

e history and evolution of the monochrome

An exhibition in Dubai explores a provocative art form that invites introspection

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Miya Ando, Hamon (The Cloudlike Pattern on the Edge of a Sword), 2016. Pigment, urethane, aluminum

Image Credit: Supplied

The Jean-Paul Najar Foundation's latest exhibition, *The Monochrome Revisited*, explores the history and evolution of the monochrome from its origin to its contemporary manifestations. The show presents rare publications featuring the earliest documented examples of monochromes; a variety of monochrome paintings from the 1970s by prominent artists of the time, selected from the foundation's own collection; and contemporary works in various media sourced from other collections and artists' estates. It also includes photographs, letters, videos and transcripts of interviews of the featured artists from the foundation's archives. The show is accompanied by an educational programme of talks, tours and workshops for all ages.

The monochrome has been an important form of painting since 1915 when Kazimir Malevich painted *Black Square*, recognised as the first monochrome in art history. But in 2015 the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow announced that art historians had discovered the words 'A battle of negroes' written by hand in the white margin of Malevich's iconic painting of a black square.

is pointed to an earlier origin of the monochrome because the words are believed to be a reference to a black monochrome by poet Paul Bilhaud provocatively titled *Negroes Fight in a Tunnel*, which was exhibited in 1882 at *Les Arts Incohérents*.

The first section of the show goes back to the 17th century to explore the genesis of monochrome painting through early examples found in printed matter. It features rare publications such as a philosophical work by Robert Fludd, published in 1617, where a black square is used to depict the universe before creation; an autobiographical novel by Laurence Sterne published in 1759 where an entire page is covered with black ink to depict the main character's grief at his friend's death; and the *Album Primo-Avrilesque*, published in 1897 by Alphonse Allias where he presented his own version of Bilhaud's black monochrome along with six other monochromes.

The second section is inspired by late American artist Marcia Hafif's seminal text, *Beginning Again*, published in 1978. Hafif, who died last year, used the monochrome to explore the medium of painting and its methods and techniques throughout her 50-year career.

Her life-long investigation of colour, brushstroke, surface and light began in the early 1970s and resulted in 15 major bodies of work known as *The Inventory* that examined the different methods and materials used throughout the history of painting.

In her influential essay, she argued against the notion that painting and the monochrome had become irrelevant in the 1970s and talked about how her contemporaries who were still interested in it were analysing and deconstructing the art form and reinventing it in their individual ways.

This section of the show brings together monochromes by Hafif and other important artists mentioned in her text such as James Bishop, Dale Henry, Ralph Humphrey, Douglas Sanderson, Lucio Pozzi and Susanna Tanger. It offers a deeper understanding of the monochrome by showing how these artists used material and technique and developed this art form in their own ways to address artistic, conceptual and social concerns.



Hassan Sharif, *Cadmium Yellow No. 2*, Wood, coir, papier-mâché, wire and acrylic, 2014

While Hafif's paintings from her Mass Tone series are part of her methodical investigation of individual pigments, Tanger's untitled works are designed to trick the eye. What appears to be a square or rectangle painted with broken dark lines on a textured white monochrome background, is in fact the dark pigment underlayer showing through scratches on the thick white layers on top. Bishop has used various densities of paint to create small squares that seem to be floating inside his ochre and brown monochromes, to slow down the process of looking and evoke an emotional response from viewers.

Late artists Humphrey and Henry were among those who laid the groundwork for American art during the 1960s and 1970s in New York. Humphrey's works in the show include an untitled 1973 painting where he has used thick layers of modelling paste with quick-drying casein paint on a protruding canvas to create a textured sculptural work with rounded edges and a portal-like form in the centre.

Henry moved from New York in 1986 to live in the countryside and remained disconnected from the commercialised art world until his death in 2011. As per his wishes his entire oeuvre was bequeathed to Alanna Heiss, founder of Clocktower and PSI with the condition that it should all be donated to art institutions or

destroyed but never sold in the art market. The two Henry works in the show have been gifted to JPNF by Heiss.

They are part of his Wet Ground series from 1971 where he used unpainted linen, emulsion, gesso, acrylic and resin to create subtle textures and reflections that change with the light and the viewer's position. Other works include Sanderson's circular monochromes and works on tracing paper, and a textured diptych by Pozzi.

In the third section, the show looks at how contemporary artists continue to be interested in the monochrome, redefine it through a variety of media, and engage with it to explore current issues and challenge our perception of the world. It includes works by Miya Ando, David Batchelor, Alteronce Gumby, Alfredo Jaar and Emirati artists Mohammed Kazem and late Hassan Sharif.



Douglas Sanderson, The shape of the Earth, Acrylic on gesso on canvas, 1976

Japanese-American artist Ando is a descendant of a famous Samurai sword maker. She combines traditional techniques of sword making with modern industrial technology to create abstract metal monochrome paintings that speak about permanence and transience. On the other hand, Batchelor looks for modern monochromes on the streets of London and other cities. Since 1997 he has been photographing white square or rectangular panels that he finds around the city in the form of blank signs, empty billboards or faded posters.

Sharif used everyday materials in his practice. His idea of a contemporary monochrome is seen in Cadmium Yellow No. 2, a work from 2014 where he applied a single pure pigment on a piece of papier-maché attached to a folding chair. Kazem has used scissors to scratch a series of angles on white cotton paper to create monochromes that represent the angle momentarily created between a door and its frame when it is opened.

Gumby uses the monochrome to explore colour and address issues regarding his identity as an African American, whereas Chilean artist Jaar has juxtaposed the well-known official photograph of Obama and his cabinet watching the capture of Osama Bin Laden in the White House, with a blank white monochrome screen to comment on an important political story that was never fully revealed to the public.

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e Monochrome Revisited will run at the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation, Alserkal Avenue, until February 28.