

Zarina Hashmi

PAPER LIKE SKIN

Printmaker and sculptor Zarina Hashmi, who prefers to go simply by her first name, has lived many lives in many places. Born in 1937 in India, into a Muslim family, her world crumbled around her at the age of ten with the destruction and mass migrations caused by the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. It was a pivotal event that profoundly affected her sense of belonging and home. In 1958, after studying mathematics and architecture at university, the artist married a diplomat and embarked on a decade of nomadism in far-flung locales, beginning with Bangkok—where she made her first woodcut prints on plant-fiber paper—and moving on to New Delhi, Paris and Bonn. Each new place offered a different perspective on the diversity and nuances of handmade paper. She lived in Tokyo, Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, California, before settling permanently in New York in 1975, in the loft that she still occupies. Through it all, paper has been a connecting material for Zarina: a medium whose history traverses place and time, from East to West and past to present.

Her first-ever retrospective, “Zarina: Paper Like Skin,” was a revelation of the artist’s lifelong experience with transience, presenting works with deeply personal histories. Displayed in chronological order, the collection of Zarina’s sculptures and works on paper was enthrallingly varied while remaining unified in its minimal yet deeply affecting aesthetic.

The show opened with a simple but entrancing sculpture that wrapped around the wall text that spelled out the exhibition title. Made of thread and wire, *Hanging in There* (2000) is titled after a mantra oft-repeated by Zarina’s sister, who lives in Karachi. The hand-bent wire hung delicately on the wall like a deranged clothes line but was also appropriately evocative of rows of coarse stitches closing up a wound. Beginning with this subtle but stirring opening presentation, the show flowed smoothly into her first works from the 1960s and early 1970s, with sophisticated abstractions and woodcuts rich with pigment and texture. The papers chosen for these works were sourced from workshops in New Delhi, thus each sheet has its own unique character and becomes an intrinsic part of the artwork.

The concept of paper being the crux of the artwork is further explored in her work from the mid- to late 1970s. During this period, Zarina eschewed inks and woodblocks and, left with simply the paper itself, she scratched, folded, pinpricked and sewed the material. Back then she was shuttling between cities, feeling lost in Tokyo and aimlessly making her way to New York. It is as if the many iterations of paper were a surrogate for her own skin—a physical expression of the loneliness and lack of belonging that resulted from her itinerant lifestyle.



Left

ZARINA HASHMI

Tasbih

2001

Maplewood stained with Sumi ink.

Courtesy Hammer Museum,

Los Angeles.

A focus on paper as a medium naturally led to her next experiment in the 1980s, when she created several sculptures using paper pulp. These sculptures, some muted and angular, others colorful and amorphous, reference objects such as picture frames, houses, body parts and flowers, and, though not unpleasing, belie an uneasy awkwardness. She is seemingly most comfortable as a printmaker, and her magnum opus, *Houses I Made/A Life in Nine Lines* (1997) is a portfolio of nine etchings on handmade Nepalese paper. Here she details the chapters of her lives, with poignant subtitles such as “A Room of My Own” and “A Space to Hide Forever.”

Zarina revisits sculpture again in more recent projects, and she attains a mastery of the three-dimensional, especially in *Tasbih* (2001), in which hundreds of tiny wood houses are strung together like prayer beads and hung on the wall, achieving a powerfully meditative state. A topic as personal and potentially trite as the longing for “home” could teeter on the precipice of mundanity or excessive sentimentality, but Zarina’s handling of the subject is full of strength and vigor. Her works are not pleas but rather are pronouncements of a life lived.

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