Rasheed Araeen 'Before and Beyond Minimalism: Drawings, Painting, Sculpture and Concepts, 1959 - 1974'
17th September to 24th October
Private View: Thursday 16th September, 6.30pm - 9.00pm

Rasheed Araeen's solo exhibition 'Before and Beyond Minimalism: Drawings, Painting, Sculpture and Concepts, 1959 - 1974' focuses on the first 15 years of Araeen's artistic practice. This ranges from works he made in Pakistan that drew on his training as a civil engineer such as 'My First Sculpture' to his encounter with the works of Anthony Caro in 1965 and the works Araeen subsequently conceived such as 'Sculpture No.1', 'First Structure' and 'Second Structure'. The exhibition then traces Araeen's introduction of the kinetic into minimalism, initially through works such as 'Char Yar' and 'Lovers' where the viewer could theoretically change the configuration of the serial elements that constituted each work. After 1970 Araeen's works such as 'Chakras' increasingly tended to leave the confines of the gallery space and continue his fusion of minimalism and kineticism outdoors.

Writing on the occasion of Araeen's retrospective at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery in 1988, Patricia Bickers argued that "The formal language Araeen began to develop during the Sixties owed much to his critical awareness of Modernist discourse about abstraction, particularly the theories of Mondrian and the Constructivists. Such ideas were then still current in England..." Araeen himself has pinpointed the influence of Anthony Caro on his developing practice: "I have often talked about my encounter with Anthony Caro's work after I arrived in London in 1964 and its influence of what I myself subsequently arrived at in 1965, which turned out to be a form of sculpture that later became known as Minimalism." For Araeen, it was not so much the form of Caro's sculptures that were interesting but his use of engineering material such as steel girders which, as Araeen recalls, "had the appearance of having been picked up from a discarded heap of demolished engineering works." At the time Araeen was working as a civil engineering assistant in London, producing drawings of industrial structures. The two influences of Caro and his day-job came together with the drawing for 'Sculpture No. 1', conceived in December 1968, which detailed four steel girders placed next to each other symmetrically. The drawing for 'Sculpture No. 2' was conceived in the same year and again showed painted steel girders, this time arranged in four stacked layers. Whilst Araeen acknowledged the influence of Caro and visited the 'New Generation' show at the Whitechapel he was, as Bickers writes, "opposed, on both aesthetic and ideological grounds, to the way that [Caro's work was] deployed which, despite the rejection of the plinth, was still traditionally compositional and hierarchical." Instead Araeen sought non-hierarchical relationships between the elements in his work.

This quest for the non-hierarchical would lead to a shift in Araeen's thinking. Jean Fisher has linked this shift to the emerging spirit of the late 1960s: "Araeen's sculptural solution to this search for a different spatial model was the invention of what he simply called 'Structures': open cube or rectangular modules that could be replicated and combined in ways that avoided a hierarchy of form..." Araeen however, has also himself pointed to his own background as feeding into the form of these 'Structures'. As an engineer he had used lattice structures in a window design he produced in Karachi in 1961: "I guess its connection with my sculptural work must be due to its presence in the chain of events that began in the fifties when I was studying civil engineering." Araeen's works from the late 1960s such as 'First Structure' (1966 - 67) and 'Second Structure' (1966 - 67) introduced diagonals, a lattice structure and negative space. The Structures were light, strong and corresponded to engineering principles. Like Fisher, Bickers has noted that the form of the structures themselves carried positive connotations through the ever-present possibility of being reconstructed at will into stable configurations.
Minimalism solidified as a movement in New York between 1965 and 1967 and critical receptions of Araeen’s works have positioned him, as Tate recently did, as a “pioneer of Minimalist sculpture in Britain”.\(^6\) Whilst this is an accurate description of Araeen's work, it is not a complete one. Bickers argues that any idea of influence from New York is unlikely as key Minimalist shows such as ‘Primary Structures’ “caused hardly a ripple in Britain.”\(^7\) She notes that whilst Smithson, Judd and Morris's articles would have appeared in Artforum and that Alan Dwan was showing Minimalists in his gallery, that Araeen was drawing more on ideas such as those discussed in E.C. Goossen's 'The Art of the Real' rather than responding to that trickle of influence. More pertinently as both Bickers and Fisher point out, by 1966 Araeen was heading in a different direction to the American Minimalists. As Fisher writes “There are, however, important distinctions to be made between the Minimalist cube and Araeen's Structures, which to my mind reside in the difference between an instrumental, abstract-logical regulation of the world and an organic one.” Introducing a diagonal to create a lattice had the effect of creating what Fisher has noted is a second spatial figure within the rectangular grid; a rough rhomboid that forms and de-forms as the spectator moves around the structure.

