

Kamrooz Aram at his exhibition *Arabesque*, between *Endless Arabesque* and *Arabesco*. 2019. Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photography by Nadine Khalil. © Canvas



DE-CONSTRUCTION: CREATE TO DESTROY

Arabesque is Kamrooz Aram's third solo exhibition with Dubai's Green Art Gallery (until 30 May) where, ever-haunted by the spectre of the ornament and its conceptual implications in Modernist discourse and art history, the Brooklyn-based artist takes the arabesque motif and breaks it down. Framed within the logic of the grid only to transcend it, Aram's latest body of work recalibrates the act of painting.

Words by Nadine Khalil

Kamrooz Aram has a knack for turning binaries to dualities. In his paintings and museological displays, he finds points of convergence between historical divisions: East and West, ornament and abstraction, gesture and grid, figure and ground. Mastering seemingly opposed visual languages with floral geometries and gestural patterns, he is well-known for these acts and counter-acts.

Although his latest exhibition seems rather quiet, dominated by the deep blues and moody colours of dusk, with titles like *Shadowboxer* and *Nocturne*, it disrupts semiotic codes. Reconfigured floral motifs referencing Persian carpets are abstracted and flattened into semi-symmetrical leaves. His clearly delineated geometries, usually placed in the background or foreground, are now curvilinear, and on one ground.

Kamrooz Aram. *Arabesque*. 2019. Installation view at Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photography by Sebastiano Pellion



"I painted up to the line - the line being the figure and the paper, the ground," Aram says when we meet at the opening, explaining that he wanted to complicate the relationship between figure and ground by treating them equally, in a conflation inspired by Matisse's introduction of ornamental features into his work. This links to Aram's academic interest in non-Eurocentric interpretations of the ornament in conceptual (rather than decorative) terms, uncovering formalist connections between non-Western 'traditional' art forms, Modernism and the turn towards abstraction.

"I think of the grid as the beginning of ornament - of pattern - as the first map you lay out, like a time signature in music," he continues. In his suite of eight painterly propositions, the ultimate grid (*Arabesco*) is paired with its ultimate negation (*Endless Arabesque*), but it's the latter that really sings. Suggesting an obliteration of form and composition, *Endless Arabesque* conjures Cy Twombly's mark-making, or Julie Mehretu's complex, lyrical gestures and phantom traces. These intimate free-form writing, unrestrained by precision or intent, improvised and performative, limitless in possibility.

Arguably, their duality represents the crux of Aram's meditation on (and deconstruction of) the arabesque. "Both are derived from the grid but *Endless Arabesque* is rebellious to the grid, eliminating it through erasure. I wiped it down while it was still wet." In its gestural antithesis, the latter recalls Aram's *Palimpsest* series (from his first solo at Green Art Gallery in 2014), in which he scraped away the paintings - simulations of urban landscapes coated with graffiti - and then rebuilt them, rendering the destruction incomplete as the subdued streaks of previous layers remained.

While Aram's process and conceptual threads are constant throughout his work, here he posits a symbiosis, something cohesive building slowly over

time. Gone are the more explicit themes of politics and spirituality, religious iconography and nationalist ideologies from 2010 and 2011. As is the former separation between triangular isolated forms (now curvilinear) and abstract expressionist brushstrokes (now bounded arabesques), each struggling for the final image. The textures are muted and not as exuberant. Culturally-specific signifiers, like the arabesque, are abstracted and transformed.

"I've always been interested in teasing out a sense of the exotic, walking up to the edge of it without it being explicit," Aram notes. "The term itself [arabesque] has vague definitions," which range from a ballet position to musical scales and leafy, ornate designs found in North African art and architecture, he explains in his exhibition statement. Aram plays with these significations, dismantling them while adhering to the grid as a rubric, and incorporating the body into the equation.

"The grid serves as a structure, guiding the line around the canvas. But the body is equally responsible for restraining the mark so that it remains loyal to the grid," he writes. "These paintings are the result of the gestures of the body, at times quite restrained by the logic of the grid, and other times restrained only by the limitations of the body itself" - like *Endless Arabesque*. *Arabesco*, on the other hand, is so contained that the bodily imprint is difficult to glean.

The essence of Aram's artistic intervention and assessment of an Orientalist term's approximations (via the suffix '-esque') goes beyond form. It is political. "It occurs to me that *I am Arabesque*. It occurs to me that there is no such thing as the *Arabesque*." By building structures and destroying them with gestures, he embodies another disruption - that of hierarchies in art history and the artificial separation of forms and identities.