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## Anila Quayyum Agha Uses Patterns to Break Patterns

Perceived dualities and opposites, including those around gender, animate Anila Quayyum Agha's light installations, drawings and paintings.



The artist Anila Quayyum Agha in her Indianapolis home. Her works will be shown at the Masterpiece London art fair. Originally from Pakistan, she has lived in the United States for more than 20 years and teaches at Augusta University in Georgia. Kaiti Sullivan for The New York Times



By Ted Loos

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The titles of the two immersive light installations by Anila Quayyum Agha being shown this week at the Masterpiece London art fair do not seem to promise an upbeat vision: “This Is Not a Refuge” and “A Beautiful Despair.”

But the works, which all visitors will see at the fair’s entrance as part of the Masterpiece Presents program, do not come across as drab or depressing.

Instead, both cast dazzling decorative patterns on their colorful surroundings. Ms. Agha has laser-cut elaborate shapes, partly inspired by Islamic geometric motifs, into steel cubes. The cubes are then lit from inside, creating a painting with light and shadow.

“People need to be rejuvenated and made to feel hopeful,” said Ms. Agha, 57. “They both create environments that are very awe-inspiring.”

Ms. Agha was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, but has been living in the United States for more than 20 years, making her way from Texas to Indiana and most recently to Georgia, where she teaches at Augusta University.

Her light installations have brought her much attention lately.

“Right now I am having a heyday of exhibitions,” Ms. Agha said. She spoke on the phone from Washington, where she was a research fellow at the Smithsonian Institution.

The installation “Let a Million Flowers Bloom” was recently presented at the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina, and “All the Flowers Are for Me” is on view at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass.





The light installation “A Beautiful Despair” at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth. It is one of the pieces that will be in London. Steve Watson

Last fall, a version of “A Beautiful Despair” was shown at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth; the museum subsequently acquired the piece, along with three works on paper by Ms. Agha.

“A Beautiful Despair” stems from personal tragedy.

“During the pandemic, I lost a sister myself,” Ms. Agha said, adding that the general feeling of loss in the Covid era also motivated her.

Shirley Reece-Hughes, the Amon Carter curator who organized the Fort Worth show, discovered Ms. Agha’s work in the 2015 exhibition “Intersections,” at Rice University in Houston.

“She’s not influenced by trends and directions the art world takes,” Ms. Reece-Hughes said. “That’s how she has differentiated herself.”

Ms. Agha noted that her practice also went beyond the installations that had been widely seen.

“I think most people who know my work are familiar with the shadow boxes; they are more visible,” she said. “But the drawings and the paintings I make are more intimate.”

The Masterpiece booth of her dealer, Sundaram Tagore, will include examples of that work, including the mixed-media piece “Flowers (Red and White Squares)” (2017), which incorporates stitching.

“Her work is conceptually driven, but it is beautiful, too,” said Mr. Tagore, who has galleries in New York, London and Singapore. (His fair booth will also feature work by other artists he represents, including Miya Ando.)

The idea behind “This Is Not a Refuge,” Ms. Agha said, was “specific to the condition of the refugees that were trying to reach safety both in Europe and the southern border” of the United States over the last few years.

“Once we approach it, we realize it’s not really a refuge,” she said, referring to the piece’s effects. “It looks beautiful from a distance. It’s more like a mirage.”

Perceived dualities and opposites, including those around gender, frequently animate her work. “I think my work is very feminist,” she said.

“A Beautiful Despair” in particular is centered on the place of women. It is doubly lit, creating a sense of being underwater.

“I was really thinking about how 50 percent of the world’s population — women or people who identify as women — are often left behind,” Ms. Agha said.



That includes the cultural milieu of museums and galleries in the United States.

“The art world has kept women down for so long,” Ms. Agha said.

Some of her mixed-media works on paper involve embroidery, and that choice of medium, once viewed as women’s work, is significant, Ms. Reece-Hughes said.

“There was an expectation in Pakistan that women would sew, and her mother was in a sewing circle,” Ms. Reece-Hughes said of Ms. Agha. “She’s saying that sewing is just as valuable as painting or drawing.”

Ms. Agha uses two forms in particular — a running stitch and a blanket stitch — often in tandem with collaged materials.



Ms. Agha’s light installation “This Is Not a Refuge” will also be in London. via The artist

“Sometimes I incorporate Mylar, to give it a ghostly image,” she said.

Ms. Agha got her bachelor’s degree in Lahore and later got her Master of Fine Arts from the University of North Texas.

“It was often said to me when I was in graduate school that if you’re going to use patterns, you become a craft artist,” Ms. Agha said.

She added, “I come from the East; pattern is part of my life. I decided to change the idea that only women are associated with patterns.”

Ms. Agha cited the influence of Mughal architecture in general, and specifically Lahore’s Tomb of Jahangir, built for a Mughal emperor, for its use of the perforated wall pattern known as a jali. She visited the tomb as a teenager.

“Jalis are carved out of marble sheets about two feet deep, and the perforations allowed the air to circulate inside these huge buildings,” she said.

A later trip to the Alhambra palace in Granada, Spain — famed for its soaring Islamic architecture — also left an impression, she said, partly because of the reactions of her fellow visitors.

“Everyone was talking to everyone else,” she said. “It was a moment of joy that people wanted to share.”

Smaller daily moments also inform Ms. Agha’s forms.

“When I go for a walk, I look down at my shadows, and I’ve done that for 30 years,” she said. “I love the speckled sunlight coming through the leaves of the trees, and I’m fascinated by the movement as you’re walking.”

That may be an entry point, conscious or not, for viewers to appreciate Ms. Agha’s work.

“I’m not the kind of artist that wants to punch you in your face,” she said. “I want to do my work in a more gentle and more harmonious way.”