



Interwoven

Anila Quayyum Agha



One of the most highly sought-after artists working in the United States today, Anila Quayyum Agha (born 1965) is renowned for installations that combine color, geometry, pattern, and, above all, light to elicit wonder and a sense of endless possibility. This exhibition—a nationally touring mid-career retrospective for which the Frist Art Museum is the final venue—traces Agha’s work during the past two decades. Encompassing intimate beaded and embroidered works on paper as well as her better-known monumental light-filled installations, *Interwoven* shows the artist’s expansive creativity and the centrality of textiles to her practice.

Through the twenty-six artworks in this exhibition, we follow Agha’s inspiring career. Now based in Indianapolis, Indiana, she has always lived outside the major contemporary art capitals of the world. She hails from the conservative Muslim country of Pakistan, where a patriarchal system perpetuates women’s inequality in both public and private spheres. After graduating in 1986 with a degree in textiles from the National College of Art in Lahore, Agha worked in fashion and furniture design. Seeking new opportunities, she moved with her family to the United States in 1999, living first in Virginia and then Texas. Fortified with the conviction that she is “not a designer . . . [but] an artist with something to say,” Agha earned a master of fine arts degree in fiber arts from the University of North Texas in 2004. As an immigrant woman artist in post-9/11 America, she has faced challenges that included racism, sexism, and Islamophobia. At the start of her career, to increase her chances of success, she was advised to make her art less beautiful, colorful, and rooted in women’s craft and to turn away from the artistic traditions, history, and language of Pakistan. Instead, Agha has used her outsider status and her own ideas about art to her advantage.

Interwoven opens with works created between 2004 and 2012, beginning with *Hessiat (Essence)* (fig. 1), which comes from the artist’s final year of graduate school. Already in this early period

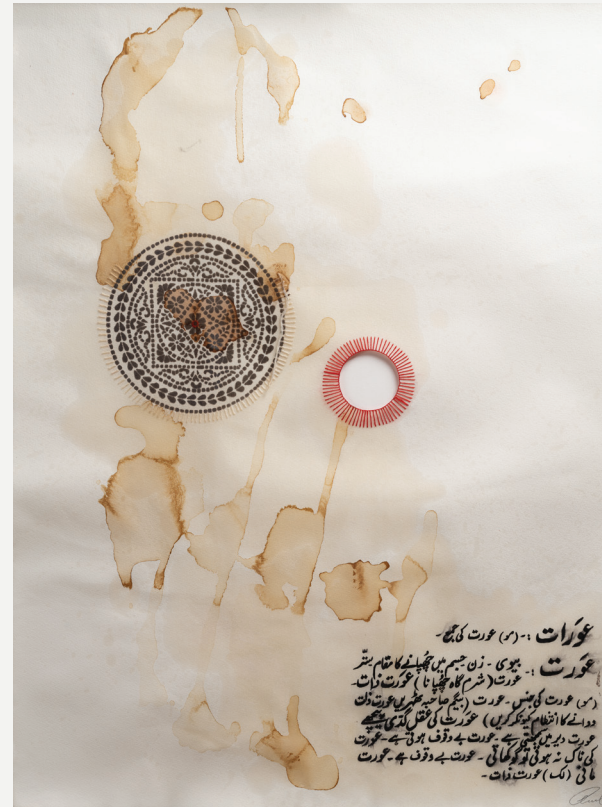


Fig. 1: Anila Quayyum Agha. *Hessiat (Essence)*, 2004. Silk-screen ink, tea, dye, wax, and thread on paper; 29 1/2 x 22 in. Collection of Joyce Harlow. Image courtesy of The Westmoreland Museum of American Art. © Anila Quayyum Agha

Agha was focused on many of the themes that still motivate her today: her own identity as a South Asian woman, the rights of all women, ecological destruction, and the need for people living in democratic societies to be active, informed citizens. Working primarily on paper, she experimented with geometry, patterns, and the layering of different media—some conventional, like inks and graphite, and others less so, like newspapers and tea. Occasionally Agha incorporated calligraphic inscriptions in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan. Common to all these works are the use of light-reflecting elements, such as glass beads and encaustic wax, along with sewing techniques and a monochromatic palette.

In graduate school Agha had internalized the idea that bright colors are unsophisticated. Eventually, however, she came to understand that notion as rooted in colonial biases about non-

Western cultures such as her own. Seeing this clearly freed her to embrace vibrant color as a vital means of self-expression. *Intersections (Teal)* (cover) and *Intersections (Gold)*, both made in 2016, epitomize this major shift. One is a deeply saturated blue, the other an equally luminous orange.

