

## Shaik Rashid



**Black with Red Fabric.** 2010. 186 cm x 440.5 cm. Mixed media on canvas

### **Convex – a precursor for globalization**

An art student in the UK during the 70s, Bahraini artist Sheikh Rashid Bin Khalifa Al Khalifa's eyes were opened to a new world of theories amid the vibrant London art scene in a period that was marked by experimentation with styles and movements breaking away from Abstract Expressionism. As a student, he adhered to traditional representational renditions of the physical world. However, responding to the trends of Geometric Abstraction, Hard-Edge painting and Colour Field he began pushing his work towards abstraction. Very much a product of his time, experimentation was and remained the life-force of his art.

Painting for over 40 years and disconnected from the contemporary art scene, he proceeded in a self-enclosed manner within the various 'isms' and methodically developed his style until he found a distinctive voice with his 'convex' painting. This paper aims to examine Shaikh Rashid's art from 2000 to the present and to trace the developing theory and primacy of audience situations in contemporary art.

### **SHAPED-CANVAS AND MINIMALISM**

The roots of modern shaped-canvas painting lie in the pre-war Modernist movement, a development which can be dated to the early 60s. American painters were driven by the logic of their own development to differentiate Minimalism from its European origins – the Bauhaus and the Russian Constructivist. This propelled Minimalism and broke traditional notions of art making by redefining the form, material, and production of the 'object' and its relationship to physical and temporal space and the viewer– a movement away from painting and toward sculptural concerns.

One has to think about the typology of Minimalist productions : the connection between painting and sculpture, the application of the grid or the use of industrial material, shaped-canvases, anti-expressionism, the mindset towards mass culture and the lure of dematerialization, which all seemed to approach the condition of 'objects' rather than paintings. Artists specifically associated with Minimalism who managed to produce 'high art'

were Frank Stella, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Donald Judd and Barnett Newman, to name but a few.

In the 70s Minimalism was believed to be lucid but it was still vague and as the constructions of the 80s evolved, problems of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colours moved from two to three dimensions.

The shaped-canvas, forms and ideas of minimal art continue to resonate powerfully in art produced to this day but with a subtle emphasis on Conceptual, Minimalist, and Constructivist as practiced by Shaikh Rashid bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, who was pulled into the spotlight after his deployment of the never-before-used 'convex' shaped-canvas. After four decades of modular amalgamations by the Minimalists', Shaikh Rashid's simple but fluid 'convex' exploits illusion in three dimensions.

### **PAINTING ON CONVEX**

In the beginning of 2000, the 'convex' shaped-canvas was the primary structure that Shaikh Rashid used for the merging of Landscape, Figurative and Abstract Expressionism in a Colour-Field language that was scrapped, slashed etc. In these works colour was used metaphorically for content. The metaphoric imagery that filled the pictorial spaces supported a precise formal and conceptual understanding of space, especially when the metaphors were in conflict. Paramount to his work, Landscape suggests the impression of immense depth and the figurative metaphor evokes another realm. Furthermore, the metaphors were partly drawn from certain pictorial continuities that exist between his early and late work. Definitely, in contrast to his mid-90s two-dimensional work, it is not as much of an image as a device, creating expressive values of space and colour while permitting them to remain in the realm of Abstract Colour-Field.

His attention to structure and detail, combined with elements of randomness and serendipity, reveal the emotion built into his paintings. Each painting consists of thousands of brushstrokes, painted in oil on the shaped structure. The paint is trowelled on, built it up in layers or films or dripped and stroked

at varying thickness of paint evenly or more densely across the surface. With this base in place, Shaikh Rashid would scratch or scrape it with the palette knife so that the paint surface would breathe and give an ambiguous illusion of space in a centrifugal or centripetal organisation, which is extremely vivid without being claustrophobic.

