

Sheila Makhijani: Playful interface as surface

By Catherine de Zegher

[My lines] realize that maybe it is better to be a little tame and a little wild. With that they may reach a harmonious balance... and manage to create their own world. A world which has no boundaries barring them from going on the other side... a world which is full of happiness and joy... so they try, but, that is really hard so they try again, and again... and life goes on... maybe one day they will arrive somewhere.

What we see is a blot of watercolor with blurry edges its boundary uncertain on the blank page, and within this vibrant blot, within this open space, a set of floating fine lines, also painted or even stitched with thread, creating an organic structure. What we think back to, what I vividly recall, is a random blot on a piece of paper given to me as a child—a provocative school exercise to get started on a drawing, or to think anew, by studying the cloudy pattern created by the watercolor soaked into the paper: the shape you see in it and what the blot imposes on you or awakes in you. The result is a kind of playful interface between paper, paint and draftsman leading to a kind of transformation and to new ideas, the nascent possibility of something unformed, unintended, the meaning of which happens in our attention.



Shifting Surface | 2024 | Watercolor on paper (Detail)



Everyone is thinking of that | 2022 | Dry pastel on paper (Detail)

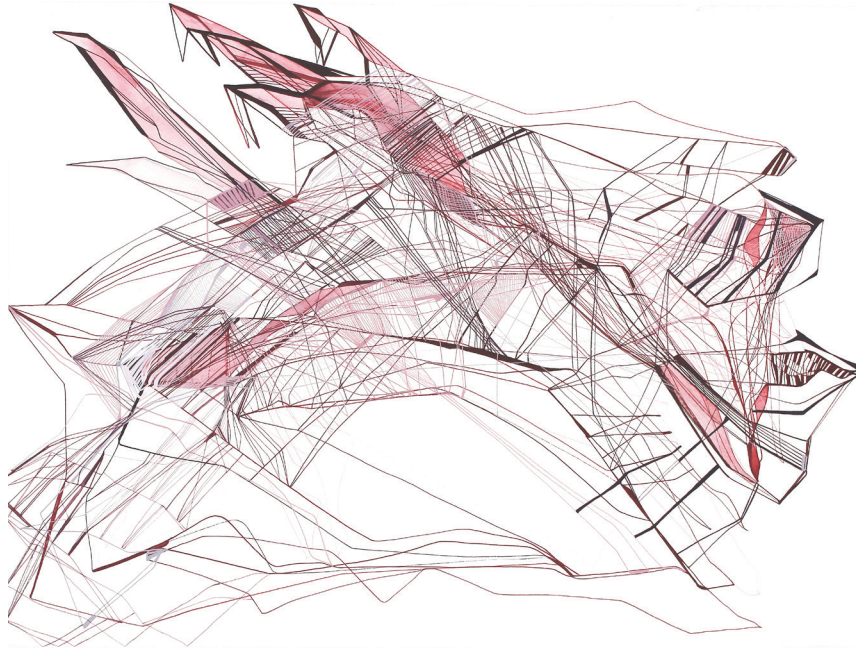
Every day, it seems, the blot approach to drawing, or such notion, kept Sheila Makhijani going in her small studio, this outward gesture towards the other, this connective minor gesture, always sensitive, always reciprocal. It is a matter of first acknowledging and of attempting to comprehend what the material world tells you, to recognize structures, creatures, an emerging world in these simple blots and stunning colors, and to bring them to the surface, as though of the paper and of consciousness, by delineating in our perception their intricate shapes. And to do this in the act, of blot making and of reading, together. It is an essential feature of contemporary drawing to make this open space visible and viable as a new possibility for the line, for the mark, and for us to exist as a part of a changing world.

In Makhijani's compositions on paper, the organic lines coexist with the more structured and geometric elements, generating a dynamic interplay between order and chaos, light and shadow. The colors blend and bleed into each other, and from them an apparent depth and texture emerge that mimics the complexity of the natural world. Simultaneously, she alternates the organic with the geometric which echo cellular and architectural structures. All these elements are often layered and intertwined, creating a sense of rhythm and dimension their elaboration sometimes coming to be even reminiscent of architectural blueprints, between abstract purpose and realization. The precision and attention to detail in her work reflect a meticulous planning and execution. In this way, she invites us to consider the parallels between the constructed world and the imagined spaces of her drawings, blurring the lines between abstraction, reality, and its representation.



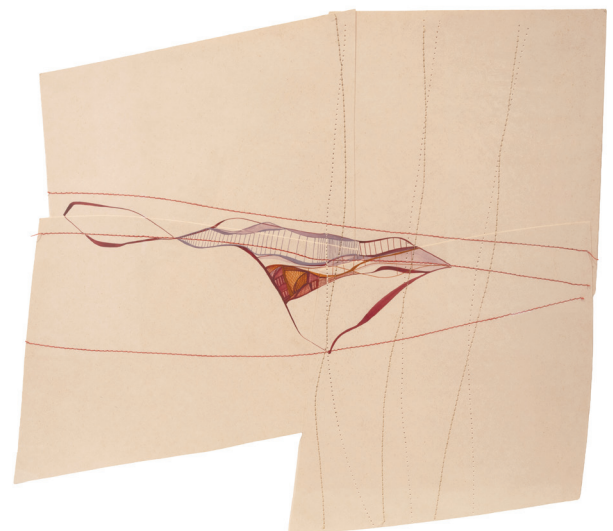
Hey, come back! | 1998 | Gouache on paper

Although beautiful and skilled Makhijani's painted lines are not mere decorative elements but are integral to the overall narrative of her pieces that profess open-mindedness, balance and harmony. They guide our eyes across the paper, initiating a visual journey that unfolds with each line or stroke or thread. As the sinuous lines vary in thickness, color, and intensity, they seem to pulse and breathe, giving her drawings a sense of life, joy, and movement. Fluid, dynamic and organic, they meander and intertwine, creating intricate patterns that evoke a pulsing of energy, of urgency and of vitality. In this it is evident that a layered deconstruction of linear modernist structures is crucial to Makhijani's collages with gouache and thread on paper and plastic sheets, like it is to the filmy surfaces of Julie Mehretu's psychogeographies, to Susan Hefuna's translucent gridlike cityscape and building drawings, and to Monika Grzymala's temporary three-dimensional drawings, with their miles of adhesive tape.



Now What | 2009 | Gouache on paper

Makhijani's interleaving and stitching of paper and transparent sheets seem to gather parallel moments of time and sequential fragments of space, creating actual and tangible borders crossed by delicate yet purposeful lines of colored thread and paint. These works point further to the fact that not only is the background drawn as much as the line is, but that when we draw the ground, we tend to forget that it also draws us. This action of the work and our attending to it spells out the precarious and complex reciprocal relationship between the human and natural worlds, like the material blot seemingly tells us what to discover, what to make out in it or through it. As self-assured as we have become in imposing ourselves on the encompassing earth, it often escapes us how interdependent we are with one another, with the material and living background, which remakes us as much as we remake it. We are human only in relation, in peace, and in conviviality with all animate being.



Wait, not so fast | 2005
Gouache on thread on paper