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Color Coded

A Conversation with

Rana Begum

BY RAJESH PUNJ



No. 670, 2016. Powder-coated steel,
dimensions variable.

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FOR CONTEMPORARY ART



No. 93, 2005. Resin on hazard tape and wood, 50 x 50 x 5.5 cm.

For the American sculptor Donald Judd, simplicity focused attention on the object in space: “It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality whole, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear, and powerful.” These codes of conduct have since come to serve an unlikely devotee of the minimal method. Moving from figuration to a fascination with form, light, and color, Bangladesh-born, London-based Rana Begum espouses some of those same principles and pushes them further. She chooses materials over subject matter, following Judd in “getting rid of the things that people used to think were essential to art.” Begum argues that the removal of the motif allows for something much more fundamental—the interplay of light and color within a form. For her, everything comes as a consequence of seeing art as a set of absolutes, assembling materials as the basis for alternately independent and integrated objects illuminated by light and conditioned by color. At their most fundamental, her configurations of simple geometric forms define her as a modern Minimalist, seeing, as Dan Flavin did, light and line as the marks of our existence.

Rajesh Punj: *Could you explain your early works?*

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

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

RB: It was because of precision. When I mixed colors, they would end up being muddy and mucky, and I wasn’t able to achieve that solidness that you have when you open a tub of paint. It was at that moment that I realized I had a collection of adhesive tape. And I thought, “Why don’t I just use the tape to study color?” I made a series of paintings using this adhesive tape.

RP: *You define those works as “paintings” and not as colored objects?*

RB: I feel like they are. I can describe them as objects, but I think it is neither here nor there. It doesn’t restrict the works or how you look at them. At the end of the day, you still notice the material, the color interaction, and the “objectness.” I think that kind of shouts out. I spent quite a few years exploring those materials, and the palette expanded when I looked at vinyls as well. There are some areas where I actually introduced paint, but it is paint straight out of the tub. At the time, what proved fascinating for me was how even the thinnest strip of color could change the mood of the work.

After a year, people became interested in purchasing these works, and I couldn’t sell them, because I knew they would fall apart. So, I had to find a way of keeping the tape down on the surface. I tried many different things, and then I found a two-part resin that generates heat when you mix the two parts together, but not enough to lift the tape off the surface; it remained intact. Even though the resin acted as a technical tool, it actually added something, which was how it reflected the shape—something that I was unconsciously thinking about anyway. The fact that the work was reflecting everything made me think more about three-dimensional space and the need to come away from the wall. And that’s where *No. 93* (2005) came in. Those works really made me think about the “sculpturalness” of what I was trying to make, how the two research elements came together.

RP: *Are your works about a homogenization of painting and sculpture, a blurring of categories or classifications?*

RB: I am not interested in each thing as a discipline. I don’t start a work saying that I want to do some



Left: *No. 245 L Fold*, 2011. Paint on mild steel, 90 x 125 x 35 cm. Right: *No. 475 S Fold*, 2013. Paint and lacquer on copper, 55 x 46 x 23 cm.

painting or that I want to make a sculpture — that is not how it works. It is about one work feeding into another and leading to something else that becomes something else, that grows.

RP: *So, the works moving from the wall to the floor was intentional?*

RB: It just became a natural progression within that series. The reflective surface made me think about three-dimensional space, reflecting it back onto the work. In that piece, the interaction of color and form is happening simultaneously. But it was an accident, something I wasn't expecting to happen. When it did happen, for me, it was like a disaster. I thought it was completely wrong, that it wasn't what I wanted to do. I don't mix colors, but the fact that it was happening naturally, and that it was creating this whole other layer of geometry and color, was incredibly fascinating, and I was blown away. I have been exploring that relationship ever since in this series of works.

At that time, I was also becoming more interested in the perimeter of the work, and that came about through folding pieces of paper. When I was folding, I was thinking about my earlier research into form and light, and I thought, "This is really interesting." I

like what is happening in works like *No. 245 L Fold* (2011), *No. 475 S Fold* (2013), and *No. 479 S Fold* (2013). I used the paper pieces to study color, and the more I worked on them, the more I understood them as works in themselves and that I needed to push them further. Those paper works became larger sculptural pieces (reliefs), which I had the chance to explore in different materials.

RP: *When I look at those works, I think of Ellsworth Kelly.*

RB: He was a huge influence early on, along with Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella, and Anish Kapoor.

