

CLEAR  
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SMOKE

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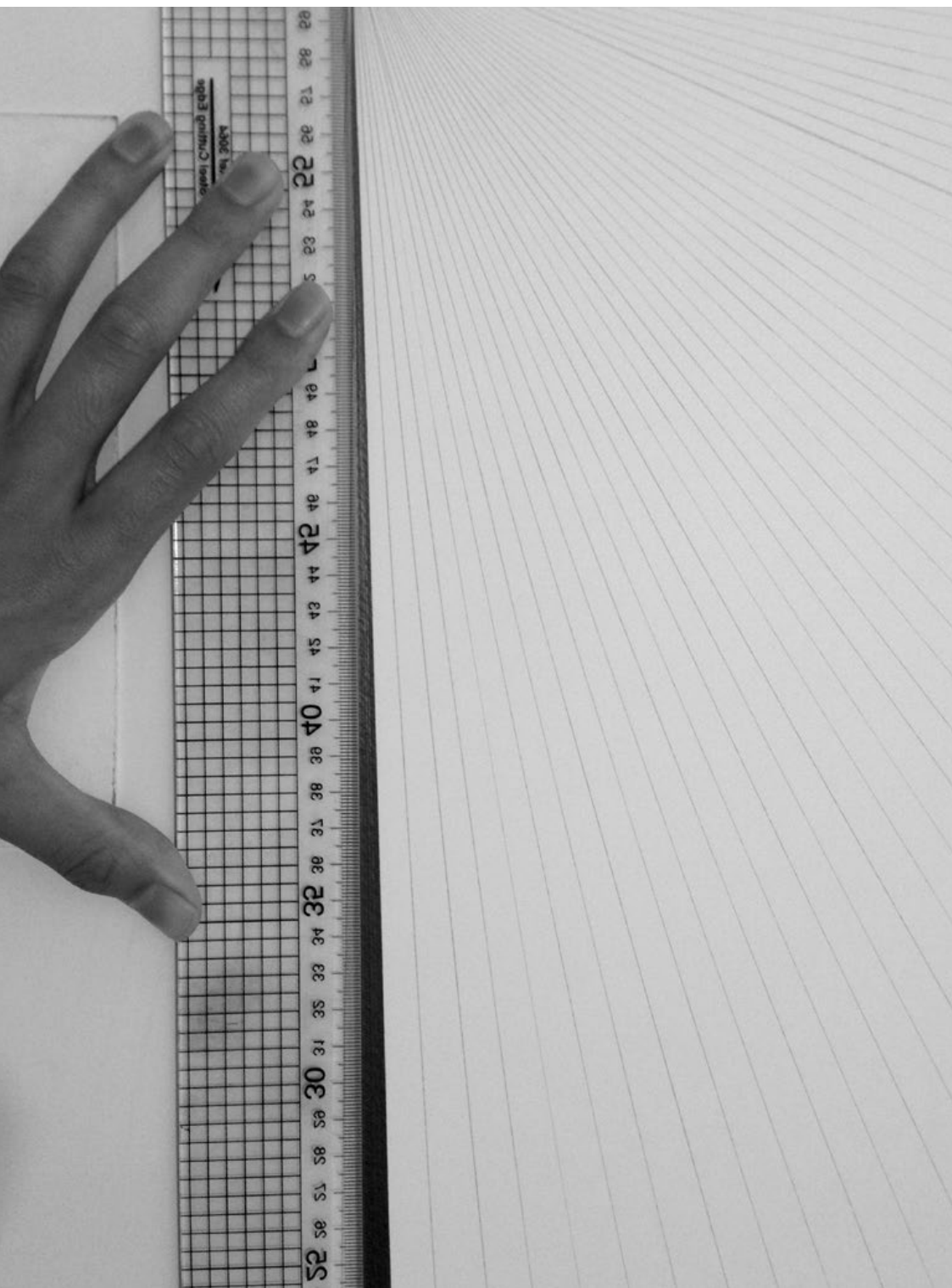
MOHAMMED  
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First Edition 2017

Editor Shanay Jhaveri  
Concept Shanay Jhaveri and Hannah Barry  
Coordination Diana Córdoba Barrios  
Photography Damian Griffiths  
Studio photos Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq  
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/ ARS, New York + DACS, London  
Design Victoria Bridal  
Typefaces Circular and Palatino

*Edited by  
Shanay Jhaveri*

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# SCALING UP, TO SHIFT

SHANAY JHAVERI

Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq's is a nascent practice, one that is still revealing itself. Since his first solo exhibition *Silver* at Hannah Barry Gallery in 2011, in which he presented a group of five maquettes on a raised table, his working methods have altered only slightly, namely, his choosing not to work under the forceful glare of an industrial-size tube light, and the addition of a long daily walk. His tools – pencil, ruler, surgical blades, Rotring compass – remain constant. He has also continued to produce his intricate graphite drawings, which issue from the maquettes, but are not technical views of the pieces, they accentuate the convergence of lines that constitute such objects. With *Clear Black Smoke*, his second presentation at the gallery's new Peckham space, Qasim Ashfaq diligently followed on from where *SILVER* left off, slowly peeling back to reveal the ambition at the heart of his practice, now on full display with his third solo outing with Hannah Barry Gallery.

*Clear Black Smoke* comprised of two graphite drawings, two medium-sized resin pieces *Figure* (2014) and *Pyramids* (2014) and

