

RASHEED

ARAEEN

FRIENDS, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY

AT THE LIBRARY AT WILLESDEN GREEN | BRENT BIENNIAL LONDON 2020



19 SEPTEMBER - 13 DECEMBER 2020

RASHEED ARAEEN

FRIENDS, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY

THE LIBRARY AT WILLESDEN GREEN

BRENT
BIENNIAL

BRENT
2020

METRO
LAND
CULTURE

Grosvenor
Gallery

If you're ever lucky enough to be invited to Rasheed Araeen's studio, it is likely to include lunch and you will never be the only guest at the table. On the first floor of a building on Cricklewood Broadway, in between shops and cafés, his studio is a hub for ideas and encounters, for discussion and sharing. 'Rasheed Araeen: Friends, Mathematics and Philosophy' (2020) brings some of the atmosphere and ethos of Rasheed's studio to The Library at Willesden Green by means of his seminal sculpture *Zero to Infinity* (1968-ongoing), a resource area on the journal *Third Text*, of which he is the founder, and a selection of some of his later paintings. All together they offer insight into the means of making and ways of thinking that Araeen has developed over more than six decades.

Zero to Infinity is based on an idea Araeen originally had in 1968, but that was not realised at the time. It was first rendered manifest in 2004, and has subsequently been reworked and made and remade for multiple contexts including the Tate and the Venice

Biennial. The work is made up of brightly coloured, open-framework lattice cubes that viewers are encouraged to lift, shuffle and move around into their own configurations. The piece is exemplary of Araeen's self-appointed mission to de-mystify the art object and to give the viewer an active role in understanding and experiencing the work. The formal nature of the work speaks to Araeen's training as a structural engineer, in addition to his relationship to minimalism. In explaining the title of the work he has said: 'In terms of the body entering the work itself, touching it, changing it, transforming it constantly – its transformation can go on to infinity. That's why it's called from *Zero to Infinity*. Zero is the static structure of minimalism.'

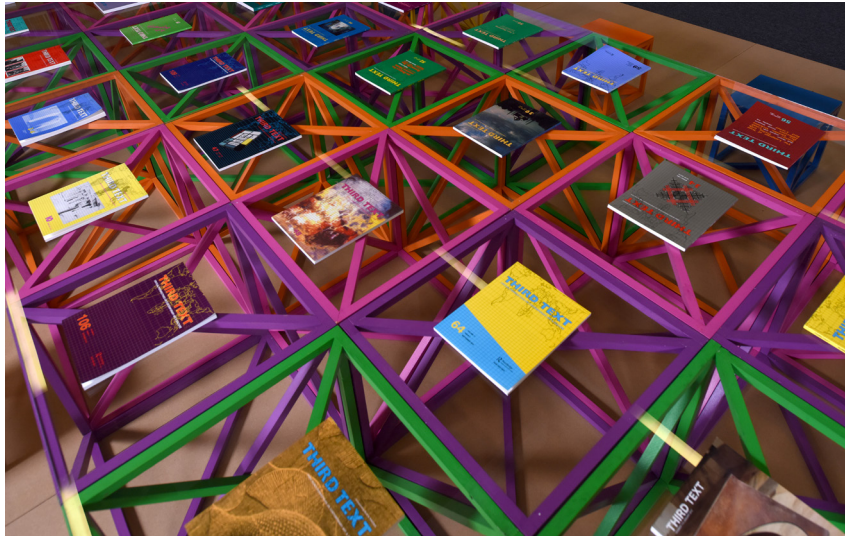
This notion of the 'static structure of minimalism', and the need to revise and reevaluate, is at the core of Araeen's lifelong endeavour: it is a call to reassess and rewrite our histories, to acknowledge and embrace the multiplicity of influences that make our world what it is today. Where the history of minimalism as we know it is dominated

by white American men, Araeen asks for an expanded understanding of this movement that takes into account the influence of mathematics, which cannot be dissociated from the ancient Caliphates of Umayyad and Abbasid in the countries of Greater Syria, Iraq, and Andalusia. To understand minimalism from this perspective would allow for a greater diversity of artists to take

their place in textbooks and exhibitions. It would also, according to Araeen, lead to the universal emancipation of all humankind.

The thinking that underpins Araeen's work is rich, steeped in history as well as lived experience. The journal *Third Text* is a foundational tool for understanding the intellectual dimension of Araeen's practice.





Established in 1987, with its roots in what writer John Roberts sets out as the 'rich and explosive resistance to racism, colonialism and imperialism between the early 1970s and mid-1980s in Britain', Third Text examines the theoretical and historical grounds on the basis of which the West legitimises its position as the arbiter of what is significant. Firmly rooted in a global context, the journal demonstrates Araeen's ongoing commitment to discussion and debate of the kind that often takes place in his company.