Islamic pattern has also become more prominent in Agha's work with time. The star-and-hexagon motif in her *Intersections* series echoes the ornamentation of the Alhambra, a medieval Islamic palace in Granada, Spain. Repeating the geometric pattern creates a sense of harmony and the illusion of infinity. Agha alters the design with her color choices and by embellishing it with embroidery, an undervalued art form associated with women that she seeks to honor.

Agha's 2011 trip to the Alhambra proved to be a major turning point in her career. The building is significant not only as one of the most exquisite examples of Islamic architecture but also a place where different cultures have long come together. Christian,



Fig. 2: Anila Quayyum Agha pictured with her installation *Intersections* in 2019. Image courtesy of *TulsaPeople Magazine*. Photo: Tim Landes



Fig. 3: Anila Quayyum Agha. *All the Flowers Are for Me (Red)* (installation view), 2016. Laser-cut lacquered steel and halogen light; 60 x 60 x 60 in. Cincinnati Art Museum, Alice Bimel Endowment for Asian Art. Image courtesy of The Westmoreland Museum of American Art. © Anila Quayyum Agha

Jewish, and Muslim artists collaborated on its realization, and today anyone can visit the palace. This came as a revelation to Agha, since, as a woman in Pakistan, she had always been discouraged from entering Islamic mosques, which are sites of enlightenment and community. The Alhambra inspired her to create the work that began her *Intersections* series (fig. 2). Lit from within, a hanging cube emits a starry geometric pattern in all directions. It is an installation that people of any class, gender, race, or religion can enjoy together. A tour de force, *Intersections* won the 2014 ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and first brought Agha to international attention.

Agha has since made more ethereal, radiant lightbox installations, many of which have been acquired by museums and frequently exhibited. Usually taking the form of a single cube, the works vary in pattern and color. Agha conceives of each one as an immersive environment in which the audience plays an active role. Male artists have dominated this kind of art, which boldly commands

space and attention. Agha is eager to challenge gender stereotypes and to demonstrate her own prowess working with traditionally masculine materials such as steel and light.

Interwoven features *All the Flowers Are for Me (Red)* (fig. 3), a lightbox belonging to the Cincinnati Art Museum. It exemplifies Agha's dramatic use of light, color, and pattern to create meaning and abounds with references to Pakistani cultural traditions. Its dappled light effects recall *jalis*, the carved and pierced screens with ornamental patterns used in Indo-Islamic architecture. But, whereas *jalis* serve to divide women from men, Agha instead creates an inclusive space. In this exhibition the walls as well as the lightbox are a brilliant ruby red, which is the typical color of South Asian bridal gowns because of its associations with love and prosperity. Agha has also exhibited this work with white walls and made similar installations using black, saffron, and turquoise.



Fig. 4: Anila Quayyum Agha. *A Flood of Tears (Gathering Storms)* (detail, installation view), 2023. Upholstery needles, bugle and hematite beads, braided cotton, wood, steel, and glass; 144 x 144 x 156 in. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of Wichita Art Museum. © Anila Quayyum Agha

In Agha's pattern are blooming flowers, a typical feature of the art and architecture of the Mughals who once ruled India and Pakistan. In the seventeenth century, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan famously built the flower-covered Taj Mahal in Agra as a paradise on earth for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. Agha's installation is a dazzling monument to love, too, and its title tells us she created it especially for herself and anyone else who has similarly felt the pain of exclusion.

Making its debut in red in *Interwoven* is another powerful installation, *A Flood of Tears (Gathering Storms)* (fig. 4), a work that emphasizes our interconnectedness and duty to one another. Light shines on hundreds of beaded threads and sharp needles. Evocative of pouring rain, the installation commemorates the devastating 2010 flood in Pakistan that affected twenty million people. That same year Agha made this installation in blue; her new version of 2023 is red to symbolize our warming planet. Climate change, Agha rightly notes, is unequal in its impact, affecting poor nations more than the wealthy ones mostly responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions causing the problem.

Through these and other lyrical and seductive works in *Interwoven*, Agha engages with some of the most pressing issues of our time. Her art creates sites of reflection and meditation for all to share. "I want to draw people into my artwork gently to stimulate dialogue," she says. In a world that is often divided and unjust, Agha dares to dream otherwise and invites us to do the same.

Trinita Kennedy
Curator-at-Large

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May 22–August 30, 2026

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery



Organized by The Westmoreland Museum of American Art, with generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Hillman Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Fine Foundation

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Supported in part by **Clay and Jeannie Blevins**
and the **Gordon CAP Gallery Fund**

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by



Cover: Anila Quayyum Agha. *Intersections (Teal)* (detail), 2016. Encaustic and thread on laser-cut paper; 21 x 14 in. Grand Rapids Art Museum, MI, Museum Purchase, 2016.28. Image courtesy of The Westmoreland Museum of American Art. © Anila Quayyum Agha