Remarkable angles

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Double heritage

The art of Mehdi Moutashar distances itself from any desire to express a subjective experience of the world or resort to the power of the image. The world to which it belongs is the rational world of the straight line, of the mathematically determined angle, of the opposition of black and white.

Conditioned thus by formal logic and a reduction of visual means, this artistic approach participates in the minimalist aesthetic. But it goes beyond the *What you see is what you see* approach of Frank Stella in order to engage in a debate that lies beyond form itself, a questioning that takes place at the threshold of form and idea. It engages us in the contemplation of the laws of geometry.

The figures the artist presents us with are never enclosed inside the limits of a contour, however. They are open, fragmentary and constantly shifting; they refuse to stay still. Sometimes, they become symbols; angular symbols that seem to float in the white space of the wall or the page.

This geometry, hinting at an preexisting mathematical order that never quite reveal itself, this ever-evolving geometry derives from an aesthetics that draws deeply on the artist's own culture.

In fact, Moutashar's art lies at the confluence of two artistic traditions. The first is the western heritage of geometric abstraction, whose story begins with the pioneers of abstract art – Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Malevitch or Lissitzky – and continues with the artists of the *Hard-Edge*, *Op Art, Kinetic Art* and *Minimal Art*. The second is that of an Islamic aesthetic tradition that shies away from reproducing worldly appearances, instead giving a special place to geometrical order and lines, as seen particularly in the arts of interlacing ornamentation and calligraphy.

The construction of the real

The artistic path chosen by MM is, then, one of abstraction in its most demanding form. Abstraction, not as in an incremental process of detaching oneself from the visible or in a physical expression of the individual's impulses or emotions, but rather a radical, geometrical abstraction that has no relationship with the body or sensory experience. This is an art form which strives to come close to being a language in its own right, reducing plastic traits in order to combine forms in the same way that language or writing articulate sounds or letters.

This path of formal abstraction, which emerged at the start of the 20th century, may be seen to correspond to a certain aniconism, or even to the iconoclasm that recurs

throughout the history of human thought. The rejection of images, which pervades idealist philosophy and monotheistic religions, ~~finds~~ could find its aesthetic manifestation in this radical abstraction.

Commenting on this artistic stance that turns away from the image in favour of a purely visual language, Mehdi Moutashar says: “We have reduced the artist to the role of a image-maker, developing a series of works that produce sensations and emotions. The role of the artist is more consequential than that. The artist is a visionary and a constructor. He is involved in the development of a *language* for constructing the real.”

The formal vocabulary he deploys is therefore based on several forms that are detached from any reference to the world of the senses: the line segment, the angle, the square. Colour tends to be limited to black and white - non-colours, as they are known - in both his sculpted and graphic work. Only occasionally is this absolute opposition of white and black punctuated by the counterpoint of sea-blue, a colour which, the artist points out, recalls its use in Iraqi vernacular architecture.

The reduction of visual language sets out to “read things in their essence, understand them,” a formula that echoes the words of Klee in his journal of 1920: “ Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible.”

The logic of the angles

Founded on the geometric properties of several basic forms, Moutashar’s visual language operates according to purely logical procedures, which we might describe as a generative grammar of forms. They are, in the words of the artist, like “a series of doors opening one after another, indefinitely.”

That most conceptual of figures, the square - a signature adopted by Malevitch, one of the fathers of abstraction - is the basic module, the root containing the code that generates the multiplication of formal possibilities.

When rotated by 45°, according to the direction of its diagonal lines, the square produces two new figures: the octagon, with angles of 135°, and the eight-point star, whose alternately salient and internal angles are 90° and 135°.

This property of the square to generate set geometric forms and angles is developed in the work of Mehdi Moutashar through his physical manipulation of shapes. His starting point is a strip - of metal for sculptural pieces, paper for graphic works - whose width equals the side of the square module. Folding it over at a right-angle produces a recurrent angle of 135° but, by adjusting the square module’s side and diagonal units of measurement, it also results in angles of 30, 60° and 120°. These are what mathematicians call “remarkable angles”.

This folding process is thus an empirical trigonometric method which reveals the possibilities of the code contained in the base model, the square. This logic of angles constitutes a law for organising and assembling forms, which the artist manipulates to produce his compositions.

While this logic of angles gives the compositions their formal coherence, if we look beyond its plastic effectiveness, mightn’t we see it as a rational law, as the expression of

a superior order which organises the visible? In that case, far from being a mere game of shapes, geometric abstraction would offer us a glimpse of the structure of the real.

Arab-Islamic geometry

While Moutashar's art inherits the tradition of geometric abstraction in Western art, its exploration of form through the rationality of mathematical angles goes further, to link up with the preoccupations of Islamic art tradition.

The language of geometry is, in fact, one of the major expression of Islamic art, as much evident in building techniques and architectural structures as it is in the interlacing geometry that features on the walls of buildings or the frontispieces of Koranic manuscripts.

