

Free from the Burden of Figures

A group show features artists separated across generations but united in their pursuit of line, texture and colour, notes **Kamayani Sharma**.



Tanya Goel. Installation view of *Aluminium Silver Leaf Studies*. Aluminium, lead, silver foils on compressed concrete. 4 pieces. 2018. Image courtesy the artist, Shrine Empire, New Delhi and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Shadow Lines: Experiments with Light, Line and Liminality, a group show at Shrine Empire, New Delhi (from the 6th of April to the 25th of May), offers a snapshot of abstraction in Indian art over the past few decades. Curated by Meera Menezes, Delhi-based critic and author of *Vasudeo Santu Gaitonde: Sonata of Solitude*, the show brings together artists across generations and media to explore how the non-figurative has been expressed in Indian art, as a function of surface, space and geometry.

The paper works suggest shared genealogies and fonts. Nasreen Mohamedi's dynamic ink-and-graphite modernist meshes in the adjacent room are displayed alongside Zarina's *Delhi* series (2000) of cartographic woodcuts, visually uniting the work of contemporaries whose lives were deeply affected by the Partition. On the wall outside this room, Parul Gupta's askew, overlapping square graphs, #37, #57, #58 (2018-2019), resemble Mohamedi's line drawings. Printed on Hahnemule paper

are Ayesha Sultana's photographs, riffing off delicate watercolour works bound into a small book. Together, they constitute *Form Studies* (2018), the photographs "translat[ing] material, texture, line and colour onto paper", in the artist's words. It is hard to immediately grasp the interrelation between the colourful marks on paper framed by negative space, and images that show the grain and crinkle of different materials, or how light behaves with wood and glass. Then slowly, a homology emerges between the abstract watercolour pictures and the forms that objects in the world take, divested of their representational burden.

Among the sculptural works, Hemali Bhuta's *Roll* (2015) dominates another room, a long tubular structure wrapped in a series of cloth bandages. A reference to her exhibition *Measure of a foot* (2016), the work suggests excess and a foregrounding of material. Similarly, Tanya Goel's Arte Povera homage titled *Aluminium, Silver Leaf*



Studies (2018), comprising silver foil on concrete slabs draws attention to the physical qualities of the industrial matter. Obliquely referencing the construction sites ubiquitous in urban India, the work points towards what they connote – questions of infrastructure and labour.

What is the argument advanced by a show about abstraction that features Indian artists spanning the contemporary moment? Works by veterans occupy the same site as younger artists, seemingly exponents of various moments in the long history of abstraction through Expressionism, Minimalism, Post-minimalism. On view is a synopsis of the challenge to mimesis that has played out through a questioning of the status of flatness in painting, for example, or that of the field in sculpture. Perhaps, during a period witnessing a surfeit of description and a fixation with art's role in capturing reality "as it is", abstraction offers other modes of rendering it that have their own logic of resistance.

Such an exhibition must also be looked at in the context of international survey shows like the Rubin Museum's *Approaching Abstraction* (2012), the retrospectives of Zarina (2013) and Gaitonde (2015) at the Guggenheim and Mohamedi at the Met Breuer (2016), presenting Indian art in terms of idioms familiar to 20th century Western art connoisseurs. For a long time, there was a tendency to understand modern Indian art in terms of Euro-American historiography. However, as Beth Citron, the curator of *Approaching Abstraction*, points out in an interview, "...abstraction in India is not teleological, and it did not replace representation or figuration. Rather, artists in India...could pick and choose stylistic and other elements (like materials and language) from that discourse and reinterpret them to make them relevant and meaningful in their own contexts." *Shadow Lines* urges viewers to reflect on what these contexts might be in the current era. /