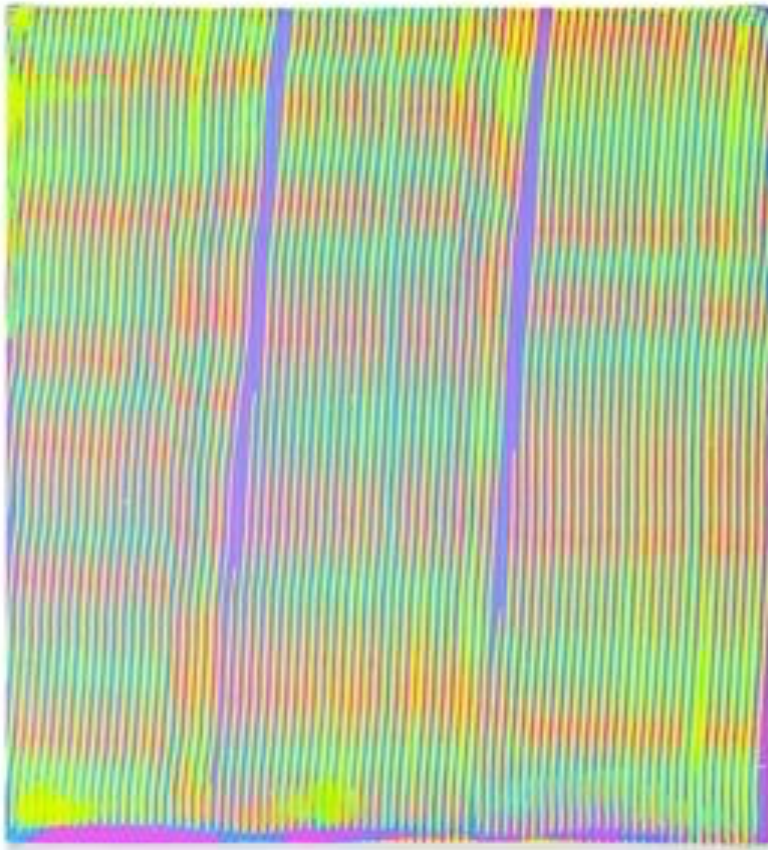


# ***BOMBLOG***

ART | ANOKA FARUQEE

by David Humphrey Jan 31, 2013

**Anoka Faruqee's dizzying moiré paintings teeter between physical fact and psychedelic fantasy.**



Anoka Faruqee. 2012P-04, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 11 ¼ x 10 ¼ inches. All photos courtesy of the artist.

Anoka Faruqee's paintings convert crafted labor into vision, as they seem to dematerialize before our eyes. Her description of these effects, however, seeks to demystify them without diminishing their power to dazzle and confound. Faruqee writes, "A moiré pattern is an interference effect created by the overlay of two or more offset patterns. The fusion of the patterns creates another pattern that is quite unlike and much more complex than any of the individual ones."

I had seen her work online and read a bit of Faruqee's writings before I met her, and I was curious to see how her ability to parse complex social and philosophic issues would relate to the woozy optics of her paintings. I finally met her at Yale, where we

both teach and where we've navigated public conversations during group critiques, but hadn't had an opportunity to explore what matters most to this recent LA transplant with family roots in South Asia. This fall I had a conversation in front of an audience with Anoka, surrounded by her paintings during a solo exhibition at the Hosfelt Gallery in New York. She describes her work as a balance of worked out process and intuitive experimentation in a way that makes sense but also comes with surprising turns and shadings.

**DAVID HUMPHREY** I wanted to start with an epigraph that is more of an apology than it is a question. Samuel Beckett writes somewhere that to restore silence is the role of objects. We're going to go against Beckett now and restore noise in the form of talking.

Here's my first question: I feel your paintings almost insist on being described with self-contradictory terms like ephemeral materiality, or speedy slowness. Their vibrating opticality—and the way that opticality arises from your accomplished craftsmanship—reminds me of the Richard Sennett book called *The Craftsman*, in which he equates making with thinking. I'm curious what kind of thinking emerges for you from the process of making.