The language of geometry is also found in a building material that has been in widespread use since Antiquity and from Mesopotamia to Central Asia: the brick. With proportions based on a simple mathematical sequence (thickness = 1, width = 2, length = 4), this modular building material lends itself, through the infinite combinations at the mason's hands, to a multitude of ornamental motifs. The mathematical sequence - 1, 2, 4 - constitutes the operational programme of certain mural pieces produced in 2009, conceptual works that are precisely entitled 1, 2, 4. These works, which might be called procedural, could also be seen as a homage to Sinjar, the village near ancient Babylon, where the artist was born and spent his childhood.

Rotating the square by 45°, a key principle within the artist's formal system, and, as he observes, it is omnipresent in Islamic architectural tradition. Originating in Greece and brought to the Arab world via the Byzantine empire, this principle dictates the entire structure of buildings such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, both floor plan and elevation. It is also behind the concept of the countless prismatic cells of the *muqarnas*, a three-dimensional geometry peculiar to Islamic culture, which cover the intrados of the domes in a starry sky.

This geometry of angles founded on the rotation of the square is raised to a veritable abstract art, as witnessed in the interlacing geometry that radiates from a central motif. In this art form, the square does not appear as a closed figure; rather, it acts as a regulating force within a framework in which the straight line shifts in a continually open movement, alternating inward and salient angles in such a way as to make the star-shaped polygon - in Arabic, *shamsa*, the sun - appear and then melt away into its successive folds.

Deconstructing the figure

Clearly, anyone accustomed to looking at Western art will see in MM's work the heritage of geometric abstraction and the prolongation of minimalism and conceptualism. However, an eye accustomed to Islamic art will recognise the visual systems at work in the Abbasid Mustansiriya Madrasah in Bagdad. The artist sees

himself at the crossroads of these two traditions: " I am in both registers but at the same time I am detached."

It is precisely the co-existence of these two artistic heritages that enables Moutashar to detach himself from one or the other. In this way, he has freed himself from the formalism of Western geometric abstraction by opening it to some of the mystique that surrounds geometry and resonates with his readings of Ibn Arabi. Conversely, he detaches himself from traditional Islamic forms by revisiting them through the formal analytical methods used in contemporary operations of deconstruction. Here, then, Islamic geometric art seems to enter the age of *deconstructivism.*

This deconstruction of Islamic geometric systems is at its finest in the graphic works shown in this present texte. Here we recognise the taste of Islamic ornamentation for the line, an even ribbon that weaves rhythmically in and out and with mathematical precision. We can perceive the angular harmonics specific to the Islamic art of interlaced design. Sometimes the presence of the star polygon motif is hinted at. Here, though, all these elements break free from the overall order and unity which governs classical interlacing geometry. We glimpse them in a fragmentary way, as if the analytical process involved dismembering the models.

Out of this deconstruction of Islamic geometric tradition emerges an ensemble of motifs which take on a relative autonomy, scattering themselves in the white space of the page like so many visual signs.

The sign

Moutashar's signs are products of a reflection on a visual language that draws on both the Western legacy of geometric abstraction and the deconstructivist analysis of Islamic systems of ornamentation. As such, the signs - those black linear elements surrounded by square dots that claim their independence in his graphic works - cannot fail to evoke writing.

In this way, the artist brings together the issue of sign and writing - an issue which emerged the moment painting broke free from the rule of representation, asserting its autonomy and the very nature of pictorial fact. As with any form of abstraction, these signs are intransitive; they do not obey any proper linguistic code and so cannot lead to any conventionally determined meaning. They are "pure signs", like those put forward in suprematism or those invented by Klee.

Such signs, regulated by an underlying geometrical order and arranged in a sort of choreography, may be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities. Even so, they challenge the spectator who, by some law of psychology, feels compelled to unravel a secret. Despite aesthetic and formalist critics seeking to instil in us the idea that there is nothing to see but what is in front of us, the graphic sign, in its silence, has the power of making us sense the existence of something else - even when that 'something else' is actually nothing more than an absence.

If they don't belong to writing in the full sense of the term, Mehdi Moutashar's signs nevertheless present certain formal analogies with Arabic writing. We frequently

recongnise the development of a line rhythemed by angular indentations, the folding of the black strip evoking upstrokes and downstrokes of the *qalam* - the bevel-cut reed. manipulated by the calligrapher In the same way, the isolated black squares which surround the strips resemble the diacritical marks of Arabic writing. Sometimes we can even make out a particular letter, such as *Shin,* recognisable from its three prongs crowned with three dots - the same letter *Shin,* also called "solar" (*shamsiyya*), that forms a fragment of the star polygon (*shamsa*).
Drawing on Islamic geometry to derive signs that recall Arabic writing highlights a link between geometry and writing. Like Klee, who said that "writing and drawing are basically identical," Mehdi Moutashar seems to assert that writing and geometry likewise share a common root.

