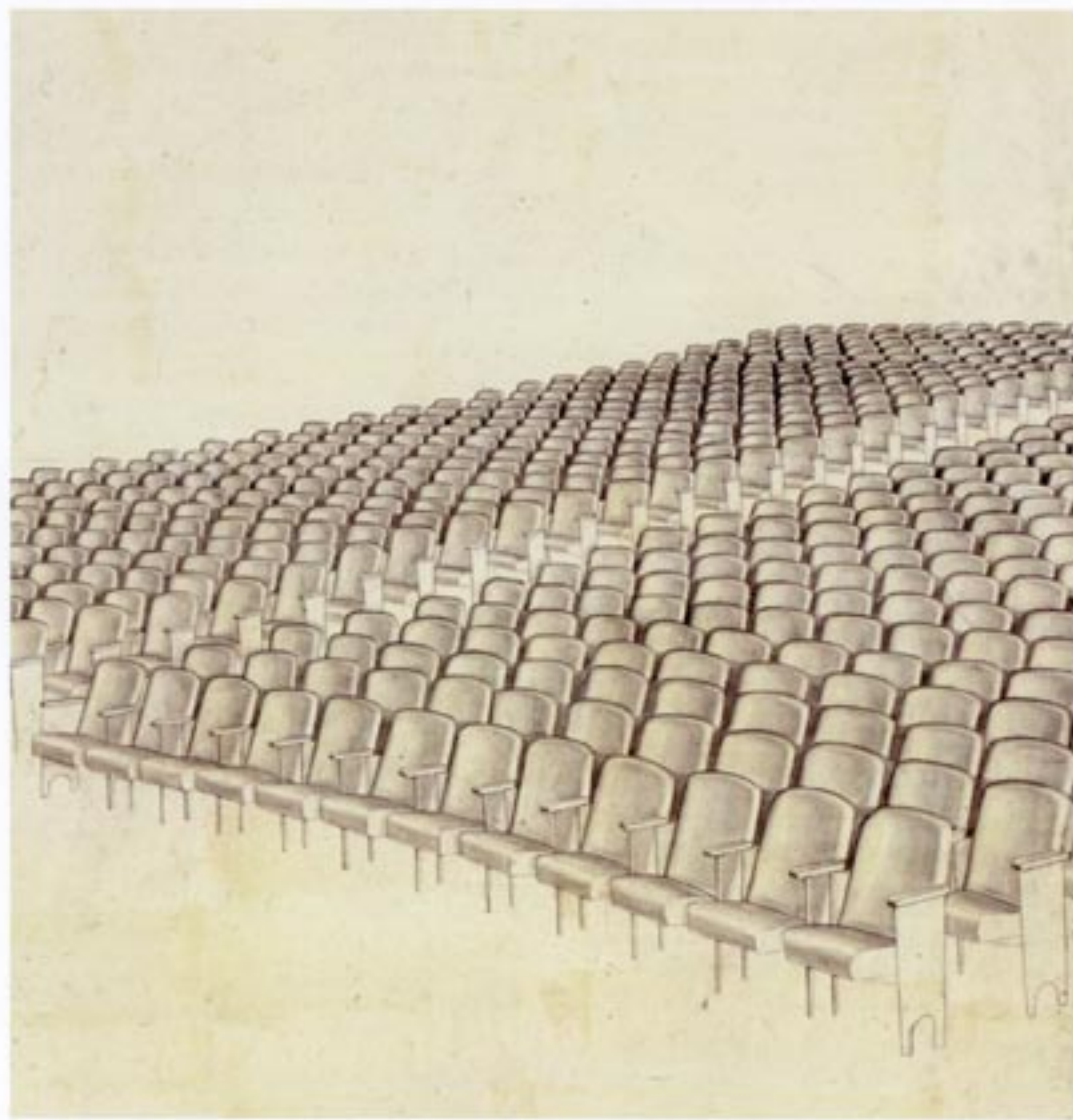


DIRECTIONS

Toba Khedoori

November 20, 1997–February 22, 1998



Detail of *Untitled (seats)*, 1996, oil and wax on paper, 11 ft. 8 in. x 25 ft. 6 in. (355.5 x 777.2 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo by Douglas M. Parker.

*We order material and it disintegrates.
We order it again, and we ourselves
disintegrate.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Journal of My
Other Self*, 1910

TOBA KHEDOORI'S ART inspires silent, meditative contemplation. Tantalized by the lightly shimmering surfaces of her wax-covered paintings, we struggle to locate the anonymous yet disturbingly familiar places she renders with a soft but exacting dexterity. In an effort to ground our perception, we focus on the isolated elements of urban or domestic architecture that are the subjects of her wall-sized works—a railing encircling a rooftop, a cutaway view of a house, the enclosure of a chain-link fence, or empty park benches. Where do these mundane spaces exist? Who inhabits them? Where do we belong in relation to them?

