

STEVENNAIFEH

Found in Translation Expertly Mends Islamic Art, Western Abstraction

A review of Found in Translation: The Art of Steven Naifeh



Mizan XIV: Mystical Green, 2011. Acrylic on 18 interconnected canvases, 60
× 60"

Found in Translation: The Art of Steven Naifeh at the Columbia Museum of Art mines the rich visual history of the Middle East and Central Asia in unexpected and ingenious ways — and with the added significance that the work was made by an artist who lives right down the road.

Aiken resident Naifeh is best known as co-author of exhaustive biographies of Jackson Pollock (which won the Pulitzer Prize) and Vincent Van Gogh. He grew up in the Middle East and Central Asia, and the visual world of those places seeped deeply into his soul, but it has taken 40 years for those influences to fully emerge in a body of work that merges the decorative arts of the Islamic world with Western abstract art. Like the works that inspired them, Naifeh's artworks blend art and mathematics.

The exhibition, which was organized by the museum, consists primarily of mostly large, mostly monochromatic, mostly multipanel canvas paintings — which are a lot like sculptures — as well as actual sculptures.

The first thing that strikes one about Naifeh's art is the scale and complexity, but they are even more complicated than they look, their shapes derived from various ways a circle can be divided. What ends up happening is a rich interplay of negative and positive shapes, spirals, straight lines appearing to form curves and one distinctive shape forming another. Some pieces are made of a dozen canvases, which is plenty; some of more than 100. The size ranges from about 5-by-5 feet to about 20 feet across.

Two of the largest pieces — each a mirror image of the other — are steel clad in copper. There are also two graceful standing sculptures, a red painted wood piece inside the museum's galleries and a similar blue piece in metal that's a magnificent addition to the museum plaza. Then there's a large floor sculpture composed of dozens of beautifully carved blocks of creamy limestone.



<http://naifeh.vangogh.webfactional.com/assets/uploads/2013/08/cma-exhibition-0003.-h25.jpg>

Cyrene XV: Venetian Blue, 2011. Acrylic on 110
canvases, 89 x 115"

Art of what we consider the Islamic world was often richly decorated: glazed tiles, semi-precious stones, mother of pearl. Naifeh's ingenious nod to this heritage is using metallic paint. Even the blacks have a glittering sheen to them, and all the colors are striking and unusual.

This exhibition is called a retrospective (and Naifeh has done similar paintings as long ago as the early 1990s), but all the pieces in the exhibition were done during the past two years when he was able to devise a way to physically create it. Because of the number of canvases, the shapes, the meticulous painting and mounting process, he worked with a team of painters, fabricators and computer folks. He makes no secret of this team effort.

The text panels — many in Naifeh's words — are accessible and informative, and the exhibition includes an audio tour and video. There's also a stone screen from India and a photo of a building in Uzbekistan that inspired his art. A museum has to walk a fine line with an exhibition like this to allow the work to speak for itself, and the museum has handled it pretty well. In the end, you don't need to know the math, the history of Islamic

visual arts, the kind of paint used or how the pieces are made to get something significant from the exhibition.

Found in Translation might not be one of the most accessible or popular exhibitions the museum has created or hosted, and it isn't likely to break down all that many cultural barriers. But it does offer many rich ideas for exploration: formal beauty, the nature of abstraction, how art and math intersect, and insights into the cultural expressions of places we've so long been at odds — and at war — with. This is, simply, a very important exhibition that deserves much more attention.

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