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REVIEWS:
Kamrooz Aram Delivers Institutional Critique at
Atlanta Contemporary



Installation view of Kamrooz Aram's exhibition "Ancient Blue Ornament" at Atlanta Contemporary through April 1.

Institutional critique looms large over contemporary art. In a moment when power is being held to account and representation matters, recent interventions into the formal, conceptual, and systemic workings of the art institution by artists and activist communities remind us of the urgent necessity of this practice. However, among the protests and hashtags for change that have emerged, a quiet radical critique can also be found that is neither weak nor literal, but strong in its subtlety. In this latter category, I would include the work of Iranian-born New York artist Kamrooz Aram and his current exhibition of paintings, sculptures, objects, and photographs at Atlanta Contemporary titled "Ancient Blue Ornament," on view through April 1.



Left to right, *Ornamental Composition for Social Spaces II* and *An Afghan Dream*.

Like other artists who engage the classic tenets of institutional critique, Aram heightens our awareness of the established frameworks that shape our understanding and valuation of art objects. Yet, his encounter with the exhibition space is informed by a certain empathy towards materials, artworks, and architecture—a refreshing gesture that frustrates the cold, reductive aesthetic that accompanies much of the movement's practices. Thus, instead of ignoring or fetishizing the gallery space and its immovable conditions, Aram incorporates the gallery into the work to allow institutional space and art to activate one another.

The variety of genres and the careful curatorial choices present in this exhibition pose challenging questions about the notion of the museum or gallery as a site of ahistorical, passive contemplation. The provocations are bold and strategic and interrupt the formulaic logics of display. A bold blue wall, for example, occupies the space between its function as a flat surface upon which to exhibit the artwork and its resonance as a decorative backdrop—a gesture that disturbs the expectation that art must live in and conform to the sterile white cube or disavow its role as an object in an interior. Formica sculptures in the form of ancient



Kamrooz Aram, *Ornamental Composition for Social Spaces 9*, 2017; oil on canvas, 78 by 56 inches.

Persian ruins at Persepolis sit on the floor across from a carefully arranged vignette of hookah pipe and Persian rug placed theatrically in a gallery windowsill, bringing historically domestic objects into the gallery space. A sharp triangle of bright blue carpet draws attention not only to the irregular dimensions of the space but to the historical stigma attached to the items and accessories of the decorative realm (carpets, wallpaper, arabesques) that modern artists feared so acutely.[1] Two white metal “fences” placed on the carpet create dynamic vectors of compositional energy yet block our access to the space—a reminder of the visible and invisible modes of intellectual and bodily control that exist in institutions of art.

Aram’s consideration of architectural space points to an embedded cultural anxiety about how artworks are supposed to function in art institutions, and the ways in which we are trained to look at art in these settings. His insertion of color, décor, and ornamentation into

the white cube points to a larger critique of the regulating conventions in Western art that have relegated certain sensory qualities and aesthetic modes to the subordinate “decorative.” Artist David Batchelor explores the issue of “whiteness” as a color and power structure in his 2000 text *Chromophobia*, stating that the employment of white by classicists and modernists alike to impose order, banish difference, and enclose the world in an ideal Truth has resulted in a marginalization, degradation, and fear of color.[2] Color, he argues, has been relegated to the realm of the cosmetic, the vulgar and, most significantly, a means of invasion and foreignness—a dangerous, threatening Other that must be subordinated. The geopolitical, racist, and sexist terms of this gesture are overt. It is under these terms that Aram’s blue wall manifests power.

While there are strong examples across the exhibition of Aram’s conflation of a modernist vocabulary and logic with the realm of the ornamental and decorative, it is most evident in his paintings. Incorporating historically weighted tropes of modernist painting, such as the grid, gestural marks, all-over composition, and hard-edged geometric forms, Aram’s paintings encourage the viewer to see how all of these characteristics are also present in modes of non-Western art and ask us to reevaluate the role of non-Western art on modern art’s development. (Fig. 3) For example, repeated floral motifs culled from Persian rug designs speak to the repetition inherent in Minimalism and Pop Art, while dots and triangles in black, white, and orange-red reference Persian stucco and Moorish tile patterns as well as the dynamic geometric compositions of Russian Suprematism and Bauhaus designs.

More than the formal appearance of these paintings, Aram’s process engages his dialectical attitude towards time, history, and the ancient versus the modern. Mapping the canvas with a penciled grid first (a technique also used by Minimalist Agnes Martin), Aram then orients the repeated patterns and motifs of flowers and triangles in a seemingly random but controlled arrangement, finally wiping away the top layer of the painting with solvent, leaving a blurry stain or trace on the surface where the motif once was. This results in an incredible swirling surface texture that collapses any stable notion of figure-ground, and invites the viewer to consider the painting as a kind of palimpsest, where what is covered and uncovered, visible and buried, past and present within the work remains alive and present. If we think of the ancient past as something that can remain alive

only in a fragmented, ruinous state, what does it mean to see what is past — that wiped-away image still struggling to be seen on the surface — in the “now” of the painting?

In Aram’s practice, this duration and visibility of the past into the present points to a radical temporal condition that is both diachronic and synchronic—a hallucinatory constellation of times, worlds, specificities, and conditions that modernism and its promoters were so eager to banish or disavow. The disorientation between discrete times, spaces, histories, and cultures in Aram’s paintings uncovers important questions about modernism’s defensive position towards non-Western aesthetics, the shared vocabulary that Western modernism and classical Middle Eastern art employ, and the entanglement of these histories that have shaped our aesthetic tastes and political values.

One is reminded of Albert Gleizes’s desperate attempt to separate his Cubist works from the decorative realm in his 1913 “Opinion” (On Cubism), which stated: “There is a certain imitative coefficient by which we may verify the legitimacy of our discoveries, avoid reducing the picture merely to the ornamental value of an arabesque or an Oriental carpet, and obtain an infinite variety which would otherwise be impossible.”

See David Batchelor’s *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 2000.

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