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Artist Seher Shah Covers New Ground with “Constructed Landscapes” and “Radical Terrain”

August 08th, 2012

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Born in Karachi, Pakistan Seher Shah is a Brooklyn based artist whose graphic, monochromatic works explore the relationship between architecture and space, digital media and mark making. Whether deconstructing iconography, erasing landscape, or recording the stages of object transformation, Shah's drawings, light boxes, and sculptures are intricate studies of the parameters of space. She is currently working on pieces for two upcoming exhibitions “Radical Terrain” at the Rubin Museum opening (November 2013) and a solo exhibition “Constructed Landscapes” at the Jones Center in Austin, Texas (January 12-March 3 2013).

Tell me about your most recent show, “Radiant Lines” at Nature Morte Berlin?

Radiant Lines is an ongoing series of works looking at iconic Brutalist architecture and in particular the Unité d’Habitation and the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh. The title is taken from Le Corbusier’s La Ville Radieuse/The Radiant City, which are his expanded urban planning ideas. There are contradictions inherent in this Brutalist 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.

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

How has your work transformed from your first exhibition?

Jihad Pop was probably the most autobiographical series and the first series I exhibited in a public solo context. I was working with the ideas of what spaces can represent both in a private and public context through their transformation, and it was a progression from looking at colonial architecture to looking at modern and iconic buildings. Paper to Monument was looking more at the architecture of spectacles, like coronation ceremonies, military processions and various monument constructions. In Radiant Lines I don’t use direct references to biographical references, but use certain iconic structures to deconstruct through drawings. I think sometimes direct biographical references can become problematic for me personally.

How did you come to making art?

I’ve always been drawing and was painting when I was younger. The amazing thing about Rhode Island School of Design at the time I was that there was a lot of emphasis on hand drawings within the Architecture department. Fine Art/Painting and Drawing and Architecture are two autonomous departments at RISD. But architectural drawing played an important role for me whilst there.

I am interested in the methods of drawing space and how various mapping constructions can be represented through architecture, geometry and objects. I am interested in the qualities of particular moments in architectural history, and I try to engage with those through drawing, sculpture and photography.

What was the concept of “Object Anxiety”?

Object Anxiety was the solo exhibition in New York at Scaramouche in the fall of 2011. Object Anxiety was about repetition and the breakdown of architecture into its structural components—these isolated, peculiar objects left out in the landscape—whether through iconic modernist buildings or through the temporary shed and trailer structures in the landscape.

The two works in particular exploring this idea of repetition were a large-scale graphite drawing Object Relic (Unité d’Habitation) in its state of disassembly. And Object Repetition (line to distance) is an object installation that literally uses small shard like objects that repeat themselves physically into the space.

There is also a series titled Hinterland Structures that are postcard size photographic light boxes I had taken from a trip to the American west. 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 both 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.

You work both hand based and digitally; what is your process?

I look at drawing as this exploration of mark making and how ideas of drawing space can be explored through various means. There is momentum in the repetition as well. In the digital work I incorporate hand drawings as well, which engages two different sides of my process. So even in the object sculpture Object Repetition (line to distance), mark making finds a way to move through the objects. The large-scale drawings are two to three months' worth of work and a different engagement of both time and process. A hand drawing versus digital construction is a very different thought process but I respond and work through both.

Have you worked on any collaboration?

The Mammoth: Aerial landscape proposal series is a work 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.

What are your inspirations?

I think that's a difficult question for most folks to answer, but I do take inspiration not just from other artists, but cinema and literature as well. Some are direct like the Corbusier works or Brutalist architecture. But there are times that I can find ideas about constructed spaces within cinematic film sets as well. *Suspiria* and *World on a Wire* are great examples, and I only recently saw *Stalker* which was incredible. I just saw *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* and that rigor of working is just awe inspiring.

Do you listen to any music while you work?

I do listen to something whilst working and it depends on the day. Lately I've been listening to Tim Hecker's Ravedeath, Peaking Lights, Oneohtrix Point Never, Megafortress, Mater Suspiria Vision and Hans Joachim Roedelius amongst other things. I like a lot of the musicians on the Ghostly International, Software Recording Company and Editions Mego labels as well.