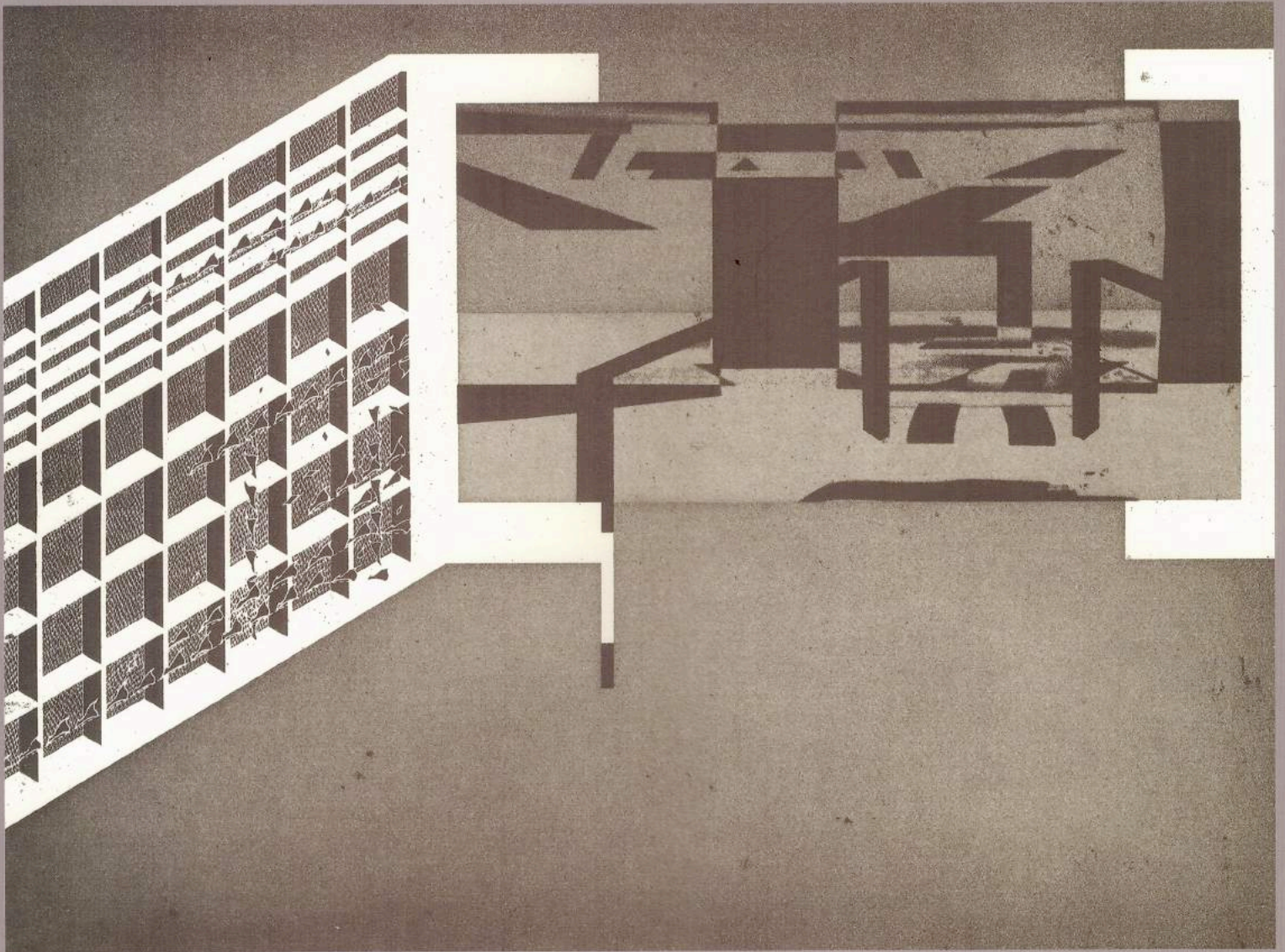


# MARG

A MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2016 ₹350

in focus: Abstraction



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# Strategic Abstractions: On Seher Shah's Large-Format Drawings

