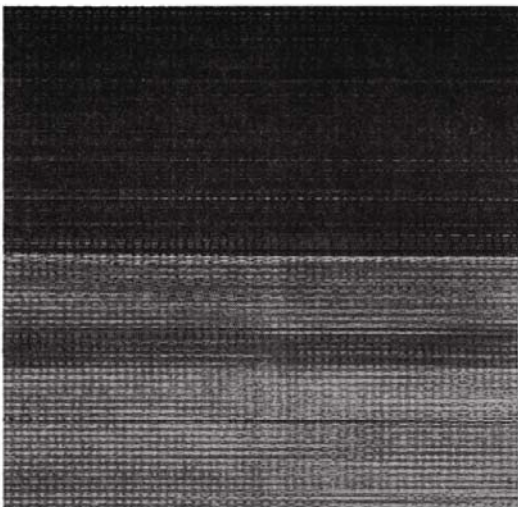


Nasreen Mohamedi *The grid, unplugged*

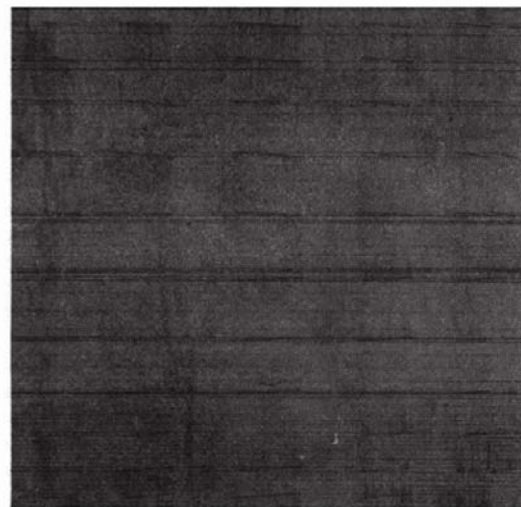
Talwar Gallery September 20 – December 20, 2008 John Yau



Untitled; 18 3/4" x 18 3/4"; Graphite and Ink on Paper; ca. 1970s. All images courtesy of Talwar Gallery.



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The drawings and photographs of Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990) are slowly but surely becoming better known to a wider American audience. In 2003, Holland Cotter, who has been her most eloquent champion in New York, wrote in the *New York Times*, “if people, especially young artists, knew about Mohamedi, they would love her the way they do Eva Hesse.” Cotter is right. Mohamedi, whose work was first seen in a group show, *Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora* at the Queens Museum in 1997, had a small solo show of drawings and photographs, *Nasreen Mohamedi: Lines among Lines* at Drawing Center in 2005, at same time that *3 X Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Emma Kunz, Hilma Af Klint, and Agnes Martin* was on view. Mohamedi’s drawings would have more than held their own in the *3 X Abstraction* show, but sometimes even the dead have to take what they get. This exhibition at Talwar Gallery is her third solo show in New York, and the first only of her drawings.

Some prejudices die hard, and the ones that Mohamedi’s work evinces are deeply ingrained. In her geometric drawings and photographs she doesn’t show the slightest inclination to make art that can be racially or culturally identified. Eschewing these often stultifying safety nets is just one reason why young artists, especially those who feel a similar pressure, should know about Mohamedi’s work. The other, more important reason is that her work clears a fresh space within a crowded territory occupied by Agnes Martin and Kasimir Malevich, the stillness of the former and the dynamics of the latter, without giving an inch; and that’s breathtaking. In a very real sense, her drawings quietly but firmly say to Western abstract artists, “Move aside. I am your equal.”

Mohamedi was born in Karachi (which was once part of India and is now part of Pakistan) and died of Parkinson’s disease in the relatively isolated coastal town

of Kihim, about one hundred miles from Mumbai. She studied at St. Martin’s School in London (1954 to 1957) and privately in Paris (1961–1963). She returned to India, and from 1972 until 1988, she taught at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. During this time she became friends with the reclusive V. S. Gaitonde (1924–2001), the pioneer of non-objective painting in India. When the history of abstraction in India becomes known outside of that country, Mohamedi’s secure place in her nation’s pantheon will become apparent.

The exhibition consists of two groups of drawings from the 1970s, all of which are undated and untitled. They are done in graphite and ink on square sheets of paper measuring around 19 x 19 inches or 7 x 7 inches. While there is a structure to each work, its pattern is not completely reliant on a grid or a set of repeating intervals, as in Agnes Martin’s work. Moreover, the pattern is never strict and thus constraining. If anything it seems to expand, follow an order, which eludes us, or bend, and tilt. In one of the pages of her journal, which was presented on an LED screen, Mohamedi drew a square, which she titled “space,” and then bisected it with two lines designated as “time.” Drawing was Mohamedi’s way of exploring the intersection of time (events or, in her work, lines) and space (the physical world and infinity). In one of the large drawings, the slightly angled vertical lines start off dark at the left edge, and for about a quarter of the drawing get progressively lighter. And then, for no apparent reason, they stay relatively the same in value and width until they reach the drawing’s right edge. Horizontal line segments fan out slightly as they move from left to right across the upper part of the drawing. These lines (they are like stairs seen from below) align themselves in diagonal rows descending from the upper left to the lower right. On the upper right hand side, Mohamedi connects the top horizontal

line of the last row to one near the middle of the adjacent slanting row with a single dark vertical. The drawing never resolves itself into an overall pattern (Martin) or image (Malevich). It stays open and vulnerable, and in this Mohamedi is unrivaled. For her, closed systems are an illusion. Everything we see is a small (and/or vast) contingent glimpse of a larger pattern that we cannot ever see and thus absorb. Mohamedi felt her way through her drawings, through the placing of lines and the pressure of her hand.

Mohamedi’s connections are often tenuous, juxtaposing and intertwining a number of very simple patterns. In the larger drawing that I have been describing, some of the groups of horizontal lines seem to be moving faster than those preceding them—stretching out—as if moving in a trajectory. In a small drawing, she draws a cluster of tightly packed diagonal lines in which the intervals between individual lines increase as they move away from the initial dark cluster, resulting in four tilting planes. And yet, we see that the artist has not set out to make a tilting plane; she has made a series of lines, which she interrupts with more severely angled diagonal lines that seemingly form no pattern. The gap between what we know and what we see subtly points to one dilemma of human experience; we want reality to conform to a secure paradigm, and it never does. We want to feel safe. In contrast to Martin, who achieved a state of quiet contemplation, Mohamedi did something more radical. She rejected the security offered to her by the grid, and found her own way, line by line, toward infinity and emptiness (she was influenced by her studies of Zen Buddhism). Each journey took her to a different intersection of time and space, and, for all the similarity of means and vocabulary, they are astonishingly different. **BR**