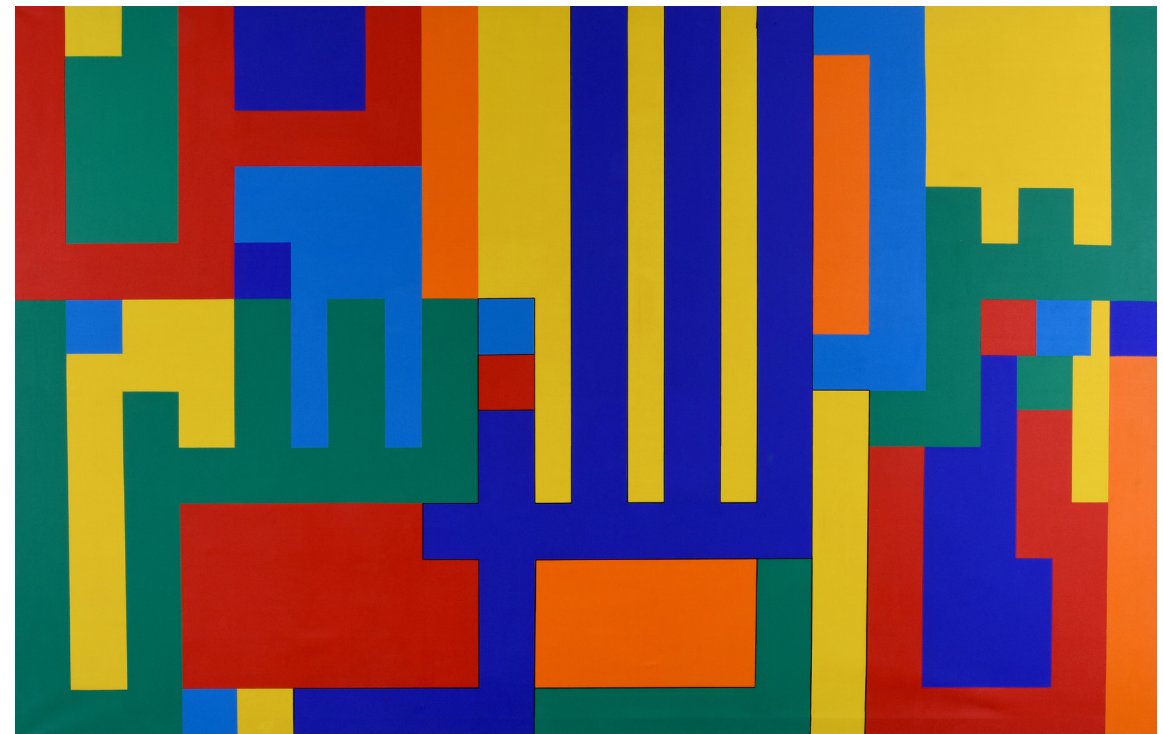
In the library's gallery space is a display of

paintings and preparatory works on paper. Some are from the series *In the Midst of Darkness* (2012 – 2013), the title evocative of how at the time the Islamic world was alive and abuzz with intellectual agility and innovation, Western Europe was in a period of demographic, economic and cultural deterioration. Alongside them are some works from *Guftagu* (A Conversation Between Al Biruni and Ibn Sina), a series of paintings made in 2014. The works reference a sometimes heated correspondence between two prominent scholars of the Islamic Golden Age – Al Biruni and Ibn Sina. Al Biruni was

a renowned astronomer, mathematician, ethnographer, anthropologist, historian and geographer who around 1000 AD came into contact with the famous philosopher-scientist Ibn Sina (Avicenna), who at the time was the recognised expert on Aristotle. Today Aristotle is widely understood as having exerted an influence on almost every form of knowledge in the West, and he continues to be a subject of philosophical discussion. This conversation between Al Biruni and Ibn Sina is exemplary of the kind of

history and exchange that Araeen is invested in – in which ideas go back and forth between people and places, mutating, fusing, growing, changing and setting a trajectory for new futures. Araeen's 2010 text, titled 'Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History', details how ideas from Ancient Greece were taken up by Arab and Islamic scholars and advanced before being 'returned' to the West. The artist

laments how over time the contributions made by the likes of Al Biruni and Ibn Sina were written out of history. The *In the Midst of Darkness* and *Guftagu* series were made during Araeen's 'Homecoming' period and marks the reclamation of his Muslim identity, when he moved back to Karachi in 2010 and began making work again after a long pause. Many of the paintings use the names of prominent Arab and Persian polymaths, including Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, Al Ghazali, Umer-Khayyam, and Al-Gazali. As his preparatory works



