

KRISTEN LORELLO

# HYPERALLERGIC

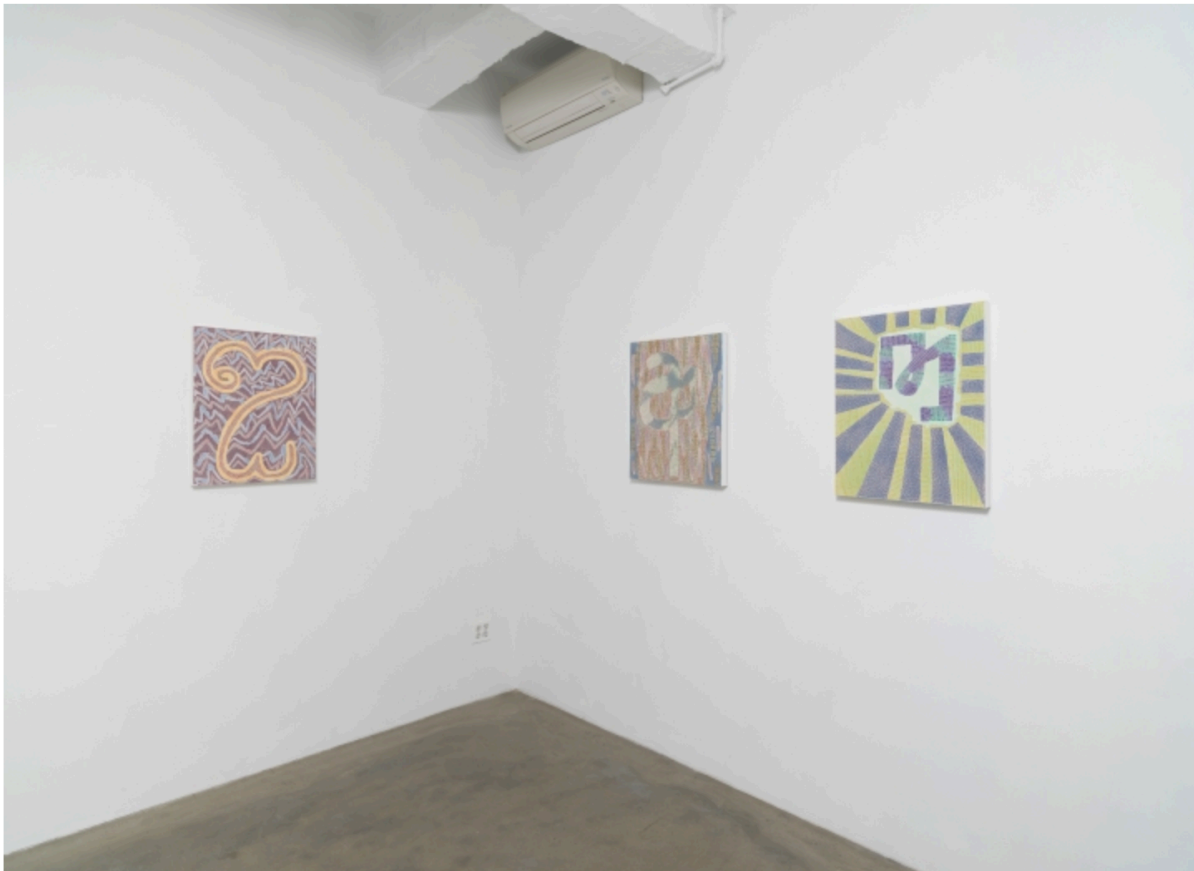
ART • WEEKEND

## Nadia Haji Omar's Multicultural Cartography

Omar brings together possibilities of allusion that the mainstream art establishment has yet to truly recognize.



