



habib kheradyar
killing space

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What we need is a spatial equivalent for the expression “killing time.” Something pithy, with that fashionably nihilistic edge; but also something that would be just a colloquialism, hiding its more subversive tone behind the pose of nonchalance.

“I’ve gotta kill a couple hours till my ride comes.”

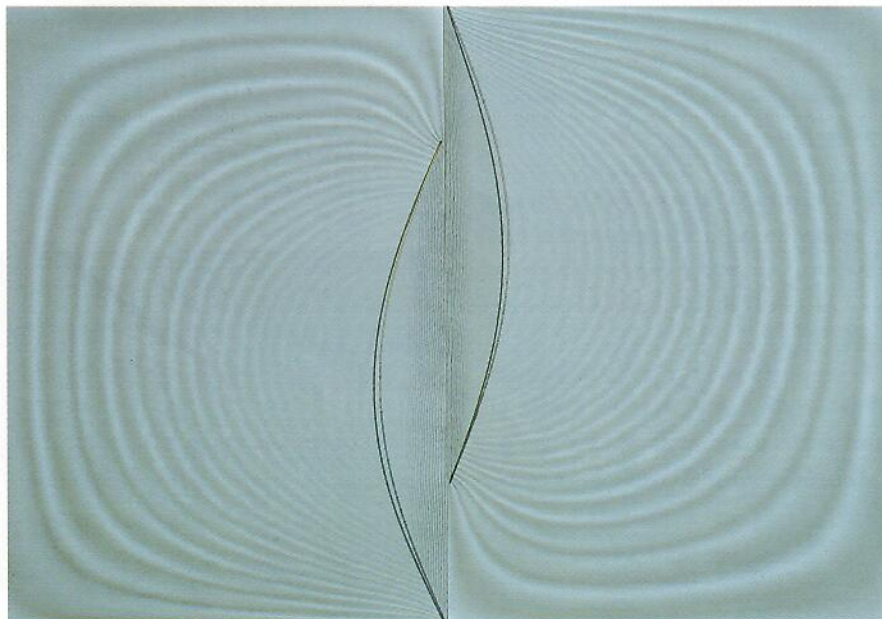
It’s a phrase we would use to describe what the retail franchise or chain store does to one’s sense of urban identity, homogenizing neighborhoods so that you can drive miles across town or even fly from one city to another, and feel like you’re always returning to the same place.

“Our restaurants are all over; they make every place feel like home.”

It would describe the endless extension that one feels moving through the nesting windows of a computer application, or across the fiber optic networks of various communication systems.

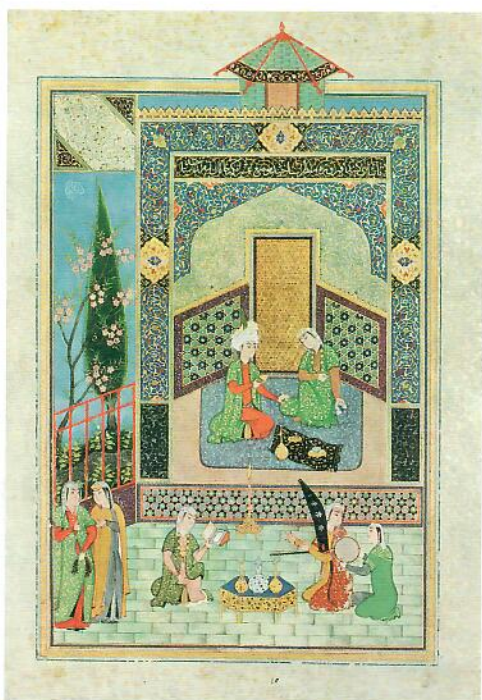
“Click from one icon to the next, just log on and float.”