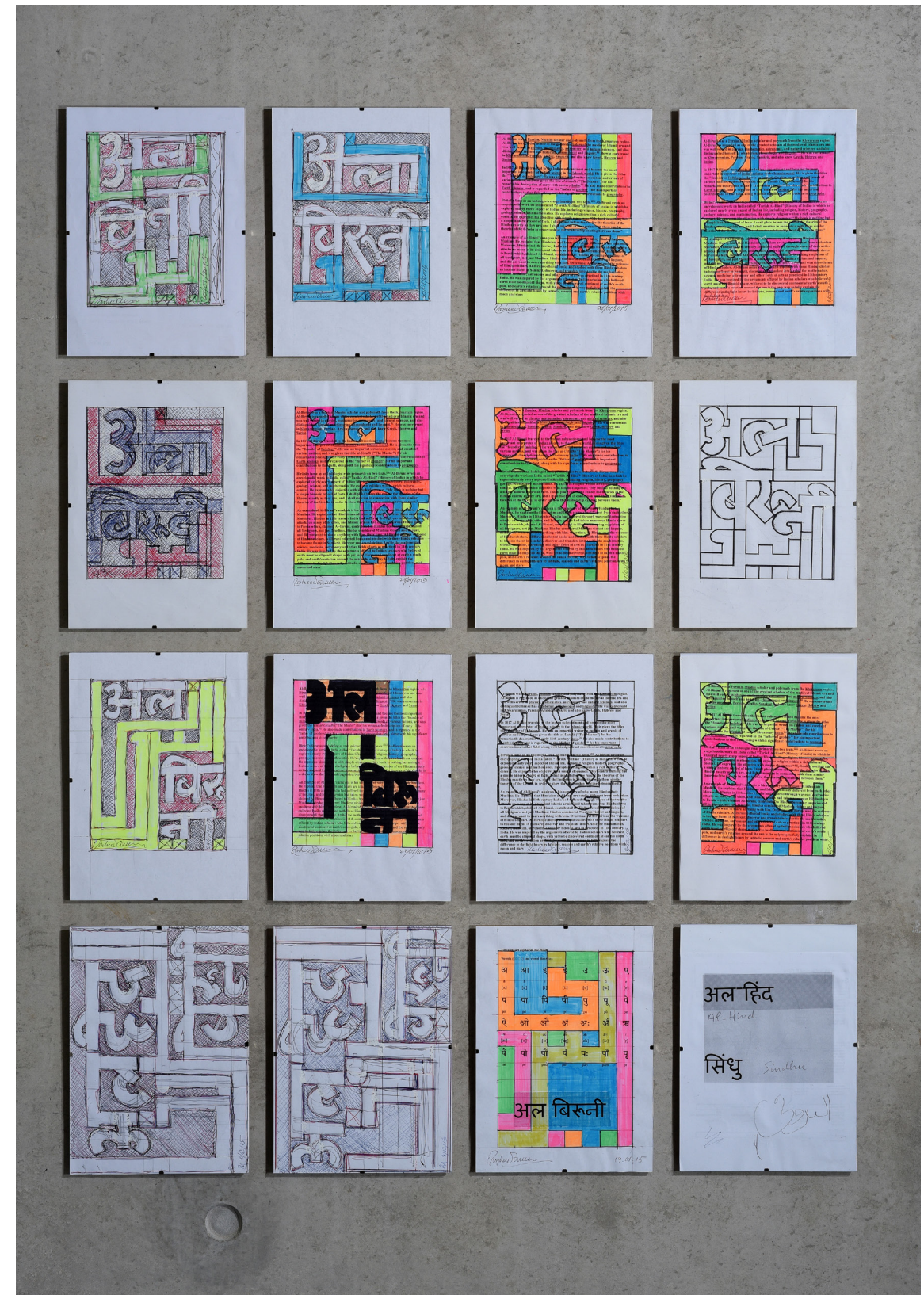
on paper show, the artist takes the Arabic script of their names and through a process of distilling morphs them into stylised, angular, geometric forms, highly reminiscent of shapes and motifs that characterise his previous work. The new shapes are then assigned vivid colours and tessellated, fanning out from the centre of the design. To those familiar with Arabic script and Urdu they are legible in semi-conventional terms, and to those who are not familiar but equipped with the title the paintings offer a way into considering the relationship between geometry and abstract thinking.

In his 'Preliminary Notes', mentioned earlier, Araeen describes his concern with the way in which 'Islamic art represents the historical movement from Egypt-Mesopotamia to Greece to the Arabs, from whose genius geometry emerges as a sensory art form, revealing not only the sensuous complexity of its own formation but enshrined within it is a rational discourse that becomes the basis of Arab or Islamic civilisation', and, importantly with regards to these paintings, 'meditation on the

revealed knowledge actually first produced the art form of calligraphy.' In taking written language, reworking its formal qualities and rendering it geometric, Araeen, as many before him, looks to harness its ability to power thought but also fuel creation.

Prior to their installation in The Library at Willesden Green, these works were all in Araeen's studio, in the heart of Brent, often listed as one of the most diverse boroughs in the UK. Following his own thinking about the way in which art can constitute the basis of civilisation, to understand the works in this context is to be alert to the need to see and appreciate the myriad of cultural contributions made by all those who inhabit this place. To do this with conviction and sincerity is to rejuvenate our contemporary world.

