



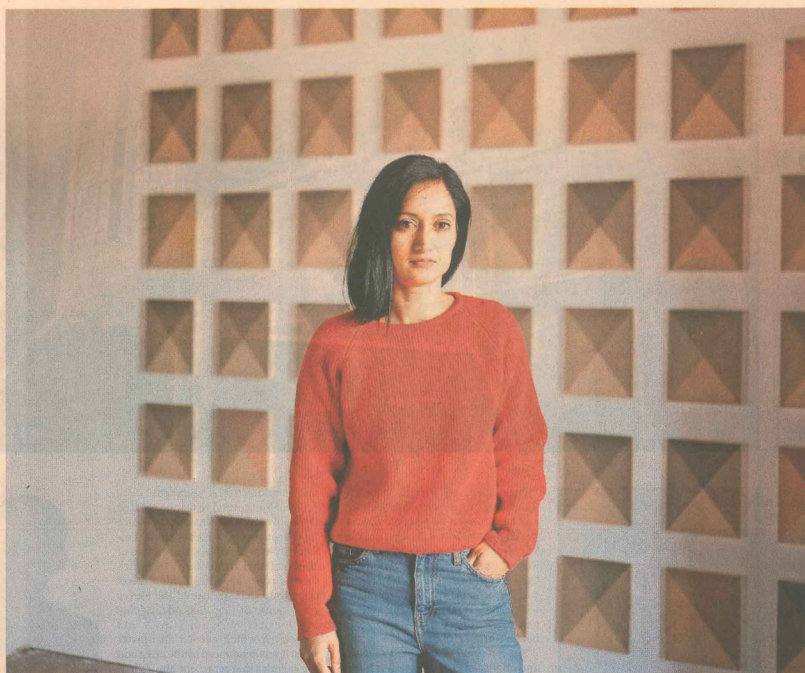
# Collecting Art in Asia

FTWeekend



6 ★ FTWeekend 18 March/19 March 2017

## Collecting



Bangladesh she has connected her practice to earlier memories still: the hours she would spend hypnotised by light hitting water in the rice fields and the calming ritual of praying five times a day. Her conclusion: "Nothing is as segregated as you think it is."

For a long time, Begum's work was met with muted enthusiasm. As an art student (she attended the University of Hertfordshire, then Chelsea School of Art and the Slade) she recalls a tutor telling her regretfully how well she would have done in the 1960s. In her twenties, colleagues suggested she make her work political. She persisted.

Now, I venture, she is tremendously popular. "Why?" she asks, before I can finish the question. "Why am I suddenly doing better now than I did a few years ago? I haven't found an answer."

Begum is keen to illustrate the painstaking lineage of her work, and takes the series that will be exhibited in Hong Kong as an example. These "M Drawings" were conceived of during a 2009 residency in Beirut, when Begum was inspired by the city's hectic skyline to experiment with drawing in 3D. In that first iteration the shapes were fashioned out of candy-coloured straws she found in a Lebanese corner shop. After eight years of incremental modifications the straws have been substituted for steel bars and attached to wall- and floor-mounted reflective sheets.

Begum has applied this empirical rigour to every aspect of developing her practice. She refused to work with colour for a long time because it was too complicated, and when she did start using colour she became less adventurous in other ways, producing pleasing but predictable stripe works. "I just knew I needed to understand certain things about the work and that they couldn't be researched all in one go, they had to be separated," she says. Most likely, herein lies the explanation for her recent success: she is at last so fluent in the languages of her three fundamentals that she can manipulate them with grace and daring.

Begum was labelled an "urban romantic" by one early critic because of the unlikely places she finds inspiration. On Instagram, which she uses as a "sketchbook", she documents neon chevrons, traffic cones reflected in puddles, half-built buildings transformed by scaffolding and gauzy sheeting.

Urban romanticism is also an apt description of what viewers take away from her work. I have seen it hung in Dubai, where her gallery, The Third Line, is one in a row of identical industrial-turned-art spaces. I have also seen it in Mumbai, where Jhaveri Contemporary is hidden up a traffic-choked hill, down an unmarked residential alley. The effect was the same: after time spent considering Begum's delicate interplay of harsh shapes, unsightly aspects of the city became interesting. I found abstract geometry in Dubai's rigid grids; moments of calm juxtaposition on Mumbai's chaotic construction sites.