RP: *Were you interested in them as colorists?*

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. When I was at the Chelsea College of Arts, I was still making work with a very muted palette, originally going toward and then temporarily moving away from color. And then on the MA, I was ready to explore color again. One of the reasons I applied for my MA was to have an opportunity to talk to the artist Tess Jaray, whom I ended up assisting for about five years. She is amazing with color. Her approach to working with color and paint proved very influential on my work.



Left: *No. 521 F Fold*, 2014. Paint and lacquer on mild steel, 46 x 31 x 25 cm. Right: *No. 207*, 2010. Drinking straws and UV lights, dimensions variable.

RP: *You appear to have retained your interest in vibrantly intense colors.*

RB: Yes, keeping their original strength was important, because the intensity reflected onto the white, and the white changed and vice versa. So, folded works like *No. 518 F Fold* (2014) and *No. 521 F Fold* (2014) became more freestanding and sculptural. I started another series of drawings during my residency in Beirut through the Delfina Foundation. “The Space Between,” my Parasol Unit show (2016), featured an installation downstairs in a tiny room with glowing drinking straws lit by UV light. *No. 207* (2010) was based on those drawings. I wanted to try and make them more substantial and stronger, something that lasts. So, I started making them in mild steel.

RP: *And you still explain them as drawings?*

RB: Yes, for me, they are drawings, because that was the intention. Works such as *No. 620 M Drawing* (2015), *No. 622 M Drawing* (2015), and *No. 623 & 624 M Drawing* (2015) are sculptural works

as drawings. When I was doing them, I was asked to exhibit in a group show curated by Paul Carey-Kent and installed in a house. He and others had curated seven shows prior to the house being renovated, and they asked me to choose a room to show these works. I made my decision based on the previous artist’s work—you could see the drawings of the landscape underneath. That was really interesting, because I was thinking about a landscape when I was making the work. I installed my pieces on the walls over this image. There is something about the drawings that relates to landscape and the urban environment at the same time. I started to see shapes form, and that’s where certain colors came up. The drawings became freestanding pieces and outdoor works, which led to a series of paintings that stemmed from the box pieces, whereby the colors overlap and create a whole other layer of geometry. I wanted to make that interaction more tangible, more physical, drawing attention to something that was there through its materiality.

The mesh pieces, including *No. 606 M Mesh* (2015), *No. 610 M Mesh* (2015), and *No. 648 L Mesh* (2015), came about as a consequence of the basket installation that I did for the Dhaka Art Summit, *No. 473* (2013–14), which stemmed from two separate childhood memories, one of which has to do with light. That is one of the strongest memories I have of growing up in Bangladesh, of the light and the atmosphere being amazing. The space that I was allocated had intense light coming in, and I wanted to take advantage of that and create a calm and meditative environment that people could enter and experience. In material terms, what I took from that 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 I have to find a way to make them last. And I wanted to try and embody color in the work as well.

The mesh works were a response to the basketwork. I had been looking at Josef Albers for a while. I haven't been able to read his books, though, because I hate reading—I'm dyslexic. I have to read the same paragraph 10 times over. Hence, I have always taken a specific approach to my research. My research into light and form wasn't done through books; it was done by physically working with materials. The same with my research into color—it was done through physically working with colored materials. Here, I felt like these materials related to Albers in terms of the colors.

RP: Homage to the Square?

RB: Yes, stacks of colored squares on top of one another. My work references that, and I have been really excited by it. Then there are the outdoor sculptures and drawings from the straw pieces, and again, I love the contrast between light and heavy, fragile and harsh. In the case of my furniture, I love blurring the boundaries between painting, sculpture, design, and architecture.

