

review



THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

The Met Breuer, the new home for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's modern and contemporary collection, has opened in New York with a Nasreen Mohamedi exhibition. **Andy Battaglia** reports on the institution's new commitment to a global perspective

There's a spot in the Met Breuer, a bold and ambitious new addition to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where visitors might find it oddly hard to stand. The floor feels somehow misaligned against the axis of the Earth. Balance is difficult to come by; the walls seem to waver all around.

The cause is not architectural negligence – this is a landmark building designed by one of history's great architects, after all – but rather the quiet, solemn power of the drafted line.

Lines are elemental in art, a common language and a recognisable tool that can somehow be suffused with the character of the artist who marked them.

So it goes with the hypnotic, mesmerising lines of Nasreen Mohamedi. The Indian artist, who died in 1990, is known for geometric painting and drawing,

and is the subject of a new retrospective installed to inaugurate the Met Breuer, one of the most momentous and anticipated museum openings in the United States for years.

The occasion is a big one, for the Met and others who orbit it as supporters of the idea of museums as noble pursuits. The main mothership Met, founded in New York in 1870, occupies a massive Beaux-Arts building on Fifth Avenue, the anchor of Museum Mile and a destination for more than six million visitors last year. Its collection covers 5,000 years of art from around the globe, with more than two million works in its collection. It is, in the simplest terms, one of the most distinguished museums in the world.

Met Breuer, continued on 6 →

review the cover

this week's essential reading

'You can never be too late in Havana' by Jochen-Martin Gutsch, Der Spiegel

'In 1992, people were already saying: hurry up. The old Cuba won't be around for much longer! The Soviet Union had just breathed its last breath. And Cuba was bound to follow'

this week's essential reading

'Pay and the "Lady Players" of Tennis' by Adam Chandler in The Atlantic

'That hasn't stopped Serena Williams from winning more Grand Slam titles than any of her male counterparts. That's also true for Margaret Court, Steffi Graf, Helen Wills Moody ...'



Below, visitors through the exhibition *Unfinished* at the opening of the Met Breuer on March 18, in New York City. An expansion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, its modern and contemporary collection is now housed in the Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue, home to the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1966 until 2014. Spencer Platt / Getty Images Clockwise from above left: Indian modernist artist Nasreen Mohamedi's *Untitled*, ink on paper (1960s); *Untitled*, ink and graphite on paper (1975); *Untitled*, gelatin silver print (1970); *Unfinished* installation, various artists. Courtesy private collection; Sikander and Hydari Collection; Chatterjee and Lal Gallery; the Metropolitan Museum of Art

'As you think more about it, she kind of rewrites art history'

→ Met Breuer, continued from 1

The new Met Breuer is a few blocks away, in a building that played home for decades to the younger, hipper Whitney Museum of American Art, which moved with great fanfare to a gleaming new location downtown in the spring of last year. The vacated building was devised in 1966 by Marcel Breuer, one of the most famous descendants of the Bauhaus school of modernist architecture and design. After his education and work as a teacher at the school, Breuer left Nazi Germany for London and later the United States, where he settled shortly before the Second World War.

For the Met, Breuer's radically modernist building — with its stacked planar façade and stark dynamism inside — offered an already-iconic home for the museum's growing ambitions in the realm of contemporary art. For much of its history, the Met had been indifferent or even hostile to the notion of art of recent vintage, placing its faith instead in the consecrated wisdom of the ages. Other museums could race to contend with the present and recent past; the Met, in all its grandeur, had many more thousands of years to advocate.

That mode of thinking began to change with the appointment of a new director in 2008, which set the course for a journey to the present and that strange, seemingly wobbly spot now on the Met Breuer's second floor — where it is hard not to lose one's bearings while staring deep into ethereal geometric space traced by Mohamedi's lines. The impact of the work is dizzying and the presence of such work also says a lot about the Met's evolving sense of self and the broader context of contemporary art. It's a worldly, enterprising exhibition of an artist effectively unknown in the West, and the effect of it has real potential to resonate for years, maybe ages, to come.

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At a press preview a few weeks ago, Met director Thomas Campbell mused over "the rich context of our global and historic collections" that range "across time, geography and multiple art forms". His invocation of global geography was familiar to those who had been paying attention, as broadening the Met's contemporary purview has been part of the museum's narrative for the past few years.

Historically, when the Met trafficked in contemporary art it was with a tendency to fix its vision on the West. The realm of contemporary art has changed though, and among its most dynamic aspects is the pointed, active and even manic crossing of borders into newly-perceived hotspots, ranging from Latin America and Eastern Europe to South Asia and the Mena region.

To marshal the change, Campbell hired Sheena Wagstaff as chair of the Met's modern and contemporary department; she'd spent 10 years as chief curator at London's Tate Modern.

For Wagstaff, the notion of borderlessness was natural. Talking just before the Met Breuer opened to the public on March 18, our conversation quickly turns to a borough in New York in which 120 languages are spoken, by a wildly diverse population from all over the globe. That borough, Queens, is just a few subway stops away from the Met Breuer's home on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Wagstaff says she chose to signal a sense of internationalism in the Met Breuer's name, which highlights the role of an émigré architect enlisted at a historical point in time when America was asserting itself as a world power and a global centre for art.