### **COLOUR**

Shaikh Rashid is most independent and original with his use of colour. He pushes his palette into constituencies of chromatic thresholds it has never before penetrated. In doing this, the colours begin to breathe, edges dissolve, and the painting comes together to reveal how conflicts of pure colour can, by themselves, establish a pictorial order as strong as any that depends on the conspicuousness of contour and value contrast. Nonetheless, in relation to his reliance on the autonomous powers of colour, he declares that "colour, when its resources are adequately put to use, can spur the most inertly enhancing form into a pictorial entity – a picture of a fully prismatic art." These luxuriant and luminous paintings are spectacular immersions into saturation, and Shaikh Rashid intended them to be seen up close so that the viewer can be enveloped by their colourful aura, which is wrapped in mystery, concealed meanings and expressive philosophical depths.

### **CONVEX: A NEW PERSPECTIVE**

Even with the success of his Abstract Colour-Field 'convex' shaped paintings, Shaikh Rashid did not stop exploring the limits of his artistic ability. As he was preparing for his 2010 solo exhibition, his work took a twist that places it virtually at the tail end of modernism – visually minimal but powerfully spatial. Reflecting on the achievements of the avant-garde and using their thought processes to find clear formulations for his own thoughts in the light of contemporary conditions, 'convex' was no longer just the service but it became the soul of the painting. The 2010 works reveal how different it is to think about Shaikh Rashid's relationship with tradition in relation to his contemporary moment and his



**Black on Black.** 2010. Lacquer paint on aluminium 190 x 190 cm

personal development. In these new works, he imported the sensibility and techniques associated with design which are just as complex and developed as his old work. The incandescent lacquer finished enamel 'convex' service is a new realm of artistic development reflecting an affinity for structure, balance and visual order. Mostly in large scale, his artworks pivot on the invisible line of gravity that holds them to the ground. They inhabit a space that is not easily classified as either painting or sculpture but yet his work remain intrinsically powerful and precise.

### **NEW COLOURS, NEW MATERIALS**

The geometric measures, reduced palette and suppressed autographic touch that had been typical of Shaikh Rashid's painting since 2000 - Convex: a new perspective - bear a superficial resemblance to Minimalism. However, the purposeful vacillations and precarious shifts in balance set off by the different weight of colour is far greater than those found in his earlier paintings of the decade and still embodies a subjective indeterminacy. As 'convex' is the soul of his artworks, colour is its primary material.

Beginning with the 'convex' service that is sprayed



**Black on Red with White Strip.** 2010. 120 x 90cm. Lacquer paint on aluminum

with enamel paint to achieve a lacquer finish, he creates form with carefully calculated nuances of colour alternating matte on the reflective surface that keeps them in constant motion. Thus the newly created weight and lambency of his colours is an attempt to explore its effect on the soul. In near-monochrome, he drips enamel in a fast motion that slightly fluctuates and spins, and which is stacked, aligned, cantilevered, or centered, in strict geometric arrangements that create an optical effect of moving patterns. The high polish reflections render the components unstable, disseminating their svelte

surfaces and divesting them, although intermittently, not only of mass and weight but even of shape and surface which wage a struggle for dominance. Also, his use of mixed-media materials: soaked canvas, impasto and enamel paint on canvas covered 'convex', increasingly evoke the third dimension, creating tactile, sculptural effects vaulting from the wall while retaining a sense of static balance.

Judging by these deceptively minimal artworks, it could be said that Shaikh Rashid has discovered a new method of introspection and the complexity beneath the surface gives these paintings a brooding

grandeur, an allusion of something further than the canvas that is all the more formidable for being indescribable.

### SEPARATING LIGHT AND DARK

Black on Black 2010, on the canonical 'convex' service, at first glance gives the feeling of non-objectivity severing Modern from Contemporary, simultaneously emphasized and crossed. Undeniably, Shaikh Rashid's choice of materials is absolutely unforgiving; the enamel paint, dripped upon an unyielding, nonabsorbent lacquered surface, seems to present itself for inspection. It is obvious

that stakes are set high in order to emphasize his uncompromising commitment to craft, which makes his labour part of the subject of his work.