Rebecca Heald, 2020

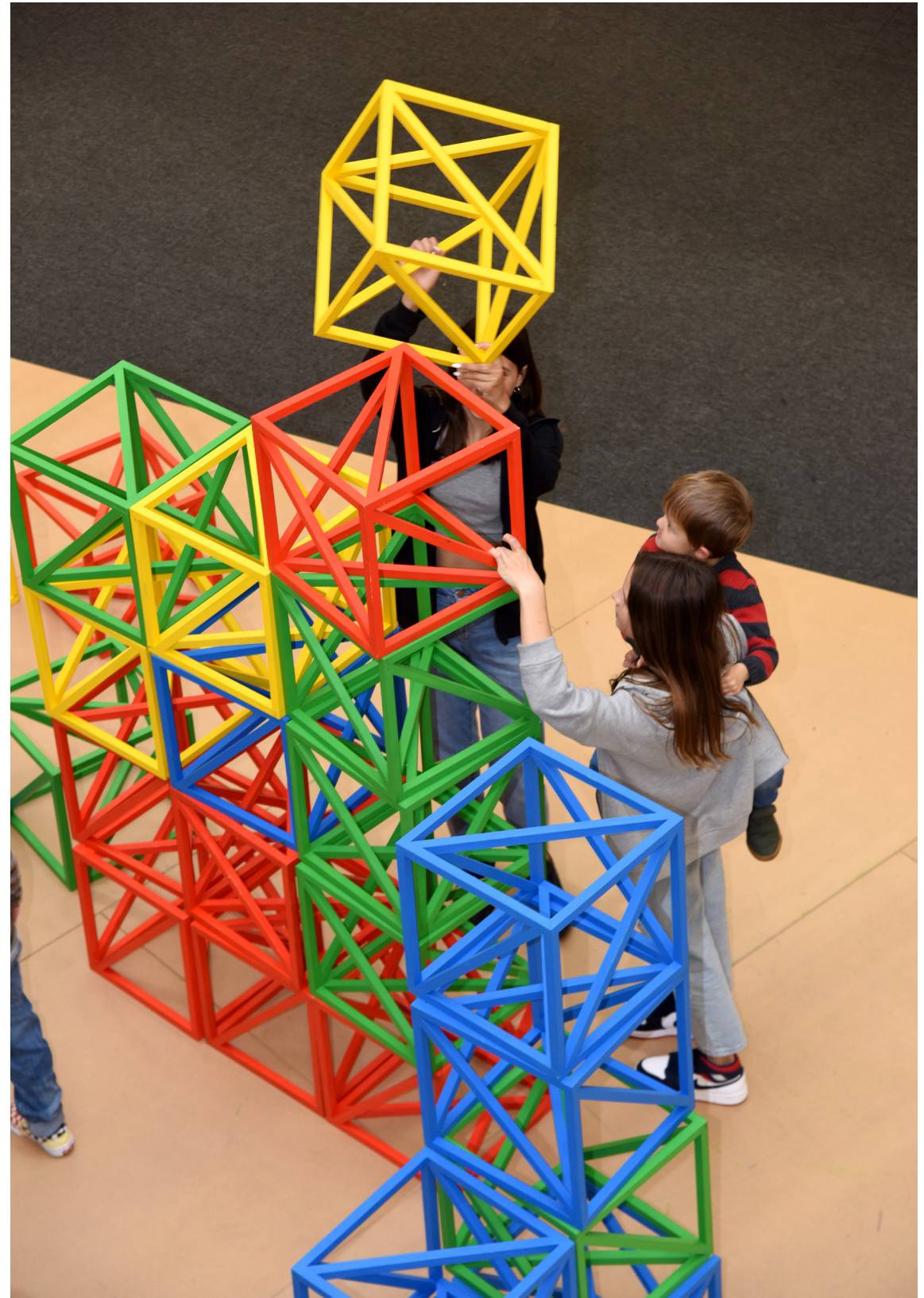


ZERO TO INFINITY

1968-ONGOING

Acrylic paint on
wood, 36 cubes



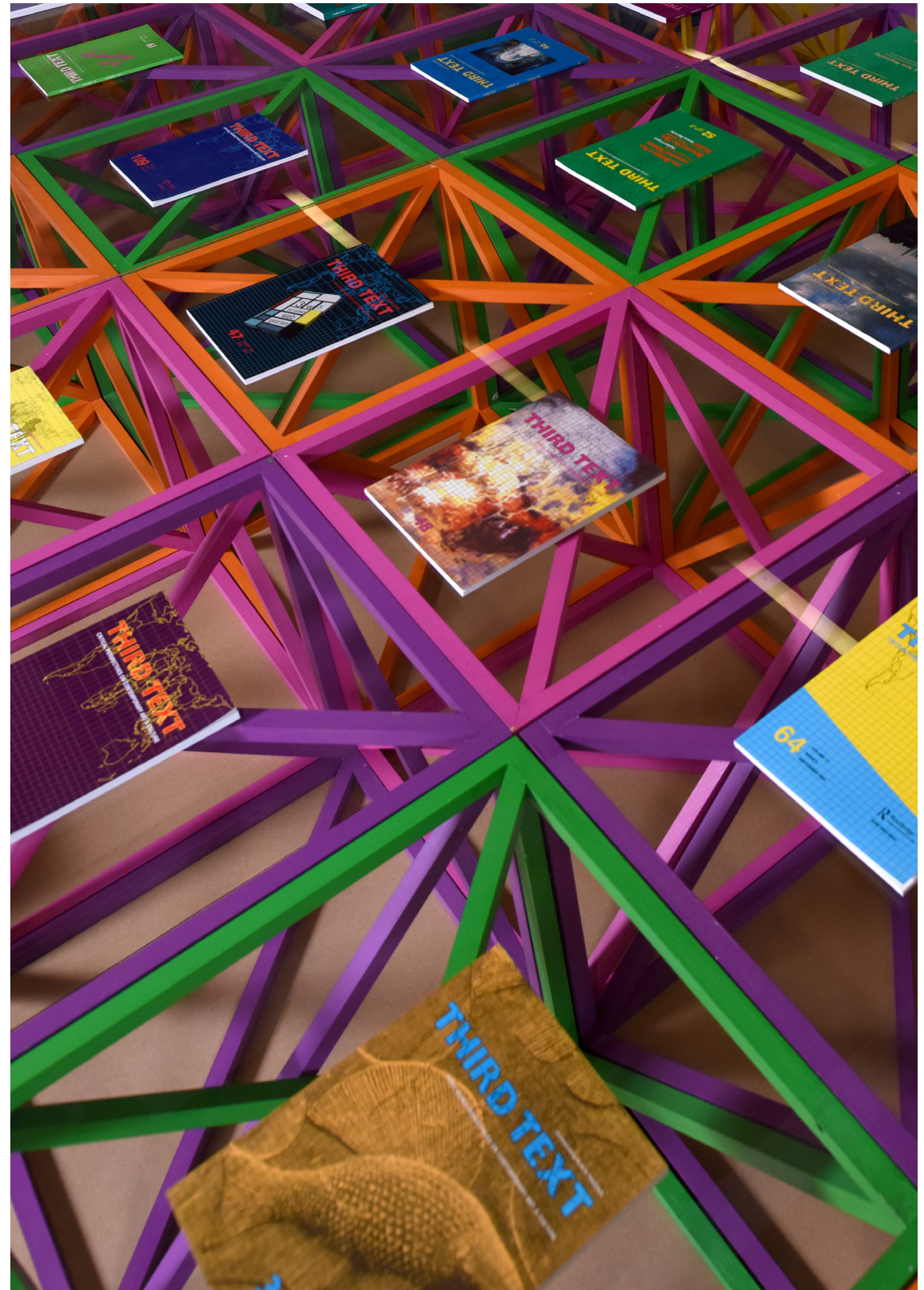


READING ROOM

2016-ONGOING

Glass and acrylic paint on
wood, with copies of the