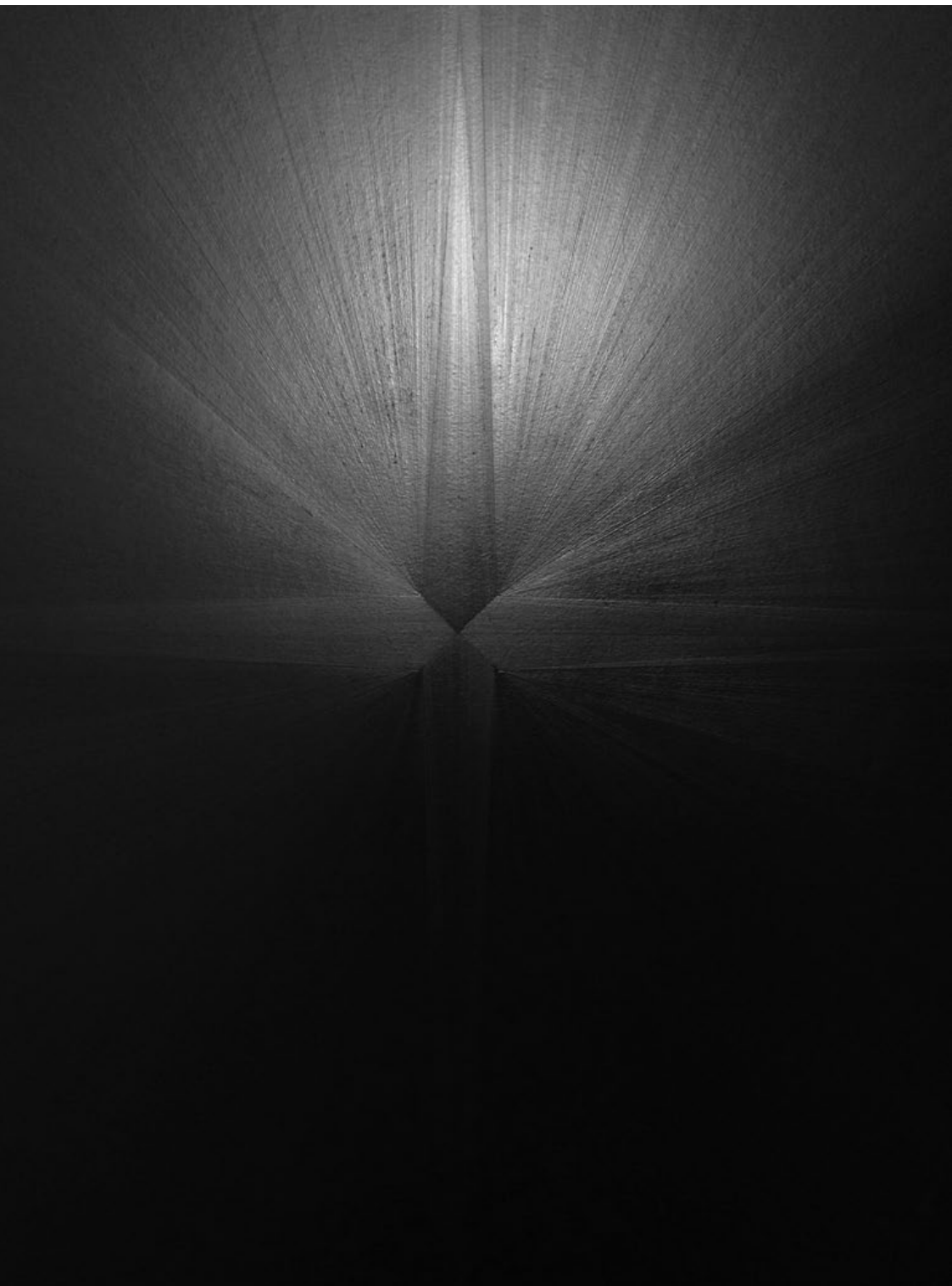
the life-sized sculptural works *Rod* (2010/2014) and *Falling Stars II* (2014). However, the set of drawings had been significantly scaled up from their previous iterations, the diameter of the geometric orbs increased, pulsating with ever greater intensity from the centre of the crisp white sheets of paper. Dense, heavily laboured, and very meticulous, the details, patterning and variation of each drawing only visible up close. Qasim Ashfaq has since continued to push at the boundaries of his practice, and scale seems to be a primary concern, as evident with his 2016 commission for the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, *Shift* (2016), a monumental drawing with a diameter of 5 meters executed directly on the wall. Qasim Ashfaq's scaled up approach to his drawings persists with his latest solo exhibition, again with him choosing to present only another single monumental graphite work.

Qasim Ashfaq's renderings are without doubt results of a fierce precision and order; chance is not a condition he courts. It is hard not to imagine his drawings somehow expanding into architectural space. Having previously exhibited his drawings with fully realized sculptures, Qasim Ashfaq has skillfully enacted a transition from the pictorial rectangle into spectatorial space. This exchange between drawing and sculptural form was thrown into further relief when *Shift* was exhibited not alongside his own sculptures, but looming over a work by Richard Long at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Such pairings prompts the question, how does the private contemplative spatiality of the drawings interface with the very physical and

public orientation of life sized sculptures, especially when they are not his own? It would seem that continued observation of how Qasim Ashfaq navigates this particular equation between drawing and sculpture might be necessary.

Therefore, it is still premature to try and firmly tether Qasim Ashfaq's slowly maturing work to specific historical precedents, referents or legacies that could range from Russian Constructivism and British Minimalist Sculpture to American Post Minimalist abstractions or even traditional Islamic art and architecture and South Asian Modernist drawing. Looking for formal similarities is one way to approach the work, but could prove limiting. Qasim Ashfaq is working within a particular contemporary context, which needs to be considered, as it informs his process and method. This publication that accompanies his third show at Hannah Barry Gallery, does not seek to fix and over-determine a burgeoning practice, and hence takes a more speculative and expansive approach. It contains a series of short texts that are not studies of Qasim Ashfaq's practice, but examine in diverse ways certain matters and notions that seem to preoccupy him and manifest in his work. Also included is an interview with the artist, and a one-word glossary that delves into the complex methods and procedures involved in realizing Qasim Ashfaq's evolving vision.





# BLACK

ALEXIS LOWRY

What exactly do we see when we see black? This question is at the heart of Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq's practice. It is raised not only by his persistent use of black to articulate the sharp geometry of his irregular forms, but also by his penchant for highly reflective black surfaces. Take, for example *Figure*, a glossy pyramidal structure with crisp black edges that appear to cut through the white space of the gallery. A mirroring effect produced by *Figure's* epoxy resin surfaces cloaks the sculpture in the faint likeness of its surroundings, deflecting vision away from *Figure's* material support and bringing into high relief the paradox of the perceptual phenomenon we know as black: aesthetic refusal.

Black is the apperception of the absence of light – a void. It is what we see when we see nothing at all. In the abyss of a lightless room, just as in the abyss of outermost space, we are blind. Yet, this blind spot is completely saturated; the pigment black absorbs all of the colours of the spectrum and reflects none of them. Black is full and empty at the same time. This

tension has driven the history of Western abstraction toward increasingly reductive terms. From Malevich to Reinhardt to Stella we can trace a genealogy of black that critically informs Ashfaq's practice (but one among many histories of black he draws upon).

