



One Piece by Abdolreza Aminlari, Untitled (22.001)

Words by Sarah Burney



Abdolreza Aminlari, *Untitled (22.001)*, 2022, 24k gold thread on handmade abaca and cotton paper, 44 x 64 inches framed

For the last year contemporary artist Abdolreza Aminlari has been making his own paper. Working with master collaborators at Dieu Donn , Aminlari has been producing velvety, vibrantly pigmented sheets of cotton paper – prussian blue, neon pink, and deep mauves.

The adoption of papermaking is unsurprising; Aminlari is best known for another labor intensive craft process: embroidery – specifically with gold thread on paper. His latest body of work, *Location of Home*, combines these two processes to stunning effect. *Kajal* connected with Aminlari to discuss *Untitled (22.001)*, his largest work on paper to date.



Paper pulp prepared for Aminlari at Dieu Donn .



Aminlari at Dieu Donn  with collaborator Katharine L DeLamater.

***Kajal:* How and why did you start making your own paper?**

Abdolreza Aminlari: I was invited by renowned paper making studio Dieu Donn  to collaborate and explore papermaking for an artist/exhibition project. The paper works I ended up making in my time there are currently on view in my exhibition *Location of Home* at **Andrew Rafacz Gallery** in Chicago, Illinois.

How did you make this sheet specifically?

When Dieu Donn  first approached me, I wasn't exactly sure what paper making entailed, or how I wanted to approach it. I've been working on/with paper for the majority of my career. I started with small paper, then moved onto Arches Aquarelle paper, that I would pierce, puncture and sew/embroider on. In 2018, I wanted to dye my paper, but because of the sizing in the paper the dye wouldn't penetrate the paper completely. So I started using a gouache treatment to cover the entire surface of the paper. Once I got to Dieu Donn  I realized you can dye the paper pulp.

At first I was couching – that’s when you transfer newly made paper from the mold to an absorbent surface so that it can be pressed and dried – I was couching layers of dyed abaca pulp on a dyed cotton base. Semi aligned only revealing layers on the deckled edges. Then I had a happy accident where the abaca layer didn’t lay properly and the base layer color popped through. It took me a bit of time but I figured out how to make more “mistakes” which I called “selective couching” (not sure if this is a real term). So each paper is between three to four layers of different colors. This piece started out with the bright pink cotton base, then the deep blue green, and finally remnants of that rusty maroon that were left over from couching another piece of paper. The splashes of pink were air bubbles that I popped and removed the blue abaca pulp to reveal the pink base layer.



Aminlari removing air bubbles to reveal the pink under layer from a wet sheet of handmade paper.



Detail from Aminlari’s *Untitled (22.001)*

I love the tension between hard and soft in this work: the straight lines of thread and crisp geometry of the golden shapes against the untrimmed deckle edge of the paper, the painterly splashes and flecks of neon pink dotting the prussian blue expanse, the confluence of the two pigmented slurries, drips, swirls and bleeds...these soft elements are relatively new to your practice...it’s echoed in your new ceramic work too, the entrance of soft and uncontrollable nature of wet materials...can you talk about this change?

I’ve always been interested in the dichotomy of control and chance, the rigid and organic, within my work. When I was using gouache there was this element of surprise too with the fluidity of paint and how it dried, but it wasn’t until now that it really came through with the paper. Everything is so wet and physical with paper making, you’re in wellingtons and rubber aprons and pulp and water is splashing all around you. It’s beyond fluid and organic both in its material and nature. And there is a point one (me) has to learn to give up control. Letting the paper do what it wants to do. And my embroidered geometric shapes entered in a way as a reaction and interaction to the paper, much like an architect to a landscape, human to nature

The paper making process is very similar to the ceramics I've recently started making. You make something and you have an idea but it can have a life of its own. It's again wet and malleable, it is fragile, but not precious, and at any moment in the process it will break, crack, explode, warp, bend and do what it needs or what it wants to do. You're dealing with earth, so there is only so much control. I've learned to let go and let loose with both these materials. But then neither are as time consuming as embroidery, so when something goes awry it's not hundreds of hours gone. With both processes, I became interested in allowing them to be and use their nature versus work against it.



Detail from Aminlari's Untitled (22.001).

Papermaking, especially the way you approached it, is collaborative – your practice has been largely solo. How was that change? Was it uncomfortable to make decisions publicly and collaborative like that or liberating?

At first completely uncomfortable, I think I had a fear of failure, whatever that means. Not knowing the medium and working out your problems and questions in front of someone can be very vulnerable. But I had an amazing collaborator at Dieu Donn , Katharine L. DeLamater. We had a Studio visit and discussed my ideas and colors before we started the process, and when I arrived everything was ready and Katharine really guided me and showed me many techniques.

I'd love to discuss your colors too. So the mauve/maroon is a byproduct of your process but the blue, pink, and gold are intentional choices. Excluding gold, blue was the first "color" that appeared in your work, in 2013 I think. It entered very quietly in your sparse thread on paper works but has been dominating your palette for the last five years. Is this a purely formal choice or is there a symbolism or personal significance to the blue? This blue specifically.

With the piece you're referencing the blue was in reference to blue found in Persian/Islamic architecture in Iran. But it was a memory of that blue, so my blue tended to be more of a turquoise so far off from the actual. From there I started to introduce multiple colors within my work. At first they were monochromes then I started blending multiple colors, in a way my first approach to painting. Then blue came back into my life after a visit to Porto, Portugal. I fell in love both with the all over tile patterns and the blues. With some research into the tile work and its influences, it led me to Delft blue porcelain, which were in turn inspired by Chinese blue and white porcelain, which in turn was produced and exported because of blues imported to China via the Middle East.

