

The Sun

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ARTS & LETTERS

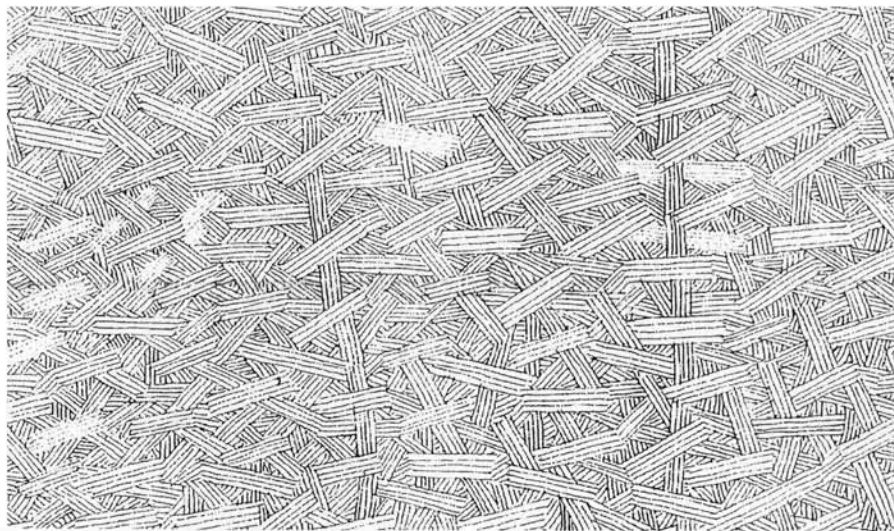
GALLERY-GOING

By TALYA HALKIN

Where Russell Crotty's drawings depict cosmic phenomena, each of Jacob El Hanani's works is a micro-universe crowded with tiny, almost invisible motifs. Mr. El Hanani, who was born in Casablanca and raised in Israel, came to New York in the mid-70s, when time-consuming, laborious processes were definitely out. His work went decidedly against the grain. For decades, he has been producing exacting, highly controlled compositions, which require close scrutiny. Although his reduction of drawing to its barest elements — a pen and three of the artist's fingertips — pays homage to the minimalist abstractions of Agnes Martin and Sol Lewitt, his compulsion to repeat marks, characters, and lines of text is motivated by cultural associations.

In "Basket" and "Gauze," the surface is built up out of hatch marks that are woven into sensuous, rippling patterns of varying intensity. The degree of concentration required to create these works forces Mr. El Hanani to work for no more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time, and a single drawing can take anywhere from two to five months to complete. The dense, complex surfaces of these small drawings turn them into something more interesting than formal experimentation.

The most interesting works are those that involve Hebrew letters and script. Mr. El Hanani cites the repetitive quality of



Jacob El Hanani, 'Basket (from the basket series)' (2002).

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Jewish prayer and childhood memories such as the ornamental pattern on his grandmother's teapot in Casablanca as essential inspirations for his drawings. He also associates the execution of repetitive motifs with the religious texts he was forced to copy over and over as a school punishment.

"Alphabet Grid" is composed of a nearly illegible pattern of Hebrew script — the language is important in many of the works. Incomprehensible to most viewers, and

largely rendered opaque through repetition or dispersion, the words acquire a material presence independent of meaning. "Letterfall," too, is composed of a delicate web of Hebrew letters and abstract lines, which tumble down and across the sheet of paper with uncharacteristic lightness.

Viewed together, the works reverberate with a hypnotic intensity, while the prolonged concentration they demand leads one's attention to dissolve into an interior landscape of reverie.

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