

Directional GEOMETRY

*Through visual deconstruction, playing fields of light, and colourful geometry, **Rana Begum's** glistening sculptures beg attention. Skye Arundhati Thomas speaks with the Abraaj Prize winner about the precious materials that define her work*

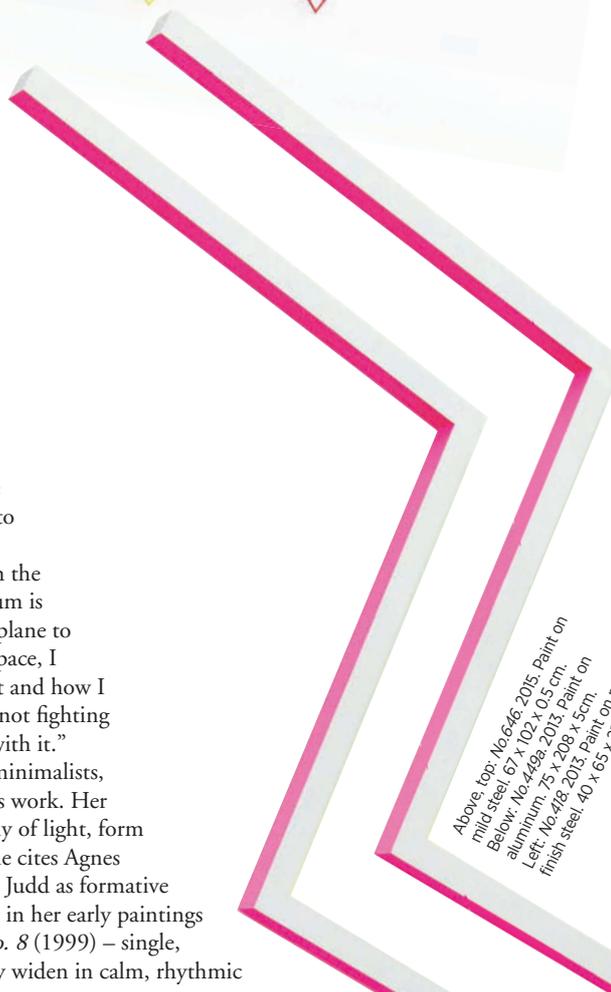
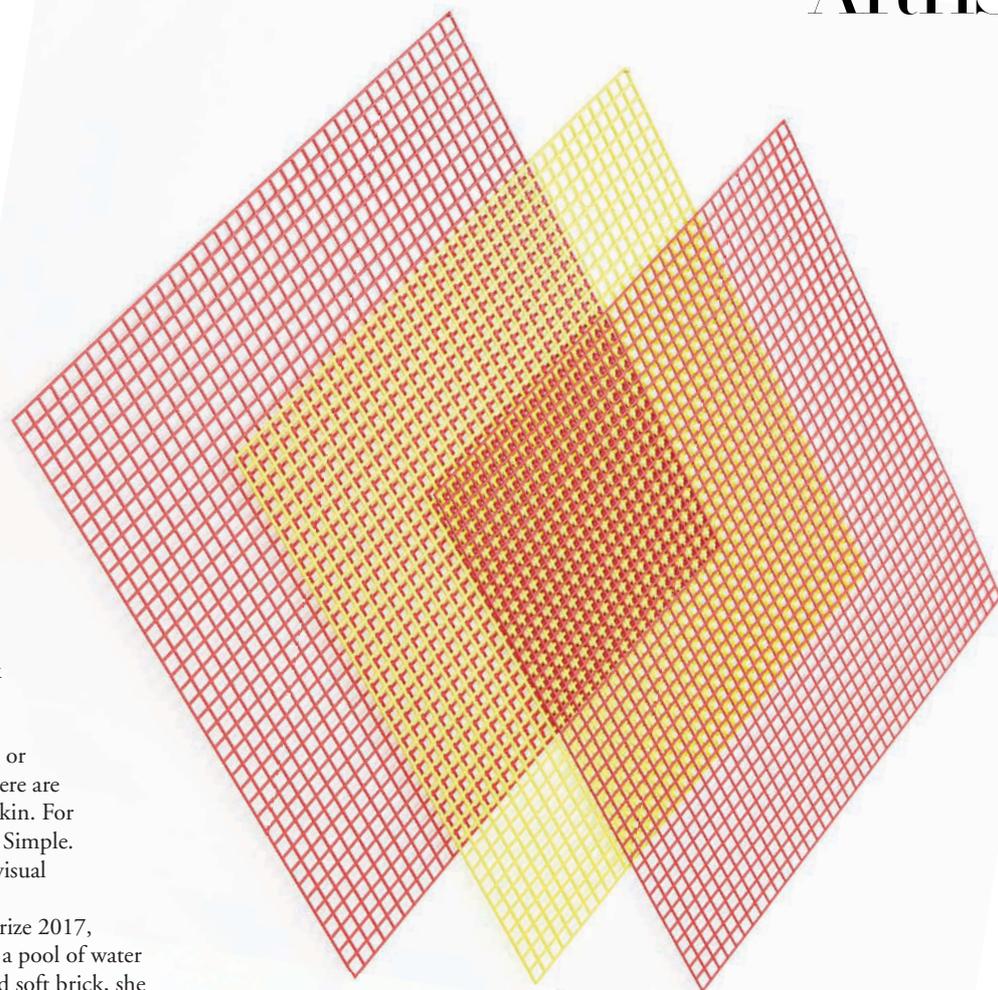
R

ana Begum's jewel-like sculptures glitter and shiver under her expert composition. Hers is a practice of small, precise gestures – a series of quick folds, for instance, or the drawing of irregular, floating lines upon a flat plane. “You know when you look at something, or when you're experiencing something – there are smells, or something that you feel in the skin. For me, what I see is what I take in,” she says. Simple. Her work is precisely a translation of this visual deconstruction.

