

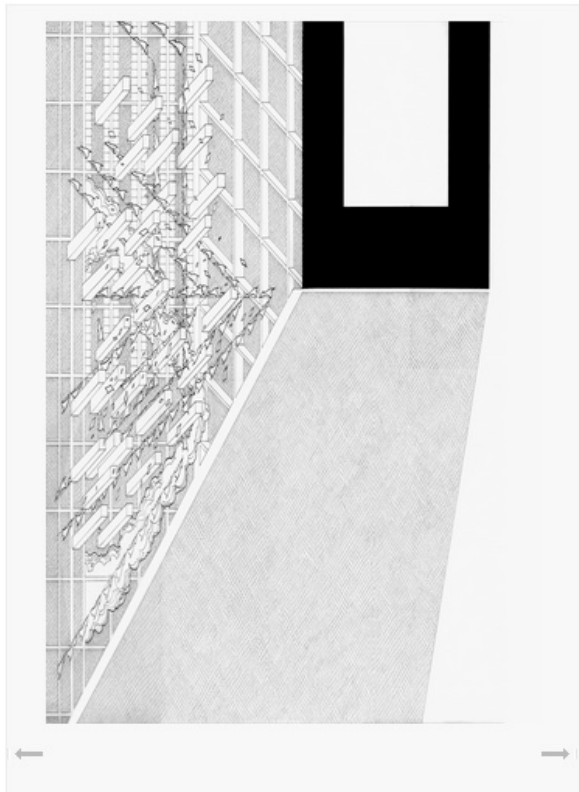
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Object Anxiety: Seher Shah Interviewed by Asif Akhtar

Interviewee: Seher Shah Interviewer: Asif Akhtar

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An encounter with Seher Shah's work bears an invocation to possibilities of re-enchantment in a disaffected world. Through the minutest detail of mark-making to the construction of expansive urbanscapes, Shah's work, in drawings, photographs, prints, and sculptural objects challenges preconceived notions of the spatial-visible and the temporal-historical facets of modern life. Lines burst into fractals, familiar motifs, repeated endlessly, morphing through continuous manipulations; patterned multiplicities become visibly obstructed by the overbearing presence of powerful monolithic shapes. Between the infinite tonalities of gray—from delicate graphite strokes to the immense black gouache—Shah is able to render monochromatic realms of intricacy with masterful strokes. From the micro-signification of individual markings and inscriptions, to the colossal presence of national monuments and high-modernist infrastructure, Shah weaves together lines and symbols, maps and iconographies, structures and landscapes, to create eerie locales of ambiguity where viewers are struck by the uncanniness of our multiple origins and countless possibilities.

Shah's architectural fascination with the ways in which building blocks of symbolism come together to form unique histories and distinct ideologies is already apparent in her earlier work. I was introduced to Shah's work while covering the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Prize in 2009, for which she was among the ten shortlisted artists. Shah's drawings and prints from that period, articulate the malleability of iconographic symbols and shapes in flux, while reverberating echoes of high-modernist urban dream-imagery from imagined imperial peripheries. Her *Black Cube Drawings* (2007) experiment with the prospects of metamorphosis in a monolithic shape: a seemingly solid black cube is molded and contorted into distinct forms, emitting fantastical swirls of endless vegetal patterns, as it unfolds into a cross. In *Cluster* (2008), she fuses structural monuments and icons to present cultural amalgamations—capturing historical subjects, colonial regiments amidst skylines of possible postcolonial empires overlooking collective aspirations of nationhood caught in an almost alienating state of ambiguity. Taking these symbolic artifacts and monumental fantasies as a point of departure, over the past few years Shah has expanded her library of images to inform her more recent work in which previously encountered icons are re-rendered in altogether different contexts.

While creating patterned intricacies through gestures of mark-making, Shah sometimes blackens out large parts of her work through monolithic shapes in black gouache. In *Object Relic (Unite d'Habitation)* (2011), a black polygon cuts through the work, in sharp contrast to the detailed drawing it destroys. Shah's usage of black gouache take on more overt forms in her collaboration with Randhir Singh's photographs in *Mammoth: Aerial landscape proposals* (2012), where vacant opaque polygons are superimposed onto sprawling urban landscape as parts of the infrastructure are concealed through this practice of erasure.

