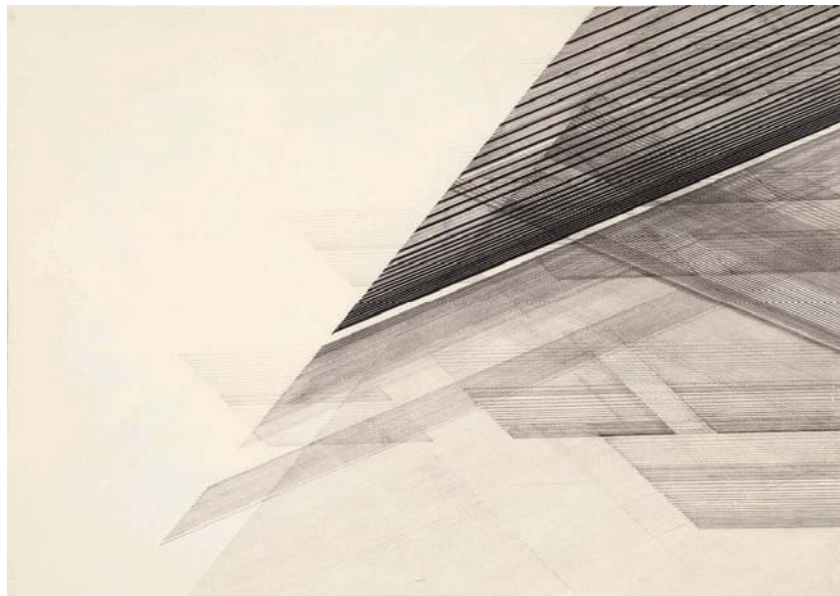




The “radical” drawings of Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi

A new exhibition at the Met Breuer gallery in New York pays tribute to Mohamedi, a pioneering artist who quietly redefined South Asian modernism

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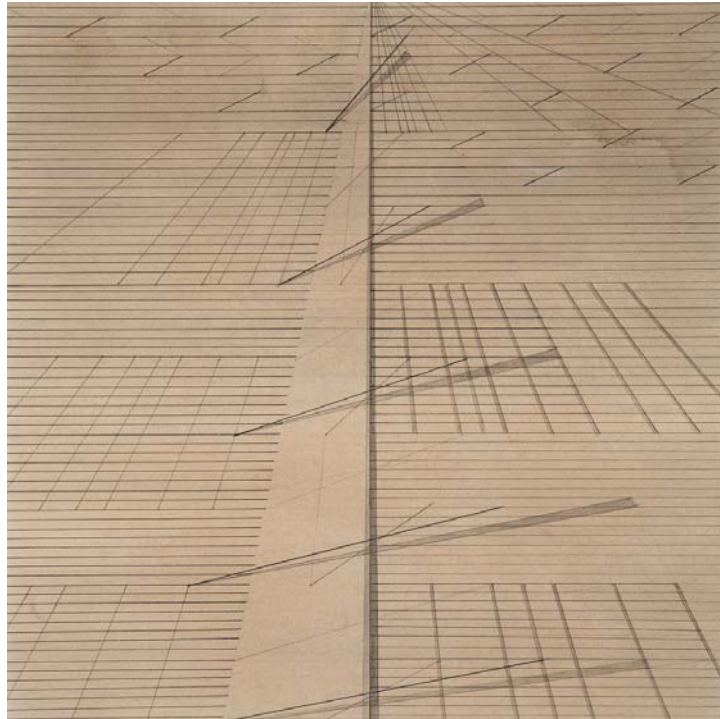


NASREEN MOHAMEDI, UNTITLED. INK AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER. CA. 1975. (SIKANDER AND HYDARI COLLECTION)

On a stark wall in the new Met Breuer gallery hangs a small, 1970s work by the Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi. Like much of Mohamedi’s oeuvre, the piece is a delicate, abstract drawing comprised of grids and geometric shapes. Lines sweep into the distance, their vanishing points lying beyond the page. Darker lines intersect the grid at dramatic angles, casting shadows, hovering like needles on textile. The piece is, somehow, both modest and ambitious—an unassuming graphite drawing that bursts with quiet activity.

“[Mohamed] has achieved the ability to describe, with a minimum of means, with the most humble of media ... a sense of enormous distance held in this kind of quivering tension right on the surface of the paper,” said Sheena Wagstaff, Chairman of The Met’s Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and curator of an upcoming retrospective on Mohamedi at the Met Breuer. It was a sunny March afternoon, just days before the gallery’s launch, and Wagstaff stood next to the work, beaming.

“It’s a pretty amazing thing,” she said. “I would love to wake up to that every morning. Because it gives you this idea that you’ve got more beyond.”