Kazimir Malevich first used black to articulate the principles of Suprematism. In pursuit of an art of pure form he painted *Black Square* in 1915: an onyx quadrangle that floats almost imperceptibly off centre on a white canvas ground. In its refusal to signify anything but its own geometry, Malevich offered his black square as a kind of secular icon, intended to catalyse the same intimate, experiential intensity as its Byzantine predecessors. Through this transcendent negation, Philip Shaw argues, Malevich found in black 'the obfuscation of vision as the principle of sublime incomprehension'.<sup>1</sup>

Ad Reinhardt similarly turned to black in pursuit of existential affirmation. From 1953 until his death in 1967 he exclusively painted black canvases: each divided into six quadrants of obsessively rendered smooth pigment. Despite their rigid formality, subtle variations between each section emerge with close and extended observation. The trace of a cruciform, for example, appears within Reinhardt's subdivisions, evoking the essentially modern battle between colour and line. Writing of Reinhardt's paintings as modern talismans Sam Hunter notes, 'the less a painting contained the more it conveyed'.<sup>2</sup> In their

insistent and repetitive silence, Reinhardt's black paintings are able to speak volumes about the nature of aesthetic experience.

Several years after Reinhardt's first monochrome, Frank Stella's redacted canvases displaced the struggle between colour and line altogether. Building upon Reinhardt's systematic approach, in 1958 Stella painted his series of *Black Paintings* by applying pigment to canvas in stripes only as wide as the paintbrush and in patterns derived from the shape of the canvas support. Each black line articulated the process of its own determination, privileging the inherent physicality of the stretched canvas above its surface visuality. This was exaggerated by the deep stretcher, which caused the painting to sit off the wall, encroaching into three-dimensional space. Freed of colour, Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* exerted a phenomenological pull on audiences that suggested they were more than just images to behold.

Today, it is impossible to ignore the multivalent nature of aesthetic experience – as both seen and sensed – that was articulated in and through black. As a blind spot on the canvas, black became a presence to reckon with in the gallery.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Shaw, 'Kasimir Malevich's Black Square', in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime* (2013); [www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459).

<sup>2</sup> Sam Hunter, *Ad Reinhardt: Sacred and Profane* (Record of the Art Princeton University, 1991), vol. 50, no. 2, p. 32.





# THINKING THROUGH PERFECT WITH DONATIEN GRAU

**Donatien Grau:** Perfection is at the centre of your vision of art, isn't it?

**Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq:** Perfection is the thing on the horizon that takes all one's energy to reach. So if I'm thinking about something that's here, that has no consequence for what's over there. That's what I've realised over the last couple of months. I knew there was something that was missing, with people not understanding what was missing. No one knows what that thing is. And as soon as that thing is available, or as soon as people see it, or as soon as they can see it, people don't want to understand that it's there. That's the best way I can describe what perfection is. Because perfection does exist, contrary to what everyone says. 'You can't make something straight', etc.: all those can'ts. This is a can't. And yet, you think about doing something, and you do it. You have to do something or nothing is going to be achieved, and you are not going to be able to see something that's not been represented before. It's the self-admission that you can't change the order of things that have arrived before us. All these things that are there.

It's a complete denial that something could exist that's right, or true, or exact. I think people like things when they are not fixed. They are scared of things that are straight and true. That's the thing that goes for it.

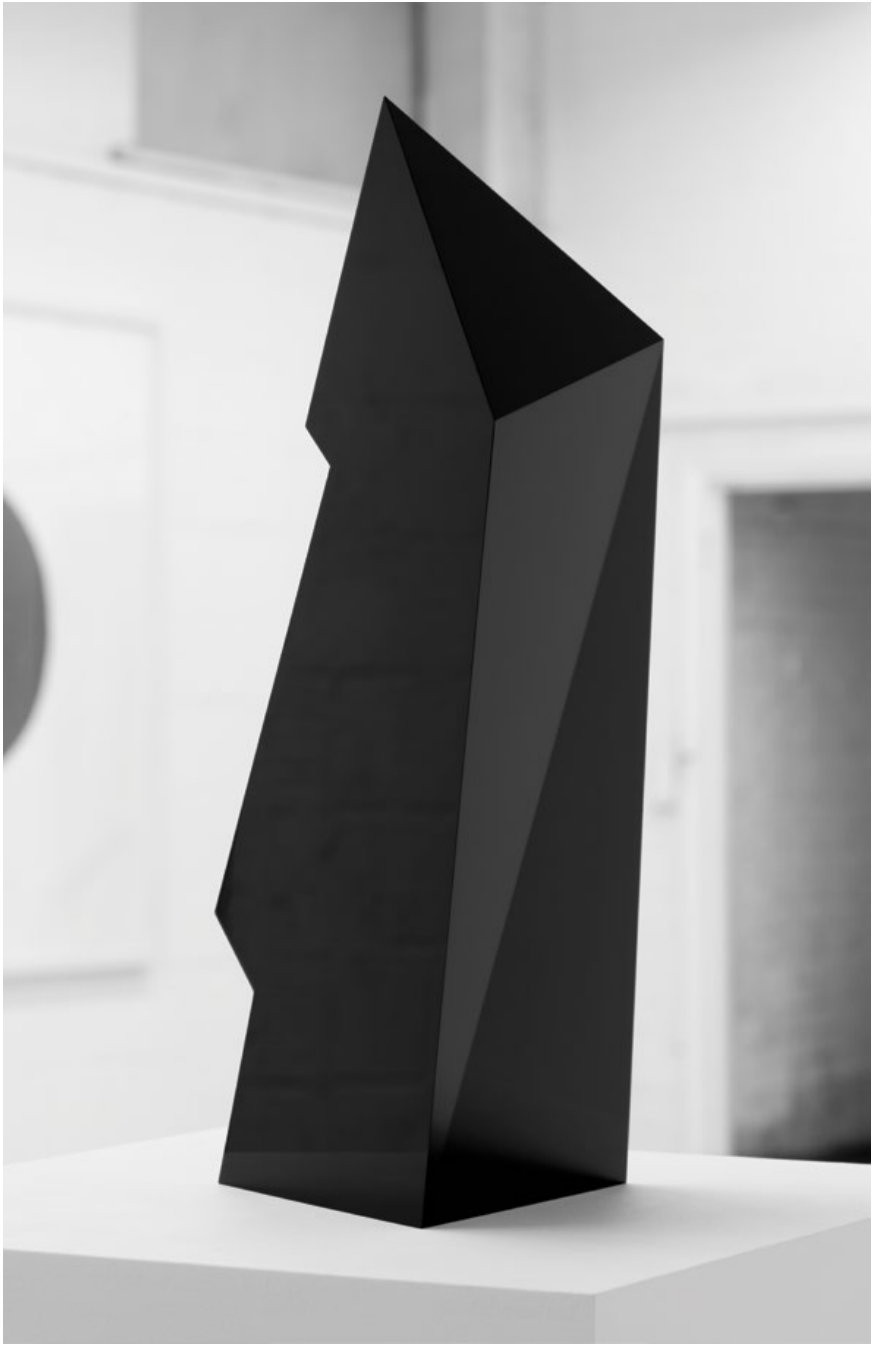
**Donatien:** People are scared of it, but when they experience it, they thoroughly enjoy it: it's fascinating when you see the reaction to the works of James Turrell, Anish Kapoor when he did *Monumenta*, or Marina Abramovic here in London. People are scared but they want to be part of the experience, because all of these works have a relation to a sense of totality, as yours does. It's different because your sense of totality, as opposed to Turrell, as opposed to Kapoor, and in a sense opposed to Marina Abramovic, is not monumental. It doesn't appear as monumental. It's a sort of human scale monument, in a sense.

