

In Review - Art

Playing with symmetry

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Rasheed Araeen's Studies for Guftugu series (*A Conversation Between Al Baruni and Ibn Sina*), 2012-14

London's Troubadour Café was a hub for artists, writers and progressive thinkers in the 1970s. They gathered there and shared their unhatched political and creative ideas with each other. It was in this café in 1974, amid jazz, poetry and multilingual voices, that Mahmood Jamal, a 20-something poet, met fellow Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen. Jamal had been in London for just a handful of years and Araeen at the time was working as a civil engineering assistant at British Petroleum.

Although a graduate of Karachi's NED University, Araeen was anything but your typical introverted science whiz. From an early age, he had an aptitude for drawing and sculpture but was hampered by a lack of facilities to nurture his talent in Karachi. He dreamt of being an artist and breaking the stereotypical art practices expected of and imposed onto non-white artists.

After immigrating to London in the 1960s, Araeen plunged himself into initiatives which worked towards obtaining equal rights for people of colour. He was a passionate member of the Black Workers Movement. He also collaborated with several outspoken activists from Artists for Democracy, a voluntary group created to challenge the exclusionary and discriminatory policies of art institutions and to liberate artists from racial categorisations.

Jamal recalls his early encounters with Araeen while sitting at London's Chelsea Space gallery, which recently exhibited Araeen's works along with those of British artist Peter Fillingham. "When I first met him I wasn't too sure if Rasheed liked me or even liked my writing but when he asked me to be a co-editor of the *Black Phoenix* magazine which he founded in 1978, I felt very honoured to have gained his trust," Jamal says. "Rasheed has always been very perceptive and has influenced me in many ways."

The *Black Phoenix* magazine is now a revered bimonthly academic journal and has been renamed as *Third Text*. It surveys art around the world in alliance with artists who critically look into the Eurocentric and western hegemony of art, academia and information distribution. Araeen is responsible for a great number of similar initiatives aimed at expanding inclusivity within the art world.

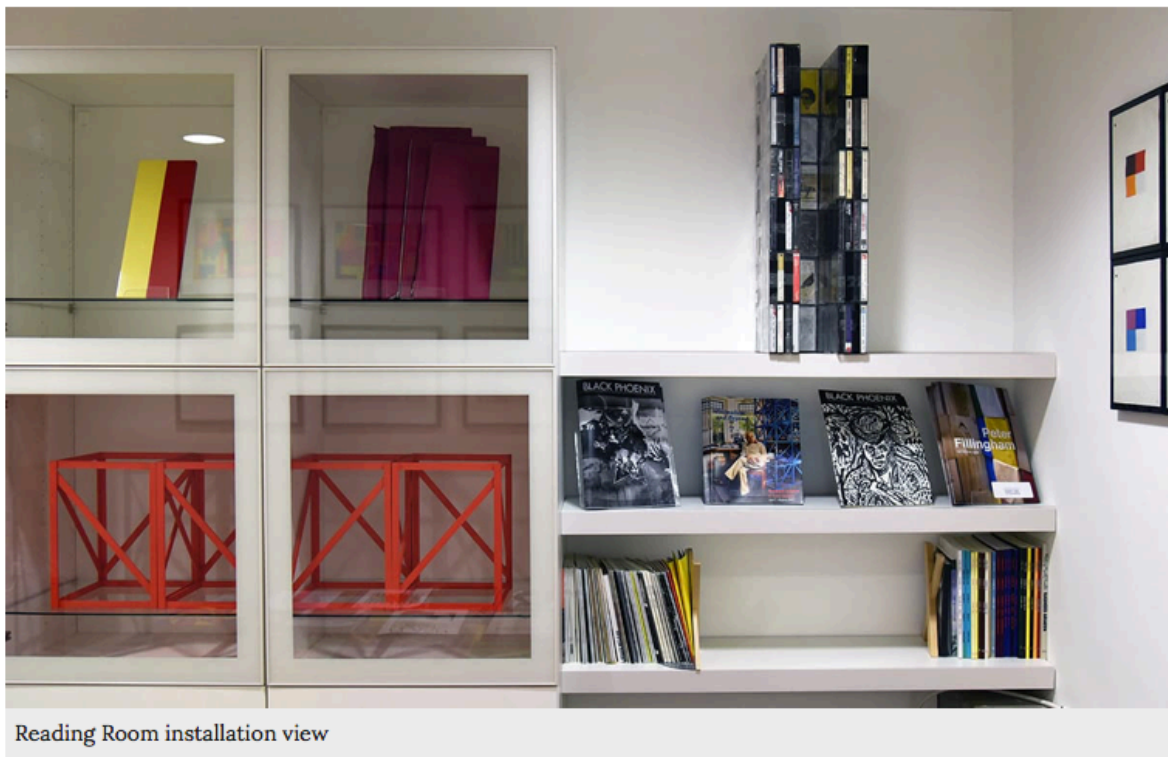
Chelsea Space is ideally located for a gallery. As a part of the Chelsea College of Arts campus in London, it is situated next door to the Tate Britain museum that is frequented by students, academics and tourists from all over the world. Perhaps the most inviting feature of the gallery – which is also emblematic of any multifunctional space – is a large glass window at the front of the exhibiting space that overlooks the college's central grounds.

