



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Calligraphic
Abstraction

Iftikhar Dadi

Shemza and Calligraphic Abstraction

Iftikhar Dadi

An important modernist in his own right, Shemza is representative of a generation of artists who emerged in the wake of the decolonisation of Asia and Africa. His work grapples also with issues of belonging in the diaspora, as he lived in the UK from the mid 1950s till his death in 1985. Based on a study of Shemza's writings and a significant part of his artistic oeuvre, this exhibition traces the development of the artist's career with reference to calligraphic abstraction.

Born in Simla in 1928 to a Kashmiri and Punjabi family who, at the time, owned a carpet and military embroidery business in Ludhiana, Punjab, Shemza studied in high school in Lahore. After a year in university reading Philosophy, Persian, and Arabic, he convinced his father of the seriousness of his artistic vocation and joined the Mayo School of Art in 1944, where a sort of late-Bengal School style still reigned, as exemplified by works such as *The Couple*. Upon graduation in 1947, he set up a commercial design studio in Simla. The bloody trauma of the Partition in the same year, of colonial India into the postcolonial states of India and Pakistan saw the killing of many of Shemza's family members in Ludhiana, a memory that continued to haunt him throughout his life. Shemza taught at various schools and colleges in Lahore until 1956, when he left to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. His interest in art education remained of abiding concern throughout his life.

During the late 1940s till the mid 1950s, Shemza had become associated with the circles of Urdu literary intelligentsia, and contributed to this sphere by his writings and his organizational work. The writer Zulfiqar Tabish has noted that during this period, literature, poetry, and especially fictional writing dominated Lahore's intellectual atmosphere.¹ Even while working on his paintings, Shemza actively participated in this literary sphere; he published several novels in Urdu, edited the journal *Ehsas* for three years, wrote and performed a number of radio plays, and contributed poetry to various publications under pseudonyms. At that time, competing stylistic and ideological groups, including the secularist and non-nationalist Progressive Writers, those associated with the *Halqa-i Arbab-i Zauq* (circle of aesthetes), and others who were promulgating a right-wing Pakistani ideology were engaged in lively and fractious debates in meetings and journals.² Much of this debate continued shifting the contours of the ongoing battle between progressivism (*taraqqi pasand*) equated with 'art for life's sake' and literary modernism (*jadidiyat*) termed 'art for art's sake'.³ The move towards painterly modernism (*tajridi*) needs to be situated accordingly as an affirmation of its metaphoric and allegorical potentialities in offering deeper insights into the self and society than the kind of reductive realism the progressives had increasingly embraced from the late 1930s.

Shemza was a founder of the Lahore Art Circle, a group of young artists who aspired towards modernism and abstraction during the early and mid 1950s. The return from Europe of the artist Shakir Ali on the Lahore scene in 1952 also decisively contributed to the gathering movement towards modernism. And in 1953, a group of young writers and modern artists began issuing a short-lived journal, *Khayal*, which was intended to address issues faced by modernist thinkers. Their discussions included the relevance for contemporary culture of the modernism of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Baudelaire and the painterly modernism of Cezanne, Matisse, Klee, and Kandinsky, along with the significance of Kabir, Mirabai, and numerous historical Muslim thinkers.⁴ Shemza's exposure to these debates in his later career may be seen in his response to the writings of Rilke and the art of Klee, his embrace of modernism as praxis in a highly disciplined and rigorous fashion, and most significantly, in the role that textuality and lettrism plays in the construction of history and memory in his works.

Shemza studied at the Slade from 1956-1960. The Slade years marked an existential crisis for the artist, which he lucidly summarized in a statement written in 1963:

Before I came to England I was a very happy man, a celebrated artist, who had had several one-man exhibitions, who had his work in the national collections of his country and among very many private collections. I was, indeed, represented in dozens of countries.

The dream of this already happy man came true in 1956, when I arrived in London. My whole body became two big, wide, astonished eyes. The first evening, I went into the National Gallery, where, after two hours, I had to be reminded that it sometimes closed. I saw Piccadilly, and was disappointed. I ate a hamburger at Lyons Corner House, and hated the smell of it.

Next month, I joined the Slade, and met young and very English students trying Englishly not to be English. But within a few months' time, I had failed my drawing test, and all the paintings I'd submitted for the annual Young Contemporaries Exhibition were rejected. These two shocks were too much for me. I could not forget that at home I was an 'established' painter.

