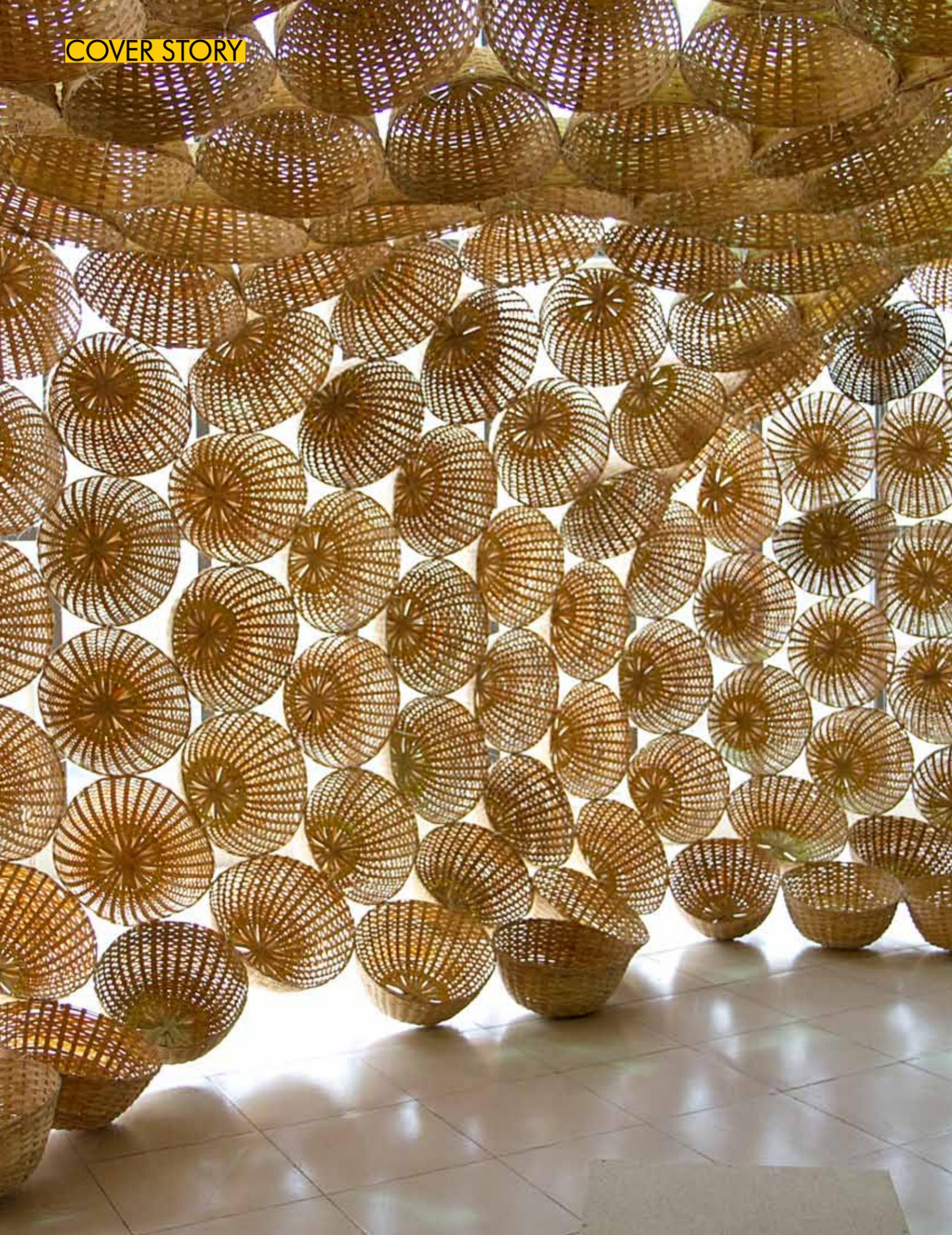


COLOUR CODED

AN INTERVIEW WITH RANA BEGUM

RAJESH PUNJ



in the 1950's, Judd's innovative codes of conduct have since come to serve a less likely devotee of a more minimal method. Bangladeshi born, London based artist Rana Begum espouses some of those same principles as a consequence of her move away from figuration towards a greater fascination for form, light and colour. As the trio of elementals that in and of themselves have become the carriers of her cannon of coloured objects. Choosing materials over subject matter, Rana sees everything as Judd foresaw it when he goes on to explain "you're getting rid of the things that people used to think were essential to art. But that reduction is only incidental. I object to the whole reduction idea...if my work is reductionist it's because it doesn't have the elements that people thought should be there. But it has other elements I like." By which Rana argues the removal of the motif allows for something much more fundamental, that of the interplay of light and colour on a form.

For Rana everything comes as a consequence of seeing art as a set of absolutes. Assembling materials as the basis for a series of independent and more integrated objects that are illuminated by light and conditioned by colour. Of her work she explains "I can describe them as objects, but I think it is neither necessarily here nor there. It doesn't restrict the works or the way in which you look at them. At the end of the day you still notice the material, the colour interaction, and the 'objectness' of it as well." And at their most fundamental Rana's configurations of simple geometric forms allow

For the American sculptor Donald Judd simplicity served to celebrate the object in space. Deciding "it isn't necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyse one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful." Rationalised

^
Rana Begum

<
*Rana Begum, Baskets, 2013,
Courtesy of the artist and Dhaka Art Summit.*



her to engage with art as a modern minimalist. Seeing as American Dan Flavin did with the light and the line as a mark of our existence.