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

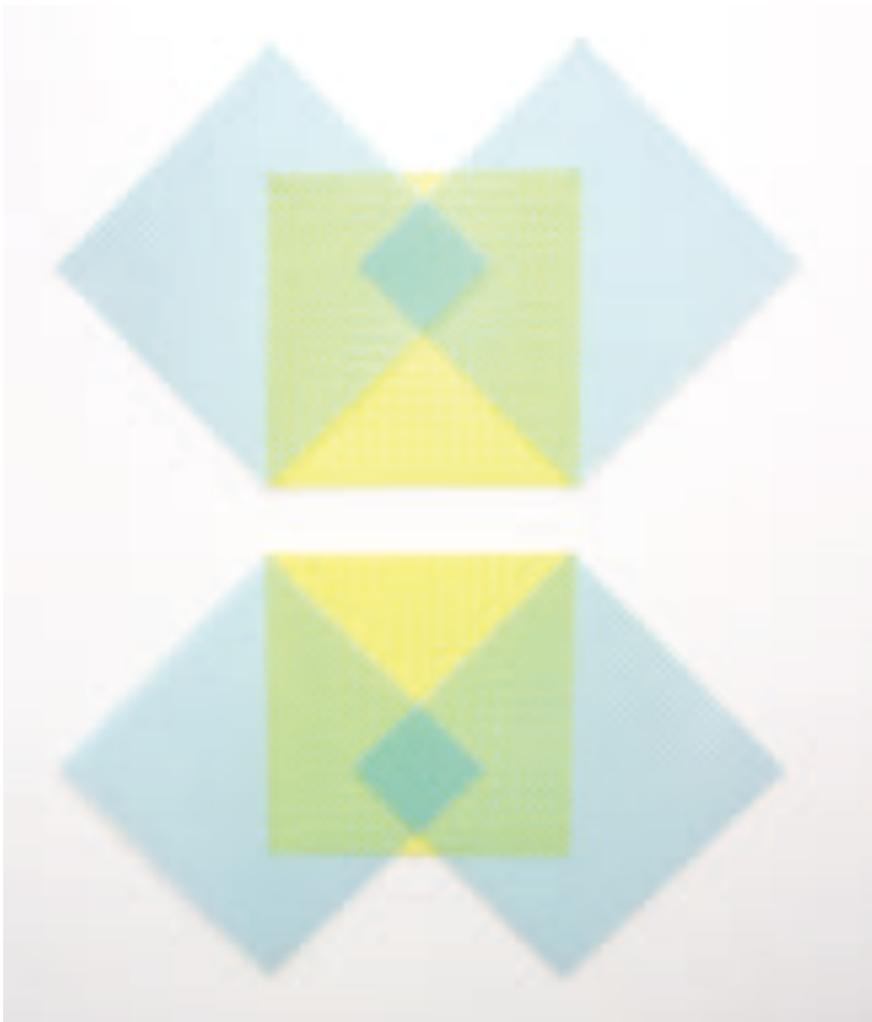
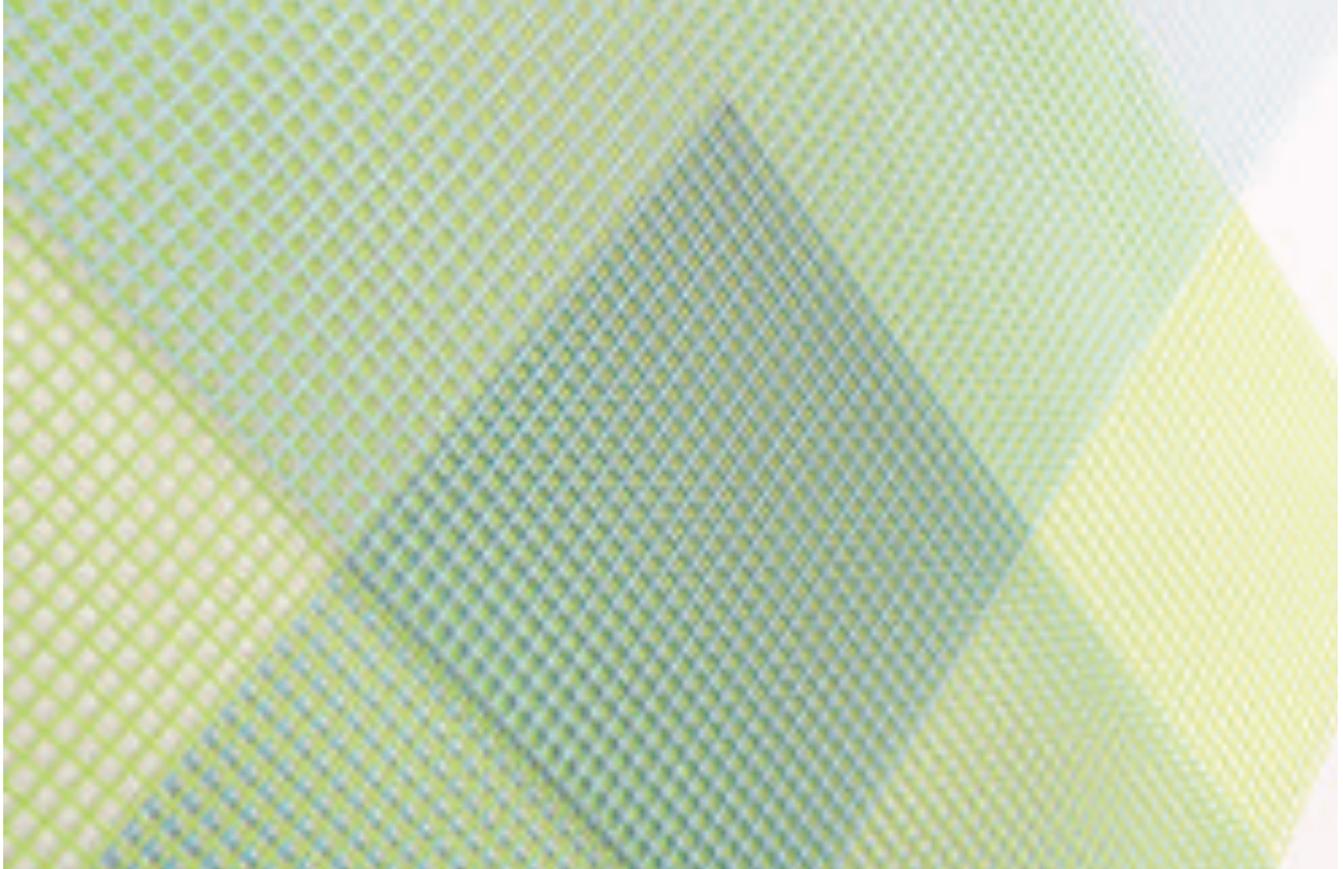