Begum approves this modest proposition. "You can walk past the work. It's not shouting 'look at me, look at me', but sometimes it's just about pausing and noticing how certain elements — light, form and colour — come together."

Walking away from the studio, the midday sun sends bright, distorted reflections of north London bouncing off the puddles on the pavement.

Art Basel Hong Kong, March 25-29  
artbasel.com/hong-kong



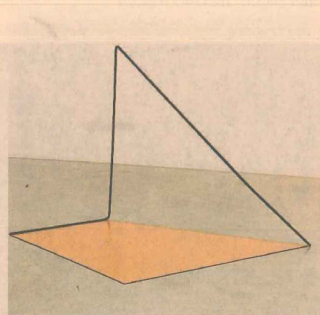
Rana Begum is wearing thermals under her jeans and knitted bed socks under her work boots. Her north London studio is too large to heat effectively, so the artist and her five assistants lug heaters between workstations. Upstairs, aluminium bars are being powder-coated in traffic-light orange. Downstairs, there are many, many crates being readied for shipping. "I used to imagine I'd have a shed in the bottom of the garden where I'd make my work," says Begum, almost wistfully. It is just spring, and this is already shaping up to be a busy year for the 40-year-old British-Bangladeshi artist, who had her first major solo exhibition in London only last summer. Last week at the Art Dubai art fair she unveiled her commission for this year's \$100,000 Abraaj Group Art Prize — a floating platform measuring almost 100 sq metres and covered in tinted glass tiles. This week she has a solo presentation in the Discoveries sector of Art Basel Hong Kong with her Mumbai-based gallery, Jhaveri Contemporary. In May she will have her first museum show at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich, and in July she is curating the Arts Council Collection at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. She has public commissions forthcoming in the UK and Sweden and residencies in Italy and the Philippines — a chance to refocus on the art, she says, although she'll have her two young children in tow: "They're old enough to travel and they're part of who I am."

Begum produces sculptural works that are abstract and geometric, rendered in industrial materials and artifi-

## Urban romantic

**Sculpture** | From Art Dubai to Art Basel Hong Kong, Rana Begum's

abstract, geometric work is causing a stir. *Harriet Fitch Little* meets her

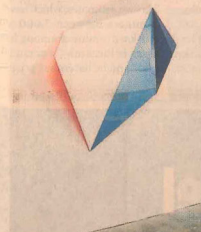


Clockwise from main: Rana Begum photographed in her studio for the FT by Leo Goddard; 'No 657 L Fold' (2016); 'No 675 M Drawing' (2016); untitled installation at London's King's Cross station (2016) — Philip White, Anthony Upston/PA

cial colours. She is a Minimalist in the colloquial sense of the term — her style is sparing — and the academic: her works are self-contained creations that brook no emotion. In the words of one 1960s pioneer of Minimalism, Frank Stella: "What you see is what you see."

But Begum subtly subverts her formal compositions. She never mixes pigment, but positions units of colour in such a way that light does the job for her, creating overlapping reflections that change as the viewer moves. Her "Folds" are wall-mounted metal sheets with creased edges whose undersides cast reflections so luminous that the sheets appear to be both floating away from and seeping into the wall. Form, colour and light: these three properties constitute her Trinity.

I ask Begum about the only criticism I have read of her work, that it is "conceptually thin". She considers it, and follows up via email: "I think this is only relevant if I was setting out to make conceptual work in the first place," she writes. So, her biography — early childhood



in rural Bangladesh, arriving in England aged six without a word of English, a strict Muslim upbringing — should we discard it? She says no, not exactly. "We grew up on a street [in St Albans] where there was a lot of racism but my dad never segregated us," she says. "We were brought up to not see any kind of difference between anyone whether it's colour, religion, politics or culture. I think that's probably where Minimalism allowed me to feel that same thing... I used forms and colours that were recognised by anyone." On recent trips to