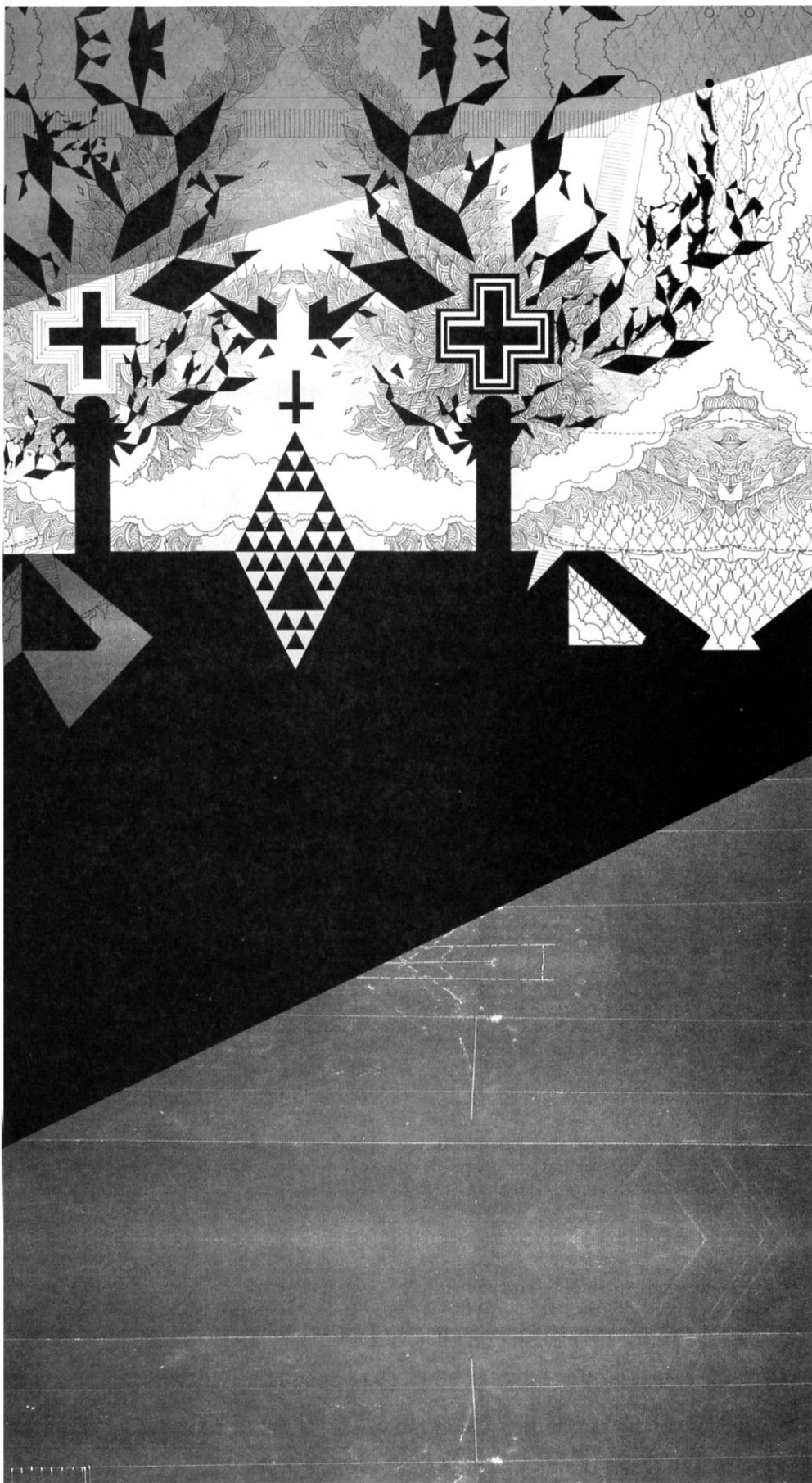


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PROFILES



SEHER SHAH

*The Expansion of the First Great
Ornamental Age: Fragmented Landscapes
(detail)*

2009

Archival giclée print, 76.2 x 55.9 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia,
New York.

