

# Seher Shah's First Solo Show 'The Lightness of Mass' in Dubai

BY BIBHU PATTNAIK | APRIL 17, 2016



The Lightness of Mass, Installation view  
(Green Art Gallery)

Seher Shah, a Pakistani artist based between New York and New Delhi, has consistently re-shaped representation. Working with both drawing and sculpture, she has mainly revisited the mainstays of architectural representational methods - plan, elevation and section - to inject unsettling slippages into their rigorous formalism. If, in the past, her practice has knowingly toyed with the frontier between the resolutely rational and the vaguely visceral, this new body of work fully embraces that visceral slant.

Seher, who graduated in fine arts and architecture from Rhode Island School of Design in 1998, uses her fascination with rugged concrete structures, combining them with drawings to create intriguing pieces. Her latest and first solo show *The Lightness of Mass* runs until May 9 at Green Art Gallery in Dubai.

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the *Lightness of Mass* exhibition with essays by Shanay Jhaveri, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Assistant Curator of South Asian Art, and Murtaza Vali, an independent writer and curator based between Brooklyn and Sharjah.

In her series *Brutalist Traces*, she draws the outlines of monstrous buildings in Delhi and London but slices the image with horizontal lines to lessen the impact. She is interested not only in what is there, but also what she has erased. The largest work in the show, *Flatlands* (scrim) in its largest form of 9 ink-on-paper panels framed, proscenium-like, by black rectangles, springs from an attempt to reinterpret the language of mark making. By abstracting the purely rational language of architectural drawing, Seher introduces an element of playfulness. In the centre of the exhibition there are a series of cast-iron sculptures.

Uncertainty abounds: scrim shifts, their translucency preventing any clear foreground or background to emerge; grids are atop grids, morphing into columns. The seriousness of the perspective view is undercut, and architecture becomes a space newly open to experience and feeling. Similarly, the Unit Object etchings liberate classic architectural representations from their restrictive process of perspective drawing, introducing them into a fluid dance of line and the material corporeality of ink.

Talking about her creation, Seher says, "I wanted the title to allude to states of being rather than anything explicit. The relationships between the works are through visceral experiential connections of lightness, weight, mass, absence and erasure, but also the use of materiality through the iron sculptures and the graphite drawings."

A quiet weight emanates from both the *Machrie Moor* series of images, a collaboration with photographer Randhir Singh, and the *Untitled* sculptures in sand cast iron. Stone and iron are deeply elemental materials, and yet, through Seher's eyes, highly visceral; the works are man-made—carved and cast—and yet resist control. Windswept and weathered, they continue to evolve over time, their mass quietly, slowly being erased away.

Across six series of works in *The Lightness of Mass*, Seher deftly collapses the binary of the show's title, illustrating that weight and lightness, far from being contradictory, exist, in fact, simultaneously. They comprise a single state of being.

"I have been thinking about the ways in which abstraction can explore ideas of movement, absence and fragmentation within the landscape, and the use of the incomplete line as a means to erase objects in drawing space," she concludes.

Recently Seher's *Capitol Complex* series was featured in 'Chandigarh is in India', a new publication that tells the story of Chandigarh through the works of Indian and Western artists. Co-authored by Shanay Jhaveri, assistant curator of South Asian art at New York's Metropolitan Museum, the book explores how various artists have used Corbusier's architecture and the city itself in their work.

*Seher Shah's 'The Lightness of Mass' runs until May 9 at Green Art Gallery in Dubai.*