Taking on a Western, almost American sense of how the object is situated in space, Rana argues that by replacing representation with a rudimentary reality, she has arrived at the truth more easily. Saying of her practice "I am engaging with materials and forms that are universal and recognisable; the square, the triangle, the rectangle, the circle. Which means that anywhere in the world, that anyone, of any background or religion, can connect with it. It is a universal language that everyone can understand." And like Yves Klein,

Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris before her, Rana sees art as an exercise of elemental interchanges; by which simplicity stands up for reality.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: *Can you explain these works initially?*

Rana Begum: Those works represent a period of research preoccupied with light and form, and the tape piece in the top corner No.94 (2005) is representative of that. I love colour but I really struggled with paint, and of how one colour works with another. So I knew at the end of the first year of my MA that I was ready to work with colour but paint wasn't something that I could use.

RP: *Was that because of your wish for a certain kind of finish, of its precision?*

RB: Of precision, and when I would mix colours they would end up being muddy and mucky basically, and I wasn't able to achieve that solidness that you have when you open a tub of paint. And it was also at that moment that I realised I had a collection of adhesive tapes. And I thought actually why don't I just use them to study colour? And I made a series of paintings that used this adhesive tape.

RP: *You consciously define those works as 'paintings' and not coloured objects?*

RB: I feel like they are. I can describe them as objects, but I think it is neither necessarily here nor there. It doesn't restrict the works or the way in which you look at them. At the end of the day you

still notice the material, the colour interaction, and the 'objectness' of it as well. I think that kind of shouts out. So I spent quite a few years exploring those materials, and the palette expanded when I looked at vinyl's as well with works. And there are some areas where I have actually introduced paint, but it is paint straight out of the tub. At the time for me what proved fascinating was how even the thinnest strip of colour could change the mood of the work, and that was what was interesting. I got to a stage after a year that people were interested in purchasing these works, and I couldn't sell them because I knew they would fall part. So I had to find a way of keeping the tape down onto the surface, for which I tried many different things. And then I found this two-part resin that generated heat when you mixed the two parts together, but it wasn't enough heat that it lifted the tape off of the surface; it still kept it intact. And even though the resin

acted as a technical tool it actually added something more to it, which was how it reflected the shape, and something that I was unconsciously thinking about anyway. But the fact that the work was reflecting everything made me think more about the three-dimensional space, and of the need to come away from the wall. And that's where the next piece down comes into it, No.93 (2005). Those series of works really made me think about the sculpturalness of what I was trying to make; how the two research elements came together.

Light, form and colour all blended quite well, and I was feeling confident. And the reflected piece became a series of works (from 2006) that looks at readymade materials, looks at repetition; that looks at the perimeter of the work, and again I think it is quite an important piece. And I think it is a piece that still represents (some



^
Rana Begum, *Bench*, 2013, Paint, Lacquer on Birch Plywood, 20 x 45 x 50 cm, Photo Courtesy: Philip White.

>
Rana Begum, *Table*, 2014-15, Paint on Plywood, 84 x 50 x 25cm, Photo Courtesy: Philip White.

eleven years later) what I am still interested in. And now I have got the opportunity to explore that material, which at the time I couldn't do because I didn't have the money to push that work. I am now doing two public art commissions using reflectors.

I made them after 2007, and it led to using materials that I could work with more easily. One of the other issues is that I am quite small and I wanted to make larger works, but I struggle with scale, weight and material. And the reflector pieces were a way for me to produce larger works that could grow. But also I felt a need to make larger works, and the way to do that was to use multiples and attach them to one another to become something bigger. Which relates to the idea of the infinite, and of concentrating on something that could have been taken out of something much larger. So I have been working at those things and seeing how they can grow.

RP: *Are you works about a homogenisation of painting and sculpture, as a blurring of categories or classifications?*

RB: I am not interested in each thing as a discipline. I don't start a piece of work saying I want to do some painting or that I want to make a sculpture; that is not how it works. It is about one work feeding into another, and about one work leading to something else, that becomes something else, that grows.

RP: *So the idea that the works moved from the wall to the floor was intentional?*

RB: It just became natural, as a natural progression within that series of works. And I think going back to what I was saying before; it was the reflective surface that made me think about the three-dimensional space reflecting it back onto the work. So that is a piece of work where the interaction

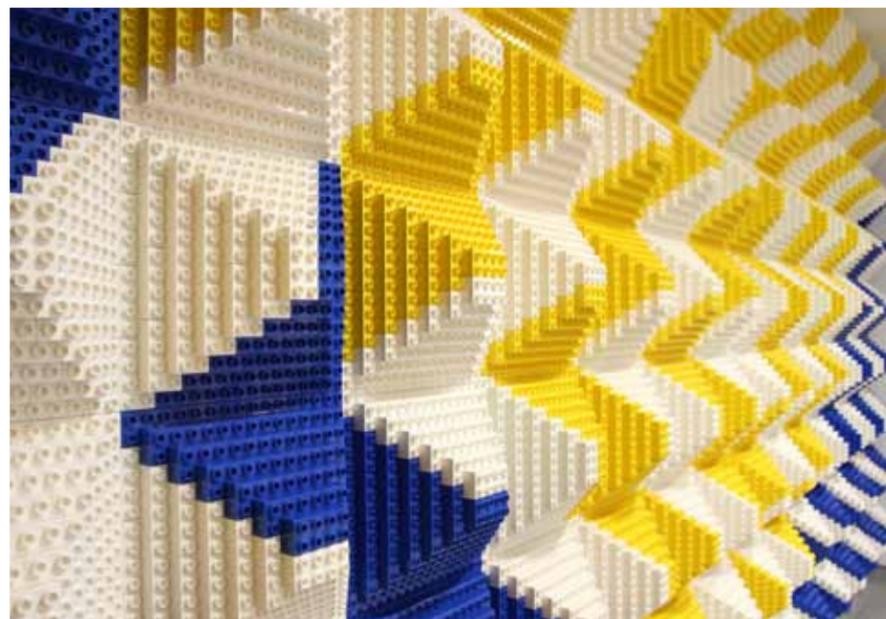
of colour and form is happening simultaneously. But it was an accident and it was something I wasn't expecting to happen, and for me when it did happen it was like a disaster. I thought this was completely wrong, that it wasn't what I wanted to do. I don't mix colours, but the fact that it was happening naturally, and that it was creating this whole other layer of geometry and colour was incredibly fascinating, and I was just blown away by that. And I have been exploring that relationship even since in this series of works.