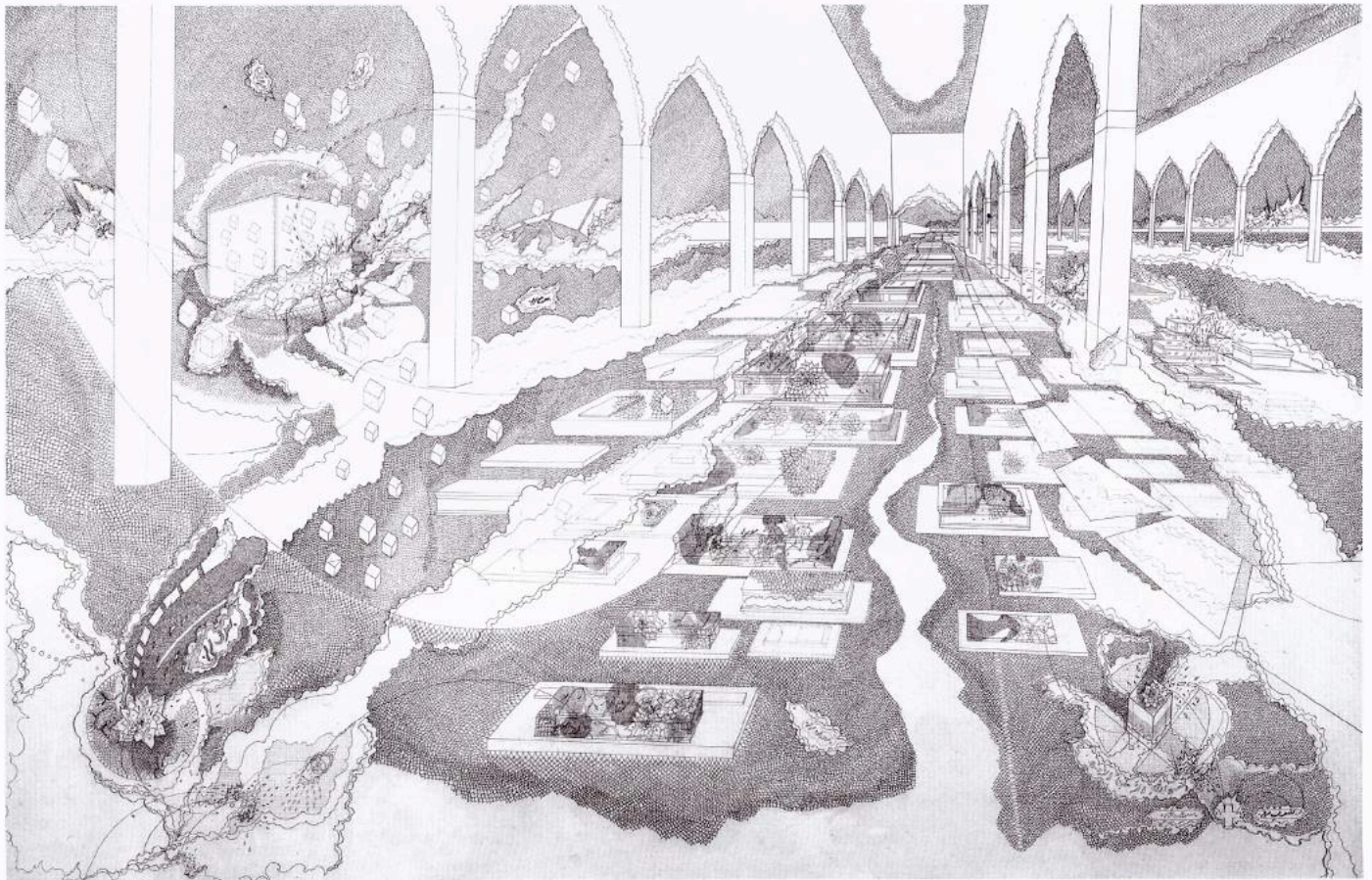
MURTAZA VALI

IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT SEHER SHAH'S FIRST MATURE BODY OF WORK, A SET of digital prints and graphite drawings on paper provocatively titled *Jihad Pop* (2007) (figure 2), garnered immediate attention and acclaim. Baroque conflagrations of signs, symbols, spaces and structures, they uncannily encapsulated the polarized geopolitical conditions of our post-9/11 world. Mistakenly understood as illustrations of these external realities, they were, however, intended as attempts to represent, metaphorically and conceptually, the artist's complex internal subjectivity. Her subsequent art practice has demonstrated a growing interest in abstraction, both conceptually and through subject matter referenced, possibly as a conscious strategy through which to subvert the reductive categorizations of discourses invested in identity politics and cultural authenticity. This essay will explore the emergence of this strategic abstraction through a careful analysis of a series of large-scale graphite on paper drawings that Shah has done through her decade-long career.

## Icono-Clash or Iconoclasm

Trained in both art and architecture, Shah synthesizes the very distinct approaches to drawing taken by these two disciplines into a unique working method that troubles the practical and rational language of architectural drawing with a personal and visionary approach that is intimate, immediate and driven by intuition, repetition and chance. Meticulously drawn and intricately detailed despite their cinematic scale and vision, *Interior Courtyard I & II* (both 2006) are amongst Shah's earliest unique works in graphite on paper. In both, an arched courtyard, more a generic structure than a reference to a specific historical landmark, is carefully rendered in deep, almost distorting perspective, its vanishing point falling to the right of centre, introducing both the illusion of depth but also of lateral movement.