

Introduction

Little known outside of her home country until recently, Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990) was a unique figure in the Indian art world, and she left behind an oeuvre that is belatedly finding its place as a key element within the modernist canon. Her most important works, modestly sized drawings in pen and pencil on paper, would almost fit in their entirety into a single drawer, and that is how many of them were found, stored in her studio and apartment along with her diaries. Born in Karachi in 1937, Nasreen Mohamedi moved with her family to Mumbai (then Bombay) at the age of seven. In 1954 she enrolled at St Martin's School of Art in London, and after graduating joined her father and brother in the Persian Gulf, where the family had business interests. Returning to India in 1958, she settled first in Mumbai, then Delhi and finally Baroda, where she became a faculty member of the Fine Art Department of the M.S. University in 1973. She died in 1990 from Parkinson's disease.

The Development of Abstraction

Mohamedi's abstract art was not without precedent in India. On her return to Mumbai she joined the Bhulabhai Institute, where she came into contact with the city's avant-garde. A decade after Independence, Mumbai was – as it is now – an important artistic centre, as well as an economic hub; a diverse and cosmopolitan metropolis, home to a group of artists who practised a bold, abrasive and self-proclaimed Modernist style. The Progressive Artists Group, founded by F.N. Souza in 1947 and including M.F. Hussain, S.H. Raza, Tyab Mehta and V.S. Gaitonde – was an initiative that 'pitched into the heroic narrative of modern art and produced a formalist manifesto that was to help the first generation of artists in Independent India position themselves internationally'.⁵

Although the group had officially disbanded by the time of Mohamedi's return to Mumbai, she became associated with many of its former members and was influenced by the group's abstract tendencies, developed by S.H. Raza and in particular by V.S. Gaitonde, who became her mentor. In Gaitonde's almost monochrome canvases and their watery ambient spaces, interrupted by areas of turbulence and surface distortion, there are correspondences with Mohamedi's oils, her collages and her works on paper from the early 1960s.

The other important voice in the equation is Mohamedi's own, made accessible through her diaries, which, written over an extended period of time, show her personal development as well as her development as an artist. They reveal how often in her life and work 'order is preceded by turbulence'.⁶ In these diaries, Mohamedi comes across as someone mediating the tensions between inner experience and outer reality, as someone who used her work to filter her impressions of the visual field and also to align and regulate the pressures of the ego. They reveal in her a mixture of receptivity and the need for compression, like a wide-open photographic lens that renders the world's imprint and reduces it to the minimum.

For Mohamedi, the price of equilibrium was restraint, and her diary entries attest to the constant call for greater effort and self-discipline. What results from this is the carefully crafted but liminal space of autonomy necessary for a sensitive soul to maintain composure in the face of an overbearing world. Perhaps this very autonomy is what allowed her to draw in so much, and 'self-absorption becomes paradoxically a condition of openness to the intersection of visions and languages'.⁷ Certainly, in the small hermetic space of her works, the attention given to the particular opens up onto to the universal.

Their lack of referent also makes them available to projections and interpretations of all kinds, something that has facilitated their translation and that is probably partly responsible for their sudden popularity outside of India. This is not to suggest a contrast between the works' reception in its original context and elsewhere. Mohamedi's practice was always destined for a wider audience that at some level she, ever an internationalist, was always already addressing. Working with Mohamedi's oeuvre today and tracking the arc of meaning as it circulates more widely in the world is not to seek a posthumous legitimacy - she has her place within Indian art history as well as within the Modernist canon. Rather, it is a question of establishing an ethical placement of her practice that meets the needs of a contemporary paradigm.

**Curators Suman Gopinath & Grant Watson
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⁵ Geeta Kapur, 'When was Modernism in Indian Art?', Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (ed.), *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, p.66.

⁶ Geeta Kapur during the conference on Mohamedi's work in Delhi on January 24, 2009.

⁷ Gabriel Peluffo Linari, 'Autonomy, Nostalgia and Globalization: The Uncertainties of Critical Art', in G. Mosquera and J. Fisher (ed.), *Over Here, op. cit.*, p.49.

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*NOTES –
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