As a recipient of the Abraaj Group Art Prize 2017, Begum unveiled a work that lay floating in a pool of water at Art Dubai. Nestled among palm trees and soft brick, she gave us a bed of coloured acetate sheets shimmering in the sunlight. The work is a step forward from her earlier bar paintings, consisting of perpendicular white powder-coated aluminium bars, which hang in succession along a plane, each painted on either side. The colours shift as you move alongside the work, like a flipbook of two tones. “What happens with those two colours is that they interact, and I wanted to make that interaction more tangible, more physical,” she says. In the planning stages of the work, the committee was hoping that Begum would agree to show the project indoors, but about this, she was adamant. “Natural light is one of the significant components of the work,” she says, “while I was arguing the point during the selection process, I had the door open and suddenly the light came in and hit the work. It was beautiful in terms of how it just did exactly what I imagined it to, and they were like okay, we get it now.”

Light, or more precisely, natural light, is perhaps Begum's most precious material – and one that is fundamental to the showing of her work. Although her pieces appear candy-like, with a faultless sheen, in photographs, Begum is weary of the transition from object to image, “I really don't like images when people have to look at my photographs to understand the work. I find that really difficult because most of my work is about experiencing it and seeing it react with the light.” For something that can depend so much on circumstance, Begum is undeterred, because it is up to the materials she assembles onto the plane to carry the complex composition of light. She adds, “I look at the space, I look at the architecture and I look at the way that light enters it and how I can use this to my advantage. I think a lot of my work is not fighting with architecture, but instead, working with it.”

As a self-proclaimed student of the minimalists, their trace is certainly visible in Begum's work. Her primary occupations are with the assembly of light, form and the viewer's field of vision, for which she cites Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd as formative influences. This is certainly visible in her early paintings on square wood panels, *No. 7* and *No. 8* (1999) – single, monotone forms repeat and exponentially widen in calm, rhythmic



Above, top: No. 6746, 2015. Paint on mild steel, 67 x 102 x 0.5 cm.
Below: No. 4498a, 2013. Paint on aluminum, 75 x 208 x 5 cm.
Left: No. 718, 2013. Paint on finish steel, 40 x 65 x 2 cm.



Rana Begum. Photography by Philip White

Below: *No.188*, 2009. Spray paint on powder-coated aluminium. 145 x 145 cm

moment when works are politicised regardless of their intent, it is interesting to note an artist who chooses to remain outside of the political spectrum, however often her work is classified as such by an orientalist gaze.

“So I’m taking something from the city and then manipulating it, pulling it a part and then filtering it before it goes back out into that environment,” says Begum enthusiastically about her public art practice – something which has really taken off, she is to unveil two new projects just this year. “It’s a kind of a... directional geometry. But as you move across, that directional geometry changes to something that is much more open and infinite. I like what happens with that, that there is that kind of shift.” Indeed, Begum’s work is all about the delicate shifts, albeit with radical potential. ranabegum.com

patterns. “I recognised that it wasn’t the narrative or the subject matter that I was interested in, and that for me the best approach was a practical one, one that allowed me to understand material, form and colour – physically,” she says. And yet, her works are not merely an assembly of formal properties, but rather, functions of them, led by delicate manipulations. By making transformative gestures onto simple materials, she is able to give way to new, and sometimes impossible, geometries.

It is interesting to place her earlier wood panels against her latest work, a series of “drawings” constructed from Perspex panels (sometimes mirrored) and, powder-coated or painted, steel. The works are irregular and full of whimsy, “I was interested in pushing some of the shapes and forms that I was seeing in the everyday, and to move away from the usual geometry I was using in the studio, which was the square, the rectangle and the triangle.” Begum explains how the work was inspired by neon-coloured drinking straws she found in a market in Beirut, and has seen several iterations since. These “straw drawings” were first displayed at Begum’s solo show *The Space Between* at Parasol Unit, London, in 2016, and again this year at a solo booth at Art Basel Hong Kong with Jhaveri Contemporary, Begum’s Gallery in Mumbai. Each work has dark limbs that extend from a flat base, and often jump out unpredictably – it is, undoubtedly, sculpture in the expanded field.

Where Begum’s work has previously been faulted for not being conceptually strong, this criticism remains quite irrelevant – because it is after all, not conceptual work. Begum’s nod towards the minimalists extends also toward a practice of universality, and that of a language outside of context. “One of the things that I struggled with is this connection that my work has with Islamic art and architecture,” she explains, “I was adamant that I didn’t want the work to be about religion, culture, politics or gender.” Begum chooses to take the relationships out of her work, “Initially, I started off as a figurative artist, and it was quite tough when my parents were like no – as a Muslim you can’t be doing figure or representational work if you can’t give life to it. But when I was looking at representation it wasn’t that – it was more that I was trying to represent light, and form, and how those things work together.” At a historical