Chelsea Space is also well-suited to display the works of an artist like Araeen who has always challenged exclusionary practices of the western art world. The gallery's defining ethos is to venture into collaborations across mediums and among artists coming from different backgrounds in order to ensure and promote inclusivity.

It was Donald Smith, director of exhibitions at Chelsea Space, who first came up with the idea of a collaborative exhibition involving Araeen and Fillingham perhaps because of the fact that the two artists do not just have different origins but are also born in entirely different eras and milieus. The idea of putting up their works together, however, was not entirely novel. They, indeed, have worked together in the past within Araeen's studio in London.

Smith, who has known Fillingham for over 30 years, says Araeen, at the age of 83, is no stranger to the art world even though he encountered many hurdles to find representation in European and British galleries in his early days and struggled to garner support for his work. Fillingham, almost 30 years junior to Araeen, is a former head of 3D Pathway (Sculpture) at Central St Martins, a college at the University of Arts, London, as well as a former chair of Fine Arts at Parsons Paris. According to his own website, he is recognised for creating "site-specific, object-based installations" and arranging artistic events on the peripheries of perceived cultural epicentres" and thereby has been "able to introduce those places – and art – to broader audiences".

The two artists have an evidently similar approach to making their art. They focus on creating sculptures and images through lines, bars, blocks and grids and their works have a high social quotient. Their art is also incomplete without an audience that feels it, walks around it and imagines the endless possibilities of its constituent parts. When one walked around the exhibits at Chelsea Space, their most obvious feature was their resemblance to construction sites and architectural design. Geometrical shapes and patterns on display looked like floor tiles and wall hangings but infused with meanings through contrasting colouring. Construction blocks and multicolour scaffoldings similarly stood next to each other in a seamless visual harmony in the gallery.



Reading Room installation view

Araeen has spoken many times about the importance of symmetry in his work. Many art writers have noticed that his lattice work pieces are possibly a reflection of the construction framework British Petroleum employed on its oil facilities. Fillingham's approach to his sculptures includes the usage of objects and shapes which are also extremely familiar to the human eye. His works are created with the help of craftsmen and any person who wishes to collaborate with him in his art-making.

The gallery also organised four talks – all open to the public – regarding the exhibition. These talks featured curators familiar with the work of the two artists as well as personalities like Jamal who share personal histories with either Araeen or Fillingham. These talks, in close proximity with the exhibits, encouraged movement around the sculptures, ridding the gallery space of its white cubic monotony. As the panels discussed the artists and their artworks, audiences sat around them, gaining new understandings about them and giving them new meanings by interacting with them up-close.

The exhibition also utilised all the various components of Araeen's art and life to make it possible for the viewers to understand how his artistic practice has evolved over the last 60 years or so. To cite just one example, the curators used a piece of art created by the artist from construction blocks as a reading room table and placed on it numerous articles, journals and books written on him and his art.

Araeen is among the few Pakistani artists left who were part of the modernist movement in the country back in the early decades after Independence. His ideas on agriculture, education and politics – with their origins dating back at least three decades, or even older – may seem alien and subversive to many of those born after the 1980s. As an art student in 2013 at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, I distinctly remember that the book supplementing Araeen's work shown at the VM Art Gallery as a mini-retrospective, titled *Homecoming*, included a set of complicated sociopolitical theories difficult for most Pakistanis of my generation to tackle.

Curator and art critic Amra Ali, who was responsible for bringing together *Homecoming* and its supporting and eponymous publication, recalls how the audience felt disorientated when Araeen delivered a talk at the Goethe Institute in Karachi in 2002. “Considering that this was a turning point in Araeen’s career, [as] he [had] moved his attention to the cultivation of land in Balochistan, it was no surprise that the art community did not and could not relate to the concept of social reform as an art project.”

This failure to understand his art as a practical means for affecting social and economic change could be one reason why Araeen’s works often does not get displayed at major Pakistani shows. For an artist who has been featured at the Venice Biennale, the Tate Modern, Documenta and Frieze Art Fair (the canons of international art), it is surprising he was not invited to partake in recent biennales both in Karachi and Lahore — held in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Of course, the biennales were meant for displaying the works of younger artists rather than focusing on the art of Pakistan’s modernist icons, but the absence of his works still felt like a gap that should be filled in any projection of Pakistani art by Pakistani curators.

Another reason for the lack of curatorial interest in exhibiting his works in Pakistan could be their nature. His works at VM Art Galley, for instance, comprised colourful iron bars in various combinations and permutations as well as graph papers filled with highlighter colours. These represent anything but neo-miniature which is all the rage among both Pakistani artists and audiences. He, on the other hand, unapologetically creates art that takes a form not restricted to South Asian visual culture.

The uniqueness of Araeen’s work and his personal status as a Pakistani immigrant in the United Kingdom raises a few important questions. Does an artist have to base his or her practice in Pakistan to have the distinctive honour of being a Pakistani artist or does he or she have to create work that visually resonates only with South Asians to be considered as meaningful and thought-provoking?

The exhibition at Chelsea Space may have answered these questions, albeit indirectly. It brought together artists and audiences from different national and ethnic backgrounds to a single gallery space and put on display works that challenge the boundaries of what is traditionally considered to be an object of art — something that can be hung on a wall. The exhibition was prescient in its curatorial direction but, at the same time, it would not have been possible if it were not for individual artists like Araeen and Fillingham who follow no rules but their own.

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