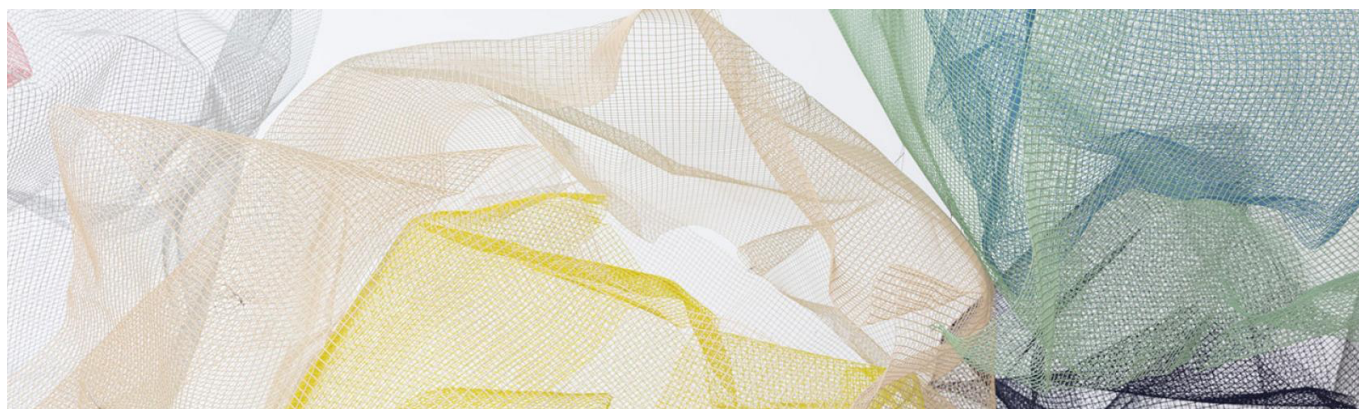


## Working through Uncertainty with Rana Begum and Idris Khan

The artists' respective exhibitions at Kate MacGarry and Victoria Miro use abstractions to expose our fragile yet resilient nature in relation to the pandemic

BY NATALIE NZEYIMANA IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS , UK REVIEWS | 24 MAY 21



Rana Begum and Idris Khan's respective exhibitions at Kate MacGarry and Victoria Miro are not instantly comparable. Where Begum's installation *No. 973*, (2019–20) throws light and colour into loose and yielding constellations, Khan's collaged paintings 'The Seasons Turn' (2021) might be seen as a series of attempts to retrieve colour from the shadows. Yet, both artists use geometry to create interventions that encourage us to emerge whole from the refracting timelines of 2020 that have exposed our fragile yet resilient natures.



Rana Begum, *No. 973*, 2019–20, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London; photograph: Angus Mill

Light takes centre stage in Begum's first solo exhibition at Kate MacGarry. In the gallery, the artist explains that light makes her feel 'elated' and this exhibition captures the 'weightlessness' it generates within her. In contrast with the bold units of colour that characterize Begum's previous, wall-mounted metal sculptures, *No. 973* features galvanized mesh in different overlapping shades, affording the individual pieces of spun metal a new virtuality. Begum's choreographed dance with fractals magnetizes the viewer with its morphogenic playfulness. 'How can you create a sense of balance?' she asks. Made in direct response to the sunbeams flooding through the skylight of the east London space, *No. 973* elicits an uncontained surrealist encounter, where curves in perception mimic a virtual reality experience

In her book *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (2010), Laura Marks explores the works of artists and scholars who question our visible and invisible relationships with matter, bringing a history of Islamic aesthetics into conversation with new media art. 'The universe is not dualistic, but folded, so spirit is separated from matter only by degree,' she explains. Begum's new work could join this dialogue. Developed through a residency at Istanbul Modern – where the artist experimented in a metal spinning workshop, working alongside resident craftspeople from factories nearby – the nebulous yet intimate work mirrors Marks's conception of an 'immanent infinite', where the world is waiting to be unfolded.



Rana Begum, *No. 973*, 2019–20, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London; photograph: Angus Mill

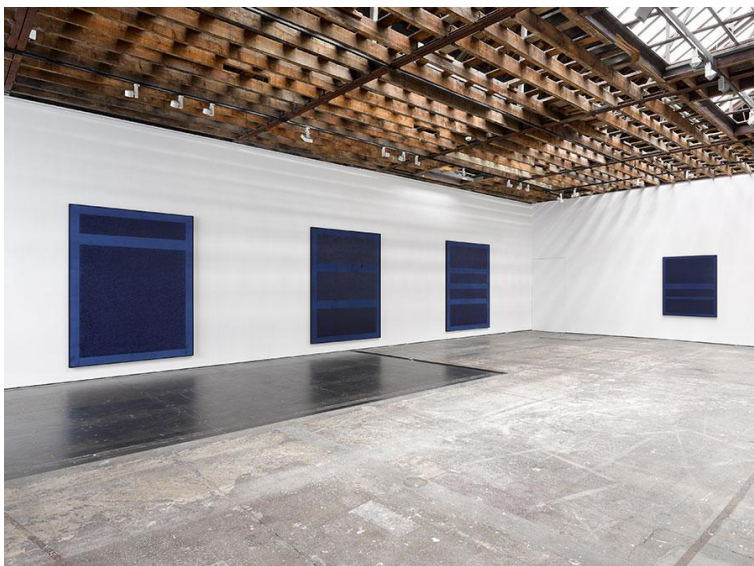
At home in London, Begum has been juggling childcare with running a small studio. She confides that, when the occasional chance for meditation emerges, the frisson of surrounding chaos generates goosebumps; expansion is catalyzed by uncertainty. This show is a reminder of what light can do and be – an invitation to share in that uncertainty and expand, uncontained.



Idris Khan, *The Seasons Turn – Autumn 5*, 2021, watercolour, oil, paper on aluminium 46 × 55 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Victoria Miro, London

For Khan, expansion happens *within* the container. Conceived as two distinct installations at Victoria Miro, ‘The Seasons Turn’ sees Khan’s continued engagement with the devotionality of repetition, while venturing tentatively into colour. In the lower gallery, a series of 28 panels responds to the narrative rhythmicity in Antonio Vivaldi’s violin concerti *The Four Seasons* (1723). Notations in oil stick over their aluminium surfaces, matching the fragments that are stamped onto them – scans of sheet music covered in washes of watercolour. In conversation, Khan recalls a ‘sense of calm’ whilst making these works as the seasons changed, equating this with the ‘order contained within the frame [...] looking away from all the negativity and looking at all the beauty.’ The seasons turn, and it seems time folds within them.

In the upper gallery, layered abstractions invite silence in Khan’s installation of oil paintings, otherwise called the ‘blue room’. On smooth surfaces, made from a mix of rabbit skin glue, slate dust, marble dust and gesso, blocks of stamped, fragmentary texts on Prussian blue oil appear in bands, and look like Arabic script from a distance. At the gallery he explains that, even ‘when [he] tried to be free,’ his works were ‘always contained’, but lockdown sent everything into a different register – life felt ‘out of control’. I sense the subtle gradations of the blocks creating a dimensionality that feels vast and imposing at first, but ultimately this gives way to the tender realization that these meditative stamps trace emotions, from waves of grief to glimpse of loss and hints of anger and frustration



Idris Khan, 'The Seasons Turn', 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Victoria Miro, London

Begum and Khan's works push the limits of two- and three-dimensional space, offering perspectives that remain attentive to the vastness of internal feeling, feelings that yearn for expression in form, even when those forms are contained. I see their work tracing the logic of psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung's *mandala* (Sanskrit for 'magic circle') described in *Man and his Symbols* (1964) by Jung's associate Marie Louise von Franz as an attempt to 'represent the nuclear atom of the human psyche, whose essence we do not know', a set of motifs that serves 'to restore a lost inner balance'. While Khan explores its 'conservative purpose – namely, to restore a previously existing order,' Begum channels its 'creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique.' I asked both artists what they hoped their work might transform and transmute within viewers. Entering feeling hope, leaving with love, one offered. Entering feeling joy, leaving with peace, the other.

**Rana Begum's first solo show** at Kate MacGarry, London, is on view until 6 June.

'Idris Khan: The Seasons Turn' at Victoria Miro, London, ended on 15 May. Exhibition catalogue available [here](#).

*Main image: Rana Begum, No. 973, 2019–20, installation detail. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London; photograph: Angus Mill*