

Lines and Corners

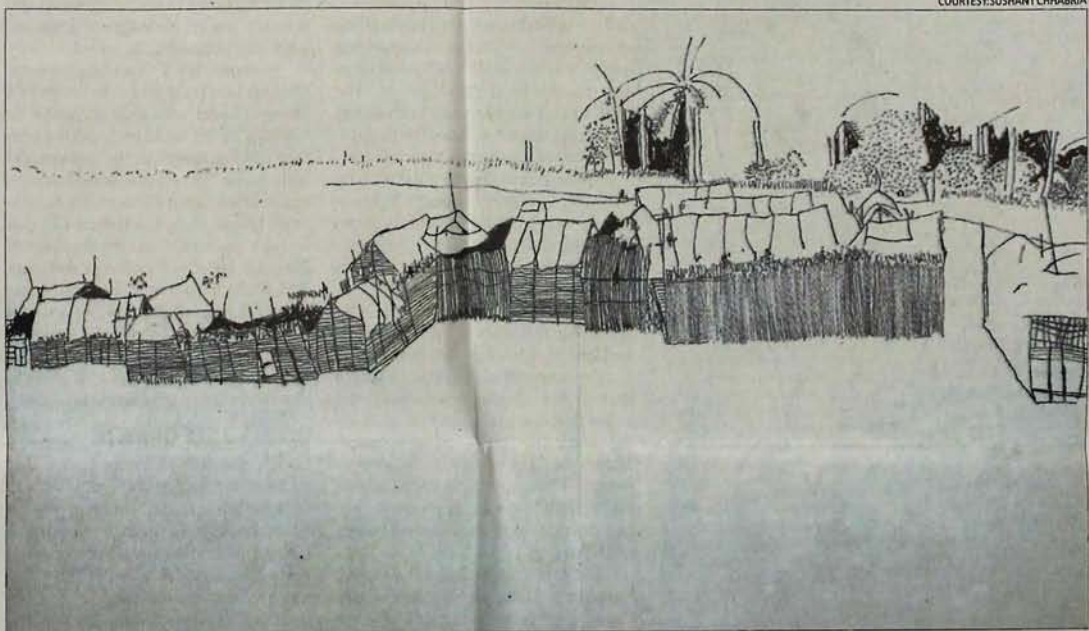
An exhibition on Nasreen Mohamedi at Tate Liverpool, the biggest in UK, reveals an artist whose quest for utopian design and universal stylistic forms has placed her as an international modern master

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NASREEN Mohamedi's is an intriguing world. Abstract pencil lines and geometric patterns float in the vacuity of a piece of paper. On others, complex yet organic structures weaving against each other create an illusionary universe, giving a sense of the artist's obscure inner dialogue. Undated and untitled, and 24 years after her death, Mohamedi's drawings still leave a viewer unsettled. Recent years have seen efforts to unravel the mystery behind the late artist — notably, solos at Milton Keynes Gallery (UK, 2009) and Talwar Gallery (New York, 2008), and a retrospective at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (Delhi, 2013). On June 6, an exhibition at Tate Liverpool titled "Nasreen Mohamedi" will be the biggest solo of the artist in the UK, which will span her work from the '60s to the '80s.

There are over 60 works on display, acquired from various public institutions and private collections. The exhibition has been curated by Eleanor Clayton, assistant curator at the Tate Liverpool, who started exploring Mohamedi's oeuvre when she was putting together Dutch artist Piet Mondrian's work for the gallery (it will open simultaneously with Mohamedi's show). "I grew obsessed with her intricate line drawings and earlier oil paintings, particularly in conjunction with her diaries, which reveal a constant quest for utopian design and balance in her work," says Clayton. "Although Nasreen and I come from different places and times, learning about her work has made me view the world in a new way, seeing the abstract and universal beauty she focused on landscapes, from India to the Mersey river."

Born in Karachi in 1937, before moving to Mumbai in her youth, and living and teaching in Vadodara until her final days, Mohamedi remains one of the most under-recognised artists of the 20th century. At the time when Indian Modernists were painting the colours and chaos



COURTESY: SUSHANT CHHABRIA



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(Above) Nasreen Mohamedi at her studio at the Bhulabhai Desai Institute in Bombay; untitled works by Mohamedi redefine the meaning of abstract art

of their homeland, Mohamedi worked alongside peers such as MF Husain, Tyeb Mehta and VS Gaitonde. Yet she was virtually alone amongst her peers because she broke away from the mainstream practice of figurative painting in post-Independence India. She has often been compared to Canadian abstract painter Agnes Martin and American minimalist Carl Andre. "Nasreen Mohamedi" reveals the artist's significant contribution to Modernism that expands the boundaries of

Western art history and offers an opportunity to reconsider the meaning of abstract art," reads the exhibition note. Mohamedi passed away at 53 in 1990, from a rare neurological disorder.

The obscurity in relation to the chronology and description of Mohamedi's works have confounded curators and art historians. Her evolving language is seen through early abstract brushwork and figurative oil and watercolour, to her grid-based drawings and those in pen and ink. Within the exhibi-



COURTESY: COLLECTION OF GAYATRI JHAVERI & PRIYAM JHAVERI

tion, Clayton groups Mohamedi's works stylistically as well as roughly chronologically. "There are only a few dated works and many cannot be ascribed to even a particular decade. As her work aspired to represent universals, in terms of space and form, perhaps it is better to consider them outside the restrictions of time as well," says Clayton.

While her line drawings are the most popular aspect of her oeuvre, what is also fascinating is Mohamedi's photographic prints, known for their unique architectural quality. A well-travelled artist, Mohamedi took photographs in several places in the Middle East (she lived in Bahrain briefly in her youth), the US and Japan,

apart from various cities in India including Chandigarh. For Clayton, her photographs, which highlight geometric shapes and lines in her surroundings through particular crops, mirrored how Mondrian began his path to abstraction, a reason why the two exhibitions will open simultaneously. Another significant aspect is Mohamedi's diaries, which reveals the artist's mind at work. On display at Tate Liverpool are extracts, notes and source material she kept in her studio.

The exhibition is a part of the Memorandum of Understanding between India and Tate to further the effort to show Indian modern and contemporary art. It was signed earlier this year in February. While the show will not travel to India, there has been a collaborative exchange between gallerists and curators from both India and Tate to share expertise. For "Nasreen Mohamedi", which will run till October, Tate Liverpool will produce an online publication and resource called "Nasreen Mohamedi: Reading Room", and will include papers from co-curator Suman Gopinath and art historian Geeta Kapur.