



CONVERSATIONS WITH LIGHT

RANA BEGUM'S
WORK SHOWS THE
INFLUENCE OF HER
ORIGINS IN
BANGLADESH, BUT
THE RESULTS
TRANSCEND ALL
CATEGORIES

BY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE

Portrait of Rana
from her installation
at Kettles Yard.

CREDITS: JOSH MURFIT

"No. 764 Handmade
bamboo baskets,"
2017-18,
dimensions variable.



For someone growing up with a conscious awareness of Islamic architecture, developing a fascination with the way light plays around form and the meaning behind a work of art and architecture is inevitable.

Even a casual walk through a regular mosque fills one with wonder as beams of light filtered through a latticed niche high above ascribe sacred meaning to the passer-by beneath it.

This is true for Rana Begum as well. The Bangladeshi-born British artist was fascinated with the play of light in Islamic architecture as a child and continues to explore its possibilities as an artist.

Her works on view at Tate St. Ives through September 30, in a show titled "A Conversation with Light and Form," are a further inquiry into the subject around which most of her career has evolved. She has explored the interaction of light and form through a range of works — drawings, paintings,

wall-based sculptures, and even large-scale public art installations. Separate from her interest in Islamic architecture, she has explored geometric abstraction in minimalism and constructivism, finding inspiration in the work of artists such as Agnes Martin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Jesús Rafael de Soto and Tess Jaray.

The subject remains an endless stream of pursuit for Begum as she says that it meets her "need to engage with geometry and light." The London-based artist, who was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh, and moved to the UK with her parents in 1985 at the age of eight, holds a BA in Fine Art (Painting) from the Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, and an MFA in painting from the Slade School of Fine Art, London. Pursuing arts as a profession wasn't a natural choice in her family, however. Though she comes from a creative background — she attributes it to her mother ("she was creative, she made all our clothes") — her father was, a

"No. 688 Cleveland Clinic,"
2016,
paint on powder coated aluminum,
495 X 265 X 5 cm.



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PHOTO CREDIT: STEVE TRAVARCA

“I partly grew up in Bangladesh, reading the Quran. So, it’s been there at the back of my mind. But I didn’t want to be pigeonholed as a female, Muslim artist from Bangladesh”

teacher, was moulded in the very South Asian outlook that prioritized pursuing academics or medicine. Begum says she finally managed to convince her father about a future in the arts when her degree show at Chelsea sold out.

Her geometric, minimalist works, often brightly colored, have been exhibited widely across Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the US. Apart from the Tate St. Ives exhibition, her work is also a part of the ongoing exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., titled “Heavy Metal” that confronts the misconception that metal is primarily a masculine material. Last year, she touched an apogee by winning the \$100,000 Abraaj Group Art Prize.

Begum, a mother of two pre-teens, spoke to Blouin Artinfo’s Modern Painters from Manila, where she is currently on a residency, about her latest exhibition at Tate St. Ives, her life-long inspirations, the influences of Asian abstraction and more.

When I first saw some of your work many years ago, I was reminded of the geometry in Islamic architecture, and that’s how I have remembered your work. Tate St. Ives also lists it as one of your inspirations. How strong is the influence?

There is definitely a connection, especially with Islamic architecture. It’s always been there because I partly grew up in Bangladesh, reading the Quran. So, it’s been there at the back of my mind. But I didn’t want to be pigeonholed as a female, Muslim artist from Bangladesh, which is why the inspiration is not intrusive. I want my work to speak for itself, without these identities. I didn’t really feel the need to make the inspiration very obvious. I want the work to embody my inquiries into aspects of light, the way I try to work it around in my oeuvre.

Taking forward the issue of identity, has it been a factor in the way your work is perceived or given it meanings that it may not have?

I believe that artists have to be a bit careful about what they want to put across through their work. My language is universal and that’s what I love best about it. You don’t need deep knowledge to understand my work. It try to keep it as open as possible [to understanding by the onlookers], though I don’t know if I’m achieving it. I’m not totally against it

“No. 700 Reflectors,”
2016,
30,000 reflectors,
50 mts.



PHOTO CREDIT: TNR IMAGES

"No. 409 S Fold,"
2013,
paint on mild steel,
53 X 52 X 20 cm.



BOTH THE IMAGES: PHOTO CREDIT: PHILIP WHITE

either. Placing an artist's identity in some context also often helps in connecting with the artist. That tends to happen often. But my focus has always been a continuous dialogue between light, form and color. How these elements change their respective positions through the materials I use is an interesting study.

For instance, the Abraaj piece [that she did in Dubai as the winner of the 2017 Abraaj Group Art Prize] was a different experience not only because of the scale but also because the material (glass) played with the special light in Dubai. When I had proposed that piece, it was very much about experience. It developed from a new series of work started in 2011 and is still developing. Glass was a material that was best suited for the kind of light it could play with in Dubai.

How has the Abraaj Group Art Prize helped in your work?

It definitely has. A prize of that scale allows one to think about large-scale works, something that galleries cannot support. It allowed me to be ambitious, to go beyond what I could only think of in my studio. It's a shame that this prize is not going to continue any more.

Where will you place yourself in your engagement with light and color as objects of study?

The St. Ives residency (earlier this year) took me back to the beginning of my research. There is so much to discover about how light describes color, how it bounces off an object, what happens when color is taken away. It's a never-ending research. The residency in Manila, on the other hand, is the next step, if you like to put it that way. The natural light one gets in Philippines is incredible. The fiery sunset, the explosive colors, all of it such rich material for me to work on.

Coming back to your inspiration, how does the rich and varied tradition of abstraction that is found in different parts of Asia since ancient times inform your work?

Yes, the cultural mix found across Asia does filter through in various ways. The knowledge one acquires in various subjects, about various places and their roles in history, may not come out in the literal sense but it does find a connection with your work. I definitely feel this connection with a place and its history where I'm working. For instance, while working at Tate St. Ives, I was aware of its history of commercial fishing, of the many artists who made it their home, most notably Barbara Hepworth. I spent the early years of my life in Bangladesh and was aware of the work of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, and black-and-white movies. It does come through in my work in some ways. When I visited Bangladesh later, I was able to connect with the country again. I went to the school where I studied, the local mosque. I especially loved the National Assembly building designed by Louis Kahn, the mosque in Dhaka designed by Marina Tabassum — it's interesting how much these met my need to study geometry and light.

"No. 698 S Fold,"
2016,
paint and lacquer on
mirror,
finished brass,
72 X 51 X 20 cm.

