Exhibition 23 September 2015 – 11 January 2016
Sabatini Building. Floor 3

Nasreen Mohamedi

Waiting Is a Part of Intense Living

Untitled, ca. 1970. Ink and graphite on paper, 46.9 x 46.9 cm.
Collection of Dossal Family (Mariam Panjwani, Zeenat Sadikot y Laila Khalid)

MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFIA

GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN, CULTURA Y DEPORTE

Exhibition organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in collaboration with the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

***Nasreen Mohamedi. Waiting Is a Part of Intense Living*, the first retrospective on the artist to be held in Spain, reviews more than three decades of her artistic oeuvre, bringing together more than 200 works in varied mediums, such as drawings in ink and graphite, collages, watercolors, photographs, and a few paintings in oil on canvas. Publicly, Mohamedi rarely theorized or spoke about her work, but the documents of her internal dialogue, tiny personal diaries and notebooks, few of which are on display in the exhibition, form a powerful soliloquy. The phases of her abstraction are made accessible by organizing her oeuvre in a loose chronology to highlight her gradual shift from works that retain references to the natural world, to the linear drawings that use line and space in a geometric abstraction, to a final phase (encompassing roughly the last decade of her life) marked by an austere economy of means, by few delicately rendered lines that manifest an ascension from the ground.**

A leading pioneer of nonrepresentational and nonobjective art in India and on the subcontinent, Nasreen Mohamedi has in the last two decades secured a distinct place within the history of Indian modernism as well as garnered serious attention globally. Quite apart from her contemporaries, many of whom remained invested in the then-dominant mainstream discourse that addressed issues of identity and nationalism through the figural-narrative mode, Mohamedi worked against the grain to arrive at an abstract oeuvre of radically pristine drawings and paintings. Her minimal aesthetic drew inspiration from multiple sources, straddling Western modern movements and Islamic culture and succeeding at a harmonious melding of the rational and the poetic, the philosophical and the mystical. Uncompromising, slow to reveal itself (as it was slow to evolve), her art steps out of the formal domain to situate itself in the realm of transcendence. Though admired in her lifetime, she remained enigmatic and elusive, quite the reflection of her work, a distilled oeuvre that does not lend itself to easy comprehension.

Born in 1937 in Karachi (then still part of undivided India), Mohamedi was introduced to the idea of the mortal body at an early age, losing her mother when barely five years old. Mohamedi herself died prematurely at the age of fifty-three, having lived much of her life with the consciousness of impending death. Her personal diaries attest an ongoing battle between courage and despair, reflecting in her works a moving away from the angst-ridden early works to her later drawings that seek an inner calm and resolve.
In 1954, Mohamedi secured a place at St. Martin's School of Art in London to study

Untitled, ca. 1972. Photograph b/w, vintage print. Silver gelatin print, 19.6 x 33.6 cm. Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

fine arts. Her early sketches and drawings reiterate her rejection of anthropomorphic representation. The few stray attempts she made to capture the human form offer sparse detail, and reveal her disinterest in the full-bodied corporeality of the figures. She experimented with diverse mediums but always with an impulse toward abstraction. In 1961, she was awarded a French scholarship and went to Paris to study graphics. While the works of Paul Cézanne, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Kazimir Malevich inspired her, she was also exposed in Paris to the personal ideograms of Henri Michaux and the lyrical abstraction of Georges Mathieu. Having spent time in London and Paris, Bombay, Bahrain, and Kuwait, she finally settled in Baroda, India, where she taught at the Faculty of Fine Arts at M.S. University until her death in 1990.

During India's postindependence decades, oil on canvas was the most prevalent artistic medium used by Mohamedi's peers. Mohamedi herself was never enamored of the medium, however, and painted only a few canvases before shunning it. Against the lure of a forgiving medium that allows for revision and reworking, she preferred the transparency of watercolor and ink, accepting the challenges of irreversibility. She explored the sensitivity of graphite and ink in both her freehand drawing and her geometric abstraction. As artists of her generation became more ambitious with the size of their canvases, using large formats to unfold complex painted narratives, Mohamedi's works grew smaller in size and more economical in means. She embraced the delicacy and fragility of paper, abolishing practically everything but line.

She spent a lot of time near the sea in the family house at Kihim, near Bombay (known today as Mumbai) and in the desert city of Bahrain where the family businesses were set up. Mohamedi was drawn to the immensity of the sea, sand, and sky and equally to their anonymity and vastness. Her works from the 1960s are highly gestural, evoking certain precariousness—as of nature withered, abandoned, bearing only traces of the "beatings" of life, an expression she repeatedly emphasized in her diaries. Her collages of this period are serene and tender, carrying further her aversion to decoration, abjuring use of an inflated aesthetics.

In the absence of her own writings on her works, her personal diaries and notebooks have become a highly relevant source, as they provide glimpses into the inner workings of her mind. They reveal her connecting with ideas and feelings from multiple traditions—Western literary and philosophical, Sufi-Islamic, Hindu-Upanishadic, and Zen Buddhist—that helped her comprehend her own angst. She read and was inspired by Federico García Lorca, Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Søren Kierkegaard, George Steiner, Albert Camus, and the poetry of Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī and Mirza Ghalib.