But one day I locked myself in my room, stood in front of a mirror, and had a heart to heart talk. It was a bitter experience. The result was a decision to start again from the beginning. And to hide the face of that 'celebrated artist', I grew a beard. This worked rather well.



The Couple, 1944-47, gouache on paper, 23 x 34 cm



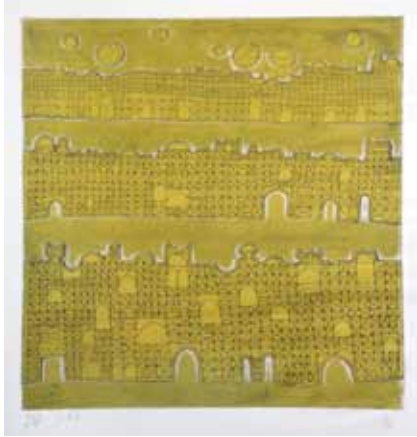
Mirza, shown at the 1955 Lahore exhibition



Still Life, 1957, oil on fibreboard, 60.5 x 44 cm



An invite for an exhibition at Gallery One, 1960



The City at Noon (version 2), 1964, colour etching on paper, 77.5 x 58 cm

It was a wonderful, depressing time. I read a lot, including [Rilke's] 'Letters to a Young Poet'. It sounded fascinating in the books, that if you go wrong, just start again – but in real life, it was a painful process, especially when you didn't know from where to start.

One evening, when I was attending a Slade weekly lecture on the history of art, Prof. Gombrich came to the chapter on Islamic Art – an art which was 'functional' – from his book, 'The Story of Art'. I remember leaving the room a few minutes before the lecture finished, and sitting on a bench outside. As the students came out, I looked at all their faces; they seemed so contented and self-satisfied. I went home and looked again in the mirror. This time I couldn't find any familiar face at all, neither the beginner at the Slade, nor the 'celebrated artist'. I couldn't talk; I just stared. After all, it wasn't a very pleasant sight.

All evening I destroyed paintings, drawings, everything that could be called 'art'. All night I argued with somebody – as I was told next morning by my hostel neighbour. All day restlessness sent me from place to place, until I found myself in the Egyptian Section at the British Museum. For the first time in England, I felt really at home.

No longer was the answer simply to begin again; the search was for my own identity. Who was I? The simple answer was: A Pakistani. But this wasn't enough. I could see Pakistan in my mind's eye: Lahore, where I came from, my friends, painters, their work – all little Picasso's, Cezanne's, Braque's, Van Gogh's [sic]. I could see a third-rate 'Paris'. The 'celebrated artist' was lost at last, as was also the beginner at the Slade. What's more, I had lost my home. I was an exile, homeless, without a name.

Although I was a regular student at the Slade, I hated much of my time there, that was the only place that gave me unhappiness, a source to find happiness. Happiness was in the British Museum, and at the Victoria and Albert. I started painting again, strange paintings. And at the Slade, Andrew Forge was 'father and confessor'. His encouragement meant more to me than anything else that had happened to me in England. I worked between fourteen and eighteen hours a day. Further encouragement from George Butcher and W. G. Archer confirmed only one thing, that my search for myself was leading in the right direction.

Such searching has its own fascination. One 'enjoys' it even when tired, depressed, annoyed. But that is the nature of the creative process, perhaps even of life itself. Thus far have I come. It is for others to look for themselves in what I have done. Either way, we have all only just begun.

The Slade Years and Beyond

Shemza's existential crisis was artistic as well as personal. As exhilarating a city that London was, it was also a profoundly alienating place. In a letter postmarked August 7, 1957, the artist notes: 'London – the world's biggest city, but if one is alone, it instantly becomes a forlorn and frightening jungle.' Precisely due to this sense of dislocation, and because even his previous artistic achievements offered no solace, the Slade years were highly productive for him. Not only did he work intensively on his own paintings, he was also exposed to the range of global art housed in British museum collections, and engaged in a sustained study of Islamic art from various regions and periods – an opportunity that was simply unavailable in Pakistan where even Mughal paintings produced in Lahore are not well-represented in the city's museum.