**ANOKA FARUQEE** That's a great question. You're right to say that the work deals with the poles, and reconciling poles. I definitely see thinking and making as part of the same process. I don't see them as being opposite.

I've always been interested in knowledge that's not passively received, but actively experienced. I guess that's why I make paintings—or why I believe in making paintings—because the act of making the painting presents the question.

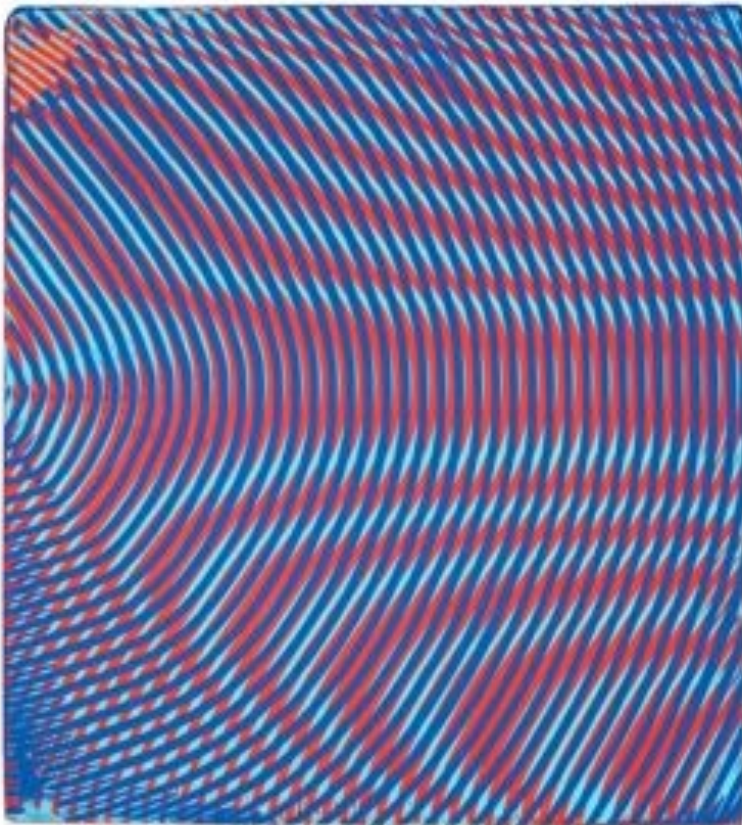
**DH** What excites me about your paintings is that they are so emphatically material. Undisguised paint and signs of process don't diminish the effect: there is a disappearance of matter into the visual hum. I feel like this has the possibility of being a metaphor for something—about being in the world, perhaps.

**AF** These are very optical paintings, some more than others. You look at them and see them very much as image and illusion. There are a lot of things happening with color in the moiré patterns that are kind of illusionistic. Yet I don't want the materiality to be lost. The materiality is important, even though it's sublimated somewhat. I feel like I'm sublimating the materiality for the optical experience, and so much of what you are seeing are traces or residues of material events.

**DH** Maybe that's why the margins seem so important—that's where the glitches are, the clogs, the edges where you see the goo overflowing. Those moments can undermine the illusion, or show the magician behind the curtain.

**AF** Right. Early on I was taping all the edges, which is characteristic of how I do things and of my earlier work. I like that space incredibly distilled and clean, but I realized these paintings demanded some other entry point because they are so mysterious. The process of sanding them in layers erases some of the materiality, or pushes it away.

About halfway through the process I started not taping all the edges. At first I was a little taken aback by it—a little uncomfortable by the messiness of the edge. I had to convince myself this was how they needed to be, that there needed to be some kind of clue or entry point into the process. A lot of people ask me, “Are these screen printed?” Is there some sort of transfer method, or digital print involved? There’s a reference to that, but I also want people to see that there are gestures and that these are pulled with tools. Some of the process is a laborious building up of layers. Other moments in the process are immediate and fast.



Anoka Faruqee. 2012P-40, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 11 ¼ x 10 ¼ inches.

