

REGEN PROJECTS *

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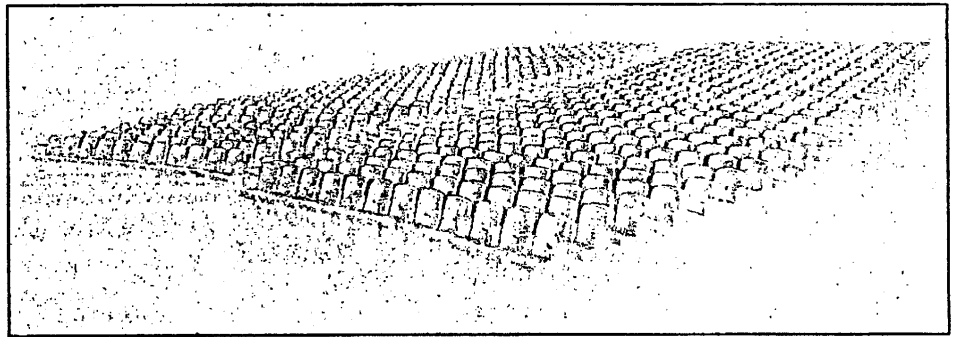
Khedoori's Inviting Exhibition

■ **Art review:** Artist's large pieces at the Museum of Contemporary Art make it seem as if the viewer is part of the magic.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

Toba Khedoori's new paintings feel like they've been waiting for you to arrive to look at them. This is certainly an odd feeling to get from a painting, but a slightly disorienting, finally appealing sense of expectation is nonetheless pervasive at the Museum of Contemporary Art, where five of Khedoori's big paintings are on view in a newly opened exhibition in the Focus Series.

It's as if the artist knows that paintings



Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

A detail of Toba Khedoori's "Untitled (seats)." The work is on view at MOCA.

need an audience in order to fill themselves up, so she's made that distinctly modern condition into subject matter.

Khedoori's paintings, which date from

1996 and 1997, are huge. The largest is more than 11 feet high and 26 feet long; the smallest 12 feet by 14 feet. While physically imposing, they also manage to exude a paradoxical sense of modesty and self-effacement.

Each is made from two, three or four panels of heavy paper, roughly cut and either stacked horizontally or abutted side-by-side. Stapled directly to the wall, rather than mounted and framed, they exhibit a casualness of display that bridges a yawning gap between the formal, public space of a museum and the private world of an artist's studio. It's as if the audience is being given a special look, an intimate glimpse behind the scenes.

The big sheets of paper have been coated with a layer of translucent wax, which gently diffuses reflected light. Errant studio flotsam, such as cat hair and loose staples, has found its way into these soft surfaces. They're elegant but not pristine.

Using a pencil, Khedoori then draws an

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image, one per painting: row after row of empty theater seats; pairs of park benches; a gated pen made of chain-link fence; a corridor flanked by closed doors; and a railing that marks off an uninhabited space. Finally, the meticulous drawing is filled in with somber colors, whose narrow range doesn't go much beyond grays, beiges and browns.

Relative to the immensity of the paper sheets, the carefully placed images are small and demure. (In each work, one or more panels ends up virtually blank.) The sense of isolation that results is further heightened by the nature of the chosen imagery: All the pictures describe places where people congregate, but Khedoori makes a point of showing them unused and utterly empty.

No one is occupying the plush theater seats or sitting idly on the park benches. The empty hallway is flanked by doors that are resolutely shut. The fenced and gated pen contains nothing, while the long railing marks off uninhabited space, like the grounds of an event that hasn't happened yet.

All of Khedoori's images imply the possibility and even likelihood of human presence. For the moment, though, it's as if the carefully articulated spaces are dormant or inert.

Dormant, that is, until you get there. Having arrived and begun to look at them, you have already gotten the event underway. Strangely, Khedoori's paintings therefore make you feel privileged to be present.

The strongest work in the show is the four-panel picture of empty theater seats. It exhibits a wonderful sense of being a theatrical production, albeit one that has cleverly turned the tables to feature the audience. When other people come into the gallery where

you stand looking at the painting, it's as if they, too, are actors preparing to take their seats at a show starring them.

Khedoori's paintings establish a condition of communion that is surprisingly warm and intimate. The intimacy is further heightened by the unusual physical qualities of the paintings. Think of them as being distant cousins to tattoos: The unstretched wax-covered surfaces exude the warmth and pliable softness of skin, into which designs have been scrupulously etched and colored.

These aren't aggressive pictures of screaming skulls or Chinese dragons, of course, meant to loudly advertise and impose their wearer's tastes. But, just as they do conceptually, the paintings as material objects address you body-to-body.

There's a quiet confidence to this work, as befits an art of compelling expectancy. The tone is different, but it recalls the way Minimalist art of the 1960s was determined to privilege the spectator's experience. Appropriately for the 1990s, Khedoori does it through figurative rather than abstract means.

The MOCA show, which was organized by Elizabeth A.T. Smith, provides the first really substantive opportunity we've had to examine Khedoori's art. The young (she's 32), L.A.-based artist hasn't been widely shown.

Born in Australia, Khedoori received a master of fine arts from UCLA in 1994. Her work has been featured in a single solo show at a gallery here—West Hollywood's

Regen Projects, in 1995—which made for an auspicious debut. Two of those three paintings were included a few weeks later in the Biennial Exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, where they more than held their own.

So, at MOCA, an unexpected puzzlement arises. You can't help wondering what the difference might be between this modest museum presentation of five new paintings and the typical exhibition a talented young artist ordinarily gets at a commercial gallery, as her work matures and develops. And frankly, I'd be hard pressed to offer an answer.

One clear distinction between the public role of the museum and the merely promotional world of the commercial sector used to be that museums produced independent scholarship. But scholarship doesn't seem to be a pressing issue here.

A small catalog for the show is said to be forthcoming from MOCA, perhaps by the end of April. However, if an engagement by the public with scholarly inquiry about a new artist's work were actually at stake, the catalog would be on hand the moment the show opened and the audience invited in.

Without it the museum seems lackadaisical. Not only is that not beneficial to the audience or the artist, it runs counter to the very spirit of Khedoori's art.

■ *MOCA, 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 626-6222, through July 13. Closed Mondays.*