

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Decolonizing Western Narratives of Modern Art

The Met Breuer mounts recent acquisitions from Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, West Asia, and North Africa alongside mainstays of postwar American art, sketching a potential reorientation of art history.

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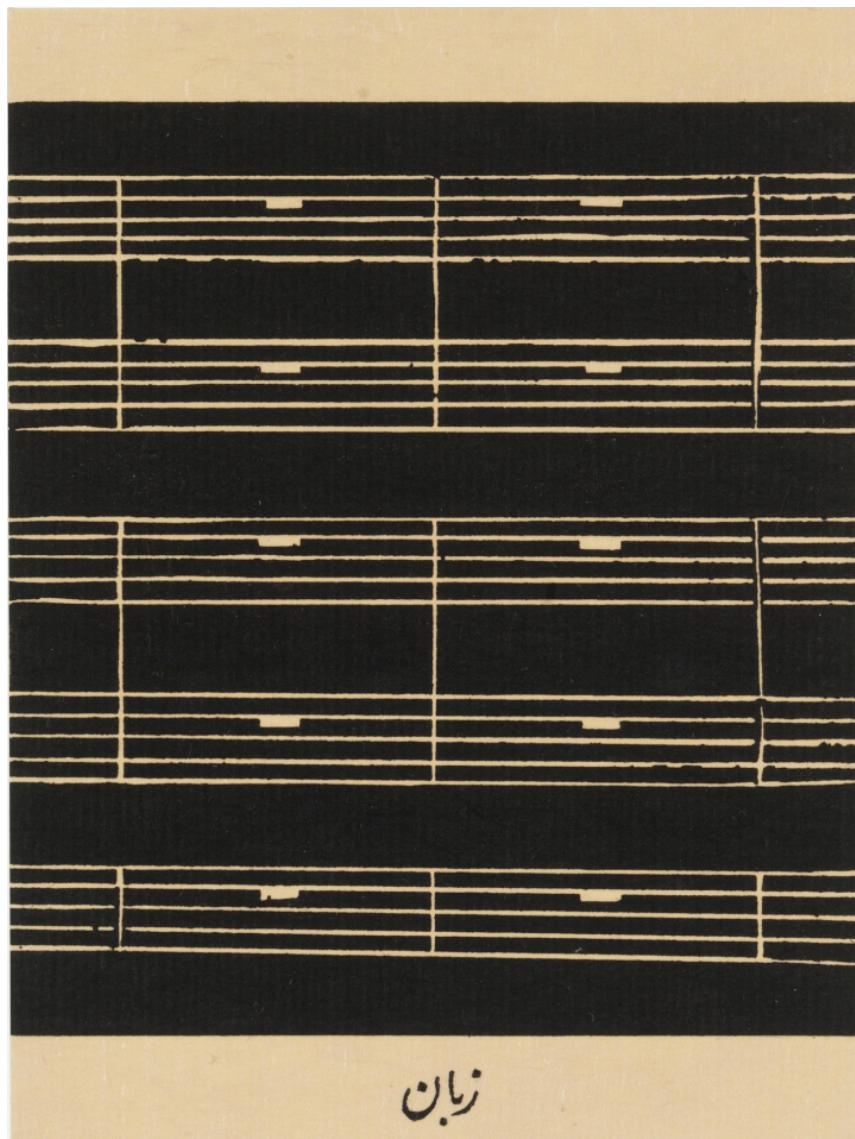


Installation view of Home Is a Foreign Place: Recent Acquisitions in Context at The Met Breuer, 2019-20 (all photos courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The 36 woodcut prints in Zarina's portfolio, "Home is A Foreign Place" (1999), strike me at the base of my throat. Abstracted images mutate and bear different Urdu and English words, beginning with "Home," a floorplan of the artist's childhood house in Aligarh, India. A dark barrier, "Wall," hollows out into a circle, "Sky." "Dust," an earthen black block, settles beside

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“Language,” a rest, the musical symbol for silence. Zarina doesn’t illustrate words so much as unravel them, revealing the buried places from which we speak.



Zarina, single woodcut from “Home is a Foreign Place” (1999), portfolio of 36 woodcut chine collé with Urdu text print on paper and mounted on paper, 8 x 6 inches; sheet: 16 x 13 inches

Zarina’s lexicon captures how contemporary meanings of home multiply through loss, becoming more challenging, yet necessary, to articulate. Her prints greet visitors to the Met Breuer exhibition *Home is a Foreign Place*, which remaps Western narratives of modern art in a global context of decolonization and displacement. This approach follows movements among Western museums to reconsider their collections through both migration and historically excluded artists and geographies. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s patchy collection of recent acquisitions

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from Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, West Asia, and North Africa mounted alongside works by postwar art mainstays like Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol sketches the potential of home and migration to reorient art history. Home's ambiguity comes alive most in the art itself, shifting from a subject to a sensibility.



