

WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

In this issue, we further articulate the parallels and divergences between the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Linked by history, trade and cultural flows, these regions are all faced with breaking down notions of singular identity. We look at the institutionalizing of Asian visual culture in the Gulf, with the arrival of the Ishara Art Foundation and recent exhibitions at Alserkal Avenue's Concrete and Jameel Arts Centre. Meanwhile, the ongoing Sharjah Biennial 14 examines the larger human condition that spans continents and territories. Writer Stephanie Bailey looks at Hong Kong and China's cultural positioning in the Global South, while Art Basel Hong Kong expands its connections to different parts of Asia. Saira Ansari responds to Umber Majeed's project on rapid urbanization that translates across geographies, while Payal Uttam looks at connections between the countries of the Global South.

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Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy,
HACKLANDER / HATAM. *Untitled (inwardness,
juice, natures)*. 2019. Performance and mixed
media installation with audio installation, palm
stumps, acrylic paint on muslin, ceramic cups,
coloured acrylic sheets, dimensions variable.
Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving
the Echo Chamber*. Commissioned by Sharjah
Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artists
and Sharjah Art Foundation.

LINES OF SIGHT

Recent work by Pakistani-American artist Seher Shah and Indian photographer Randhir Singh, both of whom are New Delhi-based, currently occupies an Artist's Room at Jameel Arts Centre (until 8 June). An exercise in drawing volume and void, Brutalist architecture and spatial abstraction, their images suggest multiple drafts of the same surface, where the line becomes both movement and redaction mark, gesture and erasure. On a micro-level, architectural tropes are fragmented and flattened in repetitive grids, removed from context. On a macro-level, the project raises questions about the discourse of artistic production from the Global South and its regional specificities.

Words by Katrina Kufer

Entering the artist room dedicated to Seher Shah and Randhir Singh at Jameel Arts Centre is like walking into an Ed Ruscha-meets-Bernd-and-Hilla-Becher twilight zone. The clean lines, endless grids and soothing banality of the blueprint-like *Studies in Form* (2018), first shown at Dhaka Art Summit 2018, are a refreshing facet to the wave of Southeast Asian and African art that has recently saturated the UAE scene, exemplified by the new Ishara Art Foundation, Sharjah Art Foundation's programming, and exhibitions by South Asian institutions such as Samdani Art Foundation. But this approach also raises the parallel issue of contextualizing artists through a still predominantly Western framing of the 'Global South'.

While the economically rooted umbrella term, which originated in the 1970s, is very much *au courant*, its relevance to artistic output is questionable. As a signifier, it serves as an easily digestible – albeit oversimplified – introduction to a vast and varied artistic production, inferring too that work from the Global South is being 'discovered' rather than examined. The UAE's recent foray into these works has often (though not always) presented work from the region in terms of urgent sociocultural concerns (identity politics, migration, labour or geographic boundaries) expressed through traditional modes of production – think localised material and medium. But this shouldn't set the standard.

So, the inclusion of Shah and Singh's Minimalist language alongside Indian Hemali Bhuta's sculptural textile installations and Emirati Farah Al Qasimi's candid, colourful photography in all three of the centre's artist rooms comes as a welcome wake-up call, and an unintentional case study in Global South diversity.

Studies in Form explores intersections of architecture, photography, drawing and printmaking. Four chapters distributed across two walls display photographs from the artists' study of specific 1960s and 1970s Brutalist buildings designed in New Delhi, Tokyo and London. The *Flatlands Blueprints* and *Hewn Blueprints* series hang on the adjacent wall, and a triptych of black-and-white graphite and gouache on paper works, *Emergent Structures: Relative Noise, Planar Landscape and Capital Mass* (2011), complete the fourth. While only the acute-perspective photographs from the different chapters and abstract representational drawings-cum-blueprints incorporate the 19th-century cyanotype technique, all three sections demonstrate an oscillating measure of incompleteness and precision, situated between the formalism of architectural scale and the materiality of drawing. Visible in the rough paper edges or erasure marks that contradict otherwise mechanical execution, they mirror the Brutalist content, which is defined by a concrete rawness offset by geometric accuracy. Despite



Left: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Barbican Estate_24*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 38 x 28 cm
Right: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Barbican Estate_25*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 38 x 28 cm



Left: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Akbar Bhavan_9*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm
Right: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Akbar Bhavan_10*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm



Left: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Akbar Bhavan_4*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches Aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm
Right: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Akbar Bhavan_5*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm



Left: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Brownfield Estate_4*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm
Right: Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Brownfield Estate_5*. 2018. Cyanotype prints on Arches aquarelle paper. 56 x 76 cm. All images courtesy of Jameel Arts Centre



Installation view of Artist's Rooms. Seher Shah and Randhir Singh at Jameel Arts Centre. Image courtesy of Jameel Arts Centre

the ink-blue's warm undertones and wood frames, the room is cold and impersonal – not a negative, but somehow unexpected in the context of Global South preconceptions of materiality.

