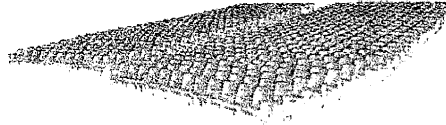


REGEN PROJECTS *

Relyea, Lane, "Toba Khedoori," *Artforum*, Summer, 1997, p. 131, ill.



Toba Khedoori, *Untitled (seats) [detail]*, 1996, oil and wax on paper, 11' 6" x 25'.

TOBA KHEDOORI

LA MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

LANE RELYEA

It's not often you run across an 11-by-25-foot painting that could be characterized as subtle, but that's true of all five works in Toba Khedoori's first solo museum show. Although Khedoori's pieces are scaled to the wall, it's hard to label her a muralist. Unlike the well-populated, briskly narrated wallscapes of, say, Nicole Eisenman and Lari Pittman, Khedoori's paintings are devoid of human actors. In fact, the enormous fields she presents are mostly devoid of imagery.

Not that they're blank. Khedoori tears sheets of paper torn from a six-foot-wide roll and covers them with a thin layer of wax. With a pencil she engraves a relatively small portion of this wax-coated surface; the precise, linear quality and nature of her imagery—a

balcony, an apartment-building corridor, a chain-link fence—recall architectural drawings. Finally, most of the gouged lines, and some of the shapes they outline, are rubbed with oil paint, which highlights the imagery and adds a modest amount of color to each work. Not only does the wax lend the sheets physical heft, but in preserving every scratch and slip, and in trapping all sorts of dirt and pet hair, it serves to index the artist's studio, rooting each painting in the process of its own construction. It also, however, gives the work a patina of age. The paintings end up looking both in-process and antiquated, at once expectant and derelict.

Even Khedoori's technique, while fully legible, betrays the same ambiguity. There's something old-fashioned about incised wax; and the paintings, each made up of multiple sheets stapled to the wall, bring to mind wet-plaster frescoes. Yet Khedoori's works—sagging a bit, their edges slightly tattered and curling—are anything but firm. Nor do they have a limited extension; there's no reason why each painting couldn't include any number of additional sheets. In that sense, it's not just the scant imagery

**NOT ONLY DOES THE
WAX LEND THE
SHEETS PHYSICAL
HEFT BUT, IN TRAP-
PING ALL SORTS OF
DIRT AND PET HAIR,
IT SERVES TO INDEX
THE PROCESS OF
CONSTRUCTION.**

that makes the work appear somewhat incomplete. Khedoori's paintings perhaps most resemble old master cartoons: while executed in minute detail, they are suspended in an interim state, as if awaiting transfer to a more permanent home. And this sense of anticipation seeps into Khedoori's imagery. Her empty hallways, fenced-off lots, vacant auditorium seats, and park benches all seem situated just this side of an event, concerned with sites of passage, storage, and spectatorship, whose content—a crowd of things, of people—has either not yet arrived or already departed.

So concentrated is Khedoori on the medium itself that she makes an allegory of it. Her pared-down imagery and emphasis on form only broadens the works' capacity for citation. Just as a lot of Rothkos look like solemn Spanish old master paintings with the figures sanded off, some of Khedoori's works

resemble blueprints of familiar predecessors—her *Untitled (railing)*, 1996, for example, suggests Delacroix's *Raft of the Medusa* reduced to a ground plan rendered with a T square. Visually minimal and repetitive, and lacking a reliable framing edge, Khedoori's large-scale paintings could be seen as depictions of the unbounded sublime, and with their focus on materials and structure they share much with postwar abstraction—from Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman to Morris Louis and Agnes Martin. Yet Khedoori shuffles devices of visual immediacy and revelation into a more general vocabulary privileging hesitation and indeterminacy; her pictorial system seems derived from grid-paper diagrams, acetate overlays, and wax writing tablets, media that facilitate not direct expression so much as inscription, augmentation, and transference. The result is a behind-the-scenes glance at heroic abstraction's closeted infatuation with textuality: Newman's compulsion to cross-reference his here-and-now canvases with titles culled from scripture, or Michael Fried's curious description of a Louis "unfurled" painting as "an enormous page."

In an evocative account of Khedoori's work, Andrew Perchuk suggests that the artist flirts with the sublime in order to perform a desublimation: because the works are lain on the floor when their wax coats are applied, they never become fully reconciled to their subsequent orientation on the wall, retaining

an allegiance to horizontality, to base matter over the superstructure of conventional form. Call it negative transcendence: rather than rise above acculturated experience, an artwork can always stoop below it. Yet, to make a claim for the ground's factual materiality is akin to privileging the optical field as "spiritual"; both are attempts to sidestep mediation, to posit a reward above or an unconscious depth below the plane of inscription. In the end, attributing this strategy to Khedoori remains unconvincing—the wax only makes her work seem more easily effaced. Suggesting at once ground plan and overlay, expectation and abandonment, Khedoori's art as a whole only displaces and approximates, it never discloses outright. And while the medium in which she labors evokes both the privacy of the sketchbook and the permanence and monumentality of the public fresco, her work is never allowed to settle in one place. What Khedoori does convey is a delicate enchantment with the seemingly endless material dialogue that constitutes representation. It's as if each of her pieces were attempting to finish a thought while still struggling with the elusive impulses that triggered it. □

Lane Relyea is a writer living in Austin, Texas.

This show of Toba Khedoori's work is on view at LA MOCA until 13 July, then travels to the Walker Art Center from 10 August to 2 November and the Hirshhorn from 20 November to 15 February 1998.