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Project Title: Abstraction in Post-Independence Pakistan, Bangladesh and India

Abstract

This project explores the largely unexamined history of abstraction and transnational modernism in post-independence in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. I focus on key artists in all three countries who were part of the modernist art movement but who, due to their use of abstraction, proved difficult to synthesize into figurative, modernist art historical canons within South Asia. Working against this grain, these minoritarian artists instead made non-figurative work the center of their practice, and developed alternate modes of inquiry into art, technology and subjectivity. My project makes two interventions. First, it challenges Western art historical scholarship on modernism that excludes non-Western artists practicing during the decades of decolonization. In particular, I examine the ways in which this scholarship situates abstract artists from the region within Western intellectual and aesthetic categories of artistic practice, attributing any innovation in form as derivative of Western artistic movements, such as late modernism or minimalism. My second intervention is within Indian historical scholarship that privileges figurative art within its own history of "national" modernism. My project refuses the nation-state as a legitimate boundary within which to situate these artists and instead looks at metropolitan aesthetic production across the three countries, as evocative of alternate notions of belonging. I argue that these abstract artists from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India were synthesizing local and regional aesthetic practices, while also sampling from a complex inheritance of colonial modernity, Islamic art and architectural modernism. By placing these artists within a broader regional framework and also articulating their aesthetic engagements and intellectual thought within Indo-Persianite traditions, I propose a transnational and transdisciplinary methodology towards decolonized global art history.