"We have a visitorship that has a natural inclination to look at work from different cultural backgrounds," Wagstaff says, while noting that the Met's collections in different departments instinctively cover "not only 5,000 years' worth of creative activity but also an enormous global span".



James Hunter Black Draftee (1965) by US artist Alice Neel. Courtesy Comma Foundation, Belgium

As chair of modern and contemporary art, she says, "My job is to reflect that span and identify the most interesting crucibles of artistic activity across the world. That varies enormously and changes all the time."

Among her main areas of interest is the Middle East, reflected in her appointment of a designated curator for the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey. (Other areas with specialist curators so far include Latin America and South Asia, with hopes for more to come.)

Clare Davies, who started in the job late last summer, boasts an eclectic resume with extended stints living as well as travelling throughout the region. After growing up with academic parents who worked in the Gaza Strip and then Tunisia, Sudan and Egypt, she went to university in the US, in California. "After graduating, I worked at some galleries," Davies says, "but I was reading about the art scene in Cairo and thought it sounded much more interesting than what I was exposed to in Los Angeles."

She moved back and took up work at downtown Cairo's Townhouse Gallery. After that came graduate studies in the US with a dissertation in Egyptian modern art, a fellowship in Berlin and, now, a new post in New York with the weight of a formidable institution behind her.

In initial discussions with Wagstaff, Davies found a department head whose engagement with her areas of interest was sufficiently nuanced and complex.

"There's a growing institutional presence in something called 'modern and contemporary art from the Middle East'," Davies says. "But as that institutional presence has developed, there's a tendency to lock in a narrative, and certain tropes become associated as a sort of shorthand. What's happening now and historically is much richer than what gets reflected in that process. What I'm interested in is how complicated it is, how nuanced it is, how many different directions it leads you in. There are a lot of blind spots that are not able to account for all that."

The collective sense of accounting has held out some significant signs of deepening reverence for art from the region, including the astute 2014 New Museum survey *Here and Elsewhere*, with 45 artists from 15 countries in the Arab world, and an impressive "Menam" focus at the Armory Show last year.

A high-profile solo show by the Lebanese artist

Walid Raad was on view at the Museum of Modern Art until January, and right now, a month-long Live Ideas festival programme is nearing the end of a slate of events in New York under the banner "MENA/Future — Cultural Transformations in the Middle East North Africa Region".

Activity of the sort is welcome and increasingly engaged, but Davies says she remains wary of the pitfalls that can attend other, more superficial, geographical surveys that are over-generalising staples at biennials and art fairs.

"I want to avoid the false friends of legibility in terms of understanding artistic practice," Davies says. "Sometimes you get a better sense of where an artist is coming from when they're de-familiarised. For a work of art produced in Lebanon in the 1960s, getting a sense of what was at stake at that moment for the artist and then also reflecting on what it means to see this work in 2016 at the Met Breuer in New York — that dislocation is important to consider. It's a complicated set of issues to grapple with. I don't want to gloss over the complexity."

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How modern and contemporary art from beyond the West will ultimately be situated in the new Met Breuer remains to be seen. For now, there's the presence of Mohamedi in a show with quiet, sustained and surprising power.

"I was thinking about the necessity to do an exhibition as a counterpoint to *Unfinished*," Wagstaff says, in reference to the other opening show, *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*. That one, splayed across two floors and drawing on blue-chip holdings and borrowings from the Renaissance to the present, surveys art that was never completed or else comes across as evanescent in some way.

The exhibit has borne the brunt of some bad reviews, most of which praise the older art (Titian, Manet, Vermeer) while pointing out that, when it comes to work of more recent times, the premise wears thin. One review, by Jerry Saltz of *New York* magazine, laid into the Met for not taking better advantage of its worldly holdings in a show that fixes on too many familiar places and names.

Wagstaff says the survey was originally meant to venture more widely into ancient Egypt and Africa but that the choice had been made to focus on western art and its legacy of painting. A worldly counterpoint, she said, was conceived from the start by way of a focus on Mohamedi.

Little known in the West, working at a time when men dominated, and accomplished in minimalist, geometric modes often attributed to movements in the West, Mohamedi provides a resounding rebuke to many ideas and preconceptions that, in the past, might have worked against her.

Vijay Iyer, a jazz musician commissioned for a 21-day performance residency at the Met Breuer, was so taken with Mohamedi's art that he wrote a composition in its spirit, newly released as an album on ECM Records titled *A Cosmic Rhythm With Each Stroke*.

"It's a knockout body of work," Iyer says of the Mohamedi show. "I was really inspired by the fact that she was from India and that she occupies the historical moment she did. She prefigures a lot of what happened in the West. As you think more about it, she kind of rewrites art history."

Wagstaff says epiphanies of the sort are part of what she has in mind for the Met Breuer's new course. "We're at the edge of time moving forward, and for those of us who believe in progress and those who don't, it becomes about how human beings have been making marks and creating objects out of materials they find around them," Wagstaff says. "Here we are at this time where you have this extraordinary privilege to get to understand yourself as part of that."

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