

Nasreen Mohamedi. Waiting is a part of intense living



NASREEN MOHAMEDI. Untitled, ca. 1970
Collection of the Dossal Family (Mariam Panjwani, Zeenat Sadikot and Laila Khallid)

DATE:	September 23, 2015 - January 11, 2016
PLACE:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Sabatini Building. 3 rd Floor
ORGANIZATION:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in collaboration with Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi
CURATORSHIP:	Roobina Karode
COORDINATOR:	Soledad Liaño
EXHIBITION TOUR:	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Nueva York (18 March - 5 June, 2016)
RELATED ACTIVITIES:	Discussion on Nasreen Mohamedi, with two keynote speeches and a subsequent debate between Roobina Karode and Geeta Kapur, to be held in Auditorium 200. September 23, 7 pm.

The **Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía** and **The Metropolitan Museum of Art** of New York in collaboration with **Kiran Nadar Museum** of Art, New Delhi, have organized the **most complete retrospective**, so far, on the Indian artist **Nasreen Mohamedi** (1937-1990), **a leading pioneer of modern abstract art in Asia**.

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, have organized the **most complete retrospective** yet held on the Indian artist **Nasreen Mohamedi** (1937-1990), one of the first artists to embrace the languages of **modern abstraction in Asia**.

Despite her outstanding contributions and her status as one of the most internationally renowned Indian artists, Mohamedi's art has never yet been shown in its totality. On this occasion, **216 works**, mostly ink and graphite drawings, photographs, watercolors and a small number of oils on canvas and collages, show the evolution of her work from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, with special emphasis on the work she did in the 1970s.

The title of the exhibition, ***Waiting is a Part of Intense Living***, is taken from the artist's diaries. The show also features a pioneering and thorough review of her photographic work as well as her various diaries and notebooks, previously unexhibited. To understand Mohamedi's art, it is not enough to be entirely familiar with her formal vocabulary. The artist never theorized about her work or spoke about it in any detail. For want of personal writing on her work, her diaries and notebooks have become a key source of information.

As the exhibition's curator, **Roobina Karode**, says in the catalogue published for the occasion, "in the last fifteen years, Nasreen Mohamedi's practice has at last aroused considerable attention within India and on an international scale, having been shown at such important events as Documenta 12 in 2007. Although admired as an artist during her lifetime, she has always been an enigmatic and elusive figure, a circumstance which is to an extent the reflection of a refined oeuvre that does not lend itself to a conventional reading. In the absence of an evident content, titles for her works and an explicit imagery, her art confounds the viewer and resists a definite interpretation."

Mohamedi's work

Nasreen Mohamedi, a leading pioneer of non-figurative and abstract art in India and on the Asian sub-continent, currently occupies a specific place in the history of modern India. Distinct from many of her contemporaries, who still embraced a dominant artistic discourse that tackled problems of identity and nationalism in a figurative narrative style, she set herself apart from this trend and instead developed an abstract oeuvre made up of paintings and drawings of radical clarity.

The Indian art critic and curator **Geeta Kapur** inscribes the characteristics of her abstraction as lying within two constellations. The first is formed by artists from her city, Bombay, who could be viewed as her abstract precedents: V.S. Gaitonde, her mentor in the early sixties,

and her friend and colleague Jeram Patel. The second is made up of the tradition that organizes the modern abstract canon: Kazimir Malevich (whom the artist, Kapur maintains, greatly admired), Paul Klee, Vassily Kandinsky and Henri Michaux.

The exhibition

Spread over eight rooms, the exhibition surveys Mohamedi's artistic evolution and distinguishes the various phases along the road she followed to abstraction. What is made evident in this way is a gradual transition from works that still preserve references to the natural world to drawings where line and space form a geometric abstraction, and ultimately to a final phase, which broadly speaking covers the last decade of her life, characterized by an economy of means and a delicate representation of lines.

The show begins with the 1950s. Between 1954 and 1957, in the fertile academic context of Saint Martin's School of Art in London, she experimented with different genres and media, including drawing, watercolor, ink wash and oil on canvas, though always following an impulse that brought her close to abstraction. She studied the forms of nature and learned to understand their configuration, their internal structure and the interrelationship of different forces, which she "took from external surroundings to transfer them to an inner need", as she was to write years later.

