

Intangible blueprints

Art & Culture



STASHIAD/SOUZA

Pakistani artist Seher Shah's new show is all architectural jigsaws says **Phalguni Desai.**

"It occurs to me that the peculiarity of most things we think of as fragile is how tough they truly are. There were tricks we did with eggs... to show how they were, in reality, tiny load-bearing marble halls; while the beat of the wings of a butterfly in the right place, we are told, can create a hurricane across an ocean" – Neil Gaiman, *Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders*.

Artist (and architect by training), Seher Shah's first Mumbai solo 30 | 60 | 90 comprising drawings, prints and photographs, exemplifies Gaiman's line of thought. Despite her soft-spoken manner and her delicate draughtsmanship the Karachi-born/ Delhi-based Shah delivers quite a punch through her series of work that function more as diagrammatic proposals which coerce the viewer into imagining varying degrees of newness into Shah's selected topography.

In the works she exhibits in 30 | 60 | 90, Shah trades in memories and markers. Dictated by our positions in the world, our memories are inked into grooves

of grey matter like light sensitive cyanotypes -- that comprise architectural blueprints and in moments of déjà vu, a curve here and a corner there can take one to an old place, making it almost new in the unfamiliarity of forgetting. Add to that Shah's nomadic personal experiences from living in Karachi, New York, Brussels, London and now New Delhi, you put together an architectural jigsaw that should by all means, boggle the mind. The trick is in her carefully detailed drawings of structures, prominent in her practice beginning with a re-articulation of her personal spaces, and more recently, seen in "Grid Corridor" and "Study for a Totem Pole (double wall)". Both part of the show, the large graphite drawings are displayed such that the richness of scale delivers the grandeur of the building they are based on: Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, which aimed to revolutionise community housing. Shah's restructuring of its interiors retains the facade of the building but hollows out its interiors to fill them with columns to communicate the upward

Black and white Architect and artist Seher Shah's new show is ongoing at Jhaveri Contemporary; (above) Study for a Totem

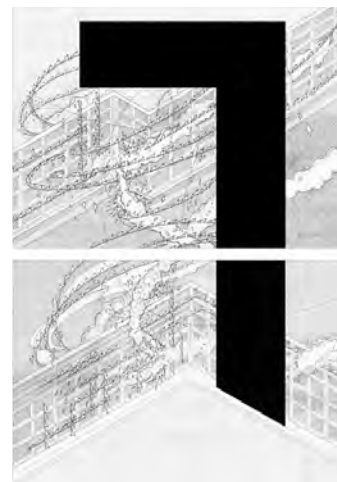
momentum of the concept. The palm-sized flags wave out of the facade with the Zen-like promise of communal living, but the trailing clouds emanating from the structure bring with them mild undercurrents of community-living disasters — such as the

Pruitt-Igoe project in Missouri, which was abandoned and eventually demolished. Shah does not seem to be critiquing the architecture as much as responding with an image full of possibilities and warning signs.

"Study for a Totem Pole" also features

another favourite intervention of Shah's: place holders. It's become one of Shah's favourite words. The show is replete with them, especially in "Mammoth: Aerial Landscapes Proposal", a suite of 21 prints that show aerial landscapes broken with black shapes that Shah throws in there to mark a possibility. Working on aerial photographs of mostly the American mid-west taken by her husband Randhir Singh, she holds place for something that will fit, or be removed, or be inserted in the landscape that allows

“**And in moments of déjà vu, a curve here and a corner there can take one to an old place**”



the possibility of change. The markers themselves are abstract shapes that seem to be parts of a larger whole. Varying in shape and size, and at times seem two dimensional, their positioning makes their scale absurd to the imagination and it boils down to perspective — something Shah has toyed with throughout the show.

The most engaging body of works in the show is "30 | 60 | 90" which also lends itself as the title. Shah returns to the basic principles of drawing, applying to it her interest in perspective. She creates 30 drawings, done over 60-second increments, and over 90 cm, where the distance was inversely proportionate to the time. The blots of ink mark the exposure of the paper to the ink, and the distance of the brush, and the lines that run across note the time. The drawings extend the moments where the ink leaves her brush and hits the paper. Everyone wishes they could capture time.

Kerouac refers to something intangible in *On the Road*, as the last thing no one can get to, which we keep living in the hope of catching, for once and for all. He doesn't name the thing, and nor does Shah. Her work however, attempts to capture it — the in-between, unnamed thing all possibility brings with it — and does hold on to it, through elegant intervention and a surprising strength.

30 | 60 | 90 is showing at Jhaveri Contemporary till Sat Feb 1 2014. See listings.

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