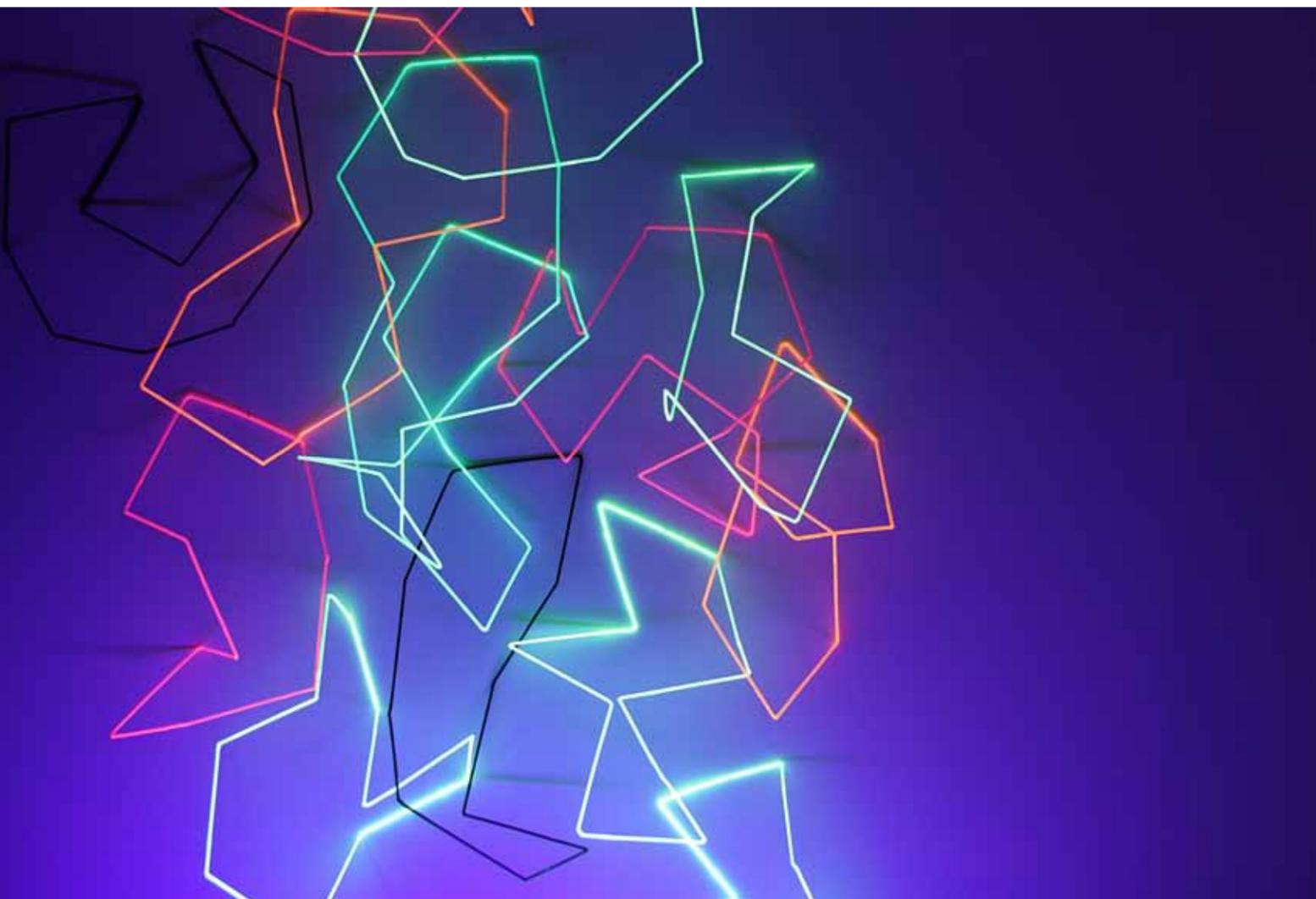
And also at the time I was becoming more interested in the perimeter of the work, and that came about through folding pieces of paper, and when I was folding paper I was thinking about my earlier research on form and light, and I thought this is really interesting, I really like what is happening with works like No.245 LFold (2011), No.475 SFold (2013), No.479 SFold (2013). I then used those paper pieces to also study colour, and the more I worked on those paper pieces the more I understood them as works in themselves, and that I needed to push them further. And those works become larger sculptural pieces (relief pieces), which I had

I am not interested in each thing as a discipline. I don't start a piece of work saying I want to do some painting or that I want to make a sculpture; that is not how it works. It is about one work feeding into another, and about one work leading to something else, that becomes something else, that grows.

>

Rana Begum, *Lego*, 2013. Paint, Plastic, Mdf, Lego, 410 x 254 x 6 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Surbiton Health Centre.





the chance to explore in different materials.

RP: *When I look at those works I think of the American artist Ellsworth Kelly.*

RB: He was a huge influence early on, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella, Anish Kapoor; they were the people that I was looking at initially.

