

ArtReview Asia



**Tigers,
modernity
and Asia's
subterranean
histories**

**Zhang Ruyi
and the
alienation of
everyday life**

**Theaster Gates
on labour,
community
and how Donald
Trump makes
him work harder**

**Essential
exhibitions
during Art Basel
Hong Kong**

Ho Tzu Nyen

Kamrooz Aram *Recollections for a Room*
Green Art Gallery, Dubai 13 November – 8 January

Over the last few years, Kamrooz Aram's paintings have sought to rehabilitate the status of ornament and pattern within modernist aesthetics. Challenging the epithet 'decorative', Aram uses ornament conceptually, orchestrating encounters in paint between two distinct types – a repeated floral motif isolated from a Persian carpet, and simple geometric shapes and patterns that recall key moments in modernist abstraction. These canvases simultaneously engage various tropes of modernist painting, like the all-over composition, the grid as structure, the collapse of figure/ground distinction and the mark as gesture.

A previous set of canvases functioned as palimpsests, collecting traces of the various additive and subtractive marks that generated them. Less concerned with process, Aram's new work is more pared down and restrained. The grid, which he uses to orient the repeated ornamental motifs and which was previously buried under paint, is emphasised. Delicately drawn in coloured pencils, and elaborated with crisscrossing diagonals to create a pattern of squat isosceles triangles, it functions as both a formal and a structural device, as in an Agnes Martin painting. The largely monochromatic *Ornament for a Quiet Room* (all works 2016) features stacks of white triangles against a soft

foggy ground. The floral motif, sketched using green and red oil-sticks, fills the gaps in the pattern, its colours subtly echoed in the visible grid lines. *Ornamental Composition for Social Spaces* (1-3) repeat the same basic composition, but the addition of black triangles and a painted frame, a few inches in from the edge of the canvas, makes them livelier. In each, the black is subtly different, varyingly tinted with green and/or blue, the colour echoed in the muddy ground. Visually prominent, the triangles function like vectors, pushing against the top and bottom edges of the frame, introducing tension and movement. These canvases achieve an uncanny balance between control and chance, structure and play, design and accident; they seem to exemplify Igor Stravinsky's famous adage: 'Composition is selective improvisation'.

In a series of related sculptural installations, Aram challenges painting's privileged status by relegating it to the role of decorative backdrop, one component of precisely composed and crafted assemblages of display that take cues from architect Carlo Scarpa's modernist mid-century exhibition designs. A minimal composition of four white triangles in a misty green expanse sets off what appear to be two marble sculptural fragments in *A Monument for Living in Defeat*. The objects are propped up on short rods

attached to the top of display pedestals made of walnut with polished brass fittings. These are bolted into a small, square platform of alternating black-and-white rows of triangular terrazzo tiles, echoing and extending the pattern implied in the canvas onto the floor. Carved from soapstone and alabaster, and purposely left unfinished, the sculptures evoke antiquities, while keeping their status as such in question.

Two smaller works feature other artefacts of similarly uncertain provenance – a tiny ceramic vase, its patterned surface obscured by white paint; a pair of metal objects that vaguely resemble each other, one patinated bronze and the other rusty iron – displayed on tall pedestals against painted backdrops. Featuring a few drawn lines and one or more painted geometric shapes, these spare compositions are executed on the sort of drab brown linen often used to line the inside of display cabinets at most universal museums. In each of these installations, Aram's understated aesthetic interventions introduce unexpected whimsy into otherwise neutral modes of display, subtly critiquing their power to influence interpretation and establish value. Rife with ambiguities, these assemblages put questions of origin and authenticity, be it of artefact or artist, into play. *Murtaza Vali*



A Monument for Living in Defeat, 2016, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai