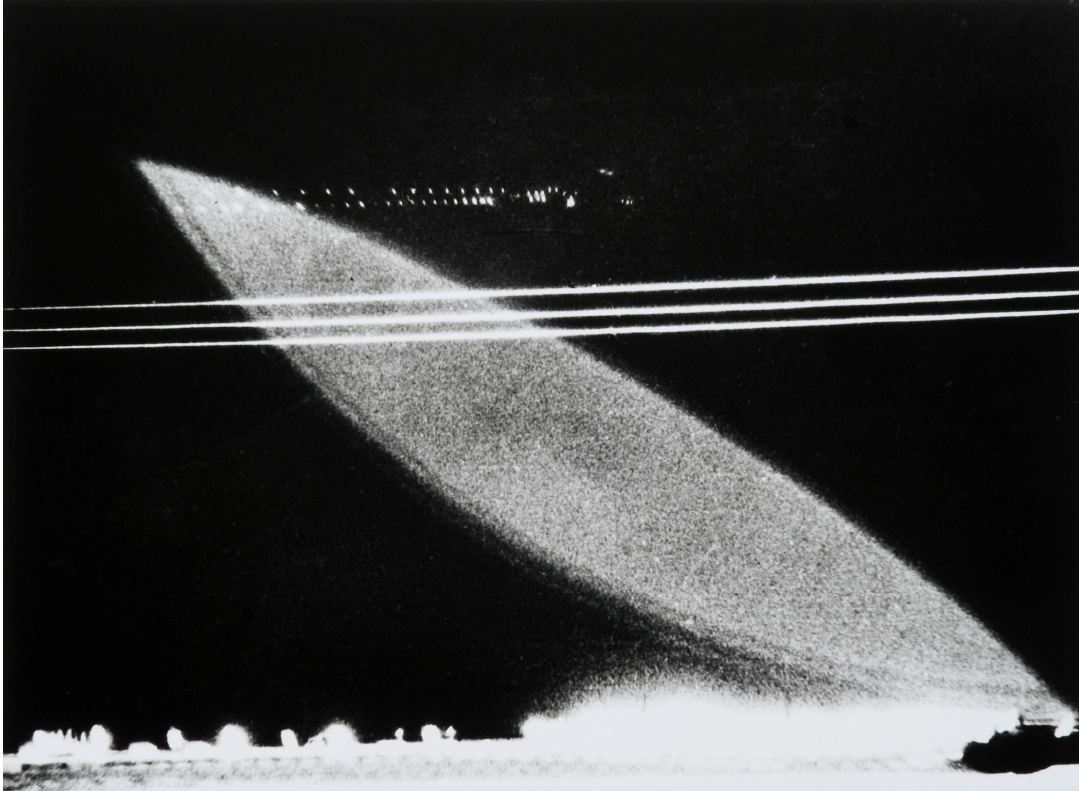




Artists on Artists | William Kentridge on the Subtle Drama of the Indian Minimalist Nasreen Mohamedi

By CAROL KINO | OCTOBER 11, 2013



Courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi

An untitled photograph by Nasreen Mohamedi from the 1960s.

The South African artist William Kentridge is best known for creating low-tech animated films, often based on charcoal drawings, that explore the painful effects of apartheid. He describes his current show (“[Second-hand Reading](#),” at Marian Goodman Gallery through Oct. 26) as being about “the excess of making.” Filled with drawings of trees, people and text made on the pages of old encyclopedias, the show also includes several animated videos and sculptural sound pieces, including one built from drums and percussion instruments and another that transforms old sewing machines into a hand-cranked phonograph.

Considering all this cacophony, it may come as a surprise that one of Kentridge’s personal favorites is the serene Indian minimalist Nasreen Mohamedi, who died in 1990.



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One of the purest abstractionists — and one of the first female artists — to emerge from postindependence India, she produced delicate ink and graphite drawings layered with grids and geometric shapes that suggest Agnes Martin and the Constructivists. Her black-and-white photographs, never exhibited in her lifetime, offer abstracted visions of everyday objects like paving stones, Islamic buildings and the warp of a loom.

Kentridge discovered Mohamedi's work earlier this year when he was in India for an exhibition of his own and visited the retrospective "[A View to Infinity](#)" at New Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (through Nov. 30). A selection of Mohamedi's drawings, photographs and daily diaries are also on view in "[Becoming One](#)" (through Nov. 23) at New York's Talwar Gallery, which represents her estate.



Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

An installation view of William Kentridge's show at Marian Goodman Gallery.

Here, Kentridge on Mohamedi:

“During all the years of apartheid, which were my formative years as an artist, South Africans couldn't visit India. So my trip earlier this year was a discovery of a huge part of the world that before I just had to take on trust. Seeing Mohamedi's work was kind of a revelation. It's utterly different to the kind of work I can imagine doing, but it's also utterly different to the kind of work that was being made in India in the 1960s and 1970s. I was more familiar with



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the figurative Indian tradition. I hadn't expected to see work like that there at all. It was wonderful to find elements there of a language I understand.

“The purity of modernism gets a fantastic taint and impurity when it's made in the third world, where you can't escape the pressures around, even if you try to. As much as her work would like to be Zen, there's a sense of very discreet theatricality that comes through, particularly in her black-and-white photographs. To me the photographs suggest sketches for a space in which a drama could happen, while the small drawings could also be a set for a dance performance. I have no idea if this is what she was intending. These are just a set of associations that the work sets off.

“The rest of the world should be interested in her because there's a chauvinism in America and Europe that all modernist impulses come from the West. But the avant-garde and modernism have always been fed from the colonies, whether it's absurd songs from Romania that become the basis of Dada, or discordant folk songs that become the basis of avant-garde music in Vienna in 1910. I think it's a sobering lesson for Americans. The relationship of the avant-garde in the center to modernism in distant places is always more complex than they assume.”



Courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi

An untitled Nasreen Mohamedi photograph from the 1970s.