RP: *So as colourists, they motivated you.*

RB: It was a big deal, but it took me a long time. I was looking at them during my foundation year in 1999, or possibly even before that. I can't quite remember. And then when I

was working at Chelsea (school of art) I was still making work that was very similar to that, with a very muted palette; originally going towards and then temporarily moving away from colour. And then on the MA I was ready to explore colour again. One of the reasons I applied for my MA was to be able to have an opportunity to talk to the artist Tess Jaray, whom I ended up assisting for about five years. And she is actually someone who is amazing with colour, and I felt that her approach to working with colour and paint was really interesting; which proved very influential on my work as well.

RP: *And you appear to have retained this interest in colours that are vibrantly intense.*

^
Rana Begum, 2010, *Drinking straw and UV lights*, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of Delfina Foundation and the artist, Photograph: Begum Studio

>
Rana Begum, *M Drawing*, 2015, Vinyl and Powder-coated Mild Steel, 59 x 74 x 66 cm Photo Courtesy: Philip White.

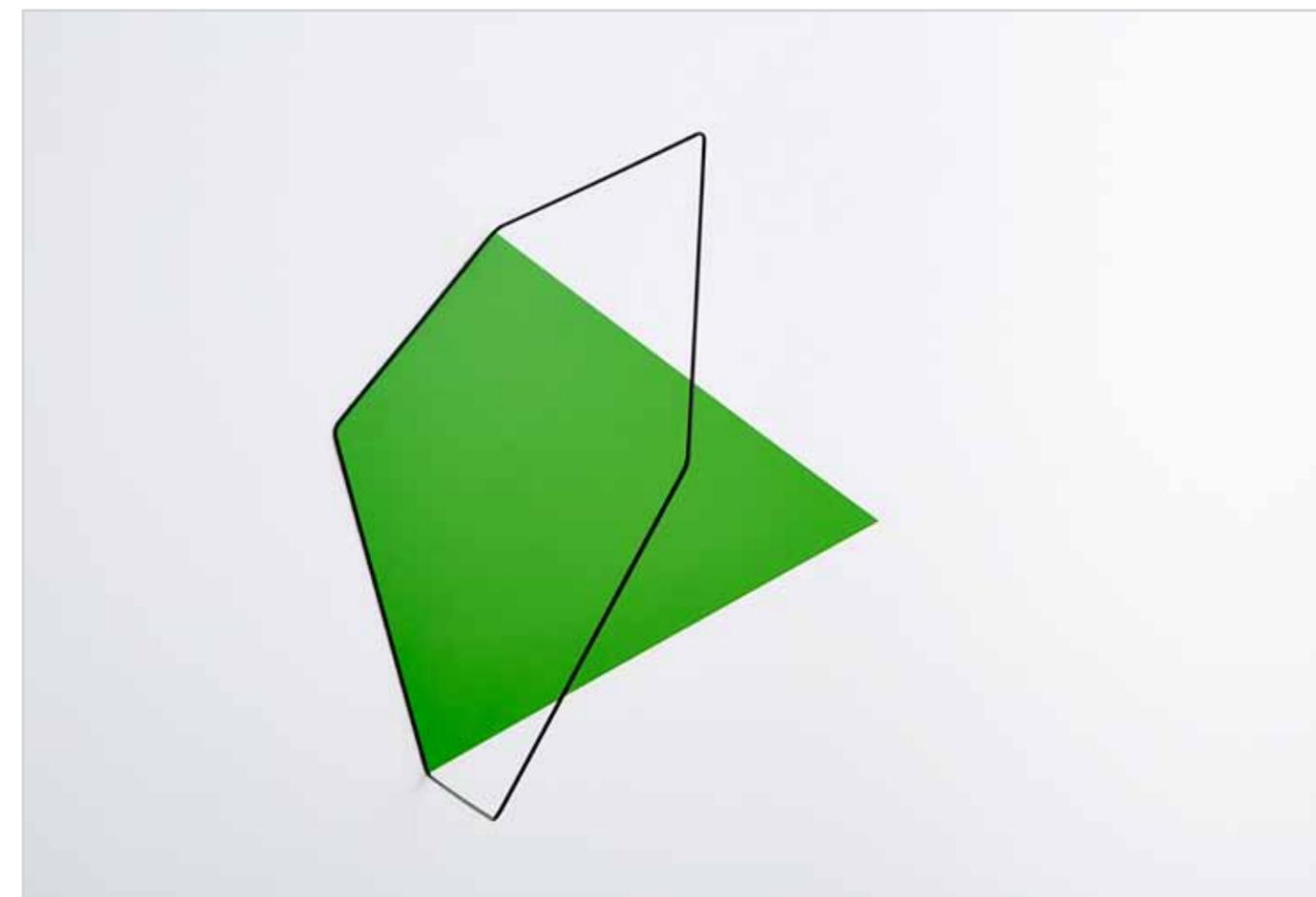
RB: Yes of keeping their original (strength). I felt it was quite interesting because the intense colours reflected onto the white and the white changed, and vice-versa. So the folded works became more freestanding and sculptural, No.518 FFold (2014), No.521 FFold (2014). And the more recent drawings are a series of works that were started from my residency in Beirut through the Delfina Foundation. So when you attend the show at the Parasol Unit, you will see an installation downstairs on the right in a tiny room with drinking straws that is lit by UV light, based on No.207 (2010) that makes them glow. So I wanted to try and make those drawings more substantial if you like, stronger; something that lasts. And I started making these drawings in mild steel.