During these years, the mediation of Paul Klee's work also proved decisive, and was fully acknowledged by Shemza. In a letter to his friend, the Lahore-based author Karam Nawaz, dated April 23, 1957, he notes 'Paul Klee's pictures are housed in Germany [sic], and I must go there to study them.' Shemza had planned to write a book on Klee, and travelled to Berne in 1957 to meet Paul Klee's son. Nevertheless, Shemza also realized the need to *creatively* appropriate formalist and thematic modalities from Klee, as evident in a letter dated July 20, 1957 to Karam Nawaz, in which the artist notes: 'I have been deeply struck by Paul Klee (*mujhay bayhad buri tarah Paul Klee ho gaya hai*). He is a Swiss painter and I am planning to travel to Switzerland for this purpose. Although [I realize that] being afflicted by Paul Klee may have a positive outcome or a negative one (*ab Paul Klee ka ho jana achcha bhi ho sakta hai aur bura bhi*).' Although Shemza never completed his book project,⁵ among the lessons he learned from Klee was the importance of *surface* as the plane of modernist experimentation rather than a stress on modelling, and the freedom and ability to deploy abstraction, geometry, and pattern – much of it derived from Islamic art – towards modernist exploration. As Andrew Forge, Shemza's tutor and supporter at the Slade, judiciously put it: 'Shemza has been intelligent enough to grasp European art at the point at which it was stretched nearest to the East: in the work of Paul Klee. He has made a special study of Klee and has been able to use his influence positively, applying his principles of growth and development to the sort of forms which he knows intimately himself.'⁶

Shemza now began to develop work based on his own lived and studied knowledge and experience – of carpet patterns, Mughal architecture from Lahore, and calligraphic forms. For this purpose, he continued to collect motifs and materials from Pakistan and, for example,



Square Composition 4, 1963, oil on hardboard, 61 x 61 cm



One to Nine and One to Seven, 1962, oil on hand dyed cloth, mount board, 30.5 x 55.5 cm

requested Karam Nawaz in a letter dated 23 March, 1958 to send him popular cards with calligraphy bearing *Ya Allah, Ya Muhammad, Ya Ali*, and similar Arabic phrases 'preferably written in older styles.'

It was during the Slade period that Shemza abandoned his earlier illustrative approach to modern art, and began his search for a deeper compositional schema for a calligraphic modernism – this quest occupied him intensively for the remainder of his career. The artist considered *Still Life* (1958) to be a breakthrough into his mature phase. It dramatically moves from a volumetric depiction of space and objects in the lower part of the painting, to an abstract flattened and calligraphic rendering at the upper middle of the canvas, prefiguring his later work.

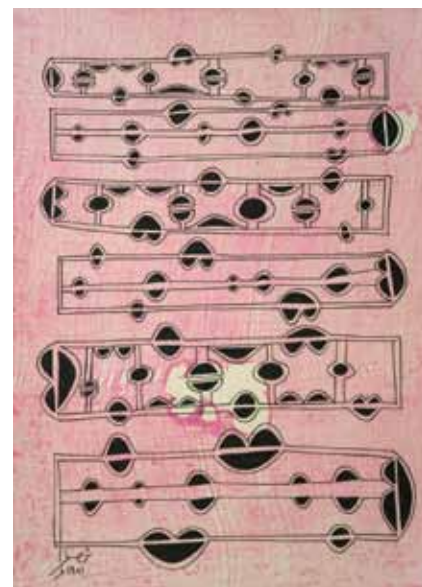
The Finality of Diaspora

Shemza had met Mary Taylor in 1957 and they were married soon after. Their eldest daughter, Tasveer was still a baby when the artist decided to move with his family permanently to Pakistan in 1960. Deeply interested in art education, Shemza's wish was to join the National College of Art (previously the Mayo School of Art) in a senior capacity. The artist was well aware of his responsibility as a postcolonial intellectual and artist towards his 'home'. In a moving letter dated 15 September, 1960 to Karam Nawaz before he embarked on his journey, after describing the sacrifices Mary and Tasveer would make in sundering their links to Mary's family in England, he writes: 'Whatever I have obtained in this country (England), it was solely for the sake of students in my country. I have tirelessly struggled to master the intricacies of artistic technique – this research was for the people of my nation who are anxious to benefit from Western experiments. But will I be able to convey this trust to them, I wonder? This is an extremely painful question, for which I see no clear answer.' Shemza was however not able to obtain a suitable position in Lahore, and was forced for a while to work for an advertising firm in Karachi. Deeply unhappy with the poor career choices available to him in Pakistan, he decided to move permanently to England in 1961, choosing to live in the Midlands, where the family would be close to Mary's parents. Thereafter Shemza taught art education in schools, and the relative isolation of the Midlands meant that he could devote himself to an intense exploration of his mature artistic project. Nevertheless, the artist showed work extensively in the UK, Pakistan, and internationally in solo and group exhibitions, but diasporic existence was now to be lived as an immanent, indefinite, and unending condition.

