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ART REVIEW: Room for interpretation at PEM's 'Intersection' exhibit

Shadows make for an apt metaphor in Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha's "Intersections," on view now at the Peabody Essex Museum. In a way, the entire installation consists of shadows.



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'Intersections' is on exhibit at Peabody Essex Museum in Salem through July 10. The five-foot cube of steel casts shadows in PEM's Wheatland Gallery. COURTESY PHOTO / Peabody Essex Museum

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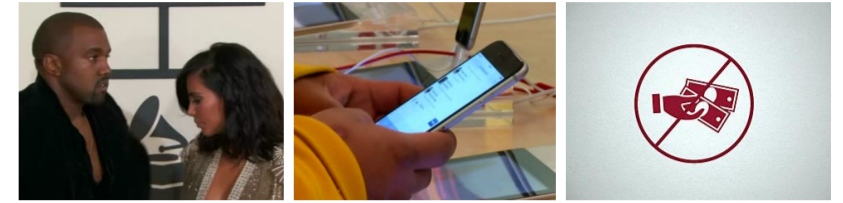
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'Intersections' in on exhibit at Peabody Essex Museum in Salem through July 10. The five-foot cube of steel casts shadows in PEM's Wheatland Gallery. COURTESY PHOTO / Peabody Essex Museum

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Feb. 18, 2016 at 10:46 PM

SALEM

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SALEM

If you go...

WHAT: "Intersections," by Anila Quayyum Agha

WHERE: Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem

WHEN: through July 10

TICKETS: Free with museum admission. Visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

Shadows make for an apt metaphor in Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha's

"Intersections," on view now at the Peabody Essex Museum. In a way, the entire installation consists of shadows.

Not all of them readily apparent. Agha, born in Lahore and now a professor of drawing in Indianapolis, brings her five-foot, machine-cut steel cube, its design inspired by the vast Alhambra palace in Granada, Spain, to cast shadows in PEM's Wheatland Gallery.

Suspended from the ceiling, and lit by a single unfiltered bulb in the center, the cube replicates its mathematically precise design in shadows along the walls, floor and ceiling of the room.

The installation goes largely unexplained. In simple exhibition labels, the visitor learns that as a woman of Islamic faith, Agha finds herself excluded from many of that religion's sacred spaces. And that a family visit to the actual Alhambra has inspired the work.

Apart from that, Agha's personal insights into the cube's cross-cultural references have to be gleaned by further study. Her notions of what the cube implies, co-opted from the cross-cultural forces that combined over the years to build, destroy and rebuild the sprawling Alhambra, are not elaborated.

The Alhambra was created more than a thousand years ago, and has undergone numerous restorations and destructions. Christians, Muslims and Jews helped create it, at certain times in history helped destroy it, and along the way also helped rebuild it. Because of its designs, the edifice stands as an Islamic artifact from a lost era, when Arabic influence in Spain was dominant.



Implicating cross-cultural intersections (one assumes that's at least in part what the title implies) can be a powerful tool, especially given the fraught cultural and religious situations that permeate global relations. Exploring those intersections, especially by an artist with multiple cultures in her background, can be helpful.

It can also be a facile evocation, inspired by a sense of political correctness, and lacking any real insight. Apart from the largely unexplained intentions of the installation, the execution of the installation itself leaves much to be desired. The shadows splayed across the walls at first catch the viewer's breath, at least during the evening hours. (The effect is greatly diminished in the daytime, when incoming light weakens the contrast.)

But the first impression doesn't last long. Viewing the cube takes some logistical maneuvering — the unfiltered bulb in the center, essential to creating the shadow pattern, also makes the cube nearly impossible to look at. It's like staring directly into a car's headlights. (There are four thicker bands of metal along each side; positioning yourself so that these bands block the bulb makes examining the work possible.)

Furthermore, the projected shadows are also marred by the light from the bulb, which distorts the detailed pattern, both above the cube on the ceiling and below on the floor. For an installation that is obviously based on intricacy and precision, this seems like a blunder. The artist herself has written that she is relying "on the purity and inner symmetry of geometric design, and the interpretation of the cast shadows." If so, such an oversight seems inexcusable.

It's always worth seeing a museum exhibition, even if the execution appears flawed, and its intentions problematic. Ideas and artworks can either inspire or enervate — and not always in the way they intended.

"Intersections" runs through July 10. For information visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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Maritime Gloucester						
"Winter Animal Tracking Adventures"						10:00 am
Cape Ann Discovery Center						
Friday Morning Play Dates at Maritime Gloucester						10:00 am
Maritime Gloucester						
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