RP: *And you define them as drawings?*

RB: Yes, for me they are drawings, because that was the intention. For me works such as No.620 M Drawing (2015), No.622 M Drawings (2015), No.623 & 624 M Drawing (2015), are sculptural works as drawings. And when I was doing these works I was asked to exhibit in a group show curated by Paul Carey-Kent, in a house. He and others had curated seven shows prior to the house being renovated, and they asked me to choose a room that I wanted to show these works in, and I chose this room because of the previous artist's work, which meant you could see the drawings of the landscape underneath. And for me that was really interesting because I was thinking about a landscape when I was making the work, and I had the works up on the walls of the room over this image. And there is something about the drawings that relates to landscape and the urban environment at the same time. Then

I started seeing these shapes form and that's where certain colours came up. The drawings become floor-standing pieces and out-door works as well.

Which led to a series of paintings that stemmed from the box pieces, whereby the colours overlap and create this whole other layer of geometry. I wanted to make that interaction more tangible, more physical if you like; of drawing attention to something that was there through its materiality. And then the mesh pieces, including No.606 M Mesh (2015), No.610 M Mesh (2015), No.648 L Mesh (2015) came about as a consequence of the basket installation I did for the Dhaka art summit, No.473 (2013-2014). Which stemmed from two separate childhood memories, one of which was to do with light. Because that is one of the strongest memories I



have of growing up in Bangladesh, of the light and the atmosphere being amazing. And for that work the space that I was allocated had this intense light coming in, and I wanted to take advantage of that and create a space that was calm and meditative, as something that people can experience and walk into. And so what I took from that in material terms was the aspect of how light flittered through the installation, and I thought of how I could find something that was more permanent? Again, I work with materials that sometimes don't last, and so you are looking at something and trying to find a way to make it last. And I wanted to try and embody colour into the work as well.

The mesh works were a response to the basketwork. And also with regarding to artists I had been looking at Josef Albers for a while, and he is someone I have been interested in for a long time. I haven't been able to read his books because I hate reading. I am dyslexic. I have to read the same paragraph ten times over. Hence why I have always taken this approach, in terms of the research into light and form it wasn't done through books, it was done physically working with materials. And also the colour period wasn't done through reading books and understanding colour, it was done through physically working with coloured materials. But what was interesting was how I felt like these materials relate to that, in terms of the colours.

RP: Josef Albers - Homage to the Square, 1965

RB: Yes stacks of coloured squares, on to top of another. My work references that and I have been really excited by it. And then these are the outdoor sculptures and drawings from the straw pieces, and again I love this reoccurring contrast between the light and heavy, and the fragile and harsh. And then there

is the furniture, and again I love blurring the boundaries between painting, sculpture, design and architecture.

RP: It is incredibly interesting your moving into physical forms as furniture. Do you feel burdened by the exercise and accomplishments of design, or are you able to move into that realm very easily?

RB: That is a really good question, for me I have always been interested in objects as things, and I see furniture as something that isn't solely for the purpose it is made. There is also a beauty to furnishings, involving a sculptural side to them. If they are in a space and light comes through in a way that plays with light or reflects light, it can be really amazing; and that is how I see it. So I don't have that burden of the history and intention of the discipline of design, I am seeing it purely for its elemental aesthetics.

RP: Obviously we think of furniture as utilitarian and of it being used, and what is intriguing with what you are doing is that they become interesting when they are not being used. It is as if you refocus on them as objects in space that have an omnipresent. That they exist beyond the period they function as furniture.

RB: Furniture, even in the way that it is placed within the space becomes interesting for me, and it is that side of the object that has a function, with works like No.372 Bench (2013), No.431 Bench (2013); and it also goes back to this idea of the materials that I sometimes use in my work. If you look at the adhesive tapes they all have a function, they are not made for an aesthetic reason. But by my action I am turning them into something else. The hazard tape has a function, the reflectors have a function; they are made for a purpose. And I think it is that kind of same approach in terms of the furniture. Yes they can have a

I wanted to take advantage of that and create a space that was calm and meditative, as something that people can experience and walk into. And so what I took from that in material terms was the aspect of how light flittered through the installation, and I thought of how I could find something that was more permanent? Again, I work with materials that sometimes don't last, and so you are looking at something and trying to find a way to make it last. And I wanted to try and embody colour into the work as well.

>

Rana Begum, *Lego*, 2013, Paint, Plastic, Mdf, Lego. 231 x 254 x 6cm, Courtesy of the artist and Surbiton Health Centre.





function but at the same time they can be an object that exists in space.

RP: The shift of semantics is interesting.

RB: Which softens the hardness but at the same time you get that form and you can see what is happening. It has been interesting looking at materials and being able to work with them when considering the function and form of furniture. This is a coffee table I have been exploring, No.604 Table (2014-2015), and then there are the installations, of which you will see something similar works at the Parasol Unit. So that is where the drawings collectively come from.

RP: Are you collaborating in terms of the production of the furniture?

RB: No, the furniture is solely my

own work. I was asked to design something for an Italian company. I designed a bench and then they chose not to make it. I ended up making it for my second show at Biscoff/Weiss, and it took off, it did really well.

RP: It does appear as if you have a real ability for creating furnishings cum objects.

RB: I love this blurring of boundaries that we keep referring to, between functioning and aesthetic forms.

RP: Clearly that in-between space is where everything works. As much as your works are visually very precise, they also enjoy elasticity to their origin.

RB: Yes, that you get to push. I find it fascinating, and even doing installations I find it incredible in terms of blurring that boundary between art and architecture. And, of creating something that someone has to physically walk into and experience, which is very interesting.

RP: Was this very well received?

RB: The basket installation was the piece that really took it off for me, in terms of public recognition.

RP: Based on a very simple idea.

RB: Artificial light on the basket piece created changes that I loved. The work was less static, as the light altered its appearance throughout the day. And then No. 545 Baskets (2014) was a piece I did in Istanbul that I wanted to react to the original work in Dhaka. For the installation in Dhaka I hadn't thought about the exterior, I had almost completely ignored that. And it was when I was putting the Istanbul work together I realised how important it was.

RP: You do see a relationship between the two works that appears to be determined by their location.

RB: It became very organic, for which the exterior was just as important as the interior. And with the making of the Istanbul work I wanted to pay attention to the exterior. And that was when the baskets were dyed a different colour, black.

RP: And they become something else entirely.

RB: Yes exactly.

RP: And in Istanbul your choice of black appears to add weight to the work. And even if we go back to your folded paper and panel folded works, the colours as they appear have a determinate weight to them; a grey being heavier than a green.

RB: Exactly and that was what I discovered in those early research paintings if you like, because the thinnest strip of colour would change the work completely and a wider band of colour would add something else. It was incredibly fascinating.

RP: And have such configurations led to something resembling a formula?

RB: There is no theory and that's my point, in terms of reading. I feel like I have learnt so much more than all the colourist could have taught me.

RP: By virtue of what you are doing it is natural to ask whether yellow is a more significant colour than red, in terms of presence. But possibly that is not the question.

RB: No, not for me, nothing is significant. It is about the relationship the colour has with the form and with the light. Those three things and how they play off each other prove most significant. And for me there is a constant need to create a balance between them as elements if you like, and sometimes one might overtake the other; but essentially the three coexist.



RP: They are your fundamental elements.

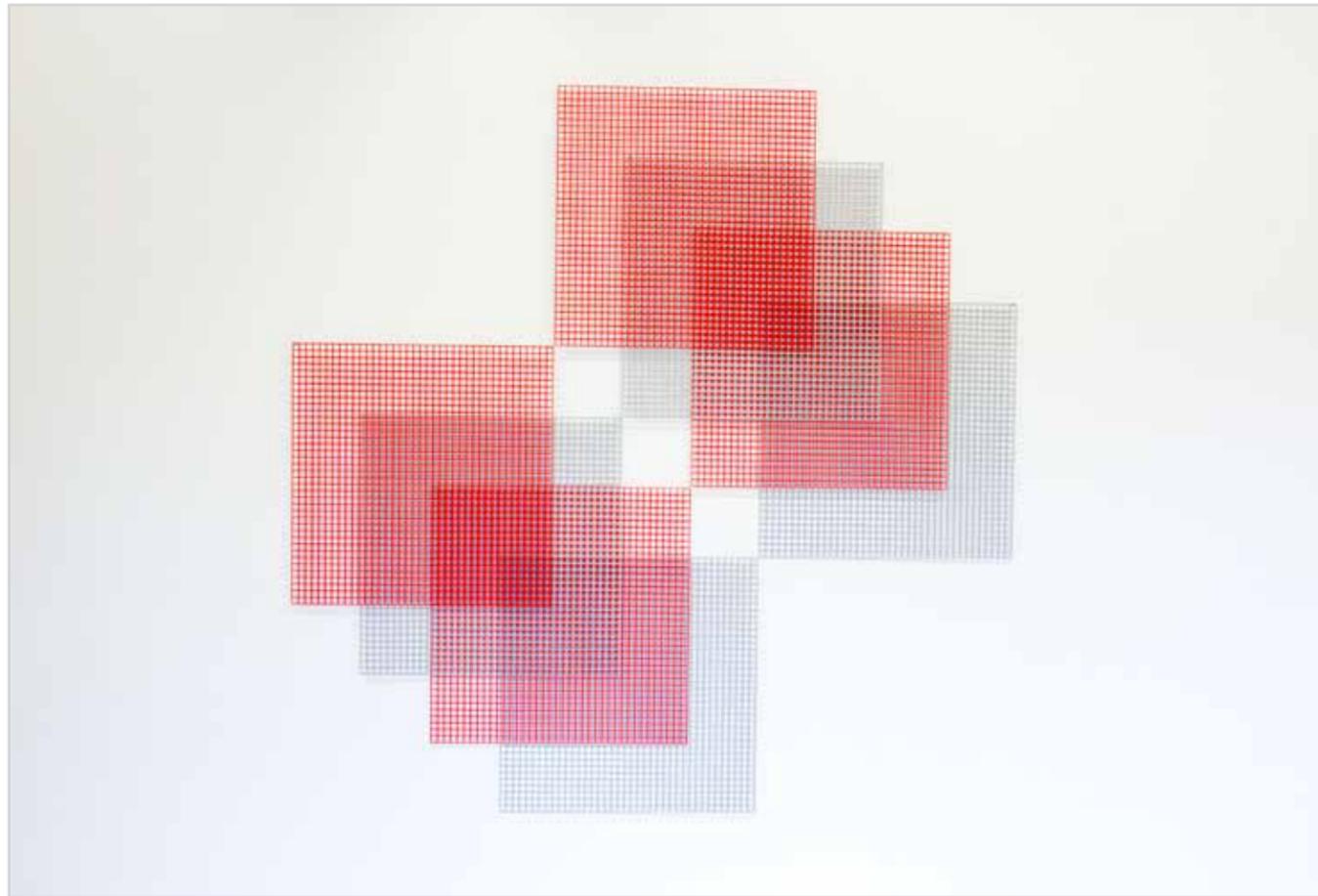
RB: I feel like they are.

RP: And have you always, going back to the beginning of our conversation, been attracted by the value of minimalism?