This implicit acknowledgement of the positioning of the spectator as being a constitutive element in the work resulted in a further development in Araeen's work. He has stated: "My interest in participation emerged from the nature of my own work in 1968. While manipulating four small cubes to see how many different arrangement I could make out of them, I realized the potential in them of infinite movement and transformation." In 1968 Araeen proposed his work ‘Zero to Infinity’ as a written proposal to the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London. The work was to constitute of a maximum of 100 cubes made of blue painted wood that would start off in a square Minimalist formation in either a gallery or an urban environment. Viewers would then be invited to dismantle the grid and re-arrange its elements. The work was never realised at the ICA and it is currently in the Tate Collection. Smaller scale works such as 'Char Yar' (1968) and 'Lovers' (1966) had the same principal of the spectator unmaking and re-making the work in them. At this time Araeen achieved his first institutional recognition when 'Boo' (1969) was awarded the John Moores Prize. However the Prize did not lead to commercial success. Arguably this was in part down to London's commercial galleries being unable to position work made by artists whose cultural origins lay outside the West (with the notable exception of Victor Musgrave's Gallery One which operated between 1953 and 1963). However Araeen himself was moving away from making objects for viewing in galleries towards more participatory, collaborative work which was increasingly informed by his growing political activism.

Writing in 1974, Araeen recalled the influence of the surroundings around his studio on this developing practice:

“In 1969 I had my studio in a warehouse, on the River Thames, in East London. The studio being surrounded on three sides by water, it became my obsession there to look at the water and observe the floating pieces of wood and plastics which were drifting from one place to another owing to the action of the movement of water and wind….It was this involvement with my physical surroundings which invoked in me the desire to make that environment part of my activity.”\(^8\)

Araeen begun working on 'Chakras' in 1969, which was his first participatory work outside the gallery space. On 21 February 1970 Araeen and members of the public threw sixteen two-foot diameter discs into St.Katherine's Docks; sixteen in order to reference a four by four configuration of a Minimalist structure but one that would immediately be undone by the action of being thrown into water. The discs eventually floated out of the Docks into the Thames and then presumably the English Channel, “thus, Araeen combined the random with the fixed, order with disorder, art with environment,” Bickers writes.\(^10\) 'Chakras' has been convincingly interpreted by Courtney J. Martin with reference to immigration and the problems of "race relations" that were emerging in the 1970s.\(^11\) And Araeen's practice, informed by a reading of Frantz Fanon's 'The Wretched of the Earth' and the controversial death of David Oluwale in Leeds in 1971 would now take a more overtly politicized nature. Araeen would have solo shows at institutional spaces such as the Ikon Gallery (1987), the
South London Gallery (1994) and the Serpentine Gallery (1996) but by and large, mainstream critical discussion of the early part of his career up until the early 1970s was largely stalled until 2007 when Tate purchased and displayed works from the late 1960s. In 2011 Araeen will exhibit in 'Modern British Sculpture' at the Royal Academy - another sign that the hiatus in critical and institutional responses to his works are in the past. A variety of reasons contributed to that hiatus. Araeen's own activist-publisher activities setting up the periodicals 'Black Phoenix' and 'Third Text', his involvement in the debates around 'Black Art' and his curating of exhibitions such as 'The Essential Black Art' and 'The Other Story' meant that the critical and curatorial focus on his actual art was irregular at best. More crucial however was a confusion amongst curators and art historians as how to account for the appearance of Minimalist sculpture in Britain, that was not directly influenced by the work of New York Minimalists, at the same time that Minimalism was being formulated there. As Bickers wrote in 1987, "The difficulty of accepting the fact that it is possible for artists to arrive, independently, at apparently similar resolutions is exceeded only by that of accepting, from a Eurocentric perspective, the primacy of an artist from an unorthodox, non-western background." Since that retrospective in 1987 art history and art institutions have, albeit unevenly and erratically, moved towards a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the development of Modernism - one which has perhaps finally escaped the imposed linearity that was first formalised by Alfred Barr's infamous diagram designed for the 1935 exhibition 'Cubism and Abstract Art'. Finally, over fifty years after Araeen produced 'My First Sculpture' it seems wise then to return to Araeen's works themselves and re-look at them closely in order in part to begin to understand the various and overlapping accounts and artistic journeys that can be described as Modernism.

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1 Patricia Bickers 'From Object to Subject' in exhibition catalogue 'Rasheed Araeen: From Modernism to Postmodernism, a retrospective 1959 - 1987' (Ikon Gallery, 1988), unpaginated
2 Exhibition catalogue 'Rasheed Araeen at Tate Britain, April to August 2007', (Third Text in association with Tate Britain, 2007), unpaginated
5 Dyer, op.cit., p.25
6 See for example Tate web entry on Araeen: "Born and educated in Pakistan, Araeen trained as an engineer before moving to Europe in the 1960s to become one of the pioneers of minimalist sculpture in Britain."
7 Bickers op.cit., unpaginated
8 Fisher, op.cit., unpaginated
9 Rasheed Araeen 'Making Myself Visible', (Kala Press, 1984), p.64
10 Bickers, op.cit, unpaginated