

From left to right: The Concrete Oracle (2), 2008; The Concrete Oracle (5), 2008.

Lines **that bind**

[By Josephine Breese]

Using architecture and landscape in her works, Seher Shah draws on the personal and historical

Seher Shah has carved a neat path for her work over the last seven years, in a measured transition from being a rising star to an esteemed mid-career professional. Her approach is eminently rational, as illustrated by her well-ordered drawings and prints that dissect the collision between architecture and landscape. A watertight conceptual rationale is evident from her website as well as from her choice of exhibitions. As she explained in a recent interview, "The exhibitions that give me the freedom I need in terms of context and positioning are the ones I respond to the most. They don't come about very often, but I am not interested in exhibiting everywhere I can."

Shah is a busy woman, juggling shows on multiple continents alongside talks and publications, picking up accolades along the way such as Frieze magazine's description of her as one of the most significant emerging artists in 2007 and her inclusion in Newsweek's roundup of 100 Women Who Matter in 2012. Born in 1975 in Karachi, she lived in London and Brussels before attending middle and high school in New York. Having trained



Artist Seher Shah at work

as an architect at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, and graduating in 1998, she later moved sideways into a career as an artist.

This has led her to show her work internationally with solo exhibitions at AMOA-Arthouse, Austin (2013), Nature Morte Berlin (2012), New Delhi (2009) and Scaramouche, New York (2011). She has also been part of many group exhibitions in London, Sharjah, Zurich, Amsterdam, Istanbul and Sydney. These international forays notwithstanding, Shah feels rooted in New York. "I know New York as a place where I have lived and worked independently through my own means. One's relationship is more

direct with the city where one lives and works,” she says.

Shah’s rigorous designs are set apart by an undertone of humour, absurdity, inquisitiveness and imaginative confidence. Her recent work is firmly associated with nostalgic visions of Islamic architecture, symbols and decorative geometries. Her first solo exhibitions had witty and phantasmagorical titles such as *Black Star* (2007) and *Jihad Pop* (2008), with the same series also including works such as *Islamica Fantastica* (2007) and *Crossing the Rubicon* (2007). *Interior Courtyard I* (2006) shows a cosmic courtyard rendered in steep and rigorous perspective, centered around a receding tomb. Curvaceous lines escape the formality of the building, surging through the corridors and across the open space, bursting into flowering formations, cubes and crosses. These shapes that represent the Kaaba and the Latin cross continually appear in Shah’s work, manifesting the contradiction that the artist proposes as the founding principle of her approach — “where ideas can exist simultaneously, as well as the tensions that are inherent within them”.

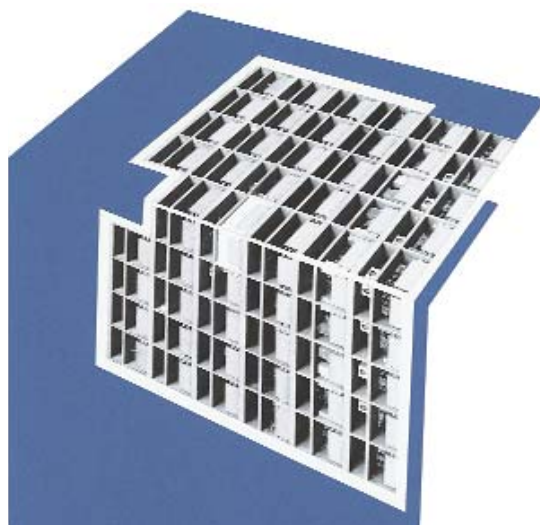
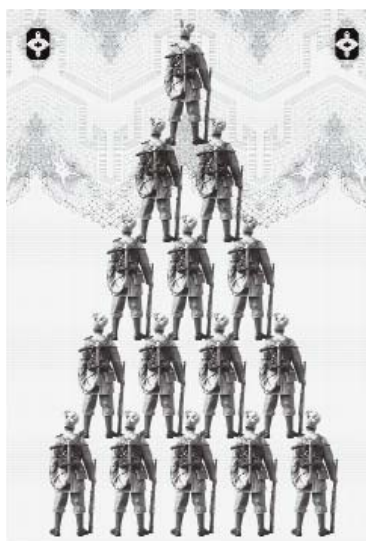
Shah celebrates different types of built and sculptural forms. Monuments feature repeatedly in her earlier work as silhouetted amalgams of different sources. Transplanted from their original context, their assigned authority is laid bare for re-evaluation. In *Untitled 2* and *Untitled 5* from *The Concrete Oracles* series (2008), a man and boy are shown with their backs to the viewer, looking at her fictitious constructions. A martyrrium is shown in mirror image, framing a dense black square surmounted by a gleaming

white cross, incongruously flanked by decoratively mosaicked pointed arches. A richly appointed palace balcony is similarly reflected in itself, with the lingering cube to the right and a formidable column supporting a winged figure reaching up to the crescent moon and five-pointed star. The *Ornamental Age* series (2009) ridicules power structures built on military self-glorification and displays of power. One print shows a pyramid of turbaned soldiers, intersecting a descending geometrical pattern.

Although such identifiably humorous markers have been superseded in Shah’s recent work, she has carried the idea of absurd scale into that of “an architect’s ego in the built world.” In 2012 and 2013, she introduced a focused study of modernist architecture into her practise, drawing out the exactitude of the grid, controlled planes and basic architectural forms from previous years. These have been explored in relation to Swiss-French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier’s two iconic modernist projects, the *Unite d’Habitation* and the *Capitol Complex*, developed from the 1930s onwards with the idea of reforming society through modernist approaches to town planning. Ironically, the results tease out Shah’s irreverence for imposed structure. *Blue Object* from the *Capitol Complex* series (2012) rotates Corbusier’s design by 90 degrees and tilts the Brutalist building’s façade off at a tangent. The scaled back combination

of the monochrome photograph and blue mount underplays Shah’s subversion of Le Corbusier’s utopian vision, ultimately defeated by its own impracticality.

“Aside from the aesthetics of the architecture itself”, Shah cites the “ambiguous relationship between landscape and object” as the sources of appeal for “these kinds of structures”. This translates in her work *Hinterland Structures* (2011), postcard-sized photographic light boxes showing a series of trailers, sheds and silos that she had documented while travelling between California,



Left to right: *Ornamental Age Series*, Archival giclee prints, 2009; *Blue Object*, *Capitol Complex Series*, 2012

Nevada, Arizona and Utah. Repetition and production found within the architecture in this series, reveal her interrogation of human behaviour in relation with landscape, irrespective of location.

Shah’s process stands as a watchful witness to narrow impulses that obscure our view of life, addressing claims on our natural and built environments. She proposes drawing as a communal gesture, “an activity that we all share at some point ... as a process to navigate various situations”. She deconstructs public buildings and contexts and transforms them into personal formats, accurately reflecting the singularity with which we filter our surroundings. ■

Courtesy Seher Shah