RB: No I started off as a representational artist. I was painting a lot of still life, and at the time I was interested in (Vincent) Van Gogh, (Claude) Monet. But the turning point was when I went to college and I was introduced to artists like (Donald) Judd and Anish Kapoor, I thought 'wow, this is incredible'. 'how do I get there?' basically, and at the time I was doing a lot of drawing and I was attracted to (Alberto) Giacometti's work. So I looked through my work and I

^
Rana Begum, *Fold*, 2013, Paint /Lacquer on Copper, 55 x 46 x 23 cm,
Photo Courtesy Philip White.

^
Rana Begum, *M Drawing*, 2015. Vinyl and Powder Coated Mild Steel. 67 x 75 x 73 cm
Photo Courtesy: Philip White.



realised I wasn't as interested in the figure or the representation of it, I was interested in (and I had a list of things) light, I was interested in line, I was interested in form, I was becoming interested in repetition and colour. And these things in themselves, individually were abstract.

RP: You understood that pretty quickly, that everything was in the elements.

RB: Yes, and for me that was very simple, and instantly I could see where the work was going; instantly I could understand. Because I couldn't completely comprehend their work but I knew I was drawn to it. And it was when I started dissecting my work that I realised that all of those things were there. I just needed to find a way to explore those elements further and in a much simpler way. And without

complicating it with representation, because that is not at all what the work is about. I am interested in how light interacts with form and colour, and that was what I was physically trying to draw attention to. And what I found with my drawings was I didn't enjoy that static-ness, I actually wanted the work to embody that change that I was seeing in front of me. And that was what the struggle was for years.

RP: It begins to become a science of sorts.

RB: It does feel like a science yes. And that wasn't intentional; that wasn't how it was planned. I just thought that in order for me to get to where (Donald) Judd, Sol LeWitt, (Sean) Scully, Agnes Martin were, I had to start from the beginning. I had to start with the basics, basically.

RP: And do you feel like you can now

^

Rana Begum, *M Mesh*, 2015, Paint on Mild Steel, 132 x 132 x 0.5 cm (47 x 47 cm each)
Courtesy of the artist
Photo Courtesy: Philip White.

>

(Top) Rana Begum, *L Mesh*, 2015, Paint on Stainless Steel, 227 x 137 x 0.5cm (96 x 96 cm each), Courtesy of the artist
Photo Courtesy: Philip White.

>

(Bottom) Rana Begum, *L Mesh (Detail)*, 2015, Paint on Stainless Steel, 227 x 137 x 0.5cm (96 x 96 cm each), Courtesy of the artist
Photo Courtesy: Philip White.



sit at the table with them, having contributed to the colour debate?

RB: I don't know. I would love to be able to sit at the table with them.

RP: I find it interesting art historically.

RB: It is definitely very interesting, and in respect to their work I feel like my work is there, and I want to go beyond it. A lot of these artists I mention are dead and I can't see where they would be going. And I feel like I want to go beyond that, and I want to see where the work is going to go. I understand their search in their own work. I get a glimpse of it.

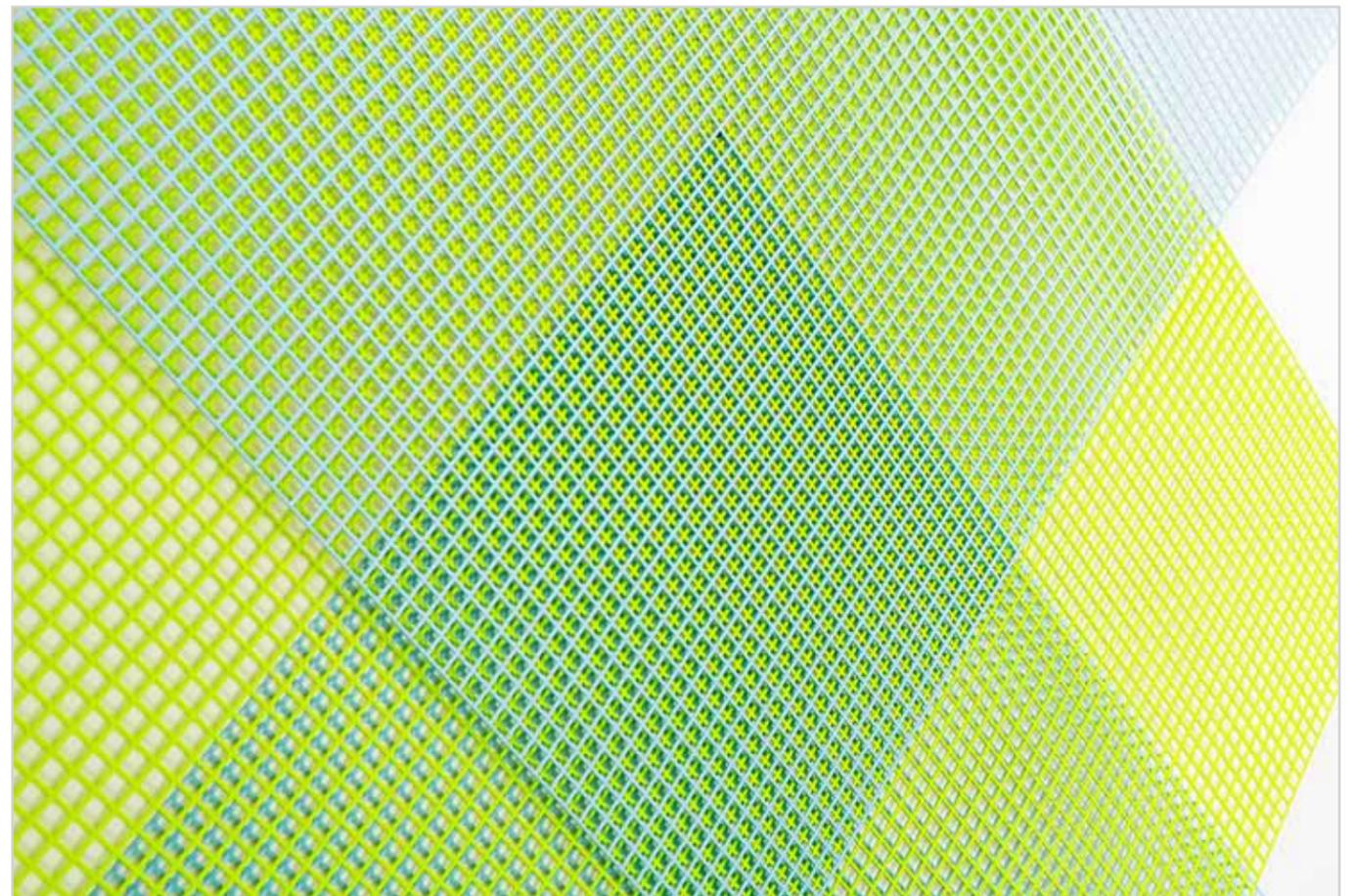
RP: And I wonder if audiences are more sophisticated now, with your applying anti-art objects to art?