I had the opportunity to visit Shah at her studio in Brooklyn, New York in 2011, where she showed me the works she was preparing for her *Object Anxiety* (2011) series. A year later I was able to revisit her work through a follow-up interview (included below). More recently, she appears to have gravitated towards detailing structural aspects of high-modernism and mid-twentieth century Brutalist architecture, while examining the relation of built spaces with surrounding landscape. Shah has located an exemplary specimen of the modernist mentality in Le Corbusier's collectivized living structures and administrative infrastructure, such as, *Unite d'Habitation* in Marseilles, France and the *Capitol Complex* in Chandigarh, India. In *Unit Object* (2012), one finds that the black cube has been replaced by a concrete Cartesian grid as the foreground for Shah's fantastical graphite swirls. In *Capitol Complex* (2012), Shah skillfully manipulates Corbusier's compartmentalized repetitions of the concrete facade of the assembly and secretariat buildings in Chandigarh to create a sense of spatial abstraction. Deconstruction of architectural fragments opens up hypothetical spaces, creating unending patterns; echoing regulated repetitions of modern urban life. Minimalistic use of colors, a rarity in Shah's work, emboldens the haunting texture of the bare concrete slabs. This series brings into question how these unsettling forms of urbanism, already imprinted onto our modern soul, produce utopian visions of life through their resounding expansiveness, overshadowing the insignificance of individual experience. Through endless partitioning and sequestering of spaces, such infrastructure defines the contours of routine activity and everyday life. Cutting and folding these repetitive structures at unique angles, Shah is able to make these monuments of modernism collapse onto themselves—while gesturing their forms towards new possibilities.

Shah's treatment of buildings and built spaces shows a truly refined eye for structural forms. She is able to conceive of buildings, at once, as places of habitation, as objects, as relics, as artifacts, as totems, and as structural abstractions. Visually mediating between the scale of individual experience and the larger scale of the landscape, Shah is able to continually change the viewer's perspective on buildings. In *Hinterland Structures* (2011), Shah displays photographs from the American west in a series of light-boxes. These images explore the relation of built structures to their surrounding landscape, how these may be conceived of as objects or relics immediately decipherable from the environment that envelops them. A picture of a church shows a corrugated metallic box with a cross at one end as the only signifying marking designating the object's function as a place of worship; the vast desert landscape in the backdrop re-enforces the presence of this lone object.

Different aspects of Shah's work negotiate between valences spanning from the slightest gesture of the individual mark, to the monumental iconographies that furnish our collective memories. Trained as an architect, Shah is all too familiar with processes of how marks on paper, such as, urban maps and building plans, can go on to become materialized as actual objects in the form of buildings and structures that manifest our everyday experience of urban life. Approaching these processes from different angles, Shah is able to fold this distance onto itself through utterly simplistic means. In *Object Repetition (Line to distance)* (2011), Shah experiments with three-dimensional forms, using hydrocal to cast hundreds of white crystalline objects. These nearly identical structures when placed in the gallery, create sharp contrast with Shah's drawings (similar to the way black monolithic shapes often cut through patterned intricacies of her graphite renderings). Through the reductive practice of inscribing repetitive marks—dashed lines—onto these white objects which resemble folded sheets of paper, Shah is able to physically inhabit drawing within the built space of the gallery's interior in an intriguing fashion. The mass-produced objects bring to the forefront, aspects of repetition and recycling which have been central in Shah's work. The practice of marking an impression directly onto the surface of the physical object also performs the work of collapsing the procedural distance separating the two contingent forms.