Ibrahim El Salahi, "Alaphet no. 2" (1962; reworked 1968), oil on canvas, 29 3/8 x 24 3/4 inches

The first gallery gathers works by Asian, Arab, African, and American pioneers of abstraction. Paintings by Mark Rothko, Mohan Samant, and Adolph Gottlieb experiment with visuals from nonwestern cultures. Yet do their forays into the foreign contradict an aesthetics of home? Evident in his incantatory painting "Alphabets" (1962, reworked 1968), Ibrahim El-Salahi abstracted Arabic and African iconography to reflect the everyday environment of Sudanese people amidst decolonization. Nearby, "Love Letter I," a 1969 Anwar Jalal Shemza painting weaves alphabets into an architectural mesh. In "Structure with One Thousand Pieces" (1966-68), a Saloua Raouda Choucair sculpture, irregular sequences of wooden fragments compose a



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tower that scatters the lamplight within. These artists explore collectivity and infinity through small, in-between spaces



Mark Bradford, "Crack Between the Floorboards" (2014), printed and painted paper, masking tape, and acrylic media on canvas, 132 x 120-1/4 x 2-1/8 inches

Another gallery features art that traces space. From Anna Bella-Papp's discreet incisions on clay, to Agnes Martin's warbling graphite lines on canvas, to Mark Bradford's grid of Los Angeles street advertisements stripped and layered into acrylic, the hand's shadowy labor takes on physicality. Oscillating dots in Kathleen Petyarre's painting "Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming-Sand-Hill Country (after Hailstorm)," (2000) embody the tracks of an ancestor who takes the form of a lizard crossing the desert. Surrounding Minimalist works visually speak to Petyarre's work, but don't help us contextualize its concepts of Aboriginal homeland.

Prabhavathi Meppayil's panel responds to our presence. Humming wires embedded in gesso flash if we shift perspective. The metal will rust, creating a work that wants us not to look, but to watch. Nailed to the surrounding space, the dizzying strings of Kazuko Miyamoto's untitled 1972

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installation shimmer as we move around them. Rooted yet atmospheric, hand-knotted threads recall feminized (and increasingly migrant) labors, such as domestic work or care work, that make spaces habitable. Simryn Gill's long-exposure photographs document abandoned vacation homes in Malaysia that were raided for fixtures. Rhythmic configurations of window panes unfold across rubble-strewn rooms. The transient memorializes transience; light records light, and shadow shadow.



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Carlos Motta subverts colonial memory through 20 pill-size sculptures that replicate pre-Columbian depictions of queer intimacy occluded from ethnographic museums. Walid Raad further unsettles institutional narratives through imagining a scenario in which objects from the Louvre Islamic Art collection traveling to Abu Dhabi grow prosthetic shadows. Mounted on the wall, Raad's sculptures cast shadows barely distinguishable from fake ones painted underneath.

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From patrimony to debris, a last gallery positions assemblage amidst global trade and conflict. Michael Rakowitz recreates objects that disappeared from the National Museum of Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion. Newspapers and packaging of foodstuffs exported to Arab-American communities imitate stone, deflecting the surveillance of foreignness through camouflage. Hew Locke adorns model vessels — from an imperial galleon to a refugee skiff — in flotsam. Suspended from the ceiling, these bundles of colonial history double as votives for precarious lives. In a humbling video by Donna Conlon, ants foraging in a Panama forest carry leaf-like national flags and peace signs back to their nest.

Global breadth sacrifices depth. The exhibition highlights the movement of styles and commodities over movements for liberation and aesthetic qualities of space over generating social space. Major figures stand in for the local worlds they navigated, where other homes for art emerge. An advocate for Asian and African modernists in postwar Britain, Rasheed Araeen resisted institutional exclusion by building Black and developing world cultural networks. Due to their fragility, museum staff periodically rearrange the timeworn, latticed cubes of Araeen's "Chaar Yaar (Four Friends)" (1968/2010), instead of visitors doing so as the artist first intended.

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Although situated in a gallery of Pop Art parody, the work's politics lie in interaction rather than imagery. Edgar Heap of Birds makes a more precise intervention in space. For a 1990 riverside commission in Minneapolis, he installed 40 signs that appropriate standard government format to commemorate Dakota people who fought relocation and were executed by the U.S. government in Minnesota in 1862. Three signs are displayed here, their site-specific power albeit dimmed. Yet the Dakota men's names, emblazoned with the direction "honor" on weather-resistant, enameled steel, lodge in my throat. "Ma-ka'ta I-na'-zin." "Ho-i'-tan-in Ku." "I-te' Du-ta." Language can entrap, but it can also protect.



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Home is a Foreign Place, *curated by a team led by Sheena Wagstaff, Brinda Kumar, and Meredith Brown, continues at the Met Breuer (945 Madison Ave, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 2020.*