Nasreen Mohamedi , Untitled. Ink and graphite on paper. Ca. 1975.(Sikander and Hydari Collection)

“Nasreen Mohamedi” is one of two exhibitions that will inaugurate the Met Breuer, an offshoot of the Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted to modern and contemporary works, when it opens on March 18th. The other exhibit, “Unfinished,” showcases incomplete works dating from the Renaissance to the present, while posing a central question: when is a work of art complete? In some ways, the retrospective on Mohamedi serves as a counterpoint to this sweeping survey of unfinishedness. Mohamedi’s meticulous, fine-line drawings are deliberately sparse, distilling the interaction of pen and paper to its most minimal form. The retrospective also comes as a significant new chapter in the legacy of an artist who was relatively unknown at the time of her death. Mohamedi was born in Karachi, which then belonged to British India, in 1937. Her family moved to Bombay in 1944, and Mohamedi spent the bulk of her childhood there. She led a cosmopolitan life, studying Western philosophy and art, travelling often. In 1954, Mohamedi was accepted to St. Martin’s School of Art in London, where she lived for nearly a decade, until relocating to Paris to study print-making. She later moved back to India and taught at the prestigious M.S. University in Baroda (now Vadodara). Throughout, she painted and drew with persistent discipline, pursuing a lifelong fascination with light, space, and perspective.

Though much of Mohamedi’s work is unnamed and undated, it can be divided into distinct phases. The first wing of the Met Breuer gallery is devoted to Mohamedi’s water colors, which hint at the sensibilities that define her later grid drawings. Tendrils of sinewy lines snake across loose brushstrokes, and the interplay of light and shadow is prominent. These works are minimalist, but they are also revolutionary. While most of her South Asian contemporaries were producing colourful, representational works, Mohamedi dealt in the muted and abstract.

“She was doing something that was very unique for that moment,” Wagstaff said. “Where so many of her peers—mostly men, frankly—were working in highly colored figurative tradition, here was this woman doing this [drawing that was] almost doggedly counter to that ... [She was] very radical, very focused, and pretty remarkable, actually, for that time.”



Nasreen Mohamedi , Untitled. Ink on paper. 1960s. (Estate of Nasreen Mohamedi / Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York / New Delhi)

The watercolours lead into Mohamedi's photographs. Cropped with deliberate precision, her photos highlight the geometric forms of landscapes and architecture: a wave curling along the sand, the famous striped water towers of Kuwait, the sharp corner of a stone building. Mohamedi never displayed these works in her lifetime, but they point to a distinctive way of seeing the world through lines and boundaries.

In the 1970s, Mohamedi began to engage with grids, a mainstay of contemporary art. Later, she introduced polygonal shapes into her drawings, which sweep, curve, and splinter across the page. Using ink and graphite, Mohamedi created abstract landscapes of lines, a number of which are on display at the Met Breuer. Their depth, their rhythm is remarkable. One piece executed—typically—in red and grey ink consists of a hash of lines so textured and intricate that the piece resembles a swatch of textile. “I keep saying to people, ‘Put your nose up to the surface,’” Wagstaff said of this particular work. “Because unless you do, it’s hard to understand that it’s not just a simple drawing, and that the variations and the nuances of the drawing are extraordinary ... It’s a drawing that is full of incredible facility, incredible illusion, but that wasn’t her purpose. Her purpose was not illusion. It was about combining the suggestion at the same time as denying it.”

Interspersed throughout the exhibit are displays of Mohamedi's personal diaries. In these little pocketbooks, Mohamedi both recorded reflections on her craft and found a second canvas for her art. She overlaid the pages with grids and circles, drew thick black boxes over phrases that she wanted to stress. She was, according to Wagstaff “actually treating [the diaries] as art works in themselves.”

Mohamedi's diaries not only reveal her preoccupations as an artist (one page on display is entirely blacked out except for the phrase, “A NEED FOR REAL AUSTERITY”), but also lend a window into the artist's personality. “You learn a certain amount from the diaries about her single mindedness, about her toughness with herself,” Wagstaff said. “She didn't give herself any slack. She was constantly saying to herself: this needs to be better, I have to rethink this.”

The discipline that is apparent in Mohamedi's writings and drawings belies a great tragedy. When she was in her 20s, Mohamedi was diagnosed with Huntington's Disease, a neurological condition that, among other things, affects a person's motor functions. For Mohamedi, whose life's work was predicated upon precision and control, it was particularly devastating affliction. Hand tremors eventually made drawing difficult, but she continued to produce art into the last years of her life. These later drawings, which occupy the third wing of the gallery, are softer, sparser than their predecessors. Curves and chevrons float delicately in a void of blank space.

Mohamedi died of Huntington's in 1990, at the age of 53. At the time, she was little known beyond India, but is now considered to be one of the most important figures of South Asian modernism. Since 2007, her work has been displayed at the documenta art show in Germany, the Tate Liverpool in England, and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi. The program at the Met Breuer marks the first retrospective of Mohamedi's work in the United States.

Wagstaff hopes that the exhibition will introduce new audiences to Mohamedi's singular, beautiful vision. "She deserves to be known more," Wagstaff said. "You only need to look at a couple of these—and spend time to understand where these lines relate to each other, and what's actually going on in the paper—to understand how brilliant she is."



Nasreen Mohamedi (wikiart.org)