**Mohammed:** I don't necessarily think that you have to make something ten metres tall. I don't think that you need to build a mountain somewhere. I don't think you need to destroy a mountain somewhere, in order to have an effect, which is greater than doing some art.

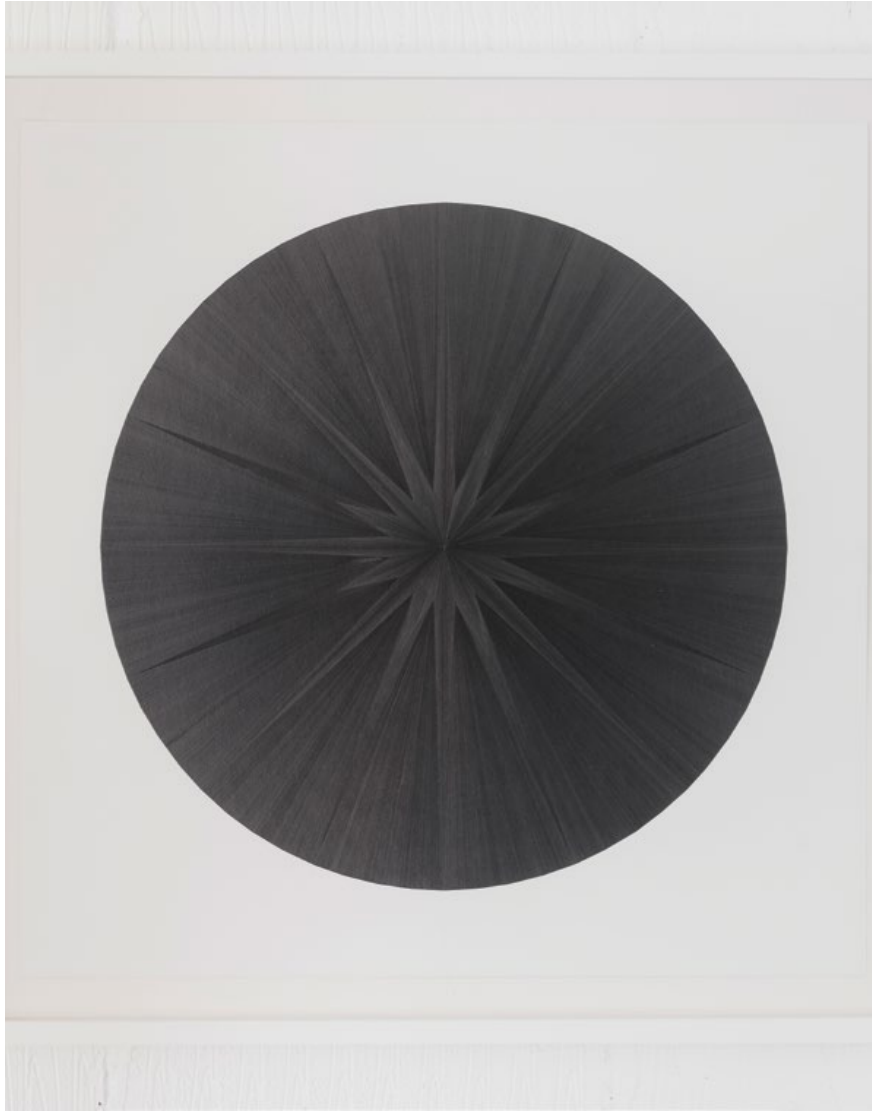
**Donatien:** You use these smaller shapes. There seems to be really an obvious will on your side to make small objects. It's not just that you want to make them big but that you want to make them small.

















**Mohammed:** Oh, I'd love to make things big. If you just look at the night sky, I'd like to make them that big. You can make things that are big. Make things as big as a glass. Completely change the thing. You can do it. Scale. How can we be churning out stuff not realising that there is no change whatsoever, and that it's always like this? But then you can just make something, one thing, it's way more powerful than any of those things, in a way. Just because it exists on its own. It's complete. It's whole. It demonstrates its own vision. I think that's way more beautiful.

**Donatien:** That has to do with a form of mysticism. With the fact that it is an object that brings you somewhere else. It's not even an icon, really.

**Mohammed:** I think that's right. I used to joke that *Rod* (2010) had been orbiting the earth for many millennia and then it just sort of landed on the earth. I'm surprised that no one's seen these objects before. I mean how many artists are there? How many people make things? And no one has ever decided that this is the thing they are going to make.

**Donatien:** They are self-evident, and yet they are really fragile.

**Mohammed:** If you could make something that was that beautiful then it would be fragile. Because you would be on that sort of precipice: just a slight tilt and you're gone. That's what it's about. Getting so close to it. In the grand scheme of things we are nowhere. There is just that slight glimpse of it. When

the light hits it. And you can just see it for a bare millisecond that it exists. It reaffirms itself. It is there. And we go towards it. We have to try even harder to get there.