Minimalism's de-emphasis of personalised expression in favour of direct encounters has Asian roots: Zen Buddhism and the Japanese movement Mono-ha existed in parallel to, if not before, the Western awakening in the 1960s. But even there it wasn't heavily showcased – the first comprehensive exhibition, *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object.*, opened at Singapore's National Gallery and ArtScience Museum in 2018. The movement's Asian trajectory was somewhat underground in relation to the more human-centric pieces typically exhibited, exemplified by works from Samdani Art Foundation's *Fabric(ated) Fractures* at Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, or in Bhuta's room, where Minimalist aesthetics are dominated by the entropy of contemporary urbanity and profound tangible traces of humanity. "Is there a sense of art having a deep capacity to influence society more a preoccupation for artists from the 'Global South'?" asks Antonia Carver, Art Jameel's director. "Perhaps so." However, Shah and Singh's room reroutes this dialogue towards less (globally) represented avenues.

Studies in Form is imbued with humanity – neither the buildings nor the works could exist otherwise – but they're lacking life's cacophony. Yet the relationship between maker and material is articulated and cleverly, if confusingly, the human experience is evoked via its omission. Numerous entryways, balconies and staircases exude such resolute stillness that they're rendered flat, impenetrable and monochrome, more akin to exercises in shape and shade than to inhabited buildings. Clustered in stoic modular hangings, the exhibition expertly activates negative space through composition and the solid curvilinear forms which interrupt the cityscapes. The formalist manipulation is equally deft – in the catalogue, art critic Jyoti Dhar asserts that the project, especially *Flatlands Blueprints*, asks: "Is there a way of carving out space through line? How do we undermine, or escape, perspective? Can you collapse it into volume?" The overall technique is so unexpressive and non-hierarchical that it's easy to forget that these structures contain living narratives.

Literal and figurative blockades maintain the mystery and intrigue of the works, the stunning results of these framing devices offering little indication of the duo's wealth of reference. Yet the catalogue illuminates Shah and Singh's exploration of architectural typologies, modernism, socialism, governmental control and identity. Shah's

imprint is revealed with *Hewn Blueprints*, in the nuanced connections between land, object, space and psyche, along with mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot's fractal geometry, while Singh infuses architect Massimo Scolari's oblique drawing and notions of the subjectivities of representation, framing and perspective. As such, *Studies in Form* is a collaboration of aesthetics, objects, ideologies and geographies that underscore organic exchange rather than imported concepts. "These exhibitions relate to our curatorial thread that investigates ideas around confluence and exchange, but perhaps in unexpected ways," adds Carver. "It's fascinating that Metabolist architecture was a movement of renewal that was embraced from London to Delhi and Tokyo. The images focus on form and the motifs that united these developments in very different cities." In a similar vein, Dhar wrote about how the work of Singh and Shah lends itself to more transnational and plural readings.

Studies in Form represents a perennial methodology, and not one that necessitates an additional categorization such as 'South Asian Minimalism'. Carver admits that it is challenging to define work from South Asia given the diversity, suggesting that perhaps threads of connectivity exist purely because we want to find them. Might it have to do with Dubai as a hub for the Global South? "One of the most fascinating aspects of the city is the way its very nature is resolutely global – less a binary case of 'local vs global' and more one of a constant ebb and flow, a daily intertwining – and this makes it a very prescient, timely place to work in the arts," says Carver, "especially when combined with a very future-oriented sense of agency."

From this UAE-based standpoint, Shah and Singh are contributing to a redefinition of representations of both architecture and art from the Global South as two artists in constant states of exchange and collaboration, tackling how to recontextualize formalisms. In terms of its institutional identity, Jameel Arts Centre is likeminded, its role framed within a web of connections. "It's less about the national or transnational and more about how to explore the nature of exchange through art," Carver continues. "We believe that in trading goods, we trade ideas, languages, customs, foods – this is the stuff that makes art practices real." Perhaps it isn't only the notions of territory-specific art movements that need recalibrating, but also the boundaries imposed in relation to art-making, and maybe, at least for *Studies in Form*, the Global South terminology ought to be done away with entirely.



Seher Shah and Randhir Singh. *Studies in Form, Flatlands Hewn*. 2018. Commissioned by the Samdani Art Foundation for the Dhaka Art Summit, 2018. Image courtesy of Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai