

AIPS FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

Sadia Shirazi

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1. Please highlight the significance of your research on Pakistan Studies (one paragraph to one page)

My research project explores the largely unexamined history of abstraction and transnational modernism across post-independence Pakistan and India. I focus on key artists in both 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 artists instead made non-figurative work the center of their practice, and developed alternate modes of inquiry into art, post-colonial modernism 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 work follows that of art historians working on artists across South Asia, to challenge the India dominated scholarship and to emphasize the multiple partitions that West and East Pakistan, now Pakistan and Bangladesh, experienced subsequent to 1947. My research and work refuses the nation-state as a legitimate boundary within which to situate the artists I study 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, Mughal art and architecture and modernist architecture. 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 decolonizing art history.

My research involved accessing archives of artists from South Asia who were educated in or spent a significant portion of their lives in London, Paris, and Madrid. I also interviewed artist's and their colleagues and family members, and conducted research on their faculty and the pedagogy of the College's and University's they were part of. Accessing people and this varied material allows me to write a more informed history across the multiple sites these artists inhabited and to speak to the multiple artistic traditions they drew from. Often work on artists from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh remains situated only within the diaspora, if they live outside their country of origin, or is unable to synthesize formative experiences abroad. My project aims to privilege the artist and to argue for a complex colonial inheritance of artists across post-colonial South Asia. It also provided me with information regarding the student's and artist's reception in these cities in a period ranging from the late 1950s through to the present.

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2. Please provide 3-4 outcomes from your research and 3-4 deliverables of your research (in the third person. Outcomes are: highlights of your presentation/research as well as new ideas to advance your research, new collaborations; Deliverables are things like chapters, lectures given, etc.)

The outcomes of Shirazi's research were gaining primary research material from oral interviews as well as institutional and personal archives; specific information regarding one artist that allows her to make an argument for which there was no prior material; expanded the transnational scope of her research. Shirazi has drawn from this material towards one conference paper and two chapters towards her dissertation.