

SPINNING LOVE

Madeline Yale Preston discusses Hadieh Shafie's performance-based, multilayered construction of text, shape, colour and movement that carries diverse temporal and cultural meanings.


Introduced in 1910, the Gestalt Theory of perceptual organisation, simply put, argues that the whole is greater and different than the sum of its parts. Its principles – proximity, continuity and symmetry, to name a few – describe the human condition to visually order what we see into aesthetically pleasing patterns in an effort to achieve wholeness. Often discussed in tandem with Color Field paintings of the 1950s and 60s, Gestalt is decidedly Modernist in its applications. Modernism is enjoying a Renaissance today, evidenced by thematic retrospectives and the visual manifestations of many Contemporary artists. This particular work from the *Telesm* series is one such work by Hadieh Shafie, an artist who builds and arranges colourful geometric shapes and patterns into beautiful, topographical constructions.

Shafie has been making scroll works since 2002. Born in Iran in 1969, she moved to the USA as a teenager, a precarious phase for anyone regardless of cultural displacement. Shafie spent her formative years writing, absorbing new literary and artistic influences and visually merging them with symbols from her cultural heritage – namely Iran's sophisticated book culture and related calligraphic traditions. While at Pratt, she was inspired by the Sufi dance of the Whirling Dervishes and studied the simplicity and flatness of Modernist works; she subsequently presented her thesis on the orientation of text and concentric circles.

Simple as it may holistically appear, this piece involves a meditative process that entails an intensely physical exploration of time-based space. Shafie spent weeks inscribing the word *eshghe* (Farsi for 'love' or 'passionate love') on thousands of cut strips of US Letter-sized paper. Since 2007, she has limited her text to *eshghe*, making a personal statement as well as a classical reference to her

cultural origins. Using this script in repetition, *eshghe* becomes part of a vernacular, transnational discourse.

The paper strips are stacked and spun into cylindrical *ketabs*, alluding to the earliest known book form, wherein the complete text is rarely revealed. Arranged in close proximity on their sharp ends, the *ketabs* protectively hide the internal *eshghe* markings within their concentricity. On the surface, works from the *Telesm* series are similar to those nominated for the 2011 V&A Jameel Prize, yet these newer topographical structures have an intensifying depth that is only apparent when viewed obliquely. The initial balance of each *ketab*'s cylindrical shape is disrupted as its vulnerable centre is pulled, rendering it a playful, conical form that is as fragile as it is menacing. The heart of the work lies in these small voids at the centre of each *ketab*. Surrounded by its rotary texts hidden by a façade of colour, this is Shafie's deliberate parallel to the dance of the Whirling Dervishes.

Her use of colour on the edges of the paper strips serves a dual purpose: it is an optical instrument and a subjective indicator of emotion. She limits her palette to as few as five colours that, when combined, have the effect of generating secondary and tertiary colours. Such was the intention of Color Field painters whose experiments with chromatic relationships held abstraction as the end point. This work also seeks an abstract aesthetic balance through deliberate juxtapositions, both of the colours within and amongst the *ketabs* and in their sidelong black and white counterparts. The stylistic references to Modernism as well as its attention to process, repetition and time demonstrate that beauty and wholeness can be found in its overall visual construction and also in the prolonged act of creation. 

Facing page:
Above: Hadieh Shafie.
Untitled, from
the *Telesm* series.
2012. Ink, acrylic
and paper with printed
and handwritten Farsi
text. 30.5 x 30.5 x 7.6 cm;
Below: Detail.
All images courtesy Leila
Heller Gallery, New York.

SHOWCASE