At the time we were in the middle of Trumpian nationalism in the USA and seeing the rise of nationalism across the world, and this fact that I had just learned erased the idea of national Identity for me. In a way everything is dependent on something else, trade of material, ideas, knowledge. Through that trade can something new be born. So in a way nothing is of a singular place and at the same time it can be so much of a singular culture. OK, back to the blue, when I came back to New York I knew I wanted to explore the ultramarine. And I finally started painting my white paper with gouache.



Abdolreza Aminlari, *Untitled (13.005)*, 2013, Thread on paper, 54 3/4 x 54 inches framed.

That messy history of blue is fascinating – especially your personal connections to the color. What about that neon pink, it is a total, beautiful outlier – explain yourself!

Ha, I was just really attracted to the pink and the contrast with these jeweled tones I've been working with.

And of course the gold, which has been a mainstay of your practice. What drew you to gold – the color? And then why did that interest manifest as gold thread? Can we separate the two? Did you ever work in gold paint before turning to thread?

I started using an imitation gold thread at first. Of course a direct correlation is the use of gold used in Persian miniatures, but for me gold is almost a color non-color. It reflects and refracts light back. It changes with light and the viewer's movement and relative position to the works. For me it's very active, but it also hints at the passage of time. Since going deeper into the act/action of sewing, time and labor positions of the world have become essential for me. Embroidery is both at once a repetitive and meditative act, but depending on what and how you're working, it can become pure labor.

**Where do you find this thread?
What is it used for?**

This is all vintage real gold threads from Japan that I have to scour online. My first use of real gold thread was about 10/11 years ago. And I found someone on the West Coast that had a limited supply they acquired in Japan in the 1970's I believe. The threads are extremely fragile and snap and break quite easily, so I'm constantly rethreading tiny little needles.

It's been so fascinating to see contemporary artists utilizing and championing craft processes that have been historically dismissed within the world of "fine art" – I've spoken to [Najmun Nahar Keya](#) and [Hangama Amiri](#) for this column for example – you're a little different though – you're using a process and material from the textile world with paper – arguably the most elemental of art materials. Why are you embroidering on paper? Why not cloth? Have you ever worked on cloth?



[Aminlari's gold thread.](#)

My first approach to embroidery was in relation to drawing. I was using black and gray threads imitating graphite or pen on paper. I was thinking of them as mark making and drawing. Paper allows me to get these sharp straight lines and precise angular geometries. The closest I've come to sewing on fabric is a [collaborative project](#) I did with my dear friend and composer Katharina Rosenberger, where I made three large beaded canvas tapestries that were a set to Katharina's composition "Gesang an das noch namenlose Land".



Detail from Aminlari's [Untitled \(22.001\)](#).

[Abdolreza Aminlari, Composition 16, 2012, Thread on paper, 25 1/2 x 33 1/4 inches framed.](#)

Perhaps these shimmering abstract shapes are functioning as Rorschach tests but I see crowned winged creatures...what are you referencing here?

The shapes are in fact referencing animals and creatures found in Persian rugs that I grew up with in my house both in Tehran and the Detroit suburbs. But for me they are what I call a 'cultural memory'. Faint and distant they act as in-between shapes, of me and my background but not fully. I wanted them to have the same feeling of in-betweenness of Diasporic culture. The shapes have multiple identities and I feel the viewer can be able to find a personal connection. Instead of being part of a greater pattern they each stand out and are in dialogue with one another.

I wanted to go back to something you said earlier, about how these “embroidered geometric shapes entered in a way as a reaction and interaction to the paper, much like an architect to a landscape, human to nature” Are these compositions predetermined, as in sketched out and planned on a piece of paper beforehand or do you build them intuitively on the handmade paper.

It was more intuitive. I have a guideline for the shapes, but the shapes are not pre-planned.

In talking about this piece, and your larger practice, you’ve mentioned architecture, ceramics, tiles, and textiles...Would it be correct to say you’re referencing craft, through multiple cultures and histories, more than “fine art” especially “contemporary fine art”? Is there a reference to “fine art” that I’m missing? What artistic tradition is this work following?

I think all research and visual knowledge tends to influence all artists, but for me personally I feel my work may reference or take influence from crafts, traditional arts, architecture and history.

I don’t really know what artistic tradition this really follows. Maybe you can help decipher. For me, as an artist, I always say we pose questions to the world and try to answer and resolve them, be it the conscious world or of the subconscious, or just of a material, we have, or at least I have a compulsion to follow and make. I always say it’s similar to a mathematician or physicist trying to answer questions of the physical world, but I don’t always know the question first.

I wanted to end by talking about the title of this body of work, [Location of Home](#), which is a play on the title of Homi Bhabha’s 1994 book *The Location of Culture*. Can you talk about this book and how this body of work came to be influenced by it?

This is a book that I read 20 years ago as a young adult, as an immigrant kid interested in post colonial theory in ways of understanding my own placement in the world. I wanted to hint at *The Location of Culture* as I’m dealing with these “in-between shapes” but my title *Location of Home* resonates beyond my personal experiences. We just lived/are living through a pandemic, where in unison across the world and cultures we were all homebound. In the end the question is, what is “Home”?



Installation view of Aminlari’s exhibition [Location of Home](#) at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago, IL.