This Page

PERVERSIONS OF EMPIRE:
CONCRETE ORACLES (detail)
2008
Archival giclée print, 33 x 48.2 cm.

1

PAPER TO MONUMENT II
2009
Graphite and gouache on paper,
203.2 x 274.3 cm.

2

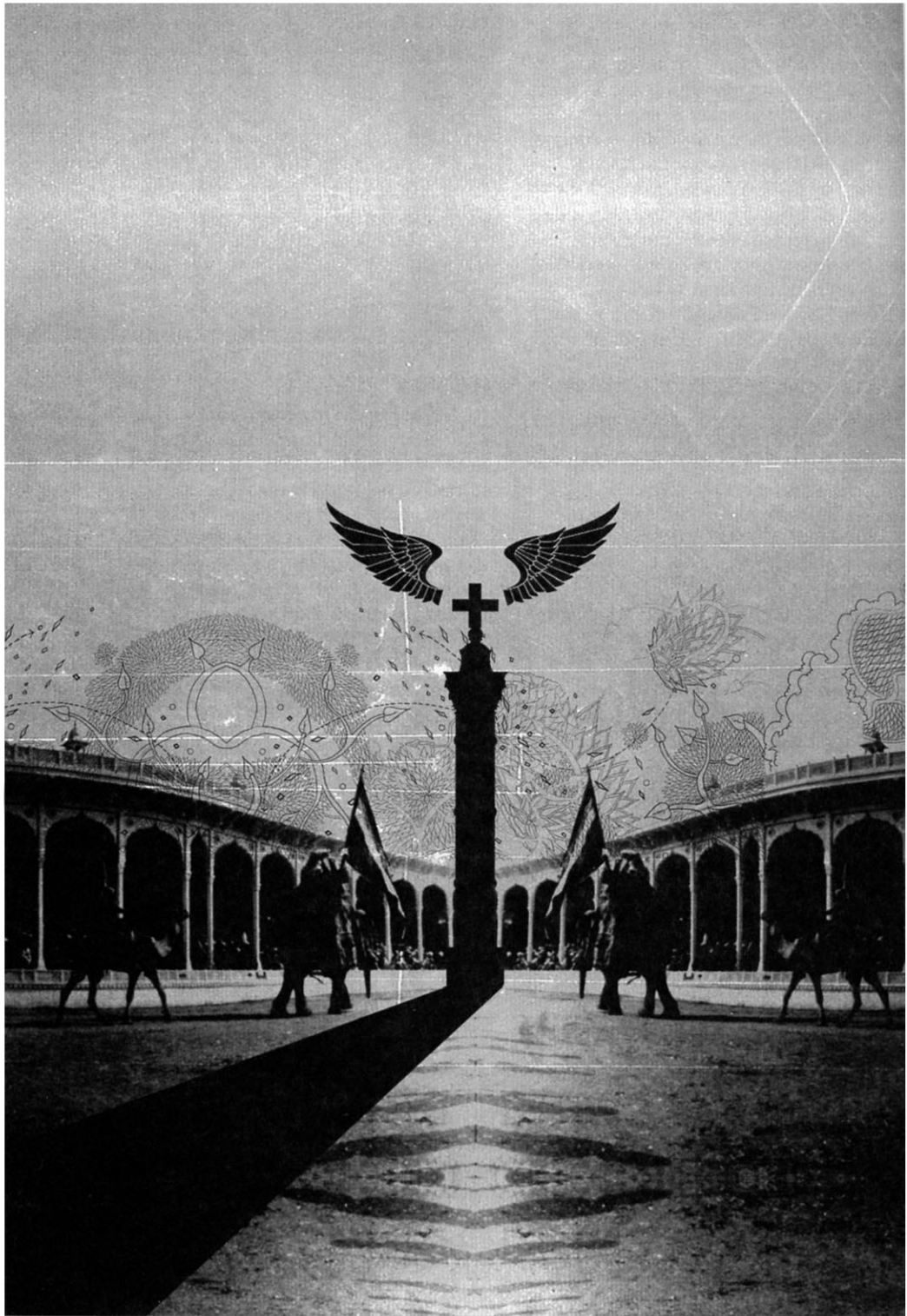
PERVERSIONS OF EMPIRE:
CONCRETE ORACLES
2008
Archival giclée print, 33 x 48.2 cm.