Third Text journal





**STUDIES FOR IN THE MIDST
OF DARKNESS**

2012-2013

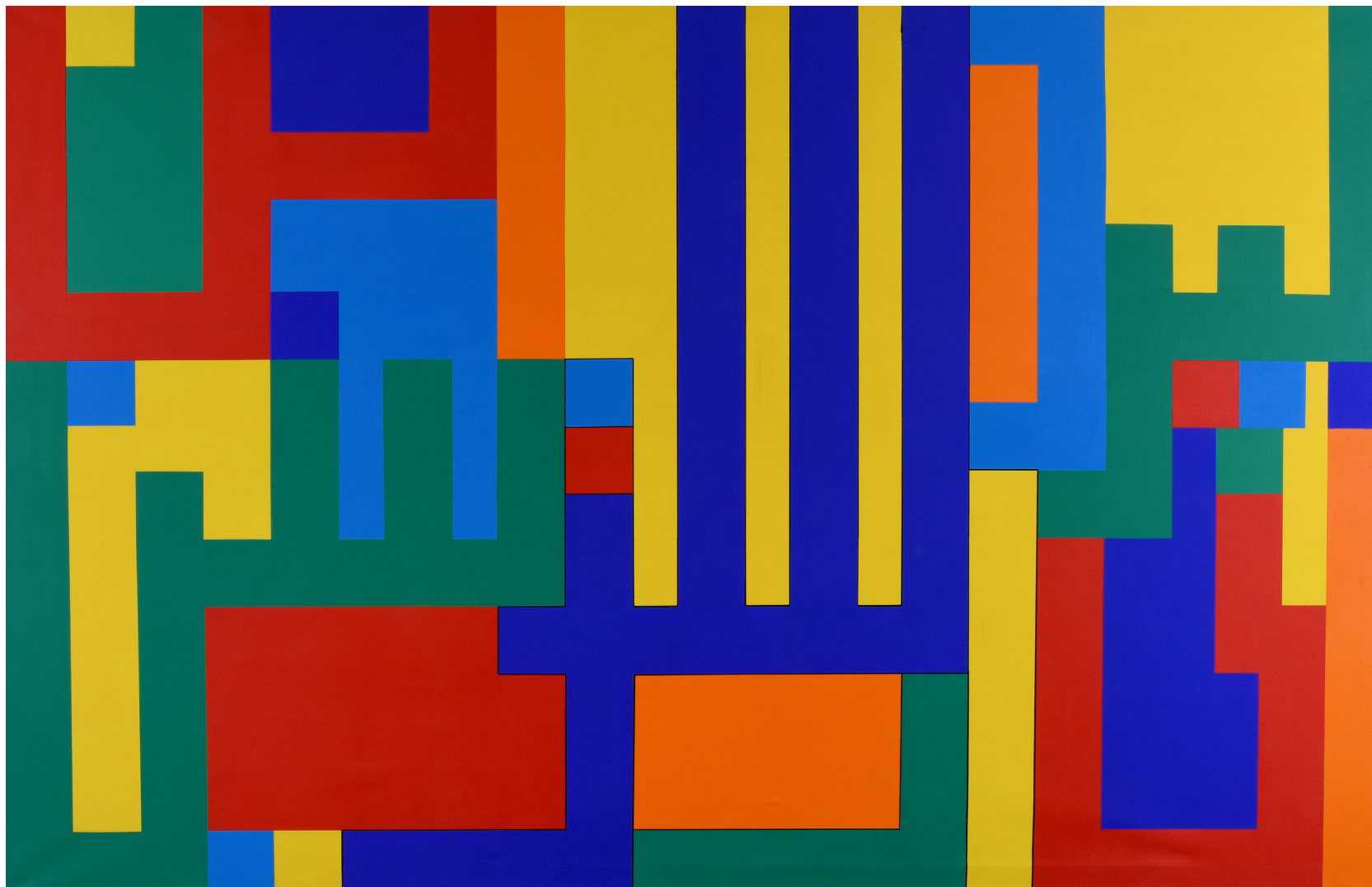
Marker pen, pen and pencil
on paper (4)
28 x 42 cm each



GUFTUGU 1
(A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
AL BARUNI AND IBN SINA),