**Donatien:** The process of making the work is somehow related to that evolution.

**Mohammed:** I've got nothing to do with where I am. I've got nothing to do with those objects existing. It's all to do with the people who have helped make it happen. It's completely by mistake, completely by chance that these things exist. But the people I work with, they made it happen. I can just sit in my room, make things with card, and worry about them existing and being real, real materials, real solid materials, finding fabricators to help make the work. That's the next level. I bring you this, in card, and you've got to make that real. Present it in a way that it's not disposable. Not just an abstraction. It's all to do with finding someone who can do it to the exact standards. I think it's easy for artists to achieve a vision of their work which is a rough translation. But when you are confronted with a piece of work, when you see something that is exactly like it is, the first thing you want to say is that it's bad. Because you don't want to believe how good it is. How often do people look at things and say, 'that is so poorly fabricated', 'why is it made badly?'. It looks like an accident, it looks like a nightmare: how can you go so far with this material, and yet be so completely complicit in finding a truth? Some people may understand perfection:

60% of what perfection actually is, they think it's good enough, and so they don't see the fine moments, to 98%, to 99%.

**Donatien:** And 100%. What about 100%?

**Mohammed:** I think it would take two years to get from 0% to 90%, you know. It might take four years to get from 90% to 95%. It might take a lifetime to get to 95... But that's not a problem. The thing is: you can get there.

**Donatien:** Your art explores a side of the visual language while not being part of the visual culture of art. We were talking about geographical identifications. In each of these works, the symbols you use are universal.

**Mohammed:** That's why I don't think that the fact I'm Muslim is a massive thing. I don't even think that it's a massive thing that we are all human. I don't even know what the current human number is seven billion or whatever it is. In terms of history, that's insignificant. I think it's very easy to say: 'oh he's Muslim and that is related to his use of geometry'. That confines the discussion. You are asking someone to look at it from here. Head on, straight on, ninety degree, on a wall. That's it. You are asking to look at it from that point of view only. And I think that is a difficult thing to understand. Because everything that we see in a visual culture is from that one angle. You never see something from the wrong angle. I just like this idea that they just fell to earth and that this millisecond that we see

these objects is just the millisecond that we see them. They fell through the ceiling and just magically appeared.

**Donatien:** And why are they dark?


**Mohammed:** I don't know. It would be easy to say space is black; and you see yourself reflected in the work, so it sets something off. I like shiny surfaces. I think there is something in perfecting the work. You can look at something in the space; be there and not be there at the same time. But it's not an illusion. I'm not trying to poke fun at the viewer. Maybe it's like the sky. The pure material. That's what I think; materials have to be black, or silver, or polished. Maybe white, but I'm not sure yet; that's pure material as well. I don't see it as being a conversation with black. It's no way they exist like other colours like blue or red or green or yellow. I think of Yves Klein: one of the most wonderful things I've ever seen, a blue canvas, and a gold canvas. I don't think you can get better than that in terms of colour.

**Donatien:** When Mark Rothko made black paintings, the reason was that he was reading the Talmud. Black is the tone, that, when you look at it, in a way always changes. When you look at black it can glow. As Soulages does, it really is a palette in its own right. A palette, not only in terms of paint but also in terms of the viewer. Black is the colour that is most likely to push the viewer to change and experience something as a human being.

**Mohammed:** Do you think so?

**Donatien:** When you think about other colours, when you think about white, white can get distorted, dirty, but black can't, black can't get dirty.

**Mohammed:** Yes, but black can show dust like no other thing. This notion of trying to hide something. You can't hide dust on a black surface. You can't hide anything on black. Think of dust on a mirror. You can't see it from a certain angle. But on black you can see dust from any angle. Yes, particularly if it's shiny.

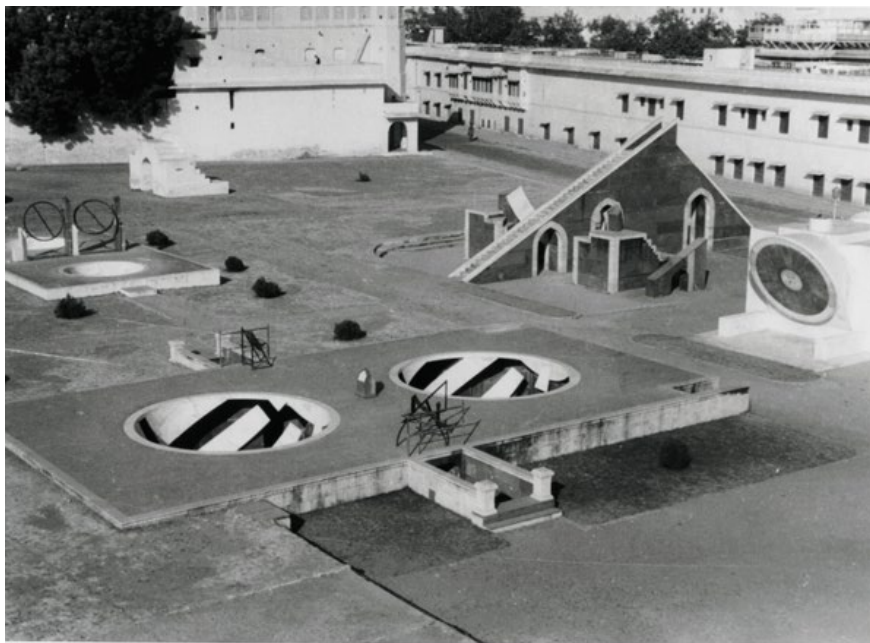
A black and white photograph of a cluttered desk. In the center is a large, dark, rounded lamp with a textured top. To its left is a long, thin ruler with the text 'LINEX ROLLING RULER' and 'UHU The All Purpose Adhesive' visible. Below the ruler are several papers, including one with a portrait and the number '10'. To the right of the lamp is a large, dark, triangular object. In the foreground, there are various small objects, including a circular protractor, pens, and a small box. The desk surface is covered with these items, creating a sense of a workspace in the middle of a project.

# MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES: ISAMU NOGUCHI AND THE JANTAR MANTAR

DEVIKA SINGH

In the eighteenth century Maharaja Jai Singh II, the founder of modern Jaipur, commissioned five astronomical observatories known as the Jantar Mantars. The ones in Delhi and Jaipur are the best preserved ones. Their instruments, some designed by Jai Singh himself, have been a source of inspiration for many artists and architects who came to India over the centuries and the Jantar Mantars remain amongst the most popular sites of India. Many visitors don't know how to use the instruments or what exactly each is meant for. But this is beside the point. The Jantar Mantar is an amusement park made of abstract shapes. My own photo albums since childhood are replete with images of the triangular and crater-like formations located in the centre of Jaipur, my family's hometown. Indians and foreigners alike have felt a special attachment to this arrangement of odd and delectable forms. Isamu Noguchi, who took many photographs of both Delhi's and Jaipur's Jantar Mantar, is one of them.





Though his links with the country date back to a much earlier period of his life, Noguchi only visited India in 1949 with a grant from the Bollingen Foundation. He arrived in Bombay via Italy, Greece and Egypt and toured the country's main architectural sites for about six months. As Masayo Duus puts it, 'by looking at remains of ancient cultural monuments and sculpture, Isamu hoped to understand how artists had established relationships with society in earlier times'.<sup>1</sup> In addition his photographs also spoke of the postwar context of the time. Perhaps the most unusual image he took of the Jantar Mantar shows a young boy making his way through a maze of huge jagged shapes. The site looks derelict and Noguchi conveys a suffocating atmosphere that is unlike any other photograph of the Jantar Mantar. It recalls the desolate landscapes and rubble of postwar Europe recorded by Roberto Rossellini and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Except that contrary to them, Noguchi's work was not about testimony or record.

Writing in 1949, the year of his first trip to India that would eventually take him to Japan, Noguchi wrote that, 'in the creation and existence of a piece of sculpture, individual possession has less significance than public enjoyment'.<sup>2</sup> Though most of his projects on India remained unrealized, the repeated trips Noguchi made across the country had a lasting influence throughout his career. Caught somewhere between architecture, outdoor sculpture and giant scientific prop, Delhi's heart shaped *Misra Yantra* would thus serve as the primary source for Noguchi's *Slide Mantra* – a big marble spiral exhibited at



the Venice biennale in 1986 when Noguchi represented the United States.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the usually frontal images of the Taj Mahal, as well as the slightly repetitive takes on the giant gutter that tops Chandigarh's Assembly building, there is no prescribed way of photographing the Jantar Mantar landscapes. The unusually frontal design of the *Misra Yantra* is an exception. But Noguchi didn't keep to it. His sculpture is a giant swirl; inside an interior staircase leads to a slide. Its black version now sits in a park in Sapporo and can be used by children and grown-ups alike.

Devoid of their original function and reduced to their design, the Jantar Mantar instruments pay homage to Indian science and its maverick inventors. First meant to record the movement of the sun, moon and the planets, they remain, like the precise futuristic and at times sci-fi constructions that make up Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq's installations, a yardstick to measure our infinitely small presence in the universe and convey our desire to understand it.



<sup>3</sup> Masayo Duus, *The Life of Isamu Noguchi: Journey without Borders* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Isamu Noguchi, 'Towards a Reintegration of the Arts', *College Art Journal* (1949), vol. 9, no. 1, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Miller, *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* (Penguin Books, 2010), p. 44.



# POTENTIAL ART

BEN EASTHAM

I want to take this opportunity to speculate upon, and thereby to circuitously celebrate, a creative method I have long admired, and of which Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq's drawings and sculptures seem to me exceptionally refined expressions. It is a technique premised upon the achievement of the sublime or beautiful, if I can be forgiven the terms (given the brevity of this text and your familiarity with the quibbles), through variations upon a single, predetermined theme. Patterns, rules and structures are posited as catalysts rather than obstructions to creative expression; the 'light bulb' theory of divine inspiration is replaced by something closer to an architect's intelligent design.

The approach, most easily described with reference to the movements in which its principles are enshrined, is one that I most closely associate with the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*. Founded by the mathematician François Le Lionnais and writer Raymond Queneau, the OuLiPo group sought to develop a style of literature premised upon the adoption of a rule, formula or 'constraint' that would guide the writer in his compositional

choices. A novelist might, for example, write a book that forsakes the letter 'e' (as Georges Perec did in *La Disparition*); a poet publish a series of sonnet sections which, through their arrangement in different combinations, creates one hundred thousand billion separate possible poems, each a permutation on ten originals (Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poemes*). The strict definition of the composition's constitutive elements does not, these works demonstrate, meaningfully restrict the variety of possible outcomes but rather generates divergent thinking, the cornerstone of creative activity. Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention.

40 • The founding tenet of OuLiPo contravenes the popular conception of the creative act as an expression of absolute freedom, of liberation from the habits and institutions we hold responsible for repressing the expressive instincts that supposedly inhere in us. By contrast, OuLiPo promotes the voluntary acceptance of 'constraints', an imaginative infrastructure through the negotiation of which it is possible to create new things. This has always struck me as an enticing counterargument to the notion that we should abandon our inhibitions, rediscover our inner children, and return to smearing paint upon the walls.

The OuLiPo movement found a parallel in the practice of Systemic Painting, to use the term coined by Lawrence Alloway, which emerged in the United States at around the same time. Artists such as Frank Stella, Agnes Martin and Kenneth Noland explored repetition and pattern in the creation

of abstract paintings premised upon geometrical rhythms. Yet their adoption of precise systems, Alloway wrote in a catalogue accompanying a seminal exhibition of their work, 'is not antithetical to the values suggested by such art world wordclusters as humanist, organic, and process. On the contrary, while the artist is engaged with it, a system is a process.' The creation of an underlying framework is thus reconciled with our traditional understanding of creativity as expressive, originary, demiurgic.

The impulse to exploit artifice precisely as a means to transcend artifice is not new, and once you start looking is everywhere. J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (1741) best demonstrate the musician's aspiration to the divine through the adoption of axiomatic principles; the 22-year-old Glenn Gould's 1955 interpretation of them demonstrates how even a work fixed in the canon can be twisted into something new, thrilling and previously inconceivable. The fractal designs that structure David Foster Wallace's writing draw on patterns that have only recently revealed themselves to us, the feedback loops of artists such as Ed Atkins on those that we have lately invented. In the incorporation of these structural buttresses to our own fragile intelligence inheres the desire, it seems to me, to overcome them. Now I perceive this same compulsion, in the supremely rarefied permutations upon a scheme that characterise Qasim Ashfaq's practice.

