

ArtAsiaPacific

LANGUAGE OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

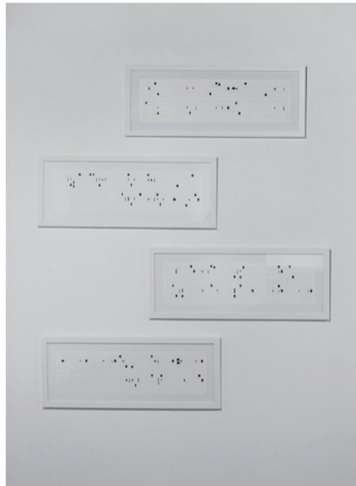
WEB REVIEW BY WIDED KHADRAOUI
ATHR GALLERY

SAUDI ARABIA

Art and geometry have always overlapped. In the Islamic world, geometric ornamentation is quintessential, while spatial instinct and its manipulation are all-inclusive. “The Language of Human Consciousness,” currently showing at Jeddah’s Athr Gallery in Saudi Arabia, comes off a bit like a sociological survey, ambitiously bringing together 40 international and regional artists under the theme of the universality of geometry. Despite the congested exhibition, curators Jumana Ghouth and Mohammed Hafiz have brilliantly negotiated the slippery terrain between the subversive and traditional. The wide array of material from these artists mimics the seemingly endless array of geometric manipulations that exist in the world.

Ghouth and Hafiz are billing the exhibition as a survey that explores “how the human mind was built to systemize and break subjects apart in order to understand them . . . in attempts to seek order [from] chaos.” While Athr may seek to explore order from chaos, the sheer abundance of works leaves one with the impression of a scrambled—rather than a systemized—mind. Among the plethora of material on display, there are a number of works that stand out from the rest.

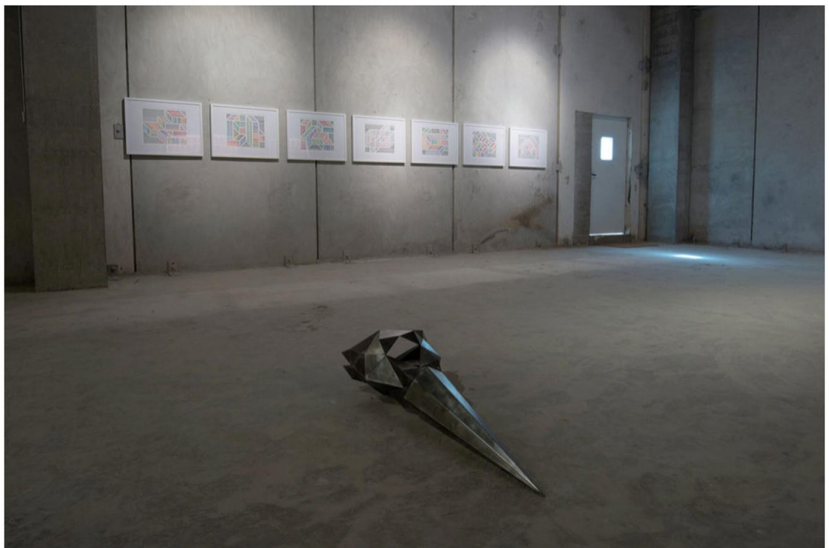
Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen’s industrial-looking wooden sculptures, *Piaray Lal* (1970) and *Summer Blue* (1985–2014), are evocative in their sheer subtlety; but his interactive piece, *Zero to Infinity* (2014), which consists of 36 painted cubic frames, is more potent—due not only to the scale of its sculptural units but also for their construction. The result of his training as an engineer is evident in the geometric sculptures’ lattice-like arrangements, which are held to-



BASMAH FELEMBAN, *Last Seen*, 2014, silkscreen and pencil on paper, 152 × 112 cm each. Courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.



RASHEED ARAEEN, *Piaray Lal*, 1970, painted wood, 86 × 15.5 cm. Courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.



SAHAND HESMAYAN, *Nail*, 2012, steel, 115 × 40 × 26 cm. Courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

gether at regular intervals and are reminiscent of timber framing. This method lends to the structural component of the piece, in which the framework is not exactly precise, yet is still visually striking.

Arguably, the exhibition’s most innovative and inflammatorily heavy-handed work belongs to Jeddah-born artist Basma Felemban. The process behind the creation of *Last Seen* (2014) is beautifully intricate. Felemban adapted the classical Persian love story of Qays and Layla and created a fictional conversation between the two star-crossed lovers, as if they were communicating via texting. Felemban then translated the mobile conversation to a coded language, based on a dissected Islamic geometric star, which she painted as a four-part silkscreen piece. The symbolic language harboring encoded messages adds an additional layer of secrecy, to Qays and Layla’s already clandestine affair. Censorship and societal limitations are at the heart of the work’s rather forced subtext, but the reframing and new presentation of a centuries-old narrative is remarkably fresh and innovative. The piece is intricately fragile, yet powerful, and clearly showcases Felemban’s meticulous workmanship.

Magnetic Field (2011), by American artist James Clar, manipulates the very idea of how to create geometry. Clar's work fuses technology and visual information to create light sculptures that experiment with viewers' perception. The artist makes three-dimensional work by utilizing lighting and filters to develop the sculptural form. Magnetic Field is comprised of a circle of fluorescent tubes on the wall that appear to almost be floating, like a weightless presence. The result is ethereal, despite its neon glow, introducing new concepts to the viewers' visual repertoire.

The honed steel edges of Nail (2012) are visually surreal in their precise execution. The sculpture, constructed by Tehran-based Sahand Hesmayan, is made of steel and highlights the artist's exploration of geometry in three-dimensional forms. The steel material itself plays a role in the strength of the piece—unfettering geometry from its traditional realm of pen and paper into the tactile world of sculpture. Such explorations of new geometric presentation are the cornerstone of Hesmayan's artistic repertoire.

Lastly, Sol LeWitt's Untitled Drawing (Ref 03) (1988) is a brilliant representation of the stringent minimalism that was practiced by the artist, who notoriously reduced his paintings to their basic elements. Ref 03 epitomizes the adamant completeness of such great works of art. The linear minimalism displayed in the piece embodies LeWitt's frequent use of structures and shapes originating from the cube—a form that influenced his entire career.

Although the Athr Gallery space does not feel crowded, despite the number of displayed works, 40 artists are still far too many, especially considering that so many of them are remarkable and established enough to merit their own solo exhibitions. Athr has been slightly over-ambitious with "The Language of Human Consciousness." Including so much in the exhibition may risk leaving visitors with the impression that the selected artists either do not have enough geometric motifs in their oeuvres or artistic depth—to warrant their own exhibitions. Yet both notions are not true for the majority of the 40 artists in the show.

The exhibition, however, does provide residents of Jeddah, and Saudi Arabia as a whole, with a unique opportunity to view works by a wide range of artists who have never exhibited before in the Middle East. It provides a chance for visitors to discover the visual resonance between Islamic art and the universal usage of geometry across the world.



SOL LEWITT, *Untitled Drawing (Ref 03)*, 1988, gouache on paper, 54 × 86 cm.
Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London.