John Yau 8 hours ago



Installation view, *Nadia Haji Omar: Ellipsis* at Kristen Lorello, New York (all images courtesy of the Artist and Kristen Lorello, NY, photos by Jeffrey Sturges)

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Some background information on Nadia Haji Omar might be useful, especially for those viewers seeing her six modestly scaled dye-and-acrylic paintings for the first time. The artist was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1985 and spent her childhood in Sri Lanka. Of Syrian, Indian, and Sri Lankan descent, Haji Omar often visited Australia as a child to see her relatives, in particular her grandparents. Of the many things they sent her, she has very strong memories of “a souvenir carved-wood boomerang that had a painting on it of a platypus in grass that was painted with many dots and was made by aboriginal people.” In 2015, she saw an exhibition of Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri’s abstract paintings at Salon 94. A major figure in Australia’s Western Desert Art Movement, which locals refer to as “dot painting,” Tjapaltjarri’s paintings stirred up Haji Omar’s childhood memories.

Her work is clearly informed by different cultures and languages (Arabic, Sinhalese, Tamil, and French) that she learned as a child in Sri Lanka, and later studied as an adult in the United States.

With her second exhibition at Kristen Lorello, *Nadia Haji Omar: Ellipsis*, Haji Omar continues to explore the visual territory she began defining in her first solo exhibition at the gallery (May 3–June 12, 2016). In both shows, she has dyed the canvas to create a pattern, which is then wiped down to achieve a muted ground. She overlays the initial ground with acrylic washes and employs a vocabulary of notational marks consisting of lines and dots. Areas within the painting are defined by their own distinct hue. Each inch of the painting is marked by a dot or short line.

While some critics have focused on the connection between Haji Omar’s recent paintings and aboriginal art, particularly in her use of dots, I want to suggest another possibility. Based on her familiarity with different languages, and the style of writing that is integral to each, it seems to me that she is developing a non-discursive visual language. This is what the Chilean artist Francisca Sutil, whose work I recently reviewed, called an “uncoded message,” in relation to similar marks in her paintings. I would expand this view of her work by pointing out the kinship between her paintings and the spirit writing of the black artist, J. B. Murray (1908-1988), who began inscribing his drawings with his mystical lines in 1978.

I mention these different echoes and associations because Haji Omar brings together possibilities of allusion that the mainstream art establishment has yet to truly recognize. Painting is not in an ahistorical free-for-all, as some have argued, and Haji Omar recognizes this. The question for her is how to bring together all the parts of her life in a way that does not come across as aesthetic tourism. Aboriginal art might have inspired her use of dots, but her use of them goes deeper to the question of her multicultural identity.

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In a country and art world that routinely recognizes people as being either white or black, Haji Omar's heritage is an anomaly. To her credit, she refuses to accommodate that binary viewpoint with her paintings. This is where the future of painting lies.

The paintings in *Ellipsis* are mesmerizing acts of devotion, joyful embraces of repetition and labor, paradoxically meticulous and loose, and are cartographic dreams. No matter how many dots and lines are in a painting, each feels individual and distinct. This tension between the one and the many animates the paintings, as well as imparts another layer meaning into our experience of them.

The dominant, largely umber, abstract shape in "Ai" (2018) can be read as either a snake or the numeral 2. This shape is traversed by a white band filled with orderly rows of short red lines, each marked by a black dot. A narrow umber field scrupulously punctuated by black dots surrounds the band, which extends from one end of the uncoiling shape to the other. Two different colored horizontal rows of zigzag bands in which the artist has carefully interspersed dots enconce this form.

I cannot help but wonder if Haji Omar produced these paintings while in a heightened trance state. The tension between the fields of dots and the different configurations constantly tugged at my attention, pulling it in different directions — from the single marks to the larger groupings. I kept staring at the paintings and getting lost in them. In fact, I forgot that I was standing in a small windowless gallery in the lobby of a building in Manhattan's Lower East Side. A lot of people claim that a work has transported them. I don't know if that is the claim I would make for Haji Omar's captivating paintings. However, I do know that I forgot where I was.

Nadia Haji Omar: *Ellipsis continues at Kristen Lorello (195 Chrystie St., Lobby, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May 25.*