It would describe the psychology of being able to punch numerical codes into a telephone that connects you with a friend in Tokyo, then a next-door neighbor, then



ABOVE: *UNTITLED #8*, 1994, DIPTYCH, FABRIC AND METAL ARMATURES ON CANVAS, 88 x 132 x 8 INCHES. PHOTO SCOTT LINDGREN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

OPPOSITE: *VERTIGO*, 1992, NYLONS, WIRE ARMATURE AND WAX ON PANEL, 11 x 8.75 x 5 INCHES. PHOTO SCOTT LINDGREN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



someone driving down the interstate, all with equal ease.

“Hey, I’m at the tip of your first finger, baby, just call me.”

It would describe what it means to see images from within one’s own body cavity, or the features of one’s own internal landscape, transmitted by X-ray, magnetic resonance, sonogram.

“We don’t need invasive procedures; this machine gives us eyes on the inside.”

BUT TIME CAN BE “killed” because it moves; it’s the measure of life, so we feel bad about losing it. Space, on the other hand, is much more resilient. No matter how much we collapse it technologically, there will always be more—or so it seems.

It’s a fine line that separates what is from what seems, and that’s the threshold where Habib Kheradyar works. His sculpture, painting, and performances all address the way our sense of space is vulnerable to our psychology of per-

ception, and how that psychology is magnified and enlarged both by modern technologies and by art. In his work perception becomes more than just a question of how the eye is wired to the mind; it becomes an entire panorama which we inhabit. Take any one of those textbook optical illusions that scramble one’s sense of visual certainty, imagine that you could step right into it and gradually accustom yourself to it as a way of life, and you begin to get an idea of the curious house of mirrors into which Kheradyar’s work leads.

Vertigo (1992) is like a sentry who greets us at the door to that house. Part of a larger series of modestly scaled works that use commercially printed fabrics stretched over a wooden substrate, its checkerboard pattern makes an amused nod to Op art, but not without raising the psychedelic ante. Are the black-and-white blocks warped and distorted because of the armature that pushes the surface of the piece outward, or were they printed that way on the original piece of fabric the artist used? The interplay between clear physical circumstance and confusing optical effect is what drives Kheradyar’s project. If his work had a motto, it would be that no illusion exists without an apparatus. But that motto would also have an auxiliary clause: to expose the apparatus is not to demystify the situation; it is to complicate it. So where *Vertigo* proposes a relationship between the depicted and the literal, that’s not enough. Kheradyar wants to make that relationship a motivated one, which is why the moiré effect becomes so important in his subsequent work.

The moiré effect happens when two repetitive geometric patterns are superimposed, generating a third, independent design like a wave of shadow that grows progressively darker as the first two patterns synchronize, then



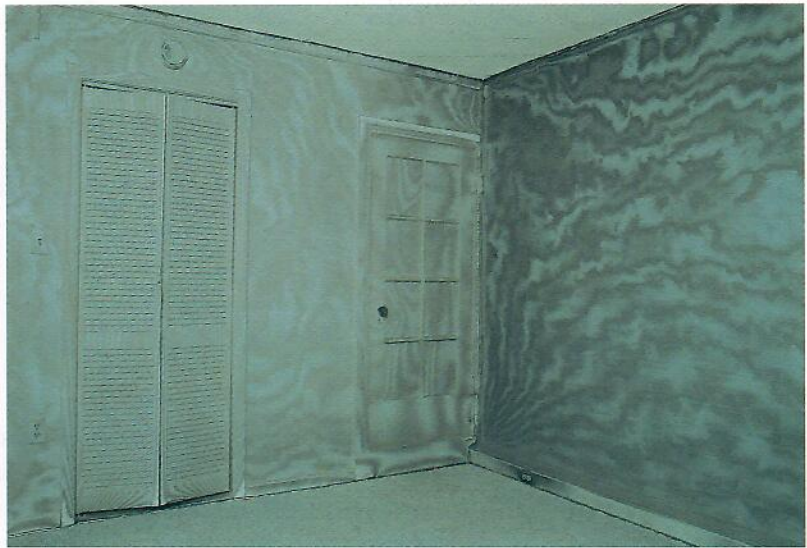
ABOVE: SHAIKH-ZADA OF KHURASAN (?), *BAHRAM GUR IN THE TURQUOISE PAVILION*, MINIATURE PAINTING FROM A MANUSCRIPT OF THE *KHAMSA* BY NIZAMI, DATED 1524-1525, TEMPERA ON PAPER, HEIGHT 7.25 INCHES. COLLECTION THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF ALEXANDER SMITH COCHRAN, 1913.