RB: But that is what I think Parasol

Unit as a space really does justice to, that process if you like. And I feel like this is the first time the audience is getting that sense of a journey that I have been on, in terms of getting to where (Donald) Judd, Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin are. Getting somewhere near to what they achieved. But for me in the same way people connect my work to Islamic art, I want to go beyond that.

I want to see what would have happened if these people had risked their lives, where would their research have taken them. Because I feel like that is what their work does, it doesn't just say here is an idea, we produce it and that's it. It is about completely dissecting that idea into so many fragments, that I want to see where I can go with the same kind of approach.

RP: It is interesting when you refer to other countries as locations; how



is your work received in London as opposed to when you exhibit in Dhaka?

RB: It is strange because I didn't really have a sense of what the response would be like in Dhaka and in India. I grew up in Bangladesh, where I was aware of the (art) language that is used, that is recognised, and of how art is seen. I didn't know if the audience would understand because it has taken me a long time to get to where I am, so you can understand my work.

RP: Your work is sophisticated for its modernist simplicity, and as with Dan Flavin or Donald Judd, does it require an understanding of a certain set of disciplines to arrive at a better understanding of your objects as art?

RB: It is not easily relatable because the work doesn't have a narrative. There isn't a story and I don't title my works; they are titled in the order they are produced. There isn't something there that someone can connect to easily and say 'oh yeah I recognise this because it is this landscape, it is this building or it is that person.' It is none of that - it is abstract. It is totally to do with light, surface, colour, form, and these are all things that we see around us and people see but they don't notice. For my part I am taking those elements from the outside and relocating them inside, onto a wall, and by doing so drawing attention to it. And I just didn't think the response would be that great to be honest.

RP: Not only is the work visually minimal, but you are asking your audiences to think more reductively, by entering into a space with a select number of objects, whilst removing themselves entirely of the outside world.

RB: Exactly, but then at the same time I am engaging with materials and forms that are universal and recognisable; the square, the

triangle, the rectangle, the circle. Which means that anywhere in the world, that anyone of any background or religion can connect with it. It is a universal language that everyone can understand.

RP: Going back to your interest in the Americans, (Donald) Judd and Sol Le Witt, have you exhibited in America?

RB: I have but not a great deal.

RP: I ask because it seems a natural adventure for your works to be seen in the country of Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt.

RB: I have had various group shows, recently Murtaza Vali curated a show for Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New York. I have shown here and there, and the work does do well there, but it hasn't been major. I sell a lot of work out there, but in terms of galleries I have to be honest with you I really haven't had the interest to start working with a US based gallery. Because the four galleries I have are keeping me so busy, and I have two children as well. It was enough, but saying that I feel ready now, hence having the studio visit. Which is quite interesting, because I feel as if I am ready to manage that extra workload.

RP: And in relation to the last question, my feeling is that you need to confront your heroes, by playing off a work of yours against a work by (Donald) Judd or Dan Flavin. The consequences of such an inter-play would be interesting on a number of levels.

RB: It would be amazing to be able to show with them. I had a very interesting email from a museum, which I cannot recall, who are doing a show on Sol LeWitt, and they have asked to show my work, which would be amazing. I am also doing a project with Yorkshire Sculpture Park, curating a show there from the Arts Council Collection. So, I will be

able to show alongside other artists.

RP: Which is planned for when?

RB: That will be next year. Returning to the works I am experimenting with a set of materials for the installation at the Parasol Unit, so again it is not what I was expecting, and I like that it is a drawing rather than a piece of sculpture. It is like a physical drawing for me, and I feel like this connects to Sol LeWitt's wall drawings. Especially when you stand here in the space and look that way. And then there the other public art pieces that I would wish to discuss on another occasion, but can initially introduce you to. For the Surbiton Health Centre (2013) commission I created interactive logo walls, so they come apart and you can build whatever you want. I spent a lot of time in hospital because of my father, so I do a lot of commissions for the hospital and the NHS. The Pictet Group (2014-2015) is a work for a curved wall, which is breaking away from the usual kind of thing. So you can see the scale as it changes, and then there is the reflector piece.

RP: So the scale of the works is fundamental.

RB: The scale varies and I really enjoy that variation. Depending on what you are working on, which can be something smaller something much larger.

>

Rana Begum, *Lego*, 2013, Paint, Plastic, Mdf, Lego, 410 x 254 x 6cm
Courtesy of the artist and Surbiton Health Centre.