<sup>1</sup> While one large cenotaph fills the entire space in the former, an orderly but irregular grid of smaller tablets and slabs crowds the latter (figure 1). In contrast to the rigid, precisely delineated architecture—a reflection of Shah's training in the discipline—a hand-drawn vegetal net fills up much of the remaining space giving the drawings an organic exuberance. Various iconic and geometric forms—cubes, crosses and lotuses—hover in these spaces, which themselves do not feel entirely stable or grounded, despite the organizing architecture; sign, structure and space are all deterritorialized. Explosions, billowing clouds of smoke and sharp vector lines all suggest conflict and disorder. Swirling and churning, all fire and brimstone, these tumultuous drawings, along with the related *Kaaba 3* (2006) and *Islamica Fantastica* (2007) (figure 3) have a visionary, apocalyptic tenor to them. It is hardly surprising then that they were frequently and reduc-





tively misunderstood as symbolic representations of a post-9/11 clash of civilizations scenario, an “icono-clash” between East and West.<sup>2</sup>

However, like her digital prints, these drawings, though packed with iconography, much of it culturally specific, were never intended as representational. They were, as Shah explained in a 2007 interview, “investigatory and exploratory”, belonging to a tradition of drawing that is not mimetic or illustrative but processual, that helps articulate a world or vision into being through its execution.<sup>3</sup> The veneer of violence in these drawings might be better understood as a metaphor for entropy, as suggestive of a semiotic universe in constant flux. What is pictured is not a heated confrontation between two intrinsically opposed iconographies but a more generalized crisis around the viability and authority of iconography itself, and as such marks a first step towards abstraction. These drawings enact and represent a process of semiotic abstraction, an iconoclasm of sorts; signifier and signified are decoupled, transforming icons and signs pregnant with culturally specific meanings into multivalent floating signifiers, both semiotically and visually, adrift in the drawings’ illusory universes.<sup>4</sup> While these floating forms initially appear to be under attack, disintegrating into shrapnel-like fragments, they may also be interpreted as replicating, releasing scores of smaller spore-like versions of themselves into the surrounding space, multiplying possible interpretations.