Perplexed by these questions, we are drawn with equal intensity to the expansive voids that surround or lie beyond the extracted fragments. In *Untitled (hallway)*, 1997 (fig. 1), for example, we are given access to a narrow corridor pierced by a succession of closed doors. Suggesting a floor in a hotel or office building, the hallway takes on a disquieting air as we realize that passage beyond the claustrophobic space is completely denied; there are no doorknobs or keyholes to provide entry or escape.

Absorbed by the psychological limits of Khedoori's subjects, we become slightly disoriented, struck at once by a curious sense of displacement as well as an acute awareness of our own surroundings. Indeed, Khedoori's subtle yet potent works invade the psyche on a profound level. Viewing her pictures has even

been likened to the experience of vertigo. The sense of disorientation, awkwardness, and anxiety elicited in the viewer is punctuated by the unnerving stillness of the places and objects she renders. Feelings of loss and regret, and a recognition of stifled potential, are conjured. Writers have used evocative imagery to characterize this compelling aspect of the artist's work. Neville Wakefield, for example, describes the allure of Khedoori's art as "that of a lone stranger's glimpse from across a crowded room." He continues, "Familiar in imagery yet emotionally distant, they are conversations never had. By the time they are approached, they seem already to have slipped away, their beauty an opportunity registered, but unconsummated."

Khedoori achieves these varying tensions in her paintings by creating works that hover steadily between engagement and detachment, ambition and humility, the absent and the visible. Bringing the improvisational



Fig. 1. Detail of *Untitled (hallway)*, 1997, oil and wax on paper, 12 ft. 4 in. x 18 ft. (375.9 x 548.6 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Purchased with Funds Provided by Robert H. Halff. Photo by Douglas M. Parker.

gesture of a sketch into balance with the precise deliberation of an architectural rendering, her process, too, exists in contradictions, fluctuating between painting and drawing, abstraction and representation, illusionistic depth and utter flatness. Using long sheets of heavy rag paper (often floor-to-ceiling in height), the artist begins by covering individual panels with thin coats of wax. She then scrapes the tacky ground to smooth the surface onto which she draws and paints. Simply stapled directly to the wall, the paper often curls, its frayed edges revealing a fragile quality that is tempered by the quiet confidence of the artist's hand and the directness of her compositions. Records of the idiosyncratic nature of her process and person—footprints and fur from her dog, hair and dust from the studio, and signs of erasures—are preserved across the waxy surface. These traces mark time as well as the human touch, presenting a sharp contrast to the distance Khedoori maintains as the creator of these seductive works.

The artist has consistently painted in this large-scale format and medium since the early 1990s as she has moved toward a greater reticence in portraying her subjects. Her early works focused on instruments of transportation, industry, and passage—sinking ships and cargo, a train, a construction crane—as well as a curious proliferation of explosions scattered across the top of several paper panels. In subsequent paintings she considered aspects of domestic spaces (rooms, staircases, windows, doors), while her most recent works have examined public sites (park benches, theater seats, urban rooftops, and fences). Rendered as fragments, the places and objects she paints exist as if suspended in a vacuum. Isolated from the environments in which they would

normally function, they are free of humanity or context and unaffected by the progression of time. The physical passage implicit in many of these structures is highly problematic and frequently improbable; an overpass leads to an undefined void, isolated stairwells and hallways fail to provide satisfactory access, a high-speed train sits motionless, its cars disconnected.

Although Khedoori's works are clearly representational, she composes her pictures with a decidedly abstract sensibility, paying keen attention to the edges and voids and to areas of color, pattern, and form. Her approach contributes to the overall tension in the work. In *Untitled (house)*, 1995 (fig. 4), the exposed elevation of a three-story dwelling floats uncomfortably at the center of the painting, surrounded by a sea of emptiness. In other works, the subjects are skewed dramatically off center, leaving panels that are completely blank. In Khedoori's hands, the void has enormous power. Both the physical and psychological weight of the void are especially clear in *Untitled (railing)*, 1996 (fig. 3), in which the subject of the composition is not the rooftop but the undefined space that lies beyond the railing.