London, from the mid 1950s till the mid 1960s, was an important centre for artists of diverse backgrounds making and exhibiting innovative work. Significant modernist artists from South Asia who resided there included Francis Newton Souza, Avinash Chandra, Ahmed Parvez and Iqbal Geoffrey. While the work of many modern artists from formally colonised regions was being subsumed and even contained under the 'commonwealth' rubric, this term also provided for exhibition opportunities. Shemza had solo shows at the influential New Vision Centre (1958) and at Victor Musgrave's Gallery One (1960) where he also showed work alongside F.N. Souza and Avinash Chandra.

Shemza continued to investigate the relation between visual and textual practice in his modernist compositions, referencing especially 'Islamic' visual motifs and calligraphic forms. He investigated a small number of themes – city walls and architecture, electronic circuit boards, chessmen, the letter *meem* (the first letter of the name of the Prophet Muhammad), and a few others. He experimented with innovative technical procedures, and worked to introduce references to fabrics, textiles, and textures in numerous works, such as *Square Composition* (1963), and *Circuit Three* (1981). The artist's sketchbooks form the basis for his experimentation, and the numerous compositions he developed there are peppered with marks and notations in English and Urdu – the sketchbooks consequently merit detailed study with reference to his evolving praxis and in tracing how he realized his ideas in finished works such as prints and paintings.

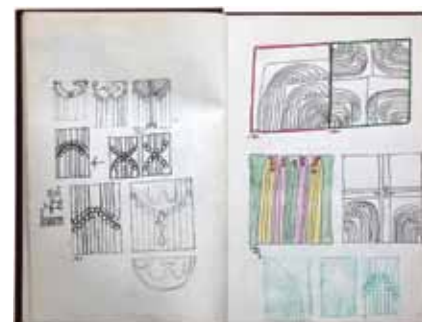
Shemza distilled his experiences into a disciplined formalist practice, much of it based on geometry. For example, in the work *One To Nine And One To Seven* (1962), he notes in Urdu: 'A circle – a square – a puzzle – for which a lifetime is not enough.' These geometric forms would provide him with a set of finite, yet flexible building blocks – much of his work is seen with reference to the shapes of the letters B and D. However, the calligraphic dimensions in many of his works, especially the *Roots* series draw from the sinuous lines of the Arabic alphabet as well, and thus venture far beyond rigid geometric abstraction. Many of Shemza's works draw on a creative tension between geometric abstraction derived from the Roman alphabet, and the sinuous character of many Arabic scripts. For example, in works such as *Love Letter One* (1969), one sees the composition bound by geometric reticulation in passages of varying modulation and frequency, yet here, using the Roman alphabet, the work strains against its strict geometric form. On the other hand, *Meem One* (1967), the Arabic letter *meem* often written in a sinuous manner is now interpreted in the opposite direction, as an strict optical geometry of circles and lines.



Circuit Three, 1981, Indian ink on paper, 29.6 x 21 cm



Meem One, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 91.5 cm



A detail from one of the artist's sketchbooks, showing manipulations with the letter *meem*.



A detail from one of the artist's sketchbooks



Love Letter One, 1969, oil on canvas, 91 x 61 cm



Roots, 1977, hand dyed cloth on marble hardboard 61 x 44 cm



Roots 6, 1984, ink on paper

Roots Series

Shemza's career culminated in the *Roots* series, executed from 1977 till his death in 1985. Structurally, these works often delineate an imagined plant form on the upper half of the picture, while the lower half depicts root forms. In the works developed in 1977, both upper and lower forms are rendered in flat, optical shapes on a richly textured hand-dyed cloth, while works developed from 1983, such as *Roots 6* (1984), are more frequently based on abstracted Arabic cursive scripts that are, however, not legible. Shemza's sketchbooks suggest that the series involved extensive preparation and much forethought. These works, some of which are on display in this exhibition, relay the anguish of diaspora in a formally restrained language based on calligraphy and ornamental designs inspired by oriental carpets and textiles. Made on a small format, their moveable character recalls works by other artists who have grappled with issues of the portability of artistic form with reference to exile and diaspora.⁷ Moreover, *Roots* while retaining a strong sense of formal discipline in its serial execution is unabashedly more decorative than much of Shemza's earlier work.