Through continuous fluctuations of our gaze, between the gesture and the monument; inscription and collective memory; and individual scale to the scale of landscape, Shah's work allows us to glimpse at spaces of ambiguity that lie somewhere beyond history. Fragments of imagery, symbols found in archives, nationalistic images, architectural facades, icons, and motifs comprise Shah's extensive visual library of source material. By stripping symbols out of more familiar contexts while subjecting them to manipulation, Shah is able to display these forms in a constant state of becoming. Facilitating encounters in altogether different visual environments from where these symbols are usually found, Shah's images expose these forms to a critical gaze that is often looming in the backdrop. Constant recycling symbols and icons in her images, she is able to create cross-references within her own work to show us how the meaning of the symbol can change as the surrounding context changes. Recognizing the same imagery from different vantage points—looking at a city from its central square, and then again from beyond its boundary walls—also invokes a strange sense of familiarity and alienation. Combining forms from distinct sources, like courtyard elements from Brussels and Lahore, also manifests truly unique cultural experiences through an amalgamation of similarities and differences inherent in these forms. Objects become relics as soon as they are constructed, symbols are constantly reincorporated into vocabularies of emerging cultures, what is novel and futuristic today will undoubtedly become an artifact of nostalgia tomorrow; Shah's work is there to constantly remind us of the fluidity of the forms that construct the reality around us, and how they are always in flux and in a constant mode of redefinition.

Interview Transcript: September 8, 2012

AA: During our earlier conversation in 2011 you were preparing for your *Object Anxiety* show at Scaramouche in New York. How have your interests developed over the past year to converge on *Brute Ornament*, and how have certain themes carried forward to your more recent work in *Radiant Lines*?

SS: *Object Anxiety* at Scaramouche in New York (2011) and *Radiant Lines* at Nature Morte Berlin (2012) were my last two solo exhibitions showing works from an ongoing interest in landscape, repetition and basic architectural forms. The use of the object in landscape, and the ambiguous relationships inherent in structures, whether on a large urban planning scale or within an individual monument are explored through drawings, prints, light boxes and a sculptural installation. *Brute Ornament* at the Green Art gallery in Dubai (2012) was a two-person exhibition with the artist Kamrooz Aram, curated by Murtaza Vali, that explored the relationship between ideas from Western modernism, the role of ornament and the use of abstraction within our respective practices. I had several works included in this exhibition that used structure, perspective and elements of architecture to create a series of landscape and object drawings.

There are definitely overlapping interests in all three exhibitions for me, as well as references to two iconic modernist projects; the Unite d'Habitation and the Capitol Complex by Corbusier, and the ways that the basic components of architecture are broken down. The installation *Object Repetition (line to distance)* that started in 2010 at the Headlands Center for the Arts helped me with ideas for the smaller *Unit Object* drawings in *Radiant Lines* and *Brute Ornament*. A few selected works from these exhibitions will be exhibited at the AMOA-Arthouse at the Jones Center in Austin in April, 2013 for my first museum solo exhibition, *Constructed Landscapes*, curated by Rachel Adams.

AA: Can you describe your interest in Brutalist architecture and what it is about this particular style that fascinates you? How did you find these themes to be coalesced in diverse structures – as far apart as Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille and the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh – in how they come to formulate certain ideals of modern urban living?

SS: There are contradictions inherent in this architectural aesthetic and principles that involve landscape, social engineering and repetitive reductive structural forms. Aside from the aesthetics of the architecture itself it is the ambiguous relationship between landscape and object that I am interested in within these kinds of structures. Both these Corbusier projects were starting points for me to explore landscape and object, through the basic reductive elements of architecture such as the grid, the column, the wall and the frame.

The use of beton brut, or exposed unfinished concrete that used the Radiant City principles for both the Unite housing principles in Marseille and the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh is what initially attracted me to these projects in particular. Structure, function and material are the key components of modernist architectural principles in both these projects. But my interest in these two geographically different projects was about the breaking down of its basic components as a starting point for the drawings. They are not diverse projects in terms of the common principles involved, and this is what makes these two projects interesting for me.

I am interested in how ideas from European modernism get translated to different parts of the world, and how the second and third waves of these principles are situated. I am in awe of certain Brutalist structures and buildings just because of the sheer forceful relationship between object, landscape and scale. The use of repetitive forms and Utopian ideology is an inspiration for social housing but somehow is quite contradictory in its nature.

AA: In your collaboration with Randhir Singh, you apply black forms to aerial photographs to superimpose spaces of ambiguity onto the landscape. Is this use of erasure a means of exploring how urban architecture interacts with the surrounding landscape? Do you find that the regulatory work of urban planning has the uncanny ability to destroy space while creating space at the same time?