Khedoori's focus on the spaces between and outside of objects is shared by many of her contemporaries, including, most notably, the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread and the Argentinean painter Guillermo Kuitca. Whiteread, who casts the spaces under beds and between walls in plaster and rubber, seeks to give sculptural volume to the intimate and often intangible places where living occurs. Kuitca, who merges elements of painting and drawing in his canvases, renders silent, empty theaters and the site plans of apartments, cemeteries, and prisons. Khedoori's interest in the implication of spaces charged doubly with private

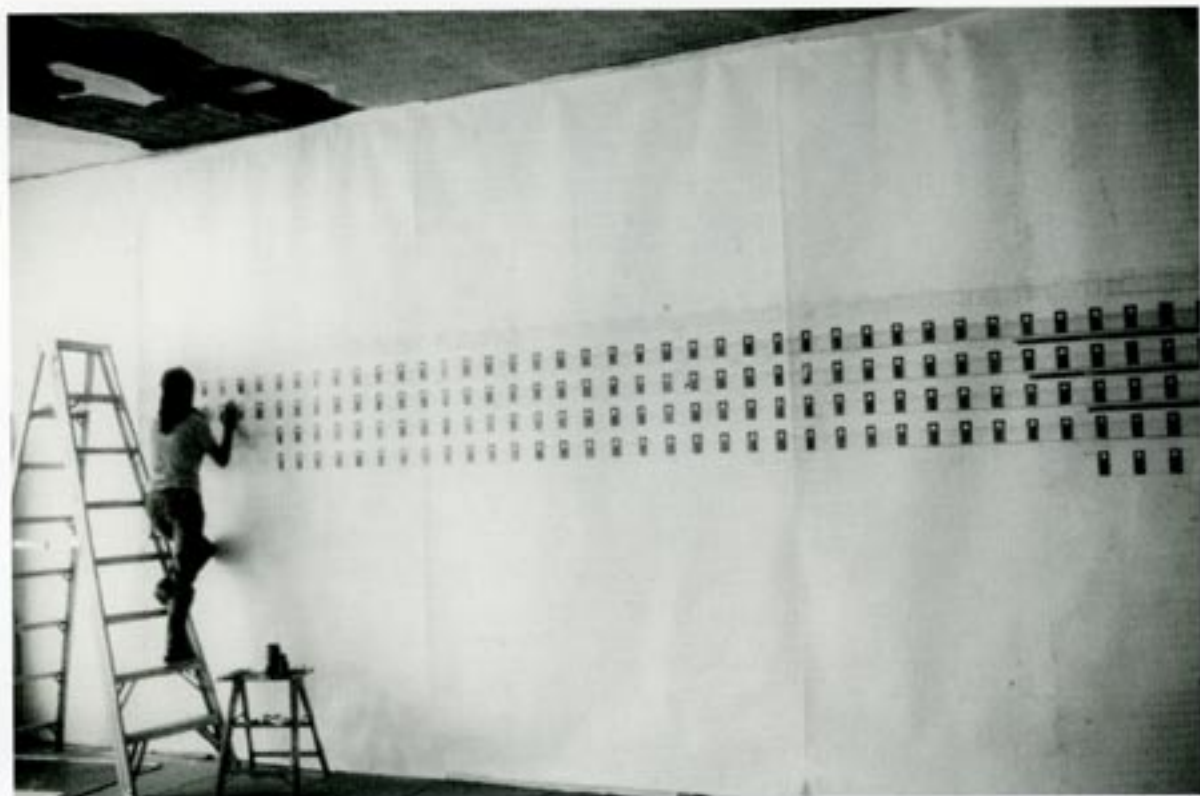


Fig. 2. The artist working on *Untitled (doors)*, 1995, in her Los Angeles studio. Photo by Rachel Khedoori.

and public significance, and the elusive presence she asserts in relation to her work and her audience, parallels Kuitca's own intentions. Her position, however, is one of even greater detachment and reserve. Free of the romance and nostalgic longing associated with Kuitca's art, Khedoori's work is more about the power of the void than the resonance of the object, about the absence of memory rather than memory itself. By reconfiguring the subtle details of a familiar location or reordering the viewer's orientation to a place, Khedoori undermines the physicality of her subjects. As vacant shells signaling larger spatial and psychic realities, Khedoori's sites offer a conceptual type of architecture in which our own materiality becomes fragile and fleeting.

