



## Exhibition in Dubai examines ornamental art

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May 2, 2012

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"Ornament" became a dirty word by the time the big thinkers of the early 20th century got into their stride.

The hornblower in this charge was the architect Alfred Loos - a notoriously intense man, who went as far as to equate decoration with deviancy. Anyone who dared to jazz up, spruce up or interfere with the perfection of simplicity was butting against the modern grain, according to Loos in his essay "Ornament and Crime".

This fed into later dreams of a utopian future, where the fussiness and fluffiness of the past was eradicated. The mantra was form follows function: strip everything inessential away, be it in art, architecture or lifestyle. Under the auspices of architects such as Le Corbusier, buildings would be free of the trappings of earlier, lesser ages. It was modern living, standing tall, clean and alone.

Of course, this lofty thinking met reality. The staunch rigour of modernism (championed by the likes of Loos) found echoes in the insane political projects that typified the early half of the century and slowly the pristine, blank-faced apartment blocks decayed.

*Brute Ornament*, in its last few days at the Green Art Gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, explores this trajectory.

Putting Seher Shah together with the Iranian painter Kamrooz Aram is a marvellous match because the two couldn't be more different. Whereas Shah is adept at drawing ultra-detailed cityscapes in graphite, Aram can suspend a decorative image at the point of obliteration.

Unpicking the dying embers of the modernist dream has become a little commonplace in exhibitions these days, but the curator Murtaza Vali, in bringing these two divergent artists together, has a fresh, potent perspective.

Shah's work is by far the more compelling here. In *Emergent Structures: Capital Mass*, we see a rectangle punctured by thousands of skyscrapers. A sphere floats above, seeming to bear down on this concrete jungle - like a sun drifting close to the surface.

Although Shah walked away from a career designing skyscrapers, and has a clear draughtsman's eye, she's able to use this rigid style to create a scene of pure imagination: her dense fields of jagged buildings have a science-fiction appeal to them. It's as if we're looking into a *Tron*-like world pared down to lines and geometry.

In her earlier work, the Pakistani artist looked at the sanctity wrought in the architecture of the courtyard, again employing her graphite pencil to render these spaces, such as Al Hambra in Spain, in fierce line. Yet a similar idea can be found in *Brute Ornament*: in the excellent accompanying text, Shah says she's interested in the "paper architect", those whose dreams remain sketched in lead rather than built in concrete. The search for purity that was worked out on the drawing board had an almost spiritual dimension for these architects and thinkers, which Shah articulates in her works.

Meanwhile, this seemingly perfect world is constantly being torn apart. In her best pieces, licks of flame roar in from the horizon, and triangles whip up from streets as though these imagined cities are being blown away in the wind. This isn't, perhaps, just reality intruding but a spiritual, social void that crept in and dismantled the modernist dream of forcing out everything that held sway in the past.

Aram explores this differently. He uses his canvases to show how the moderns' rebellion against ornamentation led to a

crisis in painting.

With flowery motifs, Aram depicts "decorative" paintings that are slowly imploding. In *Angelus Novus*, for instance, flowers and murky colours seem to be sucked into a bright white void in the centre of the image, like a Big Bang waiting to happen. They're replaced by ethereal triangles and strange geometry.

Aram is showing the tension of trying to create meaningful, progressive work in painting - a medium often associated with the decorative and the past. The works question whether the act of painting has become mere ornamentation in an art world fixated on conceptualism, which arose in part as a response to the ideas of the modernists.

He's almost restaging this tension in some of the images, which seem to disappear to white - fading into the wall.

But there's a multitude of readings that can be brought to this challenging and considered exhibition. It's a show that looks to make connections with the history of western art, but in the play of geometry and pattern, also references Islamic art and the connections that might be found with this canon in Europe's search for an artistic language of the future.

It isn't all chin-stroking. Shah's works are mighty impressive, and Aram describes his paintings' power best: "I decided that a painting was finished when it started to hum."

• ***Brute Ornament* continues at Green Art Gallery, in Al Quoz, Dubai, until May 5. [www.gagallery.com](http://www.gagallery.com)**

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