All images in this article are courtesy the
artist and Bose Pacia, New York.

IN DEPTH

Monuments of the Mind

BY JYOTI DHAR

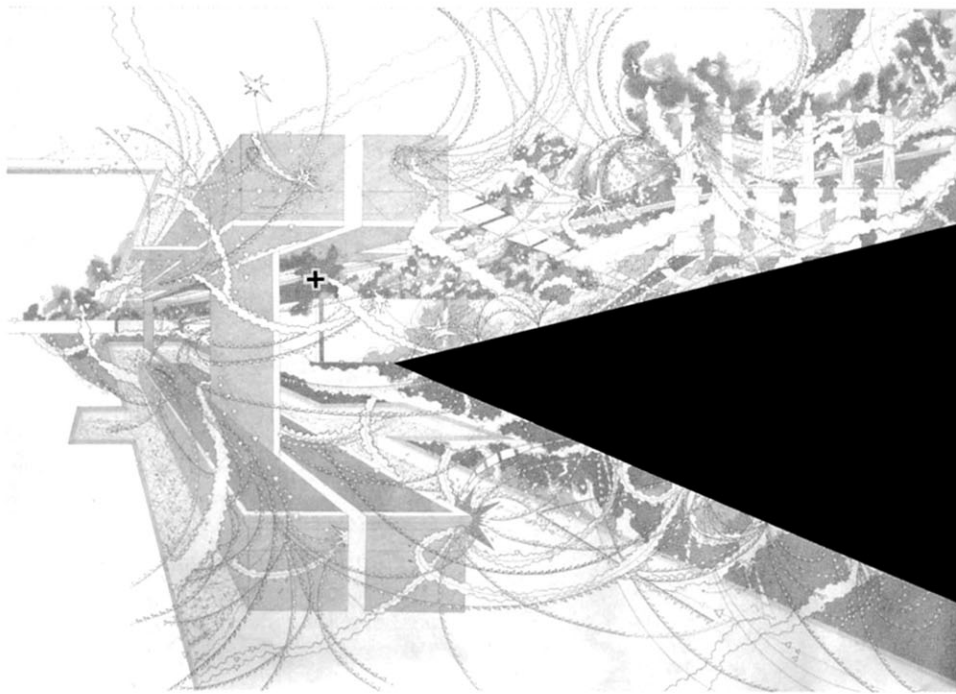


Ominous military parades, looming geometric shapes and intricate layers of meshed lines—Seher Shah’s powerful drawings reimagine the terror and the beauty of monuments and public spaces built to project power and order.

Seher Shah's black-and-white drawings are structured like lattices in which architectural façades are superimposed with delicate markings, linear details confront black voids and archival imagery intersects with multicultural symbols. Yet, for all the precision of Shah's aesthetics, conceptually, her motifs are not rooted in fixed meaning; there is room for interpretation in these ambiguous façades, references and symbols.

When I spoke with her in May, she described them as a "language in flux." Each distinctive layer is meticulously created with graphite and gouache on paper, and a single drawing may take between two to three months to complete, though ultimately she never sees them as finished. "I start drawing while thinking about theater, where each symbol is an entity. It could be that one object goes through nine different permutations and the drawing distils those different states."

