

Rana Begum



Installation view of RANA BEGUM's *No. 1048 Mesh*, 2020, paint on powder-coated mesh, dimensions variable, at the solo exhibition at Kate MacGarry, London, 2021. Courtesy Kate MacGarry.

Rana Begum's work to date has followed in the lineage of artists like Josef Albers, Bridget Riley, and Robert Irwin, whose varied practices all maintained at their core the enquiry of seeing itself. Begum's first solo exhibition at Kate MacGarry, spanning drawing, painting, and installation, represented a steady continuation of the artist's pursuits in this realm, exploring the interplay of material, form, color, and light, and searching for wonder in the visual experiences it yields.

The exhibition's most commanding presence was also the work least congruent with Begum's foundational vocabulary of geometric patterns and precisely measured forms. Situated prominently opposite the entrance, the installation *No. 1048 Mesh* (2020) features undulant, improvisatory forms shaped from pieces of wire mesh in an array of bright colors, like a cluster of crumpled candy wrappers. These are suspended from the ceiling with discrete wires, such that from afar the aggregate appears weightlessly afloat in space, its translucent shrouds yielding variations in shape, color, and tone that come in and out of visibility. The use of mesh here gestures to the grid as a paradigm of modernist painting and sculpture, a history

perhaps referenced more obviously in Begum's *Mesh* etchings of colorful overlapping grids from 2019. Her mesh-grids provoke comparison with Agnes Martin's signature works, which wrested from the grid a means to express the subjective, notably in distinction to her contemporaries' usage of the same as a reductive device in striving for objectivity. Begum's mesh works seem likewise concerned with the subjective experiences that can be educed using a simple element built up into compositions of varying complexity. Inherent in these works is an insoluble tension between physical fact and experience, between the fixed and the fugitive: *No. 1048 Mesh* lays bare its elementary grids and its folds and layers, even as its mesh forms destabilize surface and space, continually flickering and shimmering, remaining elusive to the eye.

Though Begum often draws inspiration from architecture and design, she is rarely explicit about her cultural references. An exception here is *No. 973* (2019–20), a wall-based installation developed during an artist residency in Istanbul, where Begum worked among craftspeople in a metal-spinning workshop. The installation consists of some two dozen lapidary symmetrical forms of spun steel, arranged to protrude from the wall in an irregular constellation reminiscent of a climbing gym. The variably shaped conical and cylindrical forms were designed to evoke Istanbul's historic architecture, just as their seductive satin finishes in silver, salmon, vellum, and sapphire gesture to the local scenery, from modern skyscrapers to the Sea of Marmara. In contrast with the optical intensity typical of Begum's wall-based

installations, this abstract landscape has an oddly exquisite machined quality that resolves in a tempered lyricism.

Also on view are a new body of paintings composed from rectangles in pastel shades of peaches, yellows, and blues, as well as tones of grey. Executed using acrylic paint on aluminum ground, these works are assuredly impersonal: edges are crisp and surfaces are flat, devoid of brush marks or other visible signs of the handmade. Ten of these iterations hang on one wall, grouped into diptychs in a rhythmic sequence. Measuring 45 by 25 centimeters each, they compel the viewer to edge in close, at which point the painted surface divulges its materiality—the tiny dimples on the aluminum; the uniform, ever so slightly translucent layers of color laid on top of one another. When one steps back again, these facts do not disappear but rather transmute into an altered optical effect. To encounter these works is to be made hypersensitive to visual experience—the sensation of this weighty peach, of that refulgent yellow—as it unfolds, through time, within one's body.

Unlike some optically-minded forebears, like Albers, for instance, who codified their experiments and creations in essays and theories, Begum's exhibition proposed no overarching thesis. The works themselves, however, collectively suggest her practice as an idealist endeavor, fundamentally engaged in conversation with a Romantic model of the viewer that situates vision in the subjective individual. It is a perspective that twists the meaning of Frank Stella's famed assertion, "What you see is what you see."

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