By 1969–1970, Mohamedi's illness had begun to disrupt her normal motor functions. She switched to an assisted working etiquette using precision drawing instruments with a mini-drafter that led, to a pristine geometry in measured/ruled lines. The grids and geometry she leaned toward in the 1970s were not without precedent. She was attentive to the classical Greeks, to the golden ratio and the idea of eurhythmy. Closer to her time were the Russian constructivists, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich. Closer to home were the Asian/Eastern mystical traditions that rely on geometry for a symbolic manifestation of the universe and its creative force. The geometric layouts or mandalas of temple architecture consecrate the ground with grids that represent cosmological diagrams. By employing the sacred science of geometry, in Islamic Architecture, the clear form, precise shapes and neat edges embody the idea of archetypes, of order with which the greater concept of unity can be grasped.

In transiting from the notion of a free space to the regulated space of the ordered grid, Mohamedi evacuated all obvious references to nature. The accidental and referential were ordered through mathematics, though intuitively grasped into a rational structure. This inward turning shifted the emphasis from an outer world to an inner one, where all traces of her subjectivity were erased and the impulse of emotion distilled into a pure thought and form. While for Mohamedi this was a new adventure, an even harder way to work with the rigor and restraint she imposed on herself, what she arrived at was nothing short of a miracle. She opened up the grid, overcame its static orthogonality, and charged it with dynamic movement through the use of multiple horizon lines and diagonals, skewed perspectives, and depth and created unparalleled rhythms and interstitial spaces by a layering of crisscrossing of lines and the creation of interstitial spaces. Mohamedi's drawings of the 1970s and 80s are exceptional in that the drawings neither look static, cold or

Untitled, ca. 1975. Ink and graphite on paper, 47.4 x 47.4 cm
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

mechanical despite being mathematically ordered. One can hardly remain unaffected by them even when one is unsure about what one is to see in the work.

Parallel to her drawings is her corpus of photographs, never exhibited in her lifetime. The early photographs emphasize her interest in the framing of compositions. Linear elements, repetitive motifs such as utility poles and streetlights receding alongside a path, lead the eye into remote distance. Mohamedi captures the contrast between the curved and straight lines of built forms and fences or the way the play of light conveys a sense of depth to the circular forms. Her semi-abstract photographs of looms focus on threads as lines, their tautness at times echoing the hammer of a musical instrument. Rarely are her photographs mimetic portraits of places, objects. Perhaps the memory of site was personally significant for Mohamedi, but whether site served any revelatory aim in her photographs is unclear. For instance, the city/site/locale in many of her photographs remains untraced, and one is left to conjecture. In her photographs, as in her drawings, Mohamedi's vision tends to remain austere. Her images refuse the lure of effusiveness, the temptation to fill the frame, paring away unnecessary elements to arrive at contemplation. Contrasts are accentuated, a mark perhaps of her time spent by the sea and in the desert, places where light always presents itself in high contrasts and shadows appear as intense apparitions. In her photographs, the perceptible world/ experience is extracted into an abstract configuration of lines, shapes, textures, patterns, and light.

As her health deteriorated, Mohamedi grew calmer. She had made peace with the fact that her art seemingly detached from the social and political exigencies of her time might not be accepted within the mainstream discourse. In her position of unbelonging, terms such as *center* or *peripheral* did not matter to her. She knew no external pressures—her compulsions were all from within.

Mohamedi's drawings of the last few years became extremely frugal, light and airy, aiming a release from the anguish of the mundane to embrace a pure vision. She passed away on May 14, 1990, and lies buried in Kihim near the sea, her grave an unadorned mound of earth, marked by the simplicity she longed for in both life and death.

Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Sabatini Building
Santa Isabel, 52
Nouvel Building
Ronda de Atocha
(on the corner with
plaza del Emperador Carlos V)
28012 Madrid

Tel: (34) 91 774 10 00

www.museoreinasofia.es

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Nasreen Mohamedi
Participants: Roobina Karode
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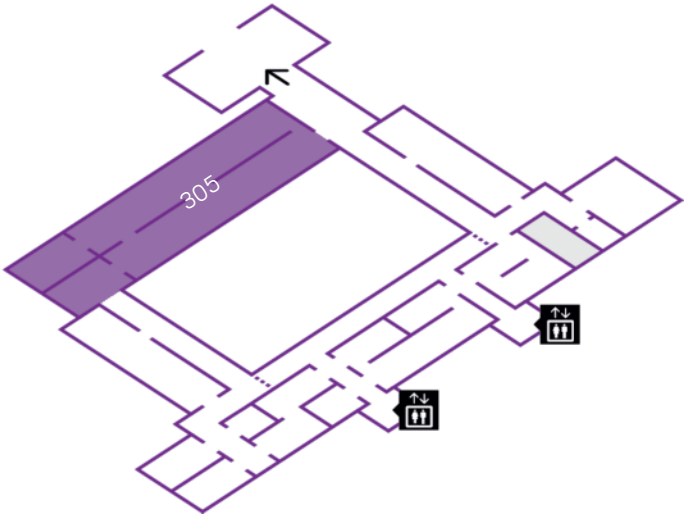

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