Shah repeatedly emphasized that these drawings were mostly driven by nostalgia and memory. They were intended to investigate whether architectural fragments and other cultural icons have the ability to capture and retain specific meanings and personal memories, and to explore the ways in which they may be reconfigured to represent complex subjectivities. They represent anxious attempts to define her perspective and situate herself as a cultural producer while still retaining and expressing

1. Seher Shah, *Interior Courtyard II*, 2006. Graphite on paper; 203.2 x 304.8 cm. Courtesy Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES DEE.





2. Seher Shah, *City Unknown*, from the series *Jihad Pop*, 2007. Archival giclee print; 27.94 x 48.26 cm. Courtesy Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.

3. Seher Shah, *Islamica Fantastica*, 2007. Graphite on paper; 203.2 x 365.76 cm. Courtesy Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES DEE.

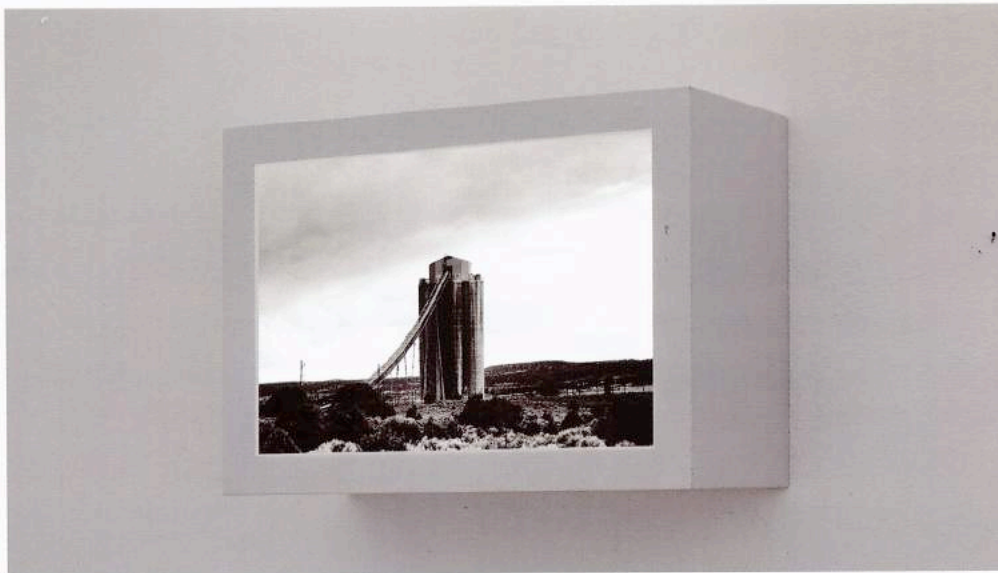
the richness of her multinational and multicultural upbringing, to transcend the cultural specificity of certain icons to make them simultaneously personal and universal. Writing in 2008, Valerie Smith, indubitably located Shah's practice "somewhere between East and West".<sup>5</sup> I would argue that Shah's work has always been, but more so since 2010, much trickier to locate. While it may represent the in-between, third space characteristic of artists in the diaspora, this space has never been fixed or static. It has always been a dynamic, performative and iterative space, a space where identity is always in question, is always in a state of becoming.

