

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Think Small

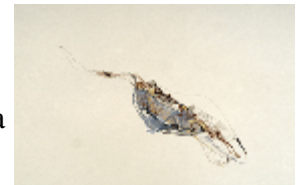
By Alexander Keefe

There is a strange pulse beating in Sheila Makhijani's recent paintings, miniature abstracts on paper included in "Fluid Spaces: Gender and Abstraction, 1973-2008," an engaging group show at Vadehra Gallery's Okhla space. And there is something refreshing about them as well, in an Indian art scene groaning beneath the weight of postmodern photoshop pastiche and heavy-handed magical realist allegorizing that anxiously advertises meaningfulness, if not meaning. Makhijani's work stands out, quietly asserting its connection with an Indian avant garde that, for better or worse, has long since moved on—in doing so, she reminds us of what we are missing.

These are complex and densely compressed little works, intricate structures of gouache paint that, at their best, strike a delicate, resonant balance between fuzzed out washes of color and spindly architectural structure. In "Shall I, Shall I not" (2004) a swirl of nested lines moves twistingly across the white surface of the painting with an almost biological energy. It looks as though it has been caught in motion, like a deep sea invertebrate frozen by a submarine camera in flight.

"Why Not" (2004) wraps a washed-out blue hieroglyph in a multicolored tensile web of lines and ladders, executed with a restless precision as though scratched into the paper with the tip of a quill. Measuring only 7 by 9 and a half inches, there is a rhythm at work here, a kind of syncopation between the cool, deep, bleeding blue and the snap of the looping, angular lines that dance around it. "Down Down Down There" (2008), an even smaller piece, works by creating dissonance between a frenetic horizontal tangled structure and a cascade of assertive vertical lines. There is collision in places, but things pass underneath and above each other as well, creating the illusion of a layered depth that stretches impossibly back into the white paper surface.

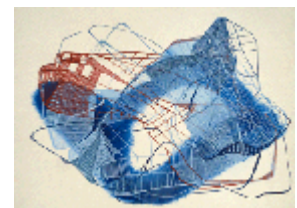
Abstract painting has long been thought of as a big game, often wall-sized, and a male one. The distinctly masculine, even macho associations with early Abstract Expressionism, and "action painting," were partly the product of writers like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, whose prescriptive critical frames amounted to an intervention. They, along with other influential critics, largely ignored non-male, non-white contributors to a "movement"



Shall, I Shall I Not



Down Down Down
There



Why Not

whose contours they defined. ("Action/Abstraction," the current large retrospective on the period on at the Jewish Museum in New York even devotes a section of the show to what it calls "Gaps" precisely to address this imbalance.) The tenacity of this gendered association owes something to the romantic image of the powerful, male "action artist" as a kind of secular demiurge, an uncreated creator pouring his soul onto huge canvases, uncontained and radically free. Hovering in the background is the image's constitutive antithesis: the sensual, embodied woman; the wife holding the genius back; the imitator.

"Fluid Spaces: Gender and Abstraction, 1973-2008" thumbs its nose at this mythology, recounting an understated history of Indian women making abstract images, and making them well. It is no mean feat that Makhijani's work doesn't look out of place here, displayed alongside impressive earlier pieces by artists like Arpita Singh, Zarina Hashmi and Nasreen Mohamedi--seeing firsthand the subtle, tightly controlled geometric abstractions of the latter was a treat--whose emergence in the 1970s marked a watershed moment for women in the Indian art scene, ending decades of near silence that began with the tragically early death of Amrita Sher-Gil in 1941. There is a serial quality to many of the works on display, including Makhijani's. Again, this sort of rigorous repetition and slow development of theme stands in stark contrast with the one-off grand acts of expression of the canonical Abstractionists. Visual patterns emerge and repeat, folding in on themselves, addressing each other in a patient conversation: it creates an effect like that of gazing upon a script at once familiar and alien, almost but never quite disclosing its meaning.