These codes are developed in the artist's case from sources as diverse as the arabesque textile patterns of the Ottoman era, logical positivism, and late twentieth-century science fiction. Most importantly, his work is premised upon the principles that have guided the representation of the divine in Islamic art, architecture and ornamentation since the seventh century, and which have much in common with the methodologies I have sought briefly to outline.

The fact remains that the visitor to this exhibition is more likely to be struck dumb by the grandeur of the works on show than to devote much thought to the procedures by which they were achieved. That is a symptom of their success. Unforeseeable effects are here wrought through predictable processes; a neat encapsulation, if one is needed, of what it means to make art in any form.





# PERFECTION

CHARLIE CLARKE

Mohammed Qasim Ashafq continually refers to a desire for perfection in his work, so I think this might be worth considering a little.

The notion of there being a perfect or ideal form 'out there' waiting to be achieved seems at odds with the way many artists work; it implies a predetermined conclusion rather than an exploration into the unknown, a visible goal rather than the application of a method whose result cannot be predicted and the importance of which will not be known until afterwards.

I had always thought of failure as the most important outcome of the pursuit of perfection in art.

Of course, by failure I don't mean incompetence or catastrophe; I mean that to create an object (painting, drawing or sculpture) which is a perfect realisation of the impulse from which it came, could one do it, would somehow be to create something known, possible to preconceive and beyond the fallibility of everything human. It would feel processed and therefore strangely cold

and unmoving. But the point at which an artist gives up and accepts what they have made is the point at which the shortfall between result and intention defines their achievement.

The idiosyncrasy of the resultant object is, by default, a true and unselfconscious expression. It is not the arrival at perfection that is important; it is the striving for it.

In failure, one defines oneself in a way which cannot be contrived. The beautiful and moving works of art we see in the world's museums are often just such failures which we treasure because we relate to them with a powerful sense of communication made possible by the fact that they are the product of a very human endeavour.

Failure, I thought, marks the frontier of an artist's accomplishment, and as a consequence it is here that we find the purest expression.

Qasim Ashafq, though, seems to know where he is going, and where he is taking us. He expresses a true faith that perfection in his work is not only possible, but that its achievement is his duty. He often talks of his works as if they must have always existed, and it is true that having encountered one, it is hard to imagine a world where they were not always present.

Perhaps he was born with them, or perhaps they come from the beginning of time. That sounds a bit majestic, but there is a sense with Qasim Ashafq that it is not he who is choosing.

Making, therefore, is not discovering or creating: the objects have already been 'created'. Making is a matter of realising and revealing.

The processes of drawing and sculpting maquettes for Qasim Ashafq involve measuring, marking, applying a straightedge, and drawing along it either pencil graphite or scalpel blade with unerring accuracy; the repeated action requiring highly consistent patience and resolve. Here the artist is directly in control.

Sculpture, however, involves activities which are altogether more complex. Diverse materials are worked by engineers, craftsmen and technicians who are drawn into a collaboration led by the charisma of the artist. Those involved are inspired by a sense of purpose.

When an object begins to appear in which success can be glimpsed, this fuels a renewed momentum. In the pursuit of perfection, for Qasim Ashafq, the failures point back to the drawing board, but the successes light the path ahead.



Qasim Ashafq's latest body of work has been a long time in the making, and this is probably because, up until now, the next step has always been immediately apparent.

But recently a half-landing seems to have been arrived at, where the objects have been cast free from the hands that made them. They have a kind of aura which suggests that the viewer cannot touch them, that they have never been touched, and the visual effect is quite hypnotic.

What we are seeing is not perfection; if it were there would be no reason to carry on. But we do see sculptures and drawings which already take us further than we would ever have thought possible.

To use Qasim Ashafq's own language, we have been taken over the hill and our horizons have broadened. But what's over the hill? Another hill, of course.