### Black Voids and Brutal Faces

Black cubes, squares and rectangles, in varying sizes, combinations and arrays, first begin to appear in two sets of smaller-scale drawings both titled *Black Cube Series* (2007) (figure 5). In many of these works, these forms anchor otherwise chaotic storms of signs, forms, lines and patterns. While on one hand these generic geometric forms, especially the cube, clearly reference the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine, they







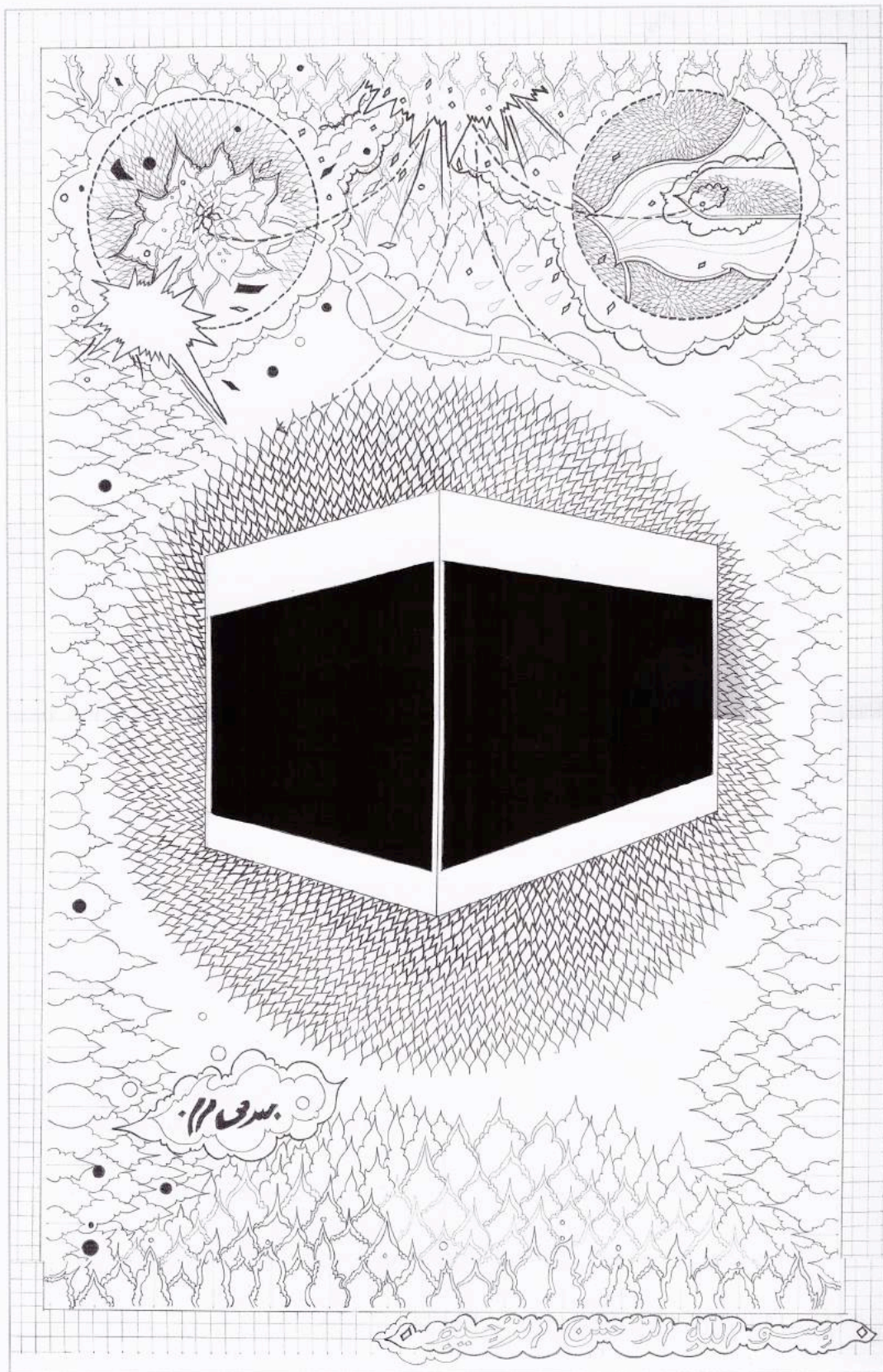
remain open to multiple meanings, simultaneously evoking Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), bringing Shah's practice into explicit dialogue with the history of Western Modernist abstraction.<sup>6</sup> Such forms reappear as compositional devices in works that follow, flat black voids that strongly reassert the surface against the illusionistic depths created with delicate graphite lines that fill the rest of the frames. The monumental triptych, *Emergent Structures: Relative noise, Planar landscape and Capital mass* (2011) (figure 6), demonstrates this play between depth and surface beautifully. While the large central panel has a clear horizon—where the perspectival orthogonals that fill out the bottom half terminate—the illusion of depth is disrupted by a black triangle, its top edge aligning with the horizon line while the opposite acute vertex points sharply down towards the lower left corner. Though the form is dynamic, all the tension and movement it suggests remains, like in a Constructivist composition, limited to the surface of the picture plane. In each of the two square flanking panels, a large black “H” functions similarly, sitting firmly and flatly on the picture plane, echoing the faint grid that fills the frame and, somewhat perversely, obstructing any suggestion of spatial depth behind it.