Installation view with (left) *No. 623 M Drawing*, 2015, vinyl and powder-coated mild steel, 67 x 75 x 73 cm.; and (right) *No. 624 M Drawing*, 2015, vinyl and powder-coated mild steel, 64 x 74 x 46 cm.

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

RP: *We think of furniture as utilitarian, but what is intriguing about your furniture is that the objects become interesting when they are not being used. It is a shift of focus in how we consider something omnipresent.*

RB: Furniture, even in how it is placed within a space, becomes interesting for me, and it is that side of the object that has a function in works like *No. 372 Bench* (2013) and *No. 431 Bench* (2013). This also goes back to the materials that I sometimes use in my work. Adhesive tape has a function; it is not made for aesthetic reasons. But by my action, I am turning it into something else. Hazard tape has a function, reflectors have a function—they are made for a purpose. This is the same approach that I take in terms of the furni-



Above: *No. 648 L Mesh* (detail), 2015. Paint on stainless steel, 227 x 137 x .5 cm. **Left:** *No. 610 M Mesh*, 2015. Paint on mild steel, 113 x 143 x .5 cm.

ture. Yes, the pieces can have a function, but at the same time, they can be objects that exist in space.

RP: *Do you collaborate on the production?*

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 Bischoff/Weiss, and it took off; it did really well.

RP: *Your work is sophisticated in its Modernist simplicity. Does it, like the sculptures of Flavin or Judd, require knowledge of certain disciplines to understand it 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 recognize this because it is this landscape, it is this building, or it is that person." There is none of that — it is abstract. It has totally to do with light, surface, color, and form. These are all things that we see around us and that many people don't notice. For my part, I am taking those elements from the outside and relocating them inside, on a



Above: *No. 431 Bench*, 2013. Paint, lacquer, and walnut laminate on MDF, 45 x 220 x 50 cm. Below: *No. 604*, 2014–15. Paint on plywood, 84 x 50 x 25 cm.



TOP: PHILIP WHITE, COURTESY THE THIRD LINE / BOTTOM: PHILIP WHITE, COURTESY THE ARTIST

wall; by doing so, I draw attention to them. 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 viewers to think more reductively, asking them to enter a space with a select number of objects while removing themselves entirely from the outside world.*

RB: Exactly, but then at the same time, I am engaging with

materials and forms that are universal and recognizable—the square, the triangle, the rectangle, the circle. Which means that anywhere in the world, anyone of any background or religion can connect with the work. It is a universal language that everyone can understand.

Rajesh Punj is a curator and writer based in London.