SS: The *Mammoth: Aerial landscape proposal* series is collaboration between my partner Randhir Singh and myself. His aerial photographs are combined with black forms that partially block out the photograph and landscape. The use of repetition and abstraction within the landscape, and the simultaneous gesture of erasure of both image and landscape is something I was interested in exploring. The ways that urban transformation occurs through both erasure and renewal is how spaces remain in flux and constantly in movement. The *Mammoth* works became about this simultaneous gesture of erasure and construction, which blocked the photographic image, and attempted to create ambiguously scaled structures that responded to the repetitive patterns inherent in urban planning within these images.

AA: Recently you have conducted studies of structures like silos and corrugated metal constructions in barren environments like deserts. How did you become interested in this particular contrast?

SS: The series titled *Hinterland Structures* are postcard size photographic light boxes I had taken from a trip to the American west a few years back. There were a series of trailers, sheds and silos that I had documented along the way between California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. They are not monumental in terms of scale and material, and disconnected in terms of the relationship between landscape and object. Temporary structures, but still architectural objects, the other end of the spectrum from the iconic modernist structures such as the Unite building.

AA: Can you walk through how starting from a geometric shape defined by a series of inscriptions and lines on a paper you arrived at conceiving an actual object through casting hydrocol and then reproducing hundreds of almost identical crystalline objects as an installation to create a truly unique effect in the exhibition space?

SS: *Object Repetition (line to distance)* is an installation that uses small shard like cast objects that repeat physically into the space. This work started at the Headlands Center for the Arts during a residency, and then expanded into the work at the *Object Anxiety* exhibition. The use of the grid, repetition and drawing found themselves in this site-specific work. Drawing as purely repetitive formal marks move physically through the grid of the installation. I had been reading the *Fractal Geometry of Nature* by Mandelbrot, and wanted to develop a simple reductive form that could allude to both natural and architectural forms.

AA: In our last conversation we touched on the spectacle of the military parade and how certain formations along with the visual dynamics of the onlooking observers give a spatial representation of power relations. I was wondering how you would relate similar socio-spatial dynamics to buildings where they might be seen as physical renditions of power-relations themselves?

SS: The relationship between spectacle and spectator is an interest of mine, whether seen through archival photographs or through structures such as monuments or civic architecture. I relate these constructions whether they are objects, or physical spectacles such as military parades, or nationalistic parades of any kind as a type of constructed theater. They are designed constructions. And this is a path into drawings of a particular kind for me that can explore this area of power dynamics. They are fascinating and perplexing simultaneously because they can show the power struggles and aspirations of the context in which they are placed or imposed. The meeting of time and purpose are what makes searching and finding these structures interesting to me. Amphitheatres, civic buildings, mortuary architecture and large-scale housing projects amongst others are the large areas that can show these renditions of power relations.

AA: Moving from buildings as totems and monuments, to structures and mega-structures and ultimately towards cities themselves as repetitions of these structural patterns – how do you draw the distinguishing line, both visually and conceptually, between nature and artifice, where a building could be seen both as an object in itself while cities might be considered to be natural products in themselves (akin to anthills or coral reefs)?

SS: There is a great scene in Wong Kar-wai's *Chunking Express* where a character runs through the Chunking Mansion in Hong Kong. The story starts in this architectural space of Hong Kong that feels autonomous. Hostels, restaurants, clothing and fabric stores and foreign exchanges are seen through the narrow corridors.

The demographic ranging from a variety of South Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries in particular are seen running various businesses within the scenes. I read an article that stated there were 120 nationalities that passed through the Chunking Mansions every year. I am curious to see this space in person, but this is the kind of space I would consider where the building could be seen as an object by itself.

I recently visited Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, the planned city by Norman Foster, which will rely entirely on solar power and attempt to be the first carbon neutral city. The relationship of nature and artifice comes to mind here, where a definite boundary will exist for this future city and the exterior environment. I am curious to know how this idea of a future city will function within this insular context. The image of the anthill could be relevant here just by its use of insular conditions.

AA: Finally, at this juncture, what possible visual and conceptual terrains are you thinking of exploring, and what future directions could your work take from this point on?

I've been working towards more object related works. The *Object Repetition* work has led to a few new directions for the way I have been thinking about objects and drawing. And I'm keen to continue working through these issues that relate to physical sculptural objects.

(images of the works discussed can be seen at: <http://www.sehershah.net/>)