Olga M. Viso
Assistant Curator

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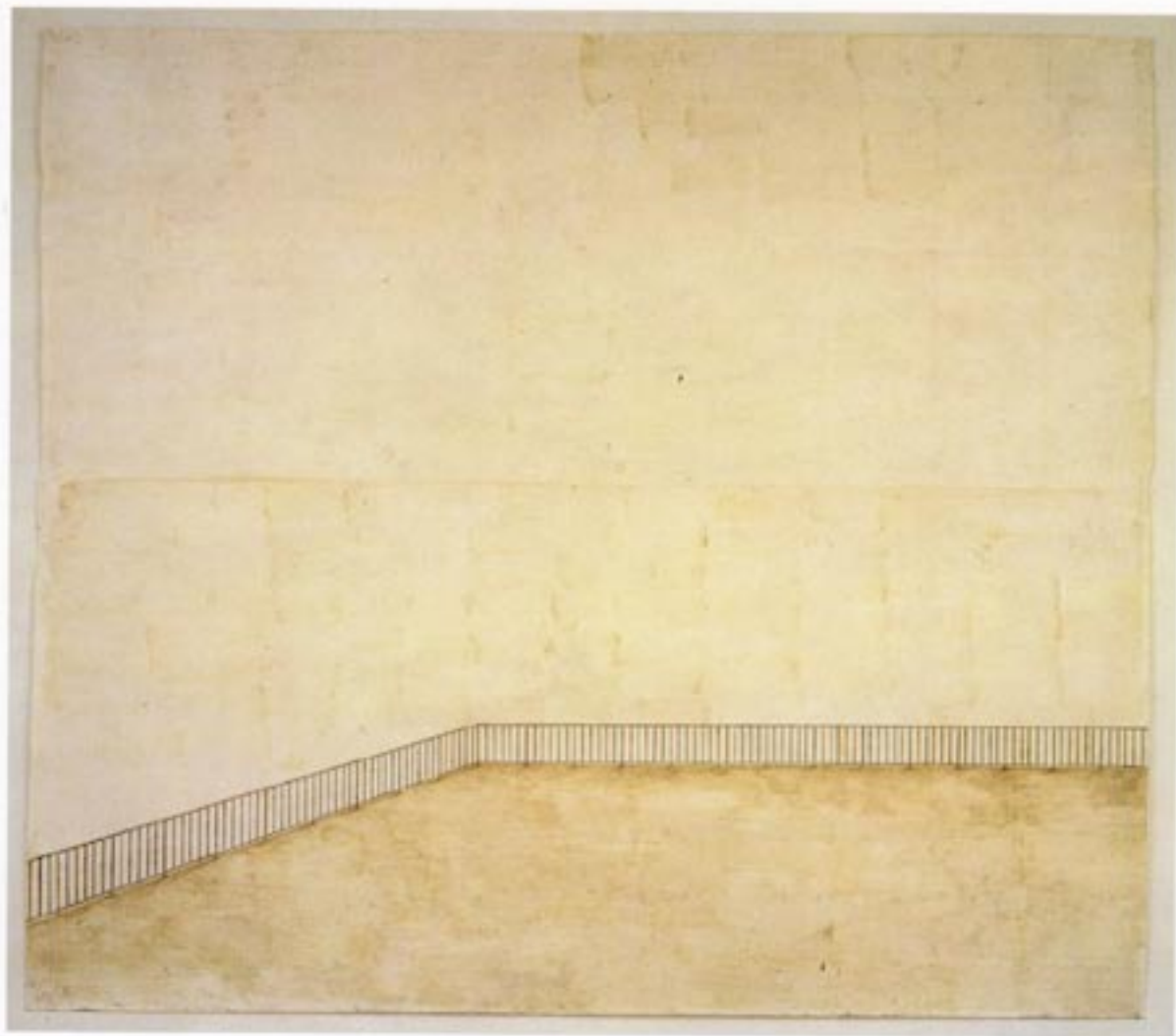


Fig. 3. *Untitled (railing)*, 1996, oil and wax on paper, 12 ft. 4 in. x 14 ft. (375.9 x 426.7 cm). Goetz Collection.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Sydney, Australia, 1964. Relocated to United States to study, 1984. Received B.F.A., San Francisco Art Institute, 1988; M.F.A., University of California at Los Angeles, 1994. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1995 Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- 1996 Gallery of Art, The Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Traveled to David Zwirner Gallery, New York. Exhibition catalog.
- 1997 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Exhibition catalog.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1993 "Invitational," Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- 1994 "Rachel Khedoori, Toba Khedoori," David Zwirner Gallery, New York.
- 1995 "1995 Whitney Biennial," The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Exhibition catalog.
- 1996 "Everything That's Interesting Is New: The Dakis Joannou Collection," The Deste Foundation, Athens, Greece. Exhibition catalog.
- 1997 "Projects: Architecture as Metaphor," The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Exhibition brochure.

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Untitled (railing), 1996, oil and wax on paper, 12 ft. 4 in. x 14 ft. (375.9 x 426.7 cm). Goetz Collection.

Untitled (seats), 1996, oil and wax on paper, 11 ft. 8 in. x 25 ft. 6 in. (355.5 x 777.2 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Purchased with Funds Provided by Lenore S. Greenberg and Laura-Lee Woods.

Untitled (house), 1995, oil and wax on paper, 11 ft. x 16 ft. (335.3 x 487.7 cm). Collection Hauser & Wirth, Zurich.

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Fig. 4. Detail of *Untitled (house)*, 1995, oil and wax on paper, 11 ft. x 16 ft. (335.3 x 487.7 cm). Collection Hauser & Wirth, Zurich. Photo by Josh White.