RIGHT: *CLIMB*, 1997, STILL FROM VIDEO PERFORMANCE SHOT BY DENVER TUTTLE AND EMMA KHERADYAR. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

disappears again as those patterns move out of phase. It will happen if two identical pieces of screen are placed atop one another and then shifted slightly out of alignment, or it can also happen if a geometric grid casts a shadow. In that case, the physical grid and the shadow of the physical grid produce an interference pattern that reads as moiré.

In the work that follows *Vertigo*, brightly colored cloth with a stretchy open weave—the texture of very fine netting—is substituted for the patterned fabric. The netting, however, is transparent and supports no design. In any other two-dimensional work this would amount to a kind of self-annihilation—if a painting gives up its surface, after all, there's not much left to look at. But it may not be fair to call these pieces paintings, since their physical volume is just as important as their surface. The wire form that presses out from within each one produces a smooth tumescent belly, as though something were gestating inside. What they finally give birth to is neither an object nor a surface, but an illusion. The netting casts a shadow on the wood behind it. Surface and shadow are then thrown out of alignment by the armature, and the two patterns join to form sensuous waves of shadow that pulse out toward the edge of each work like diaphanous halos, quivering and shifting with any change in viewing angle.

This optical instability cuts two ways. While creating a sense of restless ineffability, it also betrays the simple visual mechanics of each piece and the strictly physical contingencies that make them work. We see both the machine and the ghost within it. It's not unlike what goes on with a cathode ray tube, a liquid crystal display, or the cinema. All of these are devices that operate through positive scientific technologies to produce purely insubstantial chimeras. Kheradyar's moiré pieces are also screens which exhibit this same dichotomy. Their physical design—clear and self-evident—spins out a mirage that has an almost hypnotic attraction and that refuses to be pinned down perceptually. For the artist, there's a delicate balance in that: if his work tips too far in one direction it becomes a high school science project; if it tips too far in the other it becomes a magic trick. Kheradyar wants it to be neither, and both. As an optical phenomenon, the moiré effect is

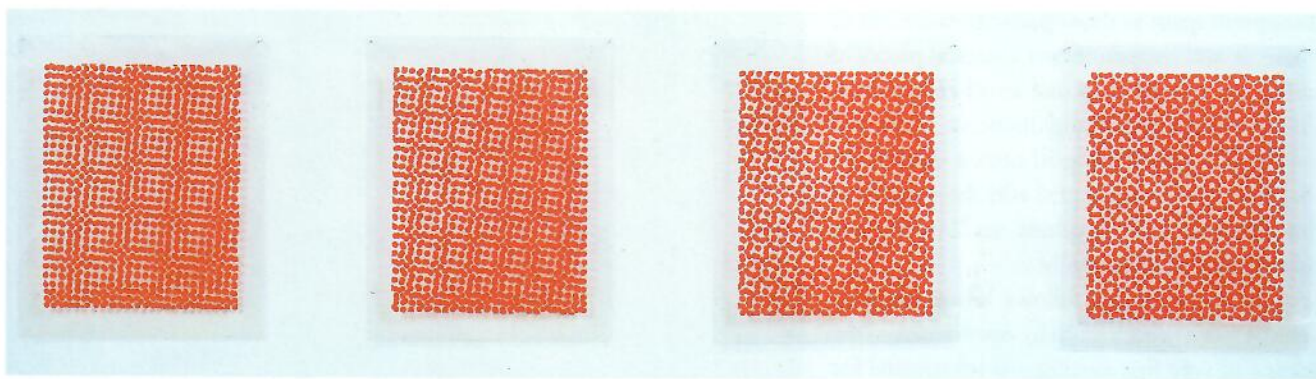


perfectly explainable, but the artist refuses to let things stop there. He insists that the illusion can be appreciated by more than just the rational mind; that an appeal to the imagination is equally legitimate; and that the two can happen simultaneously.