In the left panel of this triptych, a cluster of five vertical wedge-like structures remain visible behind this surface obstruction. While their nondescript character, like the cube in earlier works, allows for a variety of possible reads, they bear an uncanny resemblance to Mathias Goeritz and Luis Barragán's iconic *Towers of Satellite City* (1957–58) in Mexico City, and are arguably the first explicit reference to existing Modernist architecture in Shah's shifting practice.<sup>7</sup> Shah reuses this strategy in subsequent work, drawing on a specific iconography (and history)—of Modernist architecture, especially Brutalism—that is abstract to begin with, further complicating interpretations of her work that reduce it to discourses of identity politics, cultural authenticity and current geopolitics.

One of Shah's abiding interests since 2010 has been the relationship, in terms of both form and scale, of architectural structures and their surrounding landscapes. For example, *Hinterland Structures* (2011) (figure 4), a series of small black-and-white transparencies, documents examples of modest vernacular structures isolated against vast barren vistas that the artist encountered during a road trip across the American West. This body of work is driven by, on one hand, a need to try to understand the sheer hubris and unrepentant ego of Modernist architects like Le Corbusier, who triumphantly

4. Seher Shah, *Hinterland Structures (Shed church)*, 2011. Duratran in wooden lightbox; 12.7 x 17.78 x 8.89 cm. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.



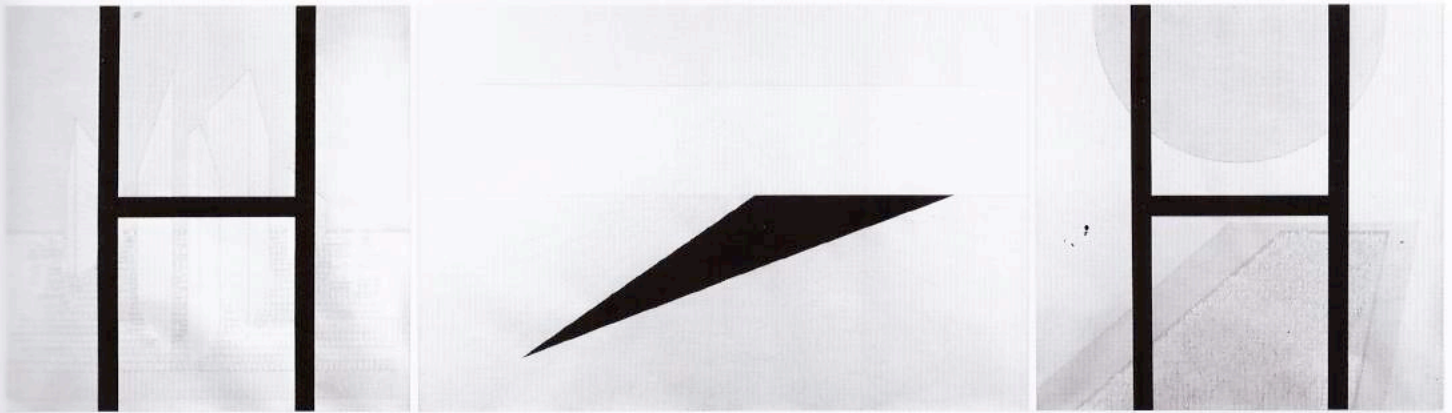


5. Seher Shah, Untitled #6, from *Black Cube Series II*, 2007. Graphite and gouache on paper; 76.2 x 55.88 cm. Courtesy Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.

