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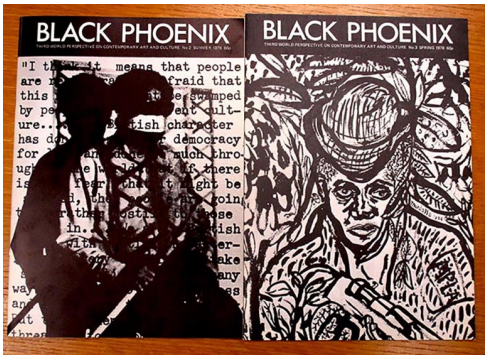
ARTICLES

The Postcolonial Artist Who Found Minimalism Before the Americans

Ellen Pearlman January 8, 2016



'Black Phoenix' covers (1978–79). The issue on the left shows Rasheed Araeen performing "Paki Bastard" (1977). (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

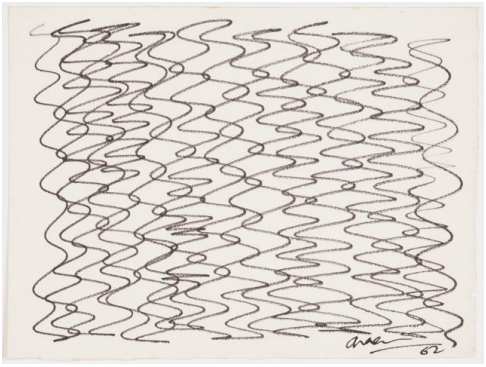
HONG KONG — Rasheed Araeen is a Pakistan-born, Britain-based, self-described "Afro-Asian" artist whose art and writing are so wildly subversive, it's taken 40 years for the critical dialogue to catch up to his tremendously prescient but fractious vision. Besides dealing with Minimalism in Britain early on, he was an outspoken and original firebrand deciphering and strategizing about issues of race and power, inventing the idea of the postcolonial artist as he went along. An outsider in the established British art world, he pushed against that status for so long that it finally flipped, leaving him an anointed theoretical and aesthetic insider.

On the occasion of Araeen's first ever solo show in New York this past year, critic Holland Cotter explained the artist's importance:

> Mr. Araeen also produced some of the most influential writing of [the 1980s] (I still have his clips from 30 years ago) and organized shows like "The Other Story" in London, which laid the foundation for the concept that modernism, far from being a Western phenomenon, had happened all over the world, on different schedules.

Going East, Araeen's solo show at Rossi & Rossi in Hong Kong, traces his career from his earliest abstract drawings to his recent postminimalist sculptures and abstract paintings. The issues of Afro-Asian identity he deals with are so complex that this short article cannot do justice to the entire oeuvre beyond his debut Hong

Kong exhibit. Ironically, the people of Hong Kong, a linchpin of postcolonialism, are more preoccupied with the mainland northern behemoth breathing down their necks on a daily basis than they are with paying attention to this critically important voice against colonial oppression landing smack at their front door. However, "museum curators and dedicated collectors are happy to invest the time [to view Araeen's work] and also make acquisitions," notes the gallery.



Rasheed Araeen "Untitled B" (1962), suite of six drawings (image courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi)

Trained as a civil engineer in Karachi in the 1950s, Araeen took basic art classes at the local US Information Service library before moving to Great Britain in 1964 to begin work as a civil engineering assistant. One of his earliest pieces in the Hong Kong show, "Untitled B" (1962), a set of six drawings, shows the integration of his engineering training and critical eye with the tenets of Minimalism. Not having the canon of Western art history to wrestle with, however, he just drew what he wanted.

During his first year in London, Araeen attended the opening of the *New Generation* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, which showcased pieces by many of the students of sculptor Anthony Caro. Caro himself focused on welding, but Araeen lacked the financial resources to make such massive, expensive sculptures. So he consciously chose a more egalitarian framework, building modular structures that he could make and remake, and that could be shaped by the viewer's perspective.

Rasheed Araeen, "Chad Yaar 1 (Four Friends)" (1968–2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

By 1965, social change was fomenting in Great Britain. The activist Malcolm X visited, bringing his then incendiary message of black self-organization, and the next year, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in California. Their ideas deeply affected Araeen and other minorities throughout the UK.

By now Araeen had converted his sketches into colorful constructed sculptures, many designed with his signature latticed grids. Even though they resembled Minimalist sculpture, he was not aware of the movement in America until 1968, when he heard about Sol LeWitt's show in Paris and saw it the following year in London. His own experience

of independently developing a form of Minimalism convinced him that modernism was not solely a Western development.

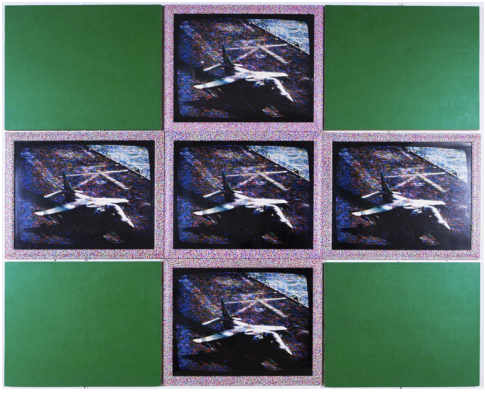
In 1969 the prestigious John Moores Painting Prize awarded him an honorable mention and £300 for his sculpture "Boo," a blue and orange, wall-mounted, lattice-like structure. It was a tremendous accolade for an influential painting organization to acknowledge a sculpture. This should have heralded Araeen's acceptance by the British art establishment, but it did not. His work was pooh-poohed as a watered-down version of American Minimalism, though he believed the snub was racially motivated.