It’s interesting to see them out of my own studio, which is sort of grungy. My tolerance for the messiness has increased seeing them in a clean space because

those planar white walls provide a frame. Going back into my studio, I feel more comfortable with that exposure.

**DH** I'm thinking a little bit about Mondrian and the way his painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* registers something of the experience of urban space for him. Maybe there's something analogous about what you're doing in terms of screen space. There's this kind of digital reference, which could be a byproduct of your method. Of course, moiré predates screens, but somehow moiré has a special relationship to screen images.

**AF** The most present examples of moiré in our culture right now are screens or printouts where something has been misregistered, or thumbnails where an image has been compressed and we see a moiré pattern on top of it. That digital effect is my point of entry to moirés. In my earlier work, too, I navigated the relationship between things that are hand made and things that are on the screen, or between the human and the machine.

**DH** What is your relationship to abstract painting, and the history of abstract painting? Is that another layer folded into the content of your work? In some ways abstract painters today have a slightly different relationship to their idiomatic past than they did in the good old days of modern art. Do you feel a part of that conversation?

**AF** I definitely am. My interest in the screen came from looking at Agnes Martin's grids, then taking Martin's grids and applying an everyday kind of fabric or weave over them—sort of taking a found image and making it collide with a more distilled reductive, abstract image. I'm interested in fabric and pattern and that whole history, but I'm also curious about how that history of decoration exists in relation to the history of abstract painting.

**DH** To me that's a surprising socio-historic layer. I wonder too about the psychological layer—a connection to the psychedelic. Maybe these paintings register qualities of consciousness, a sort of mental whirl associated with countercultural drug imagery.



Anoka Faruqee. 2012P-28, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 22 ½x 20 ½ inches.

**AF** The trajectory of my work has taken me from pattern and decoration, to screen, to pixelation. Now I have sort of ended up—I don't want to say ended up, but here I am now in this realm of hypnotic, psychedelic, optical painting. Those elements were present in the other work but I feel they are more obvious now.

**DH** Maybe we can catch an analogy to trance music too.

**AF** (*laughter*) They could relate to certain forms of electronica, definitely. I don't know as much about music as you do. The Internet and the screen present many examples of hypnotic or fractal art. Most of those things are moving; they're animation. You go online and stare at them. Those things exist in an uneasy relation to my work because they're the pop version of my paintings. I love those images, but there's a way in which they aren't enough either. That's where I go to painting and wonder, Can my paintings be better?

**DH** There's a side of your work that's spooky. The paintings seem haunted by forms that you can't put your finger on—forms that aren't articulated or don't have boundaries, and for a moment you think they might be an effect of brain, or eye, or some tangling of brain and eye. That, to me, is the road to the psychedelic. But I guess the psychedelic has its own historic forms or clichés. Here's a side question. We know each other because of teaching; if you were in a critique and suddenly these paintings rolled in, how would you talk about them?  
*(laughter)*