2014

Acrylic on canvas
160 x 239 cm



GUFTUGU 1
(A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
AL BARUNI AND IBN SINA),

2014

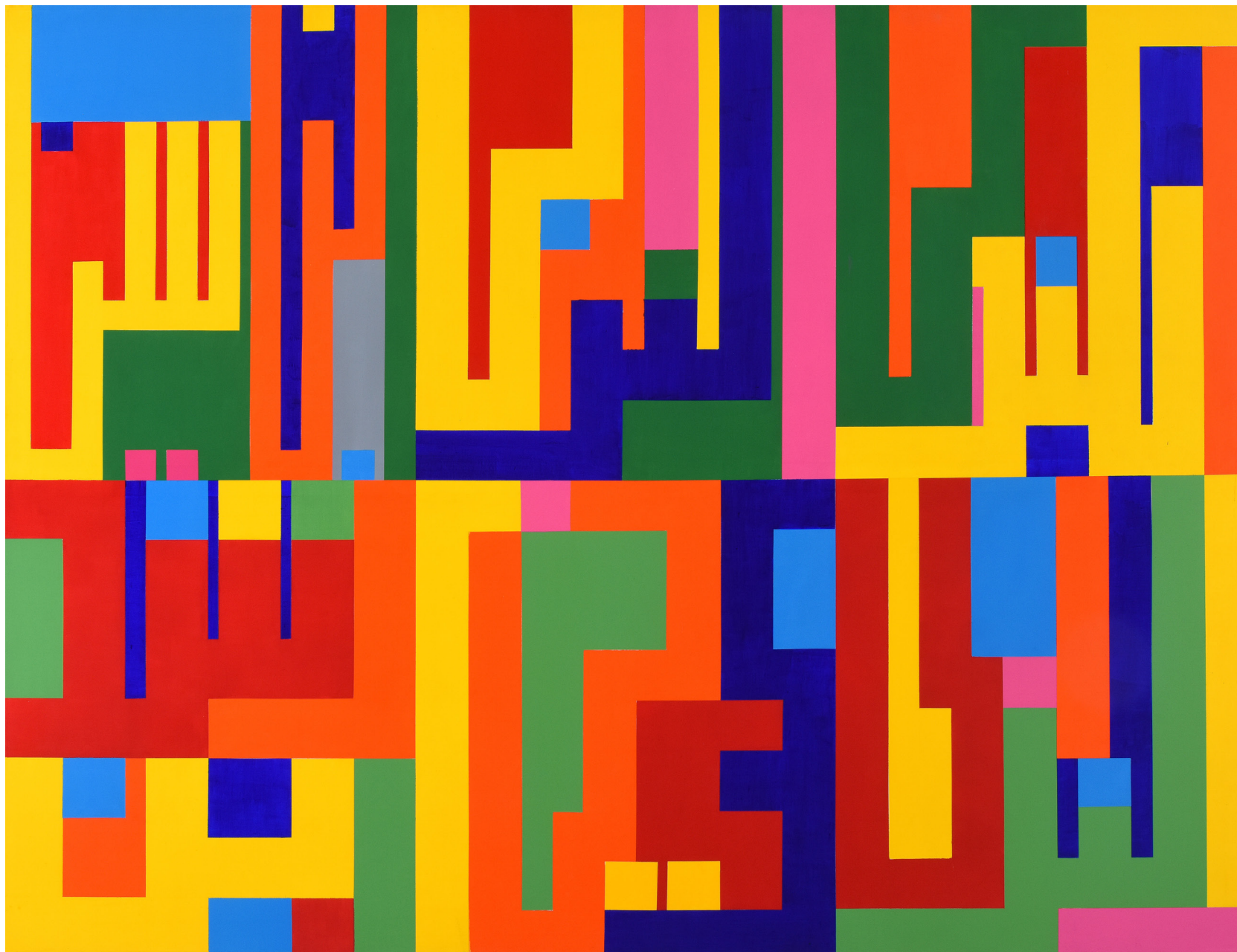
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 239 cm



IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS
1A

2012-2013

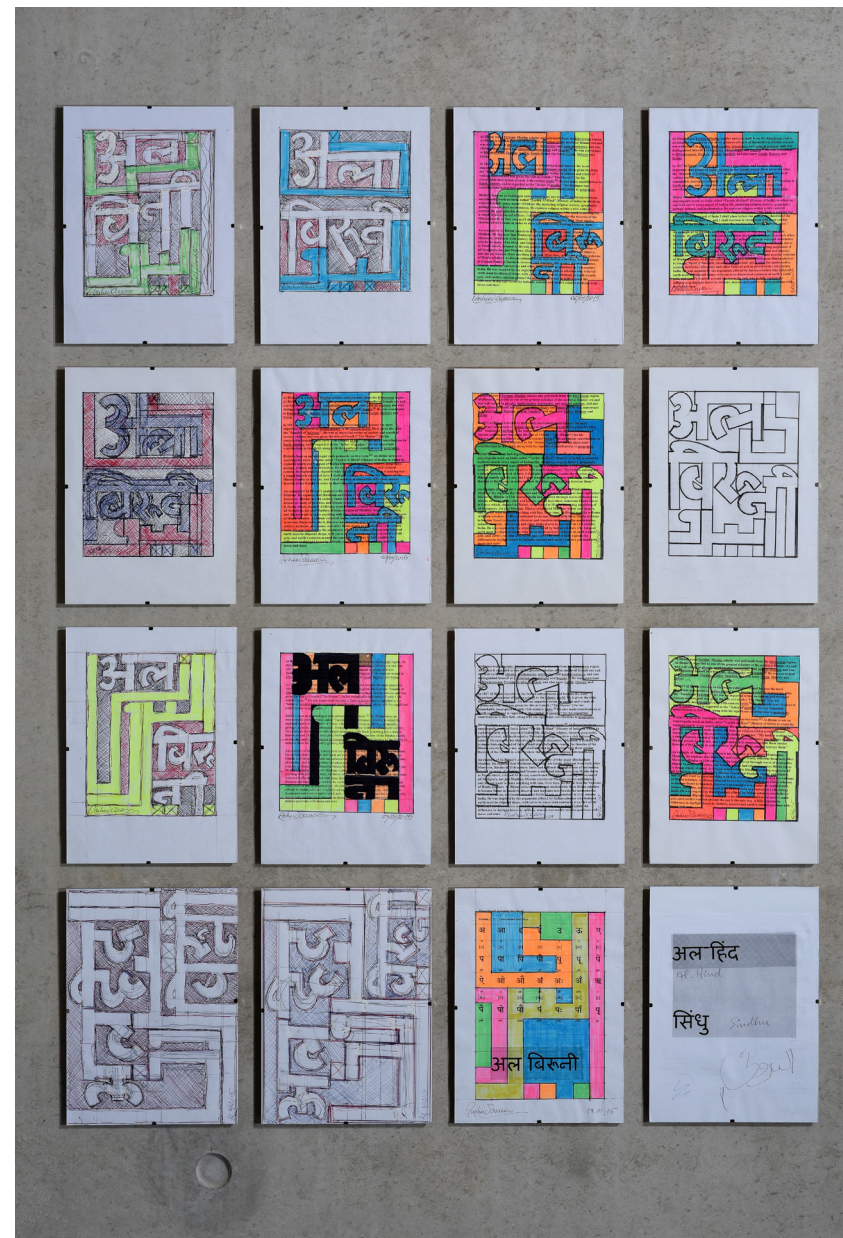
Acrylic on canvas
152 x 203 cm



UNTITLED

2015

Ink, pen and marker pen on
paper (16)
29.7 x 21 cm each





RASHEED ARAEEN

FRIENDS, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY

Friends, Mathematics and Philosophy was commissioned as part of the Brent Biennial which presents over 20 commissions and projects in libraries, civic buildings, public spaces and online, foregrounding new work by artists and the creativity that