

Art



On line The geometric forms and iridescent colours in Rana Begum's (clockwise) *No 266*, *WP87* and *WP93* conjure the impression of a city in rapid motion



Street smart

Like many artists, Rana Begum mines the mundane for the magical. Unlike most others she finds it, says **Zehra Jumabhoy**.

Londoner Rana Begum insists that the metropolis offers all kinds of nice surprises. This fortnight, the Bangladeshi sculptor will have a chance to make her case in another city altogether. Begum's first solo show in Mumbai, *The Folded Page*, at art consultant Amrita Jhaveri's Project Space, has been fashioned especially for the squeaky-clean white cube, presenting tantalisingly deceptive installations that are actually 3-D-like sculptures but will hang inoffensively on the walls like paintings.

Take *No 285* (its deliberately prosaic title notwithstanding): the work is composed of paint on nickel-plated aluminium rods, such as those left about on construction sites. Strips of shiny metal throw images of viewers back at them. But the closer we move to the mirrors, the further we get from ourselves: our reflections are split. As we turn away in bafflement, flashes of turquoise, yellow and pink accost us. "I get really excited about walking down

a street, things change and shift as you move," Begum said. "I want the viewer to be able to walk past my sculpture, and then notice something and come back to it – just like on the streets."

Begum is planning to bring along other objects to convince us of the ephemeral glories of the everyday, among them, artfully mangled paper installations and equipment (think powder-coated metal beams) that would be very helpful to a builder. *WP93* is frighteningly attractive. Orange and blue triangular shards of metal appear to grow out of a wall, forming iridescent pink and green shadows. Look again, and you see just a large piece of cleverly folded paper – like origami on steroids or a wonky model for a Modernist dwelling. As usual, we have only a number to assist in unpacking the work's significance. "I don't title my work, because I don't want to impose anything," Begum said. This deliberate omission

brings the artworks closer to industrial design, ensuring that they are as anonymous as the generic corrugated metal sheets and traffic cones they simulate. Begum's art references the "texture of East London, from its traffic signage to everyday debris and chance compositions on the pavement", said Nada Raza, a curator working at



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London's Institute of International Visual Arts. In Mumbai, *No 268* will capture something of East End's bustling roads and transitory encounters, conjuring up the impression of a city in rapid motion. Composed of metallic rods laid flat against a white wall, it resembles a railway track from one direction. From another, we see glints of white so that we imagine a zebra crossing rushing past us. "I love the things that you see around you in London – the billboards, the clashing lights, the colours, one shop juxtaposed against another,"

Begum said. "Through all this craziness, there is some kind of order."

Geometric symmetry is key to all of Begum's colourful confabulations. At certain angles, the black metal planks of *No 286* make way for a dancing green triangle. Which begs the question: how will Begum react to the often unpalatable chaos of Mumbai? Discovering seductive patterns on London's grungy streets may be a tall order, but in Mumbai – its thoroughfares thronging with deprivation – the quest could seem insensitive. Mumbai's street, after all, contains worse things than construction projects and skyscrapers.

However, it is unfair to pigeonhole Begum's offerings based on the social context from which she hails. She spans a plethora of art historical traditions. Begum's use of industrial and mass-produced materials – aluminium and paper – echoes 1960s Minimalism (such as American artist Donald Judd's boxy constructions). Her vivid, geometric shapes are also indebted to British Op Art. *No 286* recalls Bridget Riley's hard-edged abstract paintings with their vibrating bands of intense colour. Then there is ancient Islamic art. Born in Bangladesh in 1977, Begum grew up in a conventional Muslim household. While she stresses that the "visual" rather than the "conceptual" guides her choices, elements of Islamic architecture and Sufism's sacred geometry have crept into her practice. Early works like an untitled painting made with red-and-cream adhesive tape were already concerned with the trance-inducing potential of visual repetition. In this mesmerising image, small, tilted red squares overlap with each other, creating pinkish rectangles that threaten to jump out at viewers. Staring at the recurring shapes is a happily heady experience.

In Mumbai too, Begum's use of colour and form are poised to lead us into encounters with the invisible. In her installations, fragments of fluorescent prettiness reveal themselves at the corners of our vision. But, don't be tempted to gaze at them head-on – they will vanish.

The Folded Page is on display at Project Space until **Sat Dec 31**. See Exhibitions.