He then joined a British arm of the Black Panthers (later renamed the Black Workers Movement) as well as the radical Artists for Democracy, and turned his attention to critical writing. On July 31, 1977, he performed "Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)" at Artists for Democracy. In the piece, he sat blindfolded and gagged in front of one of his latticed sculptures, holding a broom and sweeping the floor. Over the course of the performance, he was mock attacked, murdered, and left for dead.

"Paki Bastard" was the second part of a trilogy of art events, and served as a form of notes for a radical black manifesto he had written in 1975 and subsequently published in the magazine *Black Phoenix* (1978–79). *Black Phoenix* eventually morphed into *Third Text* (1987), which Araeen edited until 2011, when he was removed by an internal coup (the magazine still continues) and spun off a short-lived *Third Text Asia* (2008). His work in these publications constitutes a body of seminal writings on postcolonial theory and the havoc of globalization on world cultures. Though Araeen may contest discussions of his art being enmeshed with his political and cultural views, they are inextricably linked.

In 1978 he wrote a letter to the Arts Council of Great Britain, asking them to mount a survey exhibition of black artists; the request was, of course, turned down. In 1982 he once again wrote to the council, explaining that Afro-Asian artists were woefully neglected. "We cannot place Afro/Asian people outside of the context of 20th century by shifting them to some remote part or ethnic categories just because their specificity poses a complex problem," he wrote. "After exterminating millions of people and then looting their belongings the West today has the audacity to call itself the protector of the artistic and cultural heritage of the world." Frustrated, he went ahead and curated two critical exhibitions exploring themes that no one else would touch: *The Essential Black Art* (1987) at Chisenhale Gallery and *The Other Story* (1989) at Hayward Gallery.

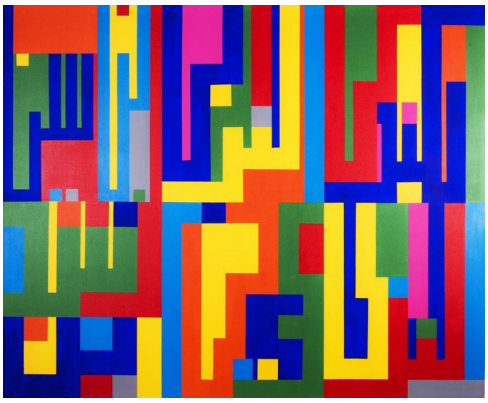
In early 1980s, Araeen developed a method of combining photographic images with painted images in a grid of nine rectangles stacked in three rows. This resulted in layered canvases like "La Grande Jatte" (1991–94), wherein he placed images from the first Gulf War alongside expanses of green. He was in Karachi at the time and



Rasheed Araeen, "La Grande Jatte" (1991–94) (image courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi)

took photos of Western aircraft fighter planes on a TV with poor reception. Using a Christian cross form, he inserted — or ruptured — the images into a consciously Islamic green picture plane, creating an unusual analogy at that time. To enhance the blurry quality of the warplanes, he painted dots on the bounding pictorial frames, turning the revealed RGB dots into a mimicry of traditional pointillism. The loveliness of the dots abuts Western symbols of power and destruction, all framed by an omnipresent Islamic voice.

For a long time, Araeen remained a provocative outsider, since there was no institutional British dialogue reframing the history of Minimalism outside of its New York origins; it was considered taboo to ask if he had indeed begun a unique strain of the movement. Because of that dismissive attitude, it wasn't until 2007 that Tate London purchased examples of his early sculptures, though he was already in the collections of many other museums worldwide. In 2014, Araeen's work was included in *Other Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum in New York, an exploration of Minimalism outside its traditional Western context, which helped placed him inside the art historical canon. In 2015, he finally had his first solo show in New York.



Rasheed Araeen, "In the Midst of Darkness 1A" (2012) (image courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi)

In the meantime, Araeen set up a studio in Karachi, reviving his painting practice with a new body of work called *Homecoming* (2010–14). These works take the names of key members of the Abbasid philosophical movement and turn them into abstracted blocks of pure color using complex geometrical shapes. Araeen is particularly interested in the medieval philosophers Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali and Abu al Walid Muhammed ibn Ahmand ibn Russh, or Averroes, both of whom he believes changed Western art and culture; Al-Ghazali introduced Aristotelian thought into Muslim theology, and some consider Averroes the founding father of secular thought in Western Europe. One of the paintings in

the series is titled “In the Midst of Darkness 1A,” reflecting the darkness of current world events but also suggesting subtly that the words of ancient philosophers may lead us out of it.

Over the course of almost seven decades, Araeen’s work has run the full gamut, from nascent engineering drawings to latticed, minimalist structures; from drawing and sculpture to writing and critical theory; and from angry separatist rhetoric to a new, unnamable ineffable. This show in Hong Kong reintroduces his prescient observations and highlights the responsibility that Western critics, curators, collectors, as well as the art-going public have to recognize his important voice that has long offered a non-Western take on minimalism, abstraction, and the power politics of neocolonialism.

Rasheed Araeen: Going East *continues at Rossi & Rossi (6 Yip Fat Street, Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong) until January 16.*

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