

Taking a Diagram for a Walk

Amit S. Rai visits a show featuring Rasheed Araeen's works from '59 to '74 and cogitates about the ways in which lines and forms move back and forth between art and engineering.

THE WORK OF PAKISTANI-BRITISH ARTIST RASHEED ARAEEN, who left his studies in civil engineering to pursue art, has gone through numerous transformations in form, content and political inflection. His recent show, *Before and After Minimalism: Drawings, Painting, Sculpture and Concepts, 1959-1974*, at Aicon Gallery, London, from the 21st of September to the 23rd of October, traced the trajectories of his many creative shifts. Niru Ratnam ably curated this show at Aicon, a gallery folded into the maze of brand-shops on Regent Street.

Araeen received the prestigious John Moores Painting Prize in 1969, five years after arriving in Britain from Karachi. Back then, Araeen was plumbing the austere resources of minimalism. He had chosen to work with patterns and materials that had, in his words, "the appearance of having been picked up from a discarded heap of demolished engineering works". His works took on the sharp vectors of geometrical design, as can be seen in the drawing and execution of *Sculpture No. 2*. They would eventually point the way beyond engineering and modernism.

Moving beyond minimalism, Araeen sought non-hierarchical relations within his works, and also questioned the sedimented expectations pertaining to the environment and the audience for art. In works like *Char Yar* (1968) and *Lovers* (1968), there was an attempt at altering older codes of seeing.

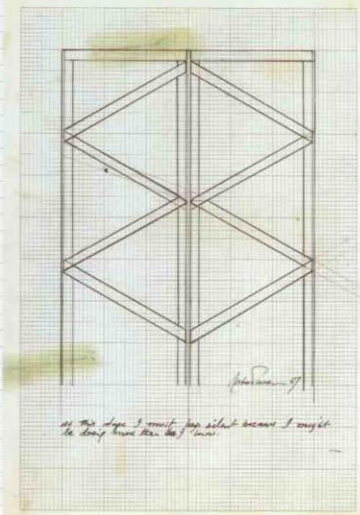
Inspired by the life and work of Frantz Fanon and the anti-imperialist liberation movements of the 1960s, Araeen's work in the 1970s would go on to reflect the new egalitarianism of the times – Araeen was one of the founders of the influential cultural journal, *Third Text*.

From the works on view, the goofy *From Discs to Discosailing* (1971-74, 1998-) inspired a kind of bemused nostalgia in the audience. The photographic works done in Pakistan – for example, *Aag ka Naatch* (1961) and *Aag* (1959-61) – had the odd bearing of being absolutely contemporary.

But for this reviewer, the most compelling works were the *Original Drawings for Sculpture* (1965-68), where a series of engineering diagrams spoke to a desire to move art out of the gallery into the living kinesis of London. Underneath one of them from 1967, Araeen, with disarming humility, had scrawled, "At this stage I must keep silent because I might be doing more than I know."



RASHEED ARAEEN. INSTALLATION VIEW. ON THE LEFT: *ORIGINAL DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURE* (1965-68); AT THE BACK ON THE LEFT: *LAL KONA* (1969); IN THE CENTRE: *CHAR YAR* (1968) AND BEHIND IT: *(3R + 2B) SW* (1971).



RASHEED ARAEEN. FROM *ORIGINAL DRAWINGS FOR SCULPTURE*. GRAPH PAPER AND INK 1965-68. PHOTOGRAPHS BY GOSWIN SCHWENDINGER. IMAGE COURTESY OF AICON GALLERY AND THE ARTIST.