

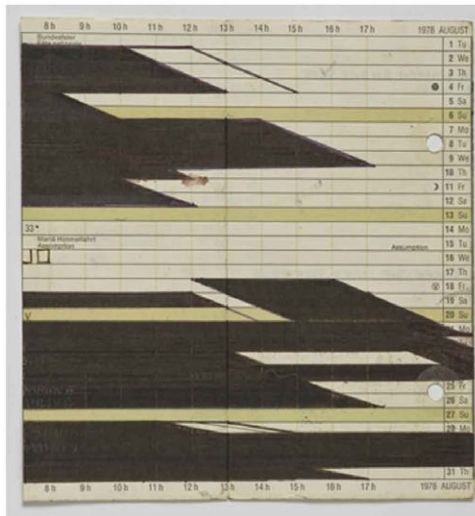
Nasreen Mohamedi: Notes Reflections on Indian Modernisms

Milton Keynes Gallery 5 September to 15 November

Until recently, Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990) was little known outside her native country. It is only in the last ten years that her delicate geometrical drawings have been the subject of a surge of interest in the West, culminating with their inclusion in Documenta 12 in 2007. Ever since this new-found popularity (suspiciously coinciding with the art world's sudden craving for artists from the sub-continent) art writers have debated where in art history's grand scheme to place her modernist practice. Mohamedi's grid compositions and her vibrant diagonals anachronistically call on abstraction's early days. Her work is also often compared to Agnes Martin's, even though, according to her close friend art historian Geeta Kapur, she only encountered the American's paintings late in her life. The legitimacy of such a western-centric interpretative framework has been directly questioned: Anders Kreuger has gone as far as to label the comparison between Mohamedi and Martin a 're-colonizing'. Yet Mohamedi studied in Europe and was exposed to modern and contemporary western art from a very young age, a personal history that renders Kreuger's claim absurd: behind such judgements lurks the over-determined political correctness too often found in writings dealing with non-western art, and the feeling of unease provoked by practices defying cookie-cutter categorisation.

The Milton Keynes Gallery exhibition has been adapted from a recent show at the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA). Perhaps surprisingly, it starts with a series of photographs that the artist didn't consider as 'work' and refused to exhibit during her lifetime. The curators' decision is easily justified, though, as this ensemble of restrained black and white images potently introduces Mohamedi's visual lexicon. Everywhere, the real is abstracted: road marks become dynamic graphic signs and sand ripples unravel, diagram-like, across the sheet. These photographs announce the sense of enjoyment of shapes and structures so masterfully expressed in the artist's works on paper. Four little diary sheets are also presented in the first gallery. 'Home. Home - work. Home - black out continues': the rare legible snippets of writing read like concrete poetry, but most of the pages are covered in closely-knit horizontal lines and black planes which plunge dates, times and words into darkness. As if to suggest a development, the diary pages are presented from the decipherable to the completely drawn; writing gradually gives way to abstract signs, scribbling becomes mediation. Millimetre by millimetre, Mohamedi was mapping her interiority.

The artist's progression towards abstraction seems to have followed the lead of a Klee or a Mondrian. Like theirs, her early works are imbued with reminiscences of the representational paradigm: bundles of lines amid misty ink washes evoke bushes and trees, darker stains could be silhouette sketches. These first pieces also bring to mind the lyricism of the École de Paris. Mohamedi was in France in the late 1950s, and George Mathieu's gestural painting could, as Kapur suggests, very well have influenced the young artist. This early stage quickly came to an end and, from the mid 1970s, Mohamedi started to use the grid pattern exclusively; Grant Watson, who co-curated Mohamedi's exhibition at OCA, calls this second period 'the artist's classic phase'. In the last decade of her life,



Nasreen Mohamedi
Untitled, 14.6 cm x 14.7 cm, Ink on paper
Courtesy of Talwar Gallery New York/New Delhi

Mohamedi abandoned the grid to work exclusively with dynamic shapes on white backgrounds.

The exhibition's last room gathers an extensive selection from these last two phases of the artist's production. They demonstrate a tremendous obsession with precision as, piece after piece, Mohamedi tests all the possibilities of the graphite mark – thick, thin, hatched, crisscrossed, the rare imperfections only rendering her endeavour more poignant. The lines are often so flimsy that they appear on the verge of disappearing. Many compositions seem to escape the hold of their paper support, not sitting on the sheet but floating above it. Kapur places Mohamedi's work in the lineage of two major early 20th-century abstract tendencies: the 'utopian abstraction' of Malevich and the suprematists, and the constructivists' 'celebration of a future plan of the world'. And in the works on show at Milton Keynes Gallery, there is certainly a sense of mysticism: a quest for the sublime paired somewhat oddly with what could be blueprint-like depictions of a futuristic urbanism. Mohamedi interlocks the spiritual with the utilitarian. 'The grid's mystic power,' wrote Rosalind Krauss, 'is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief.' Mohamedi's practice – not only her grids, but her entire production – stands precisely at this juncture between matter and soul. *

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