

Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's prodigious career spans over 60 years, but she remains relatively unknown to the wider Western public. Jef Geys invited her for a double-exhibition entitled *The World as Seen Through a Pelican in Plexi* at WIELS, in Brussels, starting in June 2013, that orchestrates a meeting between his work and works he selected from Monir's oeuvre. The origin of this exhibition project can be traced back to WIELS' foundation years; at that time, five artists were invited to develop projects that would foreshadow and sketch out the orientation an art centre would have to follow if it was to keep pace with the art practices and ambitions of the future. Geys suggested several projects, all of them unrealizable due to delays in renovation of the building and to other factors. This double-exhibition project is to be seen as a belated conclusion to that original series of commissions.

Monir, who is known mostly for the meticulously cut mirror and glass pieces she started making in the 1970s, in Iran and the US, is long overdue for rehabilitation by the art world, which has been slow in recognizing the unique bridge her work forms between New York high modernism – of which she was a part for many years – and the singular language Mesopotamian and Middle-Eastern artists developed in and through the emancipation process. Both Monir and Geys can be regarded as artists who have promoted the recognition of vernacular imagery and techniques in art, which they combine with an affinity for clear and complex geometric forms, mathematical numbers and dimensions and the meanings these have in their respective cultures.

The question everyone cannot but ask is: how and when did Geys get to know her and her work? Geys is known to be a frenetic researcher and curious reader; he spends hours in libraries and scouring the Internet, looking out for and into everything and anything that might touch upon his interests and affinities. Monir's friendships with artistic and countercultural personalities, like Andy Warhol and members of his factory-studio, might explain how he came to know her work, since in the 1960s Geys himself worked at an unconventional studio, the Bar 900. Most likely, though, it was her variations on basic geometric figures and her grid-like structures that caught his eye, since his work also betrays a similar preoccupation with the signifying and symbolic potentials of basic geometric figures (dot, line, circle, triangle, square, etc...)

And so, while the respective contexts the artists herald from and work with couldn't be more different, both have played a hand in rehabilitating local traditions and practices and imagery in the periphery of the dominant centres. Both also share a fascination with the visual play of illusion and appearance, as well as with the simple beauty and complexity of nature.

Monir's art takes traditional Iranian architecture and visual culture as its point of departure. Her work has been described as 'spiritual Pop art', and Monir herself has been connected to the Iranian Saqqakhaneh movement. But she is equally fluent with structuralist seriality, op-arts visual artifice and repetitive or organic patterning – all of which she has known since their initial formulations through her friendships with many abstract-expressionist artists in the 1950s and 1960s. Islamic decorative arts, gardens and architecture are

her sources of inspiration and her means to create complex geometric forms that reflect the symbolic meaning of shapes. Circles, pentagons, hexagons interact in manifold and variable configurations as instantiations of the highly complex yet structured universe that surrounds everyone and everything. Due to the fragmentary spatial patterns, the play of light on these complex shapes can only be perceived and experienced directly, for the shimmering material and the illusory effects of its surfaces lead to constantly changing perspectives and experiences in which the viewer seems to overcome the solidity of the forms.

The choice of works by both artists – the presentations will be quite extensive – will yield fresh and precise insights into their artistic projects. This is the first time, for example, that Monir presents one of her ‘families’ so extensively in one art space. This will be combined with several new mirror-reliefs, twelve of her concise geometric construction drawings, and several relocated works from the 1960s and 1970s: a repetitive patterned panel and several disco balls. Jef Geys, working around the video projection *A day and a night and a day...*, which collects a large number of the photographs he took in the course of his life, constructs a dialogue with Monir that takes the form of older ‘reliefs’, which play on decorative patterns and mimicry, as well as cut outs of clear forms, ranging from the everyday to the highly sophisticated, made from transparent and reflective surfaces.

Monir and Geys were decisive forces in revalidating vernacular imagery in culture and in widening the realm of modernist aesthetics and its quest for emancipation. It is an enormous pleasure for a young art institution to be able to stage the encounter of these two personalities and their work.

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