resides in the borough, bringing together work inspired by Brents' history, cultures, people and places.

Rebecca Heald curated the Exhibition Rasheed Araeen: Friends, Mathematics and Philosophy. She is an independent curator and researcher specialising in the relationship between art and architecture and unwritten art histories. She is also a lecturer in curatorial practice at the Royal College of Art.

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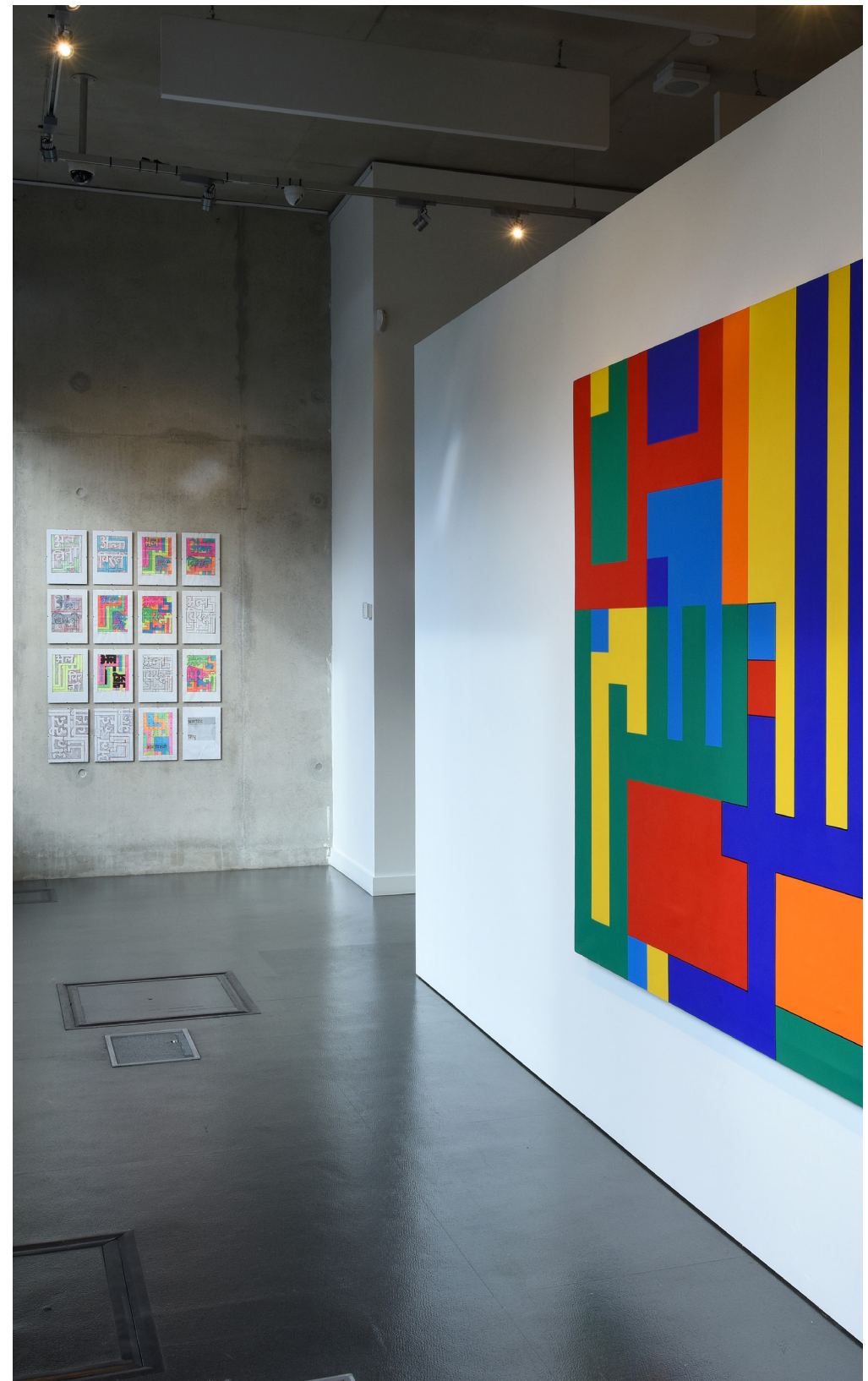
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