THAT AMBITION is nothing new. The most outstanding precedent in Western culture for melding the scientific method with art was the development of linear perspective in fifteenth-century Italy. Many of the Renaissance artists who developed the science of perspective were also mathematicians explicitly interested in perfecting the representation of space on scientific grounds, subject to precise measurement and codifiable as formulae. At the same time, such intentions were perfectly compatible with what were explicitly aesthetic concerns and a theory of beauty.

Perhaps owing to his own cultural background—the artist was born in Iran and lived there for the first 14 years of his life—Kheradyar's work points to a different precedent. The classical Persian arts are also deeply rooted in the mathematics, but not in mimesis, like their European counterparts. Rather than deal with spatiality as depth, Islamic art works through extension across surfaces. Like the concept of a vanishing point, this boundless extension also leads to the principle of infinity. The stylized ornamentation that coats all surfaces in this art gives the impression of subdivisibility to an endlessly smaller fractal, as well as that

ABOVE: *STRETCH*, 1997, INSTALLATION VIEW, MILLER FINE ART, LOS ANGELES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



sense of seething energy of which Kheradyar's moiré reads like a latter-day example. Also, like the moiré in this artist's work, the patterning in Islamic art cuts across formal boundaries and is evident in everything from architecture, to carpet design, to calligraphy, to the miniatures found in manuscript illumination.

This latter art form is particularly interesting in light of Kheradyar's experiments with performance. Manuscript illumination was one of the few places in which Persian artists could bypass their culture's strictures against representation and find a way to depict the human figure. But in many of these miniatures, the accommodation between naturalistic figures and sumptuous all-over fields is uneasy and unresolved. The bodies are flat, un-modeled, and cast no shadows. Nor are they proportionate to their surroundings, which most often consist of architectural interiors and facades rendered with hardly any sense of recession. Whether the scene is of a mosque, a palace, or a bathhouse, the building is depicted as a flattened screen, the characters floating in a kind of non-space. In a performance from 1995 titled *Climb*, Kheradyar did something so ridiculous it verged on the sublime: he tried to become one of those characters.

The performance was mounted in the gap between the wall and one of Kheradyar's largest fabric installations, literally in what could be called the space of the moiré. The artist, outfitted like a rock climber, suspended himself from pitons he had driven into the gallery wall and with excruciating effort made his way across the 42-foot length of the piece. In terms so literal as to border on the comic, Kheradyar's video of the performance speaks of vision as performative effect—a matter of interaction rather than

passive reception. It also shows the artist awkwardly trying to enter the virtual reality on the other side of the image-producing screen. If people speak of entering cyberspace and leaving the "meat" behind, Kheradyar is trying to enter cyberspace and bring the meat with him. Not surprisingly, he ends up looking rather silly. There's only so much suspension of disbelief that any dramatization can support and *Climb* does stretch the limits. But it also locates some important issues.

All of the moiré pieces generate illusion as pure optical phenomenon. With *Climb*, the artist continues to phrase that fact within the conventions of painting. He creates a discreet, wall-mounted work that presents itself as a visual plane. By literally getting himself stuck within that apparatus, though, he also stages the problem of bodily response to painting as more than just visual stimulation. Eyes are connected to brains, but brains are also connected to bodies. And those bodies inhabit physical space. The desire to close the circuitry between optical and physical experience is an ongoing theme for Kheradyar, and it probably found its most perfect resolution in a work called *Stretch* (1997).