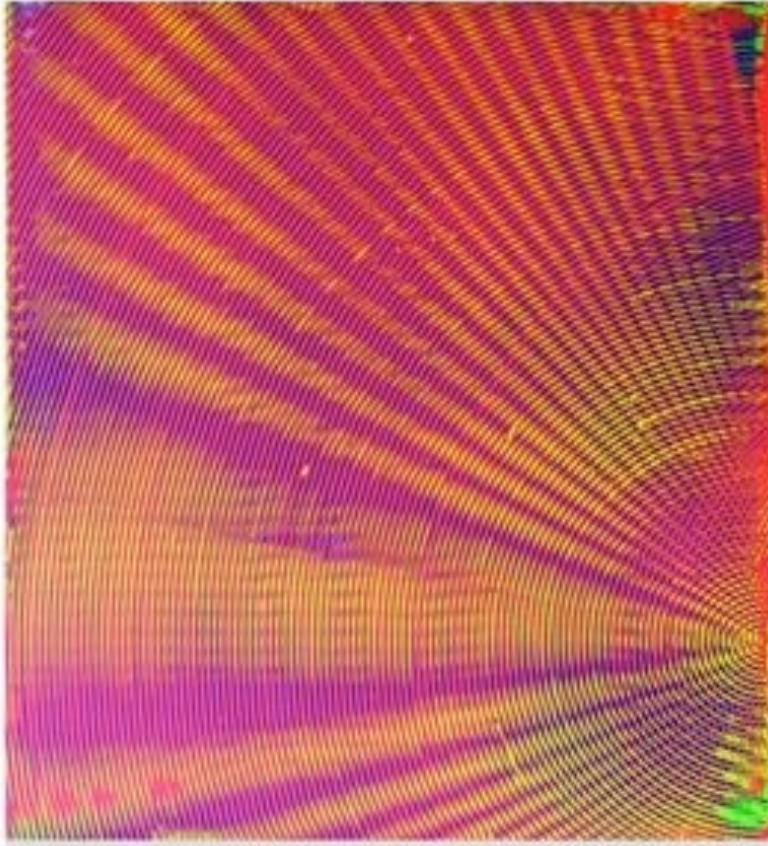
**AF** Well I certainly would hope that that wouldn't happen because that's an awkward position to be in as a teacher, to have students—I know you're asking it in a different way—but to have students making work so close to your own.

**DH** Copy-cats! *(laughter)*

**AF** But what you're asking is, if I were in another body, and these weren't my paintings, how would I respond to them? That's a great question. I think about that a lot because that's how I can be self-critical: by getting out of my own intention and my own history of looking at these (because I spend time looking at them in various stages). I've learned that I need to spend more time looking at my paintings after they're made.

**DH** Here's another question related to that. I know that you are well-versed and wellread in feminism and identity theory, and that these terms frequently are invoked in MFA critiques. I'm wondering how your work might be addressed from those perspectives, or whether your paintings might actually resist them?

**AF** For me that idea of identity is implicit in the work. I don't think my work is resistant to it, but I don't think it's explicit about it. There's a way in which I am speaking about what I like and who I am. I'm unraveling what my aesthetic tastes are and where those came from.



Anoka Faruqee. 2012P-25, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 22 ½x 20 ½ inches.

**DH** Are you saying that, in a biographic sense, the work inevitably would reflect everything that is you?

**AF** Right. It evolves. When I first started making paintings I was much more deliberate about examining that identity. In some ways we all start there, especially in grad school that's a question that was often asked of us, How do these relate to us as individuals? I was much more deliberate about that aspect of the work; For instance, the source material for the patterns was Islamic tile work. That's no longer the case with this work, but my parents immigrated from Bangladesh, and I'm building on things that came to me through thinking about their house, Islamic tile and its geometry, looking at patterns, rugs and clothing—Indian miniature and Persian miniature. As you make paintings, you evolve as a person, and what you want to say shifts a little bit.

**DH** In some ways what you're describing about Islamic tiling is true here: the work emerges from what I would call the technomorphic-imaginary. You have these technological forms and processes that you employ as a way to conjure new fields.

**AF** I'm part of this world, and when I look at the screen, that is part of my visual vocabulary. That aesthetic is part of culture at this moment. Being in this culture, it makes sense that it would penetrate into my paintings. What does sitting in front of a screen for x number of hours a day do to us? What does that do both to our brains and the way that we see things, and to our potential to see things in different ways through that medium?

I don't see it as a break, but as a continuum. Technology always comes out of another technology, coming out of another technology. The rediscovery of perspective in the Renaissance was a technology. Islamic tile work is a kind of technology, and the advances happening in mathematics during that time allowed the geometry to be displayed. Those things are forerunners to digital technology. Without those things we wouldn't have the numerical system, without those changes, we wouldn't be where we are now.

**DH** In a way those socio-historic forces reside in your work without you having to make a big deal out of it, or huff and puff to tell a story.

**AF** A good example that I often tell people is I made this one painting in graduate school that was a hand-painted houndstooth. At that time, I was more interested in talking about fabric and decoration and the everyday. But as soon as I made it, I realized I was speaking to the digital. Only later on did I discover how weaving—the early Jacquard looms used punch cards—provided the prototypes for the early computers.

