

‘Between Structure and Matter: Other Minimal Futures’

BY MOSTAFA HEDDAYA | JUNE 15, 2016



Upon first seeing the work of the Karachi-born artist Rasheed Araeen in London in the late 1960s, a critic announced, “I cannot imagine any European doing this work.” This backhanded compliment — cited by the art historian Iftikar Dadi in an essay on Araeen, a resident of London since 1964 — is in some ways the negative image of our present identitarian moment. If art historical and curatorial practices in the West today insist on a globally inclusive plurality, these are often belated, compensatory gestures, representing a kind of enlightened revisionism that “expands” old histories without troubling too much with foundational assumptions. We might speak of individual non-Western artists “finally getting their due,” a due that had eluded them by virtue of their difference, without really considering their work within a broader matrix of practitioners excluded by selective historicization.

“Between Structure and Matter: Other Minimal Futures,” on view through July 2 at Aicon Gallery in New York, attempts to flip this attitude forward and outward, strategically pushing the past into and through an expanded present. Citing the historian of minimalism James Meyer, for whom the movement was fundamentally irreducible — a “field of difference,” as he wrote his 2001 volume “Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties” — exhibition co-curator Murtaza Vali stated on a recent afternoon at the gallery his belief that “other minimal futures are possible, and here are some examples of how it has happened.

“It was an impulse and an intuition that cannot be closed off,” Vali continued, explaining that the group show seeks to provide an argument for a minimalism in the present, one that rejects the Western constraints on the term and its implied obsolescence augured by postminimalism in the 1970s. “What I am advancing, even though I am couching it in the past, is not a minimalism that is interested in replicating what minimalism was trying to do then. It is a very contemporary way of using the minimal, as a strategy to defer or deflect cultural essentialism or reductivism.” This approach is embodied in the work of the 11 international artists in the exhibition.

Occupying the entirety of Aicon’s airy Lower East Side space, the show is presided over by Araeen’s large, boldly colored triptych “Teen Rungh Upper Nechay,” executed in 2016 but recapitulating the artist’s early work of the late 1960s and early ’70s. Araeen earned early attention in the UK for practicing a minimalism that was very much in the world, flinging his yellow cubic structures into trees in London’s Euston Square Gardens, for example.

Although historically bookended by the oeuvres of two older Southeast Asian artists — Vali and his co-curator, Prajit Dutta, pair the octogenarian Rasheed Araeen with the late Somnath Hori — the bulk of the 37 objects displayed were executed in the past few years by an international cohort of artists. The two elder practitioners are thus not presented as generators of a particular minimalist influence but rather as interlocutors with their speculative peers in the exhibition, thus offering up instances of “untimely collaboration,” Vali said, referring to a concept put forth by the artist and theorist Jalal Toufic. (Such a “collaboration,” for example, could be imagined in the show’s inclusion of the younger Waqas Khan alongside Araeen. The two artists’ curvilinear

abstract drawings, fluid yet spare, are separated in their execution by a half century, yet each seems to inform the other.)

Indeed, the varied artists in the exhibition — Joël Andrianomearisoa, Minam Apang, Hemali Bhuta, Shilpa Gupta, Somnath Hore, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Jitish Kallat, Mohammed Kazem, Waqas Khan, and Abdullah M. I. Syed — seem unified in their commitment to forms, materials, and processes that may appear, from a Western art-historical position, willfully retrograde. But this refusal of a particularly defined contemporaneity is, of course, not the same as a lack of contemporaneity.

“What I’m trying to do with this show, and in “Formal Relations” at Taymour Grahne Gallery last year, is to trouble some of the arbitrary limits placed on histories of Western abstraction,” Vali said. “That is one of the reasons the exhibition is couched in history. I am trying to open it up. And both Rasheed Araeen and Somnath Hore have the ability to open up this discourse because their work is, roughly, contemporary to canonical minimalism.”