Rather than contain itself to one rectangular form, the fabric in this site-specific installation was stretched from floor to ceiling over all four walls of the gallery. The moiré not only became all-encompassing, entirely enveloping the viewer, but the physical architecture of the room became complicit in it, since the illusion was now generated by all of the room's protruding features, producing a kind of fingerprint for the space. Sinuous tendrils of shadow darted between window casements, collected in pools near electrical outlets, throbbed like auras cast off by moldings,

ABOVE: UNTITLED (SPECIFIC PATTERNS, RED), 1996, INK ON ACETATE, 4 UNITS, 14 x 11 INCHES EA. PHOTO SCOTT LINDGREN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

OPPOSITE: DNA WINDOWS, 1997, INK ON ACETATE, INSTALLATION VIEW, DNA GALLERY, PROVINCETOWN, MA. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

baseboards, and doorframes, all of which were visible only as tenebrous forms behind the veil of fabric. As though enacting the relativity between matter and energy that Einstein described, the entire room dissolved into a swimming, woozy flood of light energy and pattern.

The piece dramatized the relativity of vision and space by complicating the distinction between two- and three-dimensional art. But it wasn't just a matter of hybridizing painting and sculpture; the effect was closer to what chemists call a phase change. A phase change happens when the actual molecular nature of a substance shifts, allowing vapors to liquefy and solids to melt. The first moiré pieces turned surfaces into illusions. *Stretch* takes the phase change one step further: spatiality itself becomes spectacle.

The idea of a perceptual phase change also finds expression in a large body of work Kheradyar calls, simply, the "dot" pieces. The basic unit in each of these works is a quarter-inch dot, usually silk-screened onto clear acetate. These dots are then grouped and arranged as grids. Beyond those physical specifications, nothing else about this work stays simple for long. By superimposing two of these grids, one atop the other with a small amount of air space between, the strict regimentation and calculability of the whole goes haywire. That's because it's never possible to see the two planes independently, nor is it possible to see them in perfect registration with one another. No matter where you position yourself, the angle of view always creates a misalignment that causes the two grids to recombine in hallucinatory patterns. As though by way of antidote, the artist has also produced "braille" versions of these works in which the dots are cast as wax protrusions on a wooden ground with no superpositioning. The wry allusion to a more tactile security likewise ends up ironically, though, because the dots, in Braille, mean absolutely nothing. At best, they amount to a numerical tally that quantifies nothing, leading back to the kind of indefinability that defeats deliberate, rational design.

With these dot pieces, Kheradyar is taking the wild patterning that his fabric work produces and purposely taming it by housing it in evermore literal, reductive structures. It's as though he were trying to stuff the genie named Moiré back into her bottle. What fascinates us about optical illusions, though, is the very way they nullify such physical strictures. What the

artist works so hard to segregate on two distinct sheets of acetate, for example, the eye happily and chaotically recombines into one apparition.

Recently, Kheradyar suspended five of these acetate dot pieces not against the wall, but over the windows of the second-story gallery in which they were exhibited. The installation tried to take the collapsing of dimensions one step further by pixelating the landscape outside the windows and absorbing that landscape into its own design. In a rudimentary way, it tried to virtualize reality.

Needless to say, it failed; and that may actually signal a promising turn in the artist's work. One is free to resist the interference of Kheradyar's window screens. We can rationally separate whatever view lies beyond them from the distorted version that is transmitted through the acetate. That broken, fluttering illusion is engaging, but it does more than dazzle; it begins to make room for skepticism as well. By introducing discontinuity between what art tells us and what our mind tells us, Kheradyar expands the scope of his work. His illusions can be voracious, readily exploding beyond their frames, and that makes for a good show. But when those illusions meet resistance—something that won't be absorbed into their spell—they become more than just an entertaining deception. They begin to complicate the relationship between what we can see, what we can know, which we can trust, and why. ■

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