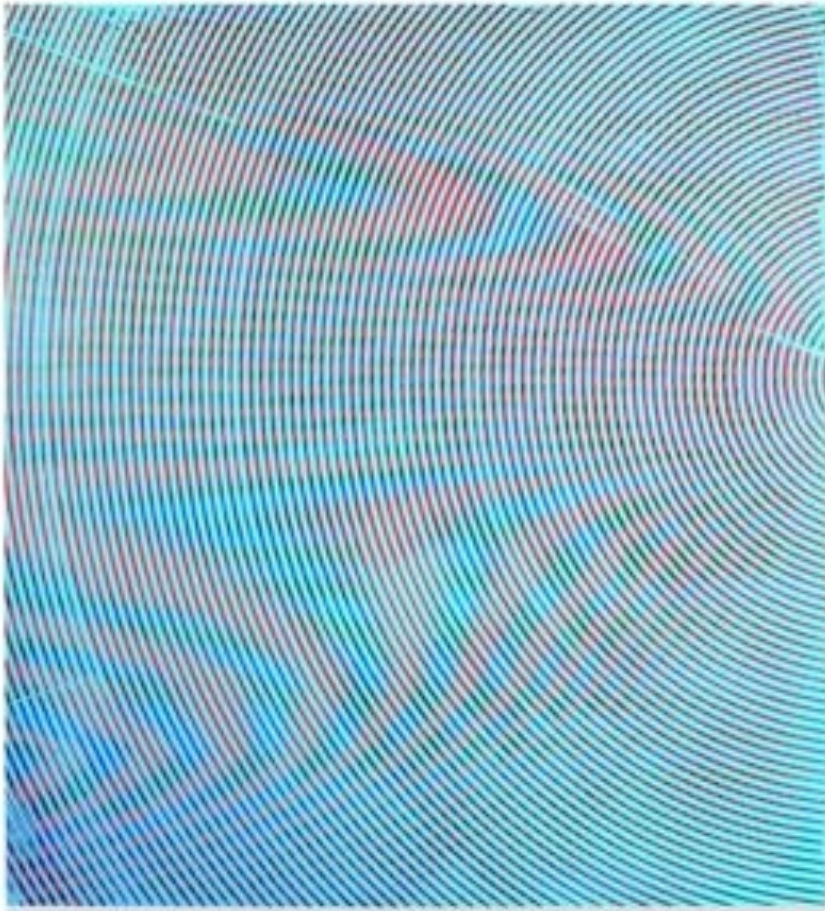
I found the historical connection later on, as opposed to before I started. I didn't sit in my studio and think, I'm going to make a work about how weaving connects to the digital. But the houndstooth that I was looking at, it's an artifact of culture. It has its own agency. The object speaks, in a sense.

**DH** That's why we love robots.

**AF** Yeah. (*laughter*)

The object—the visual objects in the world—tell you their historical agency, and you as an artist can be aware of that and pay attention and listen to that. As much as you're directing it, it's also directing you.





Anoka Faruqee. 2012P-46, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 45×41 inches.

**DH** Do you ever work according to a negative canon? Where the work evolves out of things you're trying to avoid, or that you don't want to have in there, or maybe from patterns of aversion? I know many abstract painters for whom this negative canon is an important feature.

**AF** I don't know if I've ever thought about it that way, though probably unconsciously I do have lots of things which I avoid—

**DH** I can think of a huge number of things that aren't in your paintings.

**AF** Exactly. (*laughter*)

For instance, when I first started this painting the blue was more of a true blue. I realized as soon as I started putting the paint down, Oh it's red, white, and blue: it's a flag. I wasn't quite comfortable with that, so I kind of covered it over with this greenish-blue. I do try to avoid any direct reference that would lock it down too much. David, my husband, came into the studio—and at first I thought, maybe it'll

transcend—he came in and right off the bat was like, “Red, white, and blue.”  
(*laughter*) Then I knew I had to rethink it. I didn’t totally change it off the palette, so it’s still kind of there.

