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"Geometries of Difference": Ornament Meets Abstraction at SUNY New Paltz

BY MEDIA FARZIN, MODERN PAINTERS | APRIL 04, 2015



An installation view of "Geometries of Difference: New Approaches to Ornament and Abstraction" at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New Paltz. (Courtesy Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art)

Ornament and abstraction have long been uneasy bedfellows. Modernism was anxious to distinguish abstraction from "mere" ornament, the better to shore up the former's critical capacities. Many decades and Pollock-printed scarves later, artistic critique comes in far more eclectic packaging. But the power dynamic has also been reversed: Abstraction now has to fight for its critical relevance in an art world perfectly content to embrace all manner of ornamental furniture and zombie formalism.

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With “Geometries of Difference: New Approaches to Ornament and Abstraction” at SUNY New Paltz’s Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, open through April 12, curator Murtaza Vali has stepped into this breach. The show brings together work by artists inspired by formal traditions in which the decorative hasn’t been treated with such suspicion. Their work, Vali proposes, reveals a new intersection of the legacies of modernism and ornament. It’s an ambitious premise, but certainly borne out in the work of the seven artists he has selected. Some incorporate materials, themes, and techniques from non-Western cultures and Western subcultures; others infiltrate modernist legacies with ornamental subversions.

Seher Shah’s prints and collages, for example, turn the form-follows-function motto of modernist architecture on its head. *Capitol Complex (Red Cut)*, 2014, sets a photograph of a Brutalist building by architect Le Corbusier against black and red intersecting planes, giving its stern gray grid an origami-like preciousness. Rana Begum’s wall reliefs (*No. 469*, 2014, and *No. 553*, 2013) create a similar perceptual sleight of hand: The sheets of painted aluminum are white on the front, but their sides are folded forward to reveal saturated shades of hot pink and neon yellow that create faint, effervescent halos. All sharp metal edges and sleek matte paint, they nonetheless have the severe delicacy of a Dorothea Rockburne paper foldout.

Begum’s *No. 511*, 2014, dominates the room. The vertical slats covering its surface are painted different colors on each side, so that the work changes from rose to purple to tangerine as the viewer walks past it — an abstraction that refuses to remain bound in time and space. Its clean lines and large size provide a contrasting backdrop for Jeffrey Gibson’s *Building Blocks*, 2012, cinderblocks wrapped in deer hide and placed simply on the floor. Their surfaces — imperfections, stitches, and all — are painted with pastel geometric shapes, creating an effect that is both self-contained and strangely alive.

Gibson’s use of hides — gorgeously deployed in his large-scale paintings, such as the multi-panel *Aurora*, 2013 — will inevitably be read as a reference to his Cherokee-

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Choctaw heritage. But as this grouping suggests, such biographical details can be important. Decontextualization is a key strategy here: that the Pakistani-born Shah sees decorative potential in Le Corbusier's master plans for the Indian city of Chandigarh may owe much to her perspective on modernism's contradictions. In other words, modernism has a lot more possibility when viewed as just another historic — and regional — style. "Geometries of Difference" is that rare show that pulls off two important curatorial challenges: to showcase "difference" in a way that is not coy, simplistic, or heavy-handed and to create a substantial historic context for contemporary experiments with pattern, perception, and color.