Adolf Loos has famously declared that modern man's love of ornament was a sign of his criminality and degeneracy;⁸ there are any number of thematic and formal ways by which modernism strove very hard to distinguish itself from simply being equated with decoration and ornament.⁹ It may be noted that Islamic art has been characterized in art-historical scholarship precisely as ornamental, decorative, and applied – or 'functional' in the way Gombrich had described it in the lecture that had proved to be so shattering to Shemza earlier. For modern artists drawing inspiration from 'Islamic art' however, the relation between modernism and decoration cannot be so easily disavowed. In one sense, the *Roots* series brings the dangerous question of ornament and its relation to modernism to a point of crisis, especially with reference to modernism's intimate yet unacknowledged relation to the 'decorative arts' of the non-Western world. Moreover, the 'roots' of the plant forms in the later works are textual and lettrist, suggesting that a return to one's roots can no longer be based on a blood-and-soil or 'national' affiliation, but the roots themselves have now become transnational in their historic and contemporary valences.¹⁰

The modernist experiments in calligraphic abstraction, of artists such as Shemza and others of the era of decolonization from South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa have raised analogous questions of legibility, their abstractions emphasizing form over content, quite unlike the pre-modern convention of rendering sacred or wise quotations in ornamental form.¹¹ Transcending national boundaries by its nature, calligraphy – in its dialogue with post-cubist figuration – opened up a textual conversation, acknowledging its specific historical legacy but speaking to transnational modernism as an equal. Shemza has re-territorialized the Arabic script, foregrounding its trans-local nature, while making its aesthetic engaging to the outside and so destabilizing simplistic associations between art and nation. Calligraphic experimentations like his have, through abstraction, opened a dialogue with metropolitan artistic languages, to become more global in scope.

Endnotes

- 1 Zulfikar Tabish, 'Anwar Jalal Shemza', *Mah-i Nau* (February, 1986).
- 2 Saadia Toor, 'Culture/Nation/State: Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regulation in Pakistan, 1947–1971.' Ph. D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2005; Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka dhuwan: Yadon ke pachas baras* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), 28–79. On the latter group, see Yunus Javed, *Halqah-yi Arbab-i Zauq* (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi-Adab, 1984).
- 3 Recent discussions in English include Sean Pue, 'The Desert of Continuity: N.M. Rashed, Modernism, and Urdu Poetry.' Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2007; Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji's Urdu Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 4 Intizar Husain, *Chiraghon ka dhuwan*, 112–126. For a detailed discussion of Lahore's artistic milieu at mid-century, see Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), chapter 2.
- 5 In the same letter dated July 20, 1957, he claims that he has already started work on the book.
- 6 Quoted in GM Butcher, 'Shemza: Years in London.' *Contemporary Arts in Pakistan* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 10.
- 7 Amy Lyford, 'Noguchi, Sculptural Abstraction, and the Politics of Japanese American Internment,' *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (Mar 2003); T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).
- 8 Claude Cernuschi, 'Adolf Loos, Alois Riegl, and the Debate on Ornament in Fin-de-Siecle Vienna.' In Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen* (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, 2006), 45–56.
- 9 James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
- 10 This interpretation contrasts with explanations advanced about the *Roots* series that focus solely on Shemza's attachment to the soil, architecture, and the flora of Lahore, for example see Tabish, 'Anwar Jalal Shemza.'
- 11 For a comparative study of calligraphic modernism as it developed in South Asia and the Middle East, see Iftikhar Dadi, 'Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism.' In *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 94–114.

Iftikhar Dadi is an artist and art historian. He is Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art at Cornell University, USA.

The author would like to thank Mary Shemza for her generous assistance in researching Shemza's career

Published by
green cardamom
5a Porchester Place
London W2 1SY, UK
www.greencardamom.net

Series editors: Anita Dawood & Hammad Nasar
Designed by : Vipul Sangoi

©2009 Green Cardamom
Text ©2009 Iftikhar Dadi
Images © 2009 The estate of Anwar Jalal Shemza

Perspectives is an occasional research paper series published by Green Cardamom. It comprises commissioned texts relating to new research on aspects of visual culture in the areas the organisation is engaged with.

Green Cardamom is an arts organisation that develops and runs visual arts projects in collaboration with public museums and galleries. The organisation works on a not-for-profit basis and is supported by the Rangoonwala Foundation. Green Cardamom runs a gallery programme in its London space, where it also develops new curatorial projects. The organisation's primary focus is international contemporary art viewed from an Indian Ocean perspective. Green Cardamom's programme is informed by artistic practice in Pakistan, South and Central Asia, and the Middle East.