imposed their dramatic, abstract forms and structures onto the landscape, and on the other, a fascination with the stark geometries, monumental forms and utopian aspirations—aesthetic, political and social—of the Brutalist movement he inspired.<sup>8</sup>

Considered to be the first Brutalist building, Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* (1952), in Marseille, France, has appeared repeatedly in Shah's work since 2011. In the monumental graphite and gouache on paper work, *Object Relic (Unité d'Habi-*





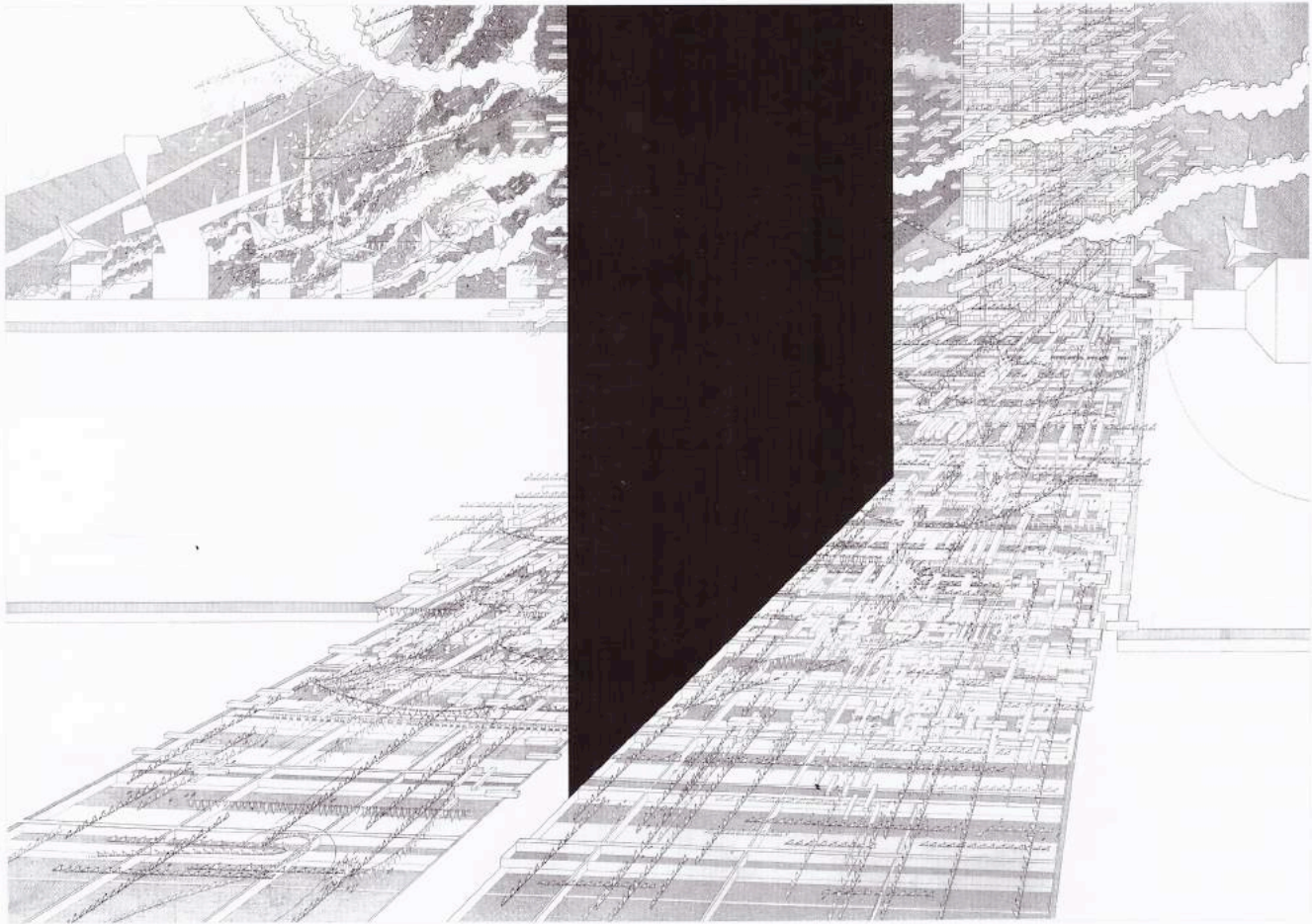
tation) (2011) (figure 7), the Unité's famous modular facade is stripped off the structure and laid flat, turned into a pattern of uneven alternating white and grey bands. Functioning as a partial and irregular perspectival grid, the facade, distorted as it recedes strongly back into the picture plane, ends abruptly in a vertical wall. Short strings of what appear to be flames, or flags, neatly vertical and horizontal at first, in alignment with the pattern below, begin to twist chaotically amidst swirling clouds a little further back. As the facade recedes, groups of small rectangular beams, lying flat, seem to rise up and float above it. An enormous opaque black wedge, its bottom edge running diagonally up along one of the perspectival lines of the facade underneath, bisects the composition, replacing its centre with a void that is both deep and flat. Though this entity may feel like an incongruous imposition, it helps balance the overall composition tonally, which is often the case with the "singular forms" Shah introduces.<sup>9</sup> Visually and spatially, this form is ambiguous and uncertain. While its flat top edge, which coincides with that of the paper, and its unrelenting blackness, make it appear like it sits flush with the picture plane, its diagonal bottom suggests a recession into space along the perspectival orthogonals, introducing an invisible torque entirely internal to this uncanny form.