The application of dripped enamel shows the differences in texture and shade of blackness as the layers of high-key black lines suggest a raised surface on the black ground that vibrates. Illuminating darkness and dealing with the challenge of separating light and dark, something more like haptic disturbance, the work assaults the eyes so unremittingly that the experience of viewing the shades defines a dynamic form which simultaneously exists across all scales.



**Black with White Fabric.** 2010. 168 x 168 cm. Mixed media on canvas

### ILLUSION AND 3-D REALITY

Shaikh Rashid's impulse to experiment shown in *Fabric, Glue and oil on canvas, 2010*. The piece reveals signs of life and movement as he has reimagined the rectangular 'convex' format as a large horizontal cinemascope field with an image of embossed fabric pressed into the artwork's expansive visual plane that pops out of the flat surface like sculpture. This is partly because the limited colour enhances the illusion of three-dimensionality – that is at once subdued and radiant – giving this work a mysteriously burnished tone. It is also because of the placidly winding, branching form, which manages to

suggest topographical structures without resembling anything in particular. But most significant is the mode of perception the painting embodies that slowly unfolds and demands a continuous shift between concentration and relaxation. This simulation of natural perception leads to the discovery of the artifice that has gone into its making. The transparency of the painted shadows, for example, is an illusion. The viewer has to trace the form with Sheikh Rashid's eyes, following several distinct passages across the surface of the canvas and shifting effortlessly between illusion and 3-D reality. And, as these paths overlap, they establish provisional



**A Fusion of Hues in Blue, Orange and Pink II.** 2007. 195 x 193 cm. Oil on canvas

layers that immerse the viewer in the painting like looking at a landscape, not as a panorama, but as a surrounding environment in which you can find your way out, or maybe travel further in.

### **POWER AND CONTROL**

His attempt to reconstruct the specific context within which he developed 'convex' yields a glowing pleasure in the beauty of colour and the endless possibilities he finds within his tightly conceived artistic system that are anything but limited. Continuing his exploration of the possibilities of 'convex,' *Black on Red and White*, 2011, Shaikh Rashid's newest painting, evokes a magisterial atmosphere of power and control, a methodical piece of jostling geometric expectations in which any minor slip-up would attract the eye immediately and ruin the overall impression.

This artwork requires the viewer to rethink the very act of viewing. The black field of enamel drips on high gloss red lacquered ground which shines eerily and creates an optical illusion that changes when viewed from different angles. In short, this virtuosity challenges yet another facet of Shaikh Rashid that has emerged for reconsideration, the overlapping boundaries of Conceptual, Minimalist and Constructivist, which reflect a clever, historicising move.

### **THE ART OF PRODUCTION**

The vast majority of contemporary art produced today employs the hands and machines of others. Out-sourced labour and specialised fabricators with a new kind of interdisciplinary workshop provide artists access to the resources and tools to produce ambitious and bespoke projects. But, that is not the case with Shaikh Rashid who enjoys running the grinder on the aluminium 'convex' before covering it with lacquer spray paint or canvas. He would draw the shapes with measured exactitude before painting or applying the glue-soaked material and then execute brushy paint handling that is rapid and perfunctory with random enamel drips within the grid. It is important to note in this context that the process of creation is as important to him as

the finished product, and his willingness to explore many different techniques and experiment with various materials has allowed him to create amazing works of art.

### **FINALLY**

While 'convex', in the last decade, has evolved from mere shaped-canvas to the soul of his art, Shaikh Rashid has, over time, offered a tantalising demonstration of how his work – chronologically and stylistically through incessant experimentation – has sustained engagement with the principles of the modern and the contemporary. Combined with his idiosyncratic sensibility, this has resulted in the production of timeless works, which are neither from the West nor from the Middle East, thus making 'convex' a precursor for globalization.



In his Studio