Educated as both an artist and an



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architect at the Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1990s, Shah initially joined an architectural firm that specialized in skyscrapers and large-scale urban projects. Shah has always been attracted to what she describes as "ideas surrounding the drawing space," and in 2006 she began to exhibit work exploring these issues.

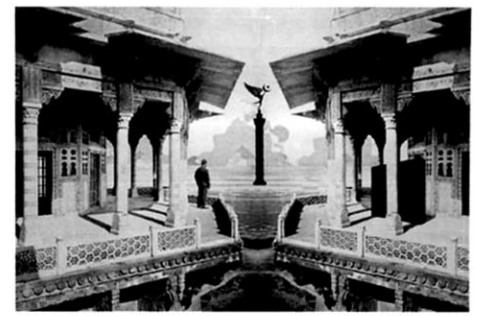
Though she no longer practices conventional architecture, she feels that her bond with it has strengthened through drawing. In her last solo show, "Paper to Monument," at Nature Morte gallery in Delhi in 2009, she explored "the relationship between two extremes—the individual architect and drawings . . . to large urban-scale relics in the

landscape, such as a monument, building or cenotaph." She is fascinated by shifts in scale, from the very intimate to the massively public, and in particular the idea of an individual's or government's ego or will being imposed on a landscape. One can see this interest articulated in large, black, geometric reductions such as the large triangular shape in *Paper to Monument II* (2009). She explains: "There's a certain type of aggression that comes out with these forms—it's something I can feel when I'm drawing these geometries." At the same time, many of her landscapes are punctuated by fragile markings that, when positioned next to these imposing objects, amplify the tension in the frame.

Shah's complex compositions are more than merely simplistic juxtapositions of opposing elements, however. Instead, her practice aligns itself with the idea of "posthybridity," in which separate entities or spaces come together yet retain their

distinctive identities. Shah's interest in this approach is the result of her personal background: she was born in Karachi but has lived in London and Brussels, and is currently living and working in Brooklyn. She tells me that she doesn't particularly identify with any one country and it is important to her that her work is not defined by one particular viewpoint or stance.

Shah's drawings often reflect spectacle and symmetry. In this way, their abstractions refer not only to architecture but to people as well. In *The Concrete Oracles* (2011), a military parade bisects the composition, depicting power and order, set against the backdrop of a utopian landscape. Figures also appear in another of her



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prominent series, "The Black Star" (2007), this time more ghostly in nature and in the form of small children or regal portraits. Often faceless, these illusory onlookers occasionally hold symbols in their hands such as the cross or the crescent. When asked about her use of these politically and religiously charged forms, Shah is quick to clarify their context: "One thing that gets misinterpreted is the symmetrical cross form. If you unfold a cube and look at it in plan, you see these five elements. For me it's a very basic way of representing transformation through geometric shifts." Notions of metamorphosis and transience come into play through the use of these fabricated symbols, derived from Euclidian geometries or appropriated from a variety of Asian cultures. Forms such as the cross and the crescent are often recycled in successive works, focusing on their interaction with shifting situations and spaces around them rather than their intrinsic meaning.

In her most recent works, Shah continues her exploration of architectural space, but this time through objects and sculpture. Conceived of during her residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California in 2010, Shah's foray into the sculptural domain further probes the dynamics of repetition and seriality. Tied into this are concepts from the book *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (1982) by Benoit Mandelbrot, such as the idea of simplified, reductive forms derived from natural fractals and utopian constructions.

Shah pushes our understanding of architectural space beyond conventional frameworks into an interstitial state between disciplines. Whether she is referencing human-made or natural creations, she reminds us that these constructs can often be the link between the past—as recounted through history—and the imagined future. For Shah, memory, both personal and historical, is not static or definitive. Such intuitive and open-ended phenomena serve to obliterate the traditional parameters of perspective and relational objects in her works.

See our website for an Arabic and Chinese version of this article.
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