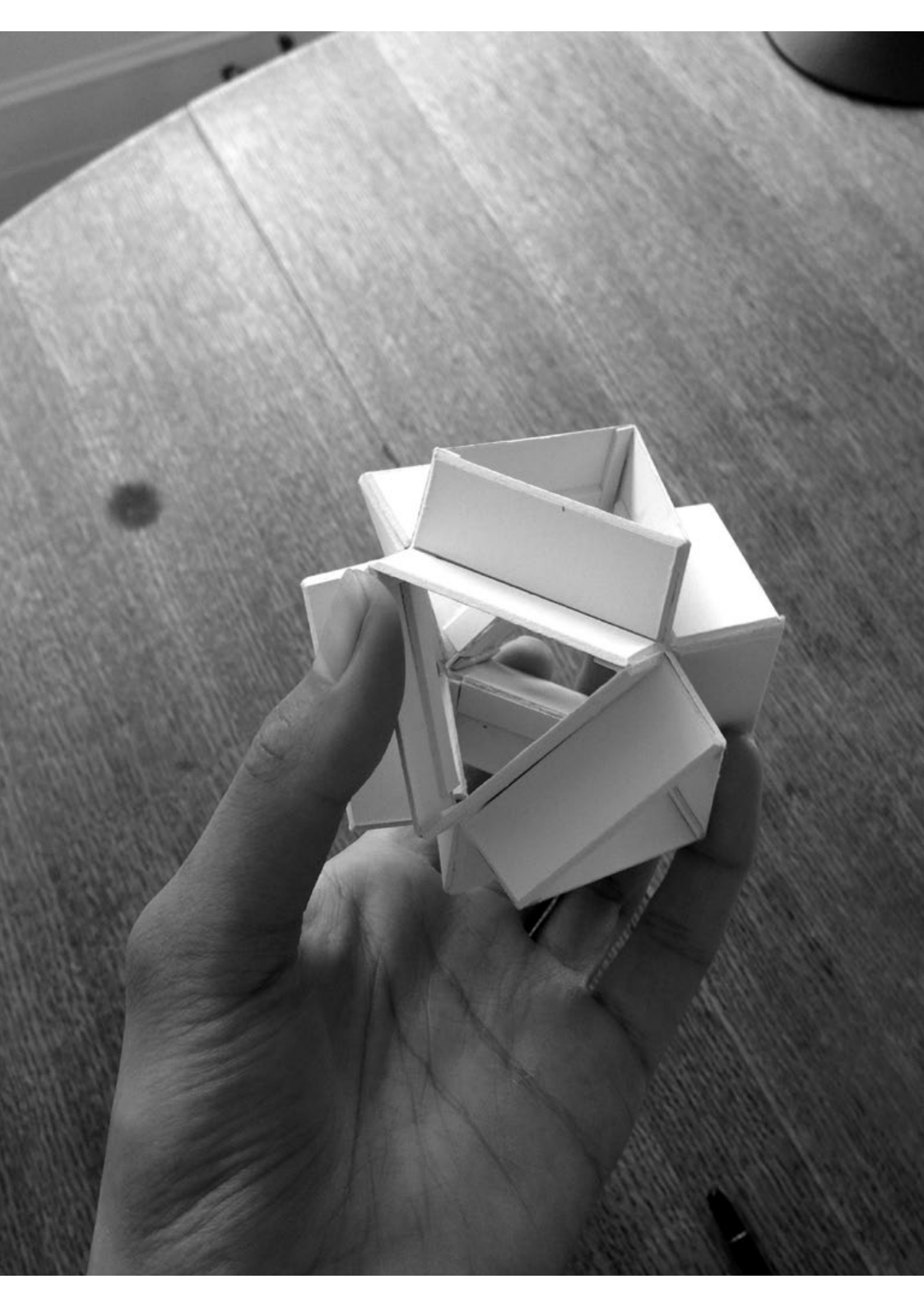
In a similar way, encountering one of Mohammed Qasim Ashafq's works evokes a startling sense of a visitation. Perhaps this is what it feels like to experience the divine? He appears to draw on ancient reservoirs of tranquil meditation in a practice where process and materiality are foregrounded, creating monochromatic geometric forms – drawings and sculptures – that commune in non-specific terms. Clearly influenced by aspects of both Islamic and modern art, his drawings invite a deep contemplation akin to a devotional practice, where the work opens up a portal for communication that ultimately routes into a sense of self that is spiritual or intellectual, but not embodied.

It was this specific quality of Qasim Ashafq's work that led us to commission him to create a new site specific work for the upper gallery of Modern Art Oxford. Forming part of a group show in our year-long 50th anniversary programme, *Its Me To The World* explored ideas of embodied experience and cognition in relation to the environment, and asked how we might connect more with ourselves in response to nature. The exhibition took its title from a statement from British land artist, Richard Long who said: 'My footsteps make the mark. My legs carry me across the country. Its like a way of measuring the world. I love that connection to my own body. Its me to the world.'

Qasim Ashafq's contemplative drawings aligned to our interest in the artistic mediation of interior and exterior worlds in the most economic and distilled way. The large drawing was

created in situ on the gallery wall over several days while the visiting public wandered through the gallery, asserting the performative aspects of his process, with the resulting drawing a temporary piece that would shortly be lost in time. Taking into its shimmering graphite surface the structures and shifting light of the gallery space, the large orbital drawing exercised a planetary gaze onto the works and audience below, a gravitational void in the voluminous space that combined drawing, sculpture and installation in a succinct form.

Qasim Ashafq's piece looked over Richard Long's *Walking a Labyrinth* commissioned for the Modern Art Oxford in 1971 and reinstalled as one of many works returning to the gallery for our 50th anniversary. It was accompanied by *Thunder* (2005) by Hannah Rickards, a recording of an eight-second thunder-clap stretched into a seven-minute passage, transcribed and arranged into a score for a sextet by composer David Murphy. The subsequent performance was recorded and compressed to the original length of the thunder clap of eight seconds. All of the works took embodied cognitive experience and translated it into forms of meditation, in doing so drawing on linguistic, spatial and performative systems. Set within this trio of very different practices, Qasim Ashafq's *Shift* represented a powerful sense of order and perfection, serving to open up new space for an intense – sometimes divine - encounter with the work and its form and ourselves.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**ALEXIS LOWRY** is an Associate Curator at Dia Art Foundation in New York City. Prior to joining Dia, she was Curator of the David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University.

**BEN EASTHAM** is the Co-Founder and Editor of *The White Review*, and Assistant Editor of *art-agenda*. He is the co-author with Katya Tylevich of *My Life as a Work of Art* (Laurence King, 2016).

**CHARLIE CLARKE** is an art technician with over twenty years experience working with museums, galleries and artists.

**DONATIEN GRAU** is a scholar and writer based in Paris, a Contributing Editor of *Flash Art International*, an Editor at Large of *Purple Fashion Magazine* and advisor to Azzedine Alaïa for the Maison Alaïa's non-for-profit exhibition space, the Galerie.

**DEVIKA SINGH** is an art historian, critic and curator based in Paris, a fellow at the Centre Allemand d'Histoire de l'Art (Max Weber Foundation) and an associate scholar at the Centre of South Asian Studies of the University of Cambridge.

**SHANAY JHAVERI** is Assistant Curator, South Asia, Modern and Contemporary Art, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**PAUL HOBSON** is Director of Modern Art Oxford.

# ILLUSTRATED WORKS

## FIGURE

2014-15

Solid resin

51 cm high

## FALLING STARS I

2013

Lacquered steel

Three parts, each 88 x 143 x 82 cm

Installation guide dimensions approx. 100 x 289 x 192 cm

## FALLING STARS II

2014

Lacquered steel

Three parts, each 88 x 143 x 82 cm

Installation guide dimensions approx. 100 x 250 x 100 cm

## BEADS

2010-14

Solid resin and rope

Three parts, each 12 cm diameter

Installation dimensions variable

## MASS III

2014

Graphite on Fabriano

4 Smooth, 200gsm

Overall paper size 75 x 75 cm

Geometry diameter 60 cm

## PYRAMIDS

2010-14

Sheet resin

67 x 60 x 69 cm

## ROD

2010-14

Solid aluminium

3 m high

## SHIFT

2016

Graphite

250 x 250 cm

*It's Me to the World* installation view, 2016 © Modern Art Oxford

Photo by Ben Westoby





FLYING SCOTSMAN



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