I saw the Rosemarie Trockel show, and she has a great piece with this red, white, and blue yarn unraveling. In her work, she’s actually walking this fine line between a kind of formal abstraction and something referential, but it just wasn’t the conversation I was trying to have. Sometimes, for instance, red and green look too much like Christmas colors.

**DH** Didn’t you have an infatuation with pink for a moment?

**AF** Yeah, right. I love pink. I still love pink. That’s a cultural reference I’m not afraid of.

**DH** Maybe you just want to maximize the freedom of the spectator to project all kinds of things into the work?

**AF** When you make abstract paintings, you accept that you’re doing something that’s limited. Even the choice to be a painter and say, Okay I’m not going to make things that enter onto the floor or into the space. They’re going to be on these, in a way, conventional rectangles. It’s within that space that I play.

The idea of limitation is fine; I feel like it comes naturally to me. It’s liberating not to worry about everything else it could be. Within those confines there’s a slowing down of perception: you don’t have to look everywhere else. You can just stop and it’s okay to slow down and look right here within this frame. Abstraction is another extension of that, possibly. It’s okay that the kitchen sink isn’t here, right? It’s about reducing or limiting the terms so that they open up again and that you find some freedom there.

**DH** So, perhaps the past of abstraction can be an irritating inconvenience sometimes, but it also underwrites some of your ambition?



Anoka

Faruqee. 2012P-41, 2012. Acrylic on linen on panel. 11 ¼ x 10 ¼ inches.

**AF** It can be frustrating because you're always repeating some other gesture that has been performed before you, but it can be liberating because you also are building on that foundation. You can engage with that history of abstraction, which, in the big scheme of things, is a fairly narrow thing to be interested in.

**DH** Maybe there's another musical analogy here, in which the improvisatory elements—the elements of play—occur within the frame of a familiar set of disciplinary rules or codes, like song structures.

**AF** Right. For me discipline, structure, and system have always been central. I'm a disciplined person. I know I can work hard. So, that's what comes naturally to me in a sense. Work hard, work hard, work hard, right? But as an artist I know that that's never enough—that the discipline is there in order so that you take a risk.

**DH** You want more than a gold star.

**AF** That idea of discipline and then improvisation, chance, or accident that you're talking about in relation to music—that is the direction my work has moved in. Hopefully this new work speaks to that conversation between a system or plan, and those moments of things unraveling.

**DH** I like that your paintings are specific, individuated, and maybe even eccentric, without being particularly subjective. I think that's partly what you're describing—that the tools, the procedures, the orderliness, can take out those maybe gooey, messy subjectivities, but without sacrificing some kind of singularity.

**AF** I mean it's a reserved subjectivity. It's funny how some people define subjectivity, but I feel that my work is clearly not how you might imagine an expressive painting. There are degrees of remove that have to do with using a tool (particularly in these because the earlier works were made with brushes and these are made with tools). Then there is the degree of remove in the sanding and the excavation. There's something material happening and I allow you to see that—the residue of that process flattened into an image.

These degrees of reserve and these filters are presented to the viewer, but through them there is still access to some other space of gesture, or accident. It's funny, this goes back to your question about how I would see these if they weren't mine. To me these are so painterly, and *wow* they leave it all hanging out—the sides are untaped! Then other people come in and say, "I have no idea how these are made; these are completely impenetrable." Having that conversation, I can see there is a coolness to them.

**DH** But the idea would be for someone to surrender to them and things emerge and they sort of go for a ride.

**AF** Exactly.

**David Humphrey** is a New York artist who is represented by the Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, NY. He is a senior critic at the Yale School of Art. An anthology of his art writing, *Blind Handshake*, was published by Periscope Publishing and is distributed by Prestel.

Humphrey, David. "Anoka Faruqee's dizzying moiré paintings teeter between physical fact and psychedelic fantasy" *BOMBLOG*, 31 January 2013. [ill. 2012P-04 (2012), 2012P-40 (2012), 2012P-28 (2012), 2012P-25 (2012), 2012P-46 (2012), 2012P-41 (2012)]  
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