On her return to Bombay in 1958, at a time when the predominant artistic medium in India was oil on canvas, Nasreen met V.S. Gaitonde, one of the artists who had rebelled in their youth against the figuration of the previous generations, and had become the pioneers of modern Indian abstract art. While Mohamedi did paint a few canvases, she never developed a true passion for the technique and was drawn instead by the transparency of watercolor and ink. The singular abstract vision of Gaitonde and Nasreen, remote from other tendencies, was not given the attention it deserved. For Gaitonde, color was the supreme force that allowed the visual miracle to be attained. For Nasreen, the indispensable thing was the graphic line.

In the next rooms, a dialogue is set up between the works of the following decades to explain the gradual progression of Mohamedi's art. Both personally and professionally, the 1960s were a crucial period for her. In the works she created then, the mental confusion she was trying to overcome is brought clearly to the fore. Although they apparently belong to the tradition of lyrical abstraction, these are the most disturbing pieces of her entire career. The collages she created during this period insist firmly on her aversion toward ornamentation and pompous aesthetics, and they represent a gentle transition from the watercolors based on nature to a world without references. Discarding the use of canvas, warm colors and large formats, she gave herself over completely to the delicacy and fragility of paper, renouncing virtually everything except the line.

In 1969 and 1970, the neuromuscular Huntington's disease suffered by the artist started to sap her motor abilities. She then abandoned Tachiste splashes and adopted a process of assisted work, using precision drawing instruments that led her to an original geometry of precisely ruled lines.

The inclination for grids and geometry that Mohamedi showed in the 1970s had numerous precedents, from Greek classicism to the influence of the Russian Constructivists, Piet Mondrian or Kazimir Malevich, as well as others in her more immediate surroundings, such as oriental mystic traditions or the geometrical compositions of temple architecture. These aspects can be observed in some of the works shown in the exhibition.

It did not take Mohamedi long to break the monotony of the grid. From 1975 onwards, she destabilized the static insertion of the grid in every way imaginable. She broadened and reduced the size of the vertical registers and the spaces between the horizontal lines in order to create new geometric elements, and she imposed dynamic movement, introducing unexpectedly divergent lines, slanted perspectives, patterns able to create illusions, and a dual sensation of movement by means of diagonal lines.

Her interest in orthogonally ordered space waned in favor of a changing horizon or a multiplicity of horizons amplifying stratified depth with the aid of intersecting lines and interstitial spaces. By accentuating the diagonals, she sometimes altered the balance of the horizontals to create the experience of a three-dimensional grid, a spatial field with a certain similarity to the axonometric drawings of architects. The straight and inclined lines formed an endless series of labyrinths of such density that they are difficult to take in at one glance. Despite her mathematical order, however, there is nothing static, cold or mechanical about her drawings of the 1970s and 1980s.

At the end of the exhibition, it can be seen how in her last works, after abandoning the grid, the empty spaces appreciably outnumber the full ones. These works dating from a few years before her death are characterized by a lightness which the curator of the exhibition sees as pointing to “a spiritual ascent from the earth, where (Nasreen) frees herself from the anguish of the worldly to embrace pure vision.”

Parallel to all this work is Mohamedi’s photography, which she developed at the same time but never exhibited while she was alive. In her austere images, she did not let herself be carried away by effusiveness or a temptation to fill the frame, but reduced unnecessary elements to a minimum in order to forge a contemplative image. In her photographs, 56 of which can be seen all through the exhibition, the world and perceptible experience are distilled until they are transformed into an abstract configuration of lines, forms, textures, patterns and light.

Brief biography

Born in 1937 in Karachi, a city which ten years later was to become part of Pakistan, Nasreen Mohamedi lived for much of her life in India, although her artistic training began in Europe. There she studied at the Saint Martin’s School of Art in London (1954-1957), joining the Bhulabhai Desai Institute (1959), where several artists had their studios, and attending the Atelier of Monsieur Guillard in Paris (1961-1963). Her artistic activity began in Bombay and continued for a long time in Baroda, where she worked until her death as a professor in the Fine Arts Faculty of M.S. University. She died on May 14, 1990, at the age of 53, as a consequence of Huntington’s disease, which had gradually worn her down.

Catalogue

A catalogue has been published for the exhibition in both Spanish and English. It reproduces the works in the show and features texts by the curator, Roobina Karode, and other authors including Geeta Kapur, Deepak Ananth and Andrea Giunta.

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PRESS OFFICE

MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

prensa1@museoreinasofia.es

prensa3@museoreinasofia.es

(+34) 91 774 10 05 / 06

www.museoreinasofia.es/prensa