

MAMCO GENEVE

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PRESS KIT

Rasheed Araeen, *A Retrospective*

Opening: May 29, 6 pm

10, rue des Vieux-Grenadiers, 1205 Geneva



PRESS RELEASE

Rasheed Araeen, *A Retrospective*
Vaclav Pozarek
We Began by Measuring Distance
Cabinet d'arts graphiques
Julije Knifer

Opening: May 29, 6 pm
Press Conference: May 29, 11 am

This summer, on occasion of the retrospective devoted to the Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen, MAMCO is inaugurating the first phase of its reflections concerning the internationalization of its exhibition corpus and the emergence of a world art history.

RASHEED ARAEEN

The political relationship that Rasheed Araeen has with so-called "minimal" forms, and his commitment to postcolonial theory, gave his practice an exemplary value in the "de-colonization" process of art history in the second half of the 20th century. For, the Western hegemony of museums and historiographical institutions had imposed the myth of a "universal museum of modern art" whose truly ideological nature can now be gauged. It is thus both the resonances of an evolutionary and progressive vision of art history, and the cultural contexts under consideration, which have today been put into question by the inclusion of other narratives.

Rasheed Araeen was born in 1935 in Karachi (Pakistan), where, with no formal artistic education, he produced his first works during the 1950s, which already attested to his interest in the geometric compositions suited to an expression of his impressions. When he arrived in London in 1964, as a qualified engineer, Araeen was struck by Anthony Caro's colored metal sculptures. By the end of the 1960s, he had developed his own language, based on the use of simple forms, and the notion of symmetry, as can be seen in his first *Structures*. Apart from their constructive and minimal aspect, these sculptures are also an invitation to a relationship with the

spectators, who can sometimes alter their arrangements. The retrospective, spanning a 60 years' career, leads the visitors through five chapters, from the works of the 1950s, through the sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s; then, following his increasingly affirmed political commitment in the 1980s, to the series of cruciform panels from the 1980s-1990s; and his most recent pieces, brought together under the title *Homecoming*.

As Nick Aikens explains, Araeen's practice has constantly rethought the formal, ideological, and political affirmations of Eurocentric modernism. This questioning lies at the heart of his practice, both in artistic and intellectual terms. It fed both into his involvement with the Black Panthers movement in the 1972, and the setting-up of the review *Third Text* in 1987. It underlay his performances in the 1970s, and his para-minimal *Structures*. What is more, it led to his identity self-portraits from the early 1980s and his photographic compositions from the same period. And, as we can be reminded by the paintings from the recent *Opus* series, inspired by Islamic decorative art, Araeen responds to the universalist pretensions of Western modernism by an affirmation of the multiple origins of abstract language.

Yet, the globalizing imperative to bring in "differences" is not enough to resolve the issues coming from a dominant ideology. For a museum like MAMCO, what is at stake is rather to gauge to what extent taking into account these differences modifies our understanding of the forms and practices we collect. What should be considered is our conception of recent historiography, and the

division of its periods, as much as the aesthetic contours applied to the movements in question. For example, how we do see the museum collection containing the work of Siah Armajani (*1939), an Iranian artist who emigrated to the USA, or of Julije Knifer (1924–2004), a Croatian artist who was based in Paris, through the prism of Rasheed Araeen's show? Can the equation that this artist has established between symmetry and democracy help to shed light on the symbolism at the heart of Armajani's work? Doesn't the irony in his re-combinable *Structures* bring to mind the view that the members of the Gorgona group, with whom Knifer participated between 1959 and 1966, had of creation? In other words, is it possible for a museum to construct different conceptual tools, aesthetic categories, and other narratives of the passing of time as we see it, while exhibiting these artists, and thus exposing ourselves to such forms?

Rasheed Araeen

A Retrospective

Organized by Nick Aikens and Paul Bernard, the exhibition was first presented at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The exhibition is supported by the Stanley Thomas Johnson Stiftung.

Spanning more than 60 years, this exhibition offers the first comprehensive survey of the work of Rasheed Araeen. It is structured across five chapters unfolding on two levels of the museum: on the first floor are presented Araeen's early experiments in painting in Karachi in the 1950s and early 1960s; his geometric *Structures* after his arrival in London in 1964; key pieces from the 1970s and 1980s following Araeen's political awakening; and his nine panel cruciform works from the 1980s and 1990s. On the third floor, new geometric paintings are displayed in a large room alongside the participative work *Zero to Infinity*. Materials relating to Araeen's writing, editorial, and curatorial projects are also presented, as well as a Reading Room, located among the collection of Minimal and Conceptual art of the museum on the 3rd floor. This unprecedented configuration stresses how much Araeen's practice continues to challenge a Eurocentric approach to art and its modernist history.

In the Beginning

The room presents Araeen's early experiments in painting, drawing, and sculpture whilst he was living in Karachi, until 1964. Without a formal artistic training, Araeen's early work depicts the places and people of Pakistan's most populous city. By the late 1950s Araeen was exploring abstraction, working from memory and the imagination, rather than directly from life. He began using geometric forms, such as squares and triangles; he also became fascinated by ideas of fluidity, movement, and transformation embodied in water and fire and evident in his use of curved lines. These formal interests, as well as his training as an engineer, would come to play formative roles in his art work.

Geometry and Symmetry

Following his arrival in London in 1964, Araeen saw the colored metal sculpture of Anthony Caro, which he describes as having a strong effect on him. Araeen's own Minimalist language, however, drew on geometry and symmetry. Araeen's interest in symmetry stemmed from its lack of hierarchy with one side always being equal to the other. By the end of the 1960s Araeen became fascinated by the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry, which he saw as a defining condition of the world. He began exposing his geometric *Structures* and forms to human interaction and natural elements.

Becoming Political

By 1971 Araeen had become disillusioned with the endemic racism in Britain and its art establishment. He started reading anti-colonial writers such as Frantz Fanon. In 1972, he joined the Black Panthers Movement and, from 1973 until 1975, he actively took part in the group Artists for Democracy, formed by David Medalla. His artwork started incorporating collage, photography, installation, performance, writing, and editing. Formal and conceptual concerns remained, such as his use of the grid and the series format. He continued producing and incorporating his geometric *Structures* into his work. From 1975 onwards, Araeen started using his own image, body, and the format of self-portraiture as the focus of his investigations into representation.

In Pursuit of a Significant Language

In the 1980s and 1990s Araeen found an aesthetic language that brought together his investigations into abstraction and geome-

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The Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from
noon to 6pm, the first Wednesday of the month
until 9pm, and Saturday and Sunday from 11am
to 6pm. Closed on Mondays.

Regular admission: CHF 15.–
Reduced admission: CHF 10.–
Group admission: CHF 5.–

Partenaires

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