The measurements of the stroke

The hypothetical kinship between geometry and writing can be justified with some confidence if we refer to Islamic culture.
Firstly consider Kufic writing, the Arabic calligraphy that appears in the earliest manuscripts of the Koran, with its angular shapes, punctuated by the vertical lines of its *Alifs* and *Lams* and long horizontal ligatures. This orthonogality, which determines the gesture of the copyist, is seen in its most radical form in architecture, in the square Kufi, also known as the Kufi of the builder (*kûfî al-bannâ'î*). When subjected to the geometry of bricks and their assemblage, the letters of the Arabic alphabet become labyrinthine compositions from which meaning seems to recede.

The classical cursive calligraphy styles owe their forms to the supple gesture of the hand that wields the *qalam*. However, while the geometry may be less immediately perceived, it is still very much present. Codified by the calligrapher Ibn Muqla in the 10th century, the cursive aesthetic is based on a precisely formulated geometric system. According to this aesthetic, known as "proportional" (*al-khatt al-mansûb*), the shapes of each letter of the alphabet are determined by a principle that derives its forms from an original module: the square dot (*nuqt*), formed by the application of the *qalam's* nib. The diagonal line in this square dot is the unit of measurement for the first letter of the alphabet, *Alif*, which takes the form of a vertical line, and from which the shapes of all the other letters follow on.
Do we not see a similar use of this square module, encapsulating all the multiplicity of the letters of the alphabet, in the works of Mehdi Moutashar, the heir of Malévitch and Ibn Muqla?
While the geometric foundations of Arabic calligraphy are founded on a rational and rationalist approach of form, it is interesting to note how the "generative grammar" of calligraphy shapes is echoed in myths about the origins of Arab writing. They tell how *Alif* was created from a speck of light emanating from the celestial *Qalam*, and how, from this first letters sprang all the others.
Arguably, while MM works within a western geometric abstraction that tends to be seen as being dominated by pure questions of form, his work also conveys strands of Arab-Islamic spiritual heritage. Indeed, a 1996 work entitled *Variations on seven Arabic*

letters. seems to confirm this. In this work, which takes the form of a portfolio of seven double plates, the artist revisits the Arabic art of calligraphy, by rotating the square by 45° to form seven Arabic letters taken from holy names.

The book space

The calligraphic dimension of Moutashar's work lends itself particularly well to the medium of the book. Any sign that appears within the space of its pages tends to put the onlooker in the position of the reader: the visible appears as though it were legible. And if legibility eludes us, the book becomes a form of enigma, an enigma which may or may not be resolved as the pages unfold.

The book is a singular visual space, distinct from that of a painting, a wall or room in an exhibition. Here, the artist's signs and motifs develop on a structured surface, bordered by the edges of the double page and the centre fold. Sometimes the signs submit to these inner and outer limits; they come to a stop or are suspended in mid-movement. Sometimes they defy them. These signs explore both the finitude of the material medium and the infinity of space to which they give virtual access.

The book is also a white expanse of paper. As Mallarmé once said, referring to the layout of his poem, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, "the white [spaces] assume an importance ." In this way, the page becomes a space of dissemination, where signs and motifs become fragmented and strike up tensions with one another. The white interspacing, as measured as the black strokes themselves, are like the power that connects the dancers in a choreography. Here, that choreography often leaves a void at the centre, as if ushering the idea of infinity into the heart of the double page.

Finally, the space within a book is one that is removed from the world, a utopian space that is suggestive, perhaps, of the *templum*, the sacred area traced out by the Roman soothsayer in order to observe and interpret the signs described in the flight of birds. Taking this analogy, the page becomes a window on a second reality which shrugs off earthly laws of weight or horizontal and vertical bearings - as in the white space of Suprematism. Here, with no attributable horizon, Moutashar's abstract calligraphy and geometrical fragments float as though weightless.

Rigorously constructed, projected into the space of the book, geometry transcends the constraints of form to become dance, or poetry, or visible music.

The order of things

The artist's visual approach is characterised by a certain asceticism in its economy of means and in the rigorous procedures it deploys. Yet, while it may set out to attain "the essence of things", it does not purport to deliver any definitive truth. Rather, the works appear to challenge and engage the intellect of the spectator. The elegance of the forms and signs, the precision of the formal assemblies, the accuracy of the relationship between the angles and between black and white all work together to take us beyond simple aesthetic contemplation. They lead us towards an intellectual analysis, to

understand the logic that underpins the work.
But what if, through the logic of the work, the logic of our world were being questioned? Can we not recognise in this body of art a reflection on the world, or, in other words, a philosophy?

Everything in this work recalls the idea that geometry governs what is real or, at least, that geometry may be taken as a metaphor for the order of things. Analysing the properties of a simple square would seem to confirm as much. But far from being presented as immutable, this geometry constantly appears in forms that are open to change, alteration, movement, as if to remind us that the world is only a diffraction of an order that operates in the background. What captures Mehdi Moutashar's attention is not so much the principle itself, as the logic of using it as a starting point to fold - and unfold - the possible.