

*In Memory of the Arabesque*  
Kamrooz Aram, February 2019

*Certainly the arabesque (in the sense of “this artistically arranged confusion, this charming symmetry of contradictions, this wonderfully eternal alternation of enthusiasm and irony”) is the oldest and most original form of the human imagination. –Friedrich Schlegel*

Every painting is essentially an accumulation of marks on a surface. The gestures of mark-making are limited and controlled by the body of the artist. The movements of the body are organic: the arm is connected to a joint that functions as an axis, and as we start to count the number of joints that affect the mark, from the fingers to the wrist, elbow, shoulder, hip, knees, etc., we begin to see that the variables allow for a vast range of motions, within the limitations of the body.

The grid serves as a structure, guiding the line around the canvas. But the body is equally responsible for restraining the mark so that it remains loyal to the grid. These paintings are the result of the gestures of the body, at times quite restrained by the logic of the grid, and other times restrained only by the limitations of the body itself.

The grid is the beginning of pattern, and perhaps also the beginning of ornament. The grid functions as a map. The grid is like a time signature in music. While the grid serves to structure the composition, the grid itself is expressive. The border has a similarly dual function. The border is a framing device, and while frames are considered to be decorative, they inevitably alter the image they contain. The line that delimits the image is itself a part of the composition.

*Arabesque* is a term that has a range of associations. The most general definition refers to the leafy and floral forms that undulate throughout a surface such as a carpet or a tiled wall, conflating figure and ground, and moving our eyes along the surface in a continuous dance. But perhaps an even more common reference for the term is that of the ballet position, which one can assume takes its name from the ornamental form. The term, of course, was coined by Europeans—likely the French, who discovered such forms in North African art and architecture. But there is evidence that the French term is derived from the Italian, *Arabesco*.

*Arabesque*: the suffix *-esque*, meaning *in the style of, resembling*; in other words *Arab-like*. *Arabesque* is part of an exoticist lexicon that now belongs to the exoticised. As a young immigrant in the United States, so many Americans thought I was Arab that I became Arab. It occurs to me that *I am Arabesque*. It occurs to me that there is no such thing as the *Arabesque*.