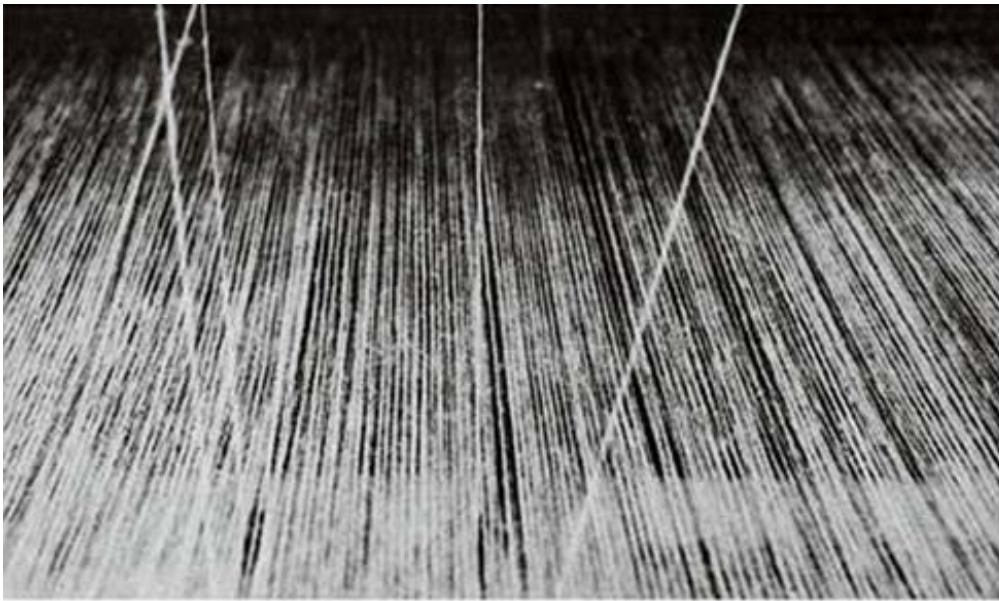


Review: Nasreen Mohamedi Retrospective at the Met Breuer in New York

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'Untitled' (c. 1970, printed 2003), a black-and-white photograph by Nasreen Mohamedi.

Estate of Nasreen Mohamedi
/Talwar Gallery, New York

A retiring presence in Indian art during her life, Nasreen Mohamedi is now at the center of global issues of contemporary art.

Mohamedi emerged in the wake of the first generation of Indian artists to gain recognition on the international scene and quickly defined a pristine, profoundly meditative approach to abstraction that both isolated her from most Indian art of her time and earned her a place among the leading artists of the late 20th century—an achievement acknowledged only posthumously.

Curated by the Museo Reina Sofia's Manuel Borja-Villel, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art's Roobina Karode, and the Met's Sheena Wagstaff, the Met Breuer's "Nasreen Mohamedi" is the first comprehensive retrospective of Mohamedi's work to appear in this country. Based on an exhibition Ms. Karode organized for the Kiran Nadar in 2013, the more than 130 paintings, drawings, photographs and diary pages on view present the full range of this remarkable artist. The show builds on the achievements of scholars in India, who have overcome nearly intractable problems to reconstitute her career. Mohamedi rarely signed, titled, dated or exhibited her work. This lack of documentation is especially challenging because Mohamedi

suffered from Huntington's disease, a neuromuscular impairment that progressively diminished her physical dexterity and ended her life in 1990, at age 53.

Born into a Muslim family that believed strongly in education for women, Mohamedi mainly grew up in Bombay (now Mumbai). In the mid-1950s, she studied at the prestigious St. Martin's School of Art in London, and she spent a couple of years in Paris in the early '60s. While this exposure to European art broadened her horizons, two transformative relationships with Indian artists had a far greater impact on her development as an artist.

Between her sojourns in London and Paris, Mohamedi returned to Bombay, where she absorbed the lessons of M.F. Husain and V.S. Gaitonde. Husain was already one of the most famous artists in India. Freely mixing references to Picasso and Mughal miniatures, Husain defined a style of linear precision and brilliant colors that he employed to create figurative paintings that celebrated the aspirations of the newly independent country.

Mohamedi, however, was more drawn to Gaitonde, a less established artist who avoided the political themes and subjects of Husain to create a richly introspective abstract art. As the Guggenheim's retrospective in 2014 demonstrated, Gaitonde adopted the discipline of Zen Buddhism and slowly evolved a contemplative art of calligraphic subtlety. During the early '60s, Mohamedi's paintings reflected Gaitonde's fluid style, but she soon put aside canvas and brush in favor of drawing as a means to delve deeply into what really mattered to her—a self-effacing dedication to measure and simplicity as the highest forms of expression.

Despite Mohamedi's differences with Husain, he was crucial to her mature vision. The key was photography. In 1967, she accompanied him on a trip through Rajasthan as he shot "Through the Eyes of a Painter," an internationally acclaimed short film that applied a modernist discipline of geometric structure to the desert landscape, historic architecture, and telling details of the region.

Mohamedi's independent photographs evince a developed sensitivity to the beauty of barren landscapes and the power of an eccentric viewpoint to turn a mundane scene into a tautly structured composition. Inspired by patterns of shifting sands, breaking waves, and scintillating light, she soon translated these phenomena into drawings—throbbing grids of fluctuating lines. Their radical austerity far surpasses the relative naturalism of her mentors and connects to her roots in Islamic traditions of abstraction.

Her mature work is almost entirely limited to pen-and-ink drawings on modestly sized sheets of paper, which she methodically and laboriously worked while seated at a low drafting table in her small and immaculately maintained apartment.

The drawings ascribed to the early '70s begin with a reductive process of drawing horizontal lines from one edge of a sheet to the other and explore a remarkable variety of ways the lines can subtly modulate—by width and density, continuity or rupture. They transform consistent geometry into a series of unexpected dynamic thrusts from two into three dimensions.

As Mohamedi's investigation of the relationship between her inked lines and surrounding space developed during the later '70s and '80s, her geometric structures became detached from the edges of the sheet and floated free. She adopted mechanical drawing instruments to compensate for her declining physical control

and used them to explore rotating curvilinear shapes that evoke planetary associations instead of patterns of sea or sand. Her conception appears cosmic, even transcendent.

Mohamedi's devotion to grids has prompted some critics to associate her with Minimalism. But her fragile geometry is far removed from the deadpan materialism of artists such as Carl Andre (whom she met in 1971) and even the large-scale poetics of Agnes Martin. Mohamedi's immersive compositions are closer to László Moholy-Nagy and the other utopians of the Bauhaus.

Discovered after her death, Mohamedi's diaries confirm how intensely she intertwined her life and art. She counseled herself, "A new day begins. Work slowly and concentrate." She testified, "Each line, texture (form) are born of effort, history and pain."

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