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ISSUE 85 SEP/OCT 2013



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US \$15

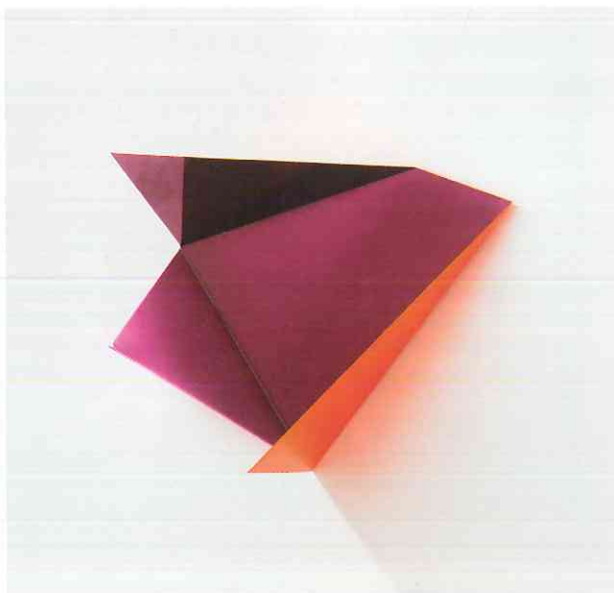
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RANA BEGUM

NO. 10



“Where do you start?” asked my bewildered opening-night cohort, referencing the task of reviewing Anglo-Bangladeshi artist Rana Begum’s latest work at The Third Line gallery in Dubai. A fair question, because for all its seemingly straightforward minimalism, Begum’s art is full of surprises.

Aptly titled “No. 10,” Begum’s tenth solo outing consisted of 13 immaculately painted, wall-mounted metallic sheets, whose edges are bent at varying angles in origami-like folds. The triangulated folds are cagily painted so that their colors are sometimes indiscernible when seen head-on. Confronted with such works, viewers tilt their heads, shuffle sideways to wrap their gaze around the fin-like edges, step back to contemplate the whole composition, then lean in again to scrutinize a fleeting detail. The works bear unobtrusive, insight-free numbers for titles. Interpretation is open. Here, the encounter is everything.

Encounters between components of a single work are a Begum hallmark. Colors infect each other or bleed onto the white of an unsuspecting wall. Alternatively, a white plane disappears into the wall, leaving only a sliver of yellow or a quick throb of fuchsia. Luscious, loud colors alternate with powdery, subdued tones in a game of hide-and-seek behind the raised edges and creased corners. Occasional works, such as *No. 428* (2013), are in mirror-finish steel. The metal piece’s folded edges are reflected in its central plane, triggering a myriad of triangulations that recede onto the wall itself.

Begum admits that she is “fascinated by the wall.” “I don’t see myself as a painter or a sculptor, but in between the two,” she adds, describing her experimentation with two- and three-dimensions

as a result of her desire to break free of the flat plane. Far more ethereal than her stacked, Donald Judd-like boxes decked in duct tape and dunked in resin (a previous foray into three dimensions from 2009), these folded works somehow cast a dreamy spell.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote at length about the fascination of the fold (*le pli*)—its duplicity, extension into infinity and role as a barrier between the physical and metaphysical worlds. For Deleuze, the fold announces that the inside is nothing more than the fold of the outside. In Begum’s work, a folded corner of metal is the inside consciously made the outside; though part of the surface, the fold instantly provides the work with depth. It teeters between public and private: springing from a single, wall-bound sheet of steel, the fold bends toward the viewer, emits a subtle, reflective glow onto the wall and even casts shadows beyond the perimeter of its plane.

Originally produced on paper as studies for another three-dimensional series, the pieces in “No. 10” eventually became sculptural works themselves. Begum simply upped the scale and crafted the jagged planes in her signature high-function industrial materials (mild steel, brass, copper). Yet the works cling to a weightlessness and fragility inherent in their initial medium of paper. They resemble nothing more than kites. The staggered heights at which they were hung slyly insinuated flight—seemingly wafting up beyond the confines of the gallery, propelled by a background glow and ruddered by the aerodynamic folds.

The visual cacophony of Begum’s previous work—the repetitive hazard-sign and warning-code-like patterns that punctuate our angst-ridden urban landscapes—has given way to a Rothko-like serenity. Even the two “folded” benches on display invited contemplation. “I want to push my work more toward the idea of experience,” she says, “rather than it just being a visual language. It’s a space, an environment, that I re-create.”

Recent public art projects have brought Begum’s work out of the white cube and into the cityscape. She is collaborating with architects on a Taiwanese theater complex shrouded in 25-meter-high beams of color, while a commission for the atrium of a corporate headquarters in Delhi finds her experimenting with suspended colored glass sheets, which change hues depending on the viewer’s position. “Most of the work I do is experimental,” she confesses. “One work leads to another. It doesn’t really end.” Approaching the work of this prolific artist is less about where to start than how to keep up.

KEVIN JONES

Opposite page

SUNIL JANAH

Boatmen on the Hooghly, Calcutta

Late 1940s

From the “Sunil Janah: Ram

Rahman Project” (2013)

Vintage-toned gelatin silver print, 28 x 24 cm.

Copyright Sunil Janah.

Courtesy Ram Rahman.

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RANA BEGUM

No. 418

2013

Paint on mirror-finish steel, 65 x 40 x 21 cm.

Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.