Once detached from the building, the Unité facade becomes, for Shah, a free-floating, readymade compositional tool, a signifier with a specific referent that can be made universal through recontextualization, manipulation and distortion, a flexible surface that can be infinitely manipulated into different shapes, volumes and arrangements. It reappears in different guises throughout the series of drawings and a suite of etchings collectively titled *Unit Object* (2011–14) (figure 10), translated using standard architectural drafting conventions—plan, elevation, section—into various generic architectural elements like planes, walls, blocks, courtyards, gates and houses. Though in a different medium, Shah's *Capitol Complex* collages (2012–14) (figure 8) deploy a similar approach to the monumental complex of government buildings Le Corbusier designed for the planned state capital of Chandigarh. First, architectural elements are carefully excised out of black-and-white photographs of these structures. These decontextualized fragments are then playfully recombined, sometimes in conjunction with simple coloured forms and planes that echo the buildings' strong geometries, to create new abstract compositions. Freed from their architectural anchors, these elements become purely formal signs, emphasizing and exaggerating the ornamental potential of Le Corbusier's abstract Modernist designs, and challenging Adolf Loos' famous dismissal of ornament as crime, as the very antithesis of Modernist aesthetics.<sup>10</sup>

6. Seher Shah, *Emergent Structures: Relative noise, Planar landscape and Capital mass*, 2011. Graphite and gouache on paper; middle panel: 182.88 x 274.32 cm, side panels: 182.88 x 182.88 cm each. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES DEE.





7.  
Seher Shah, *Object Relic*  
(*Unité d'Habitation*), 2011.  
Graphite and gouache on  
paper; 182.88 x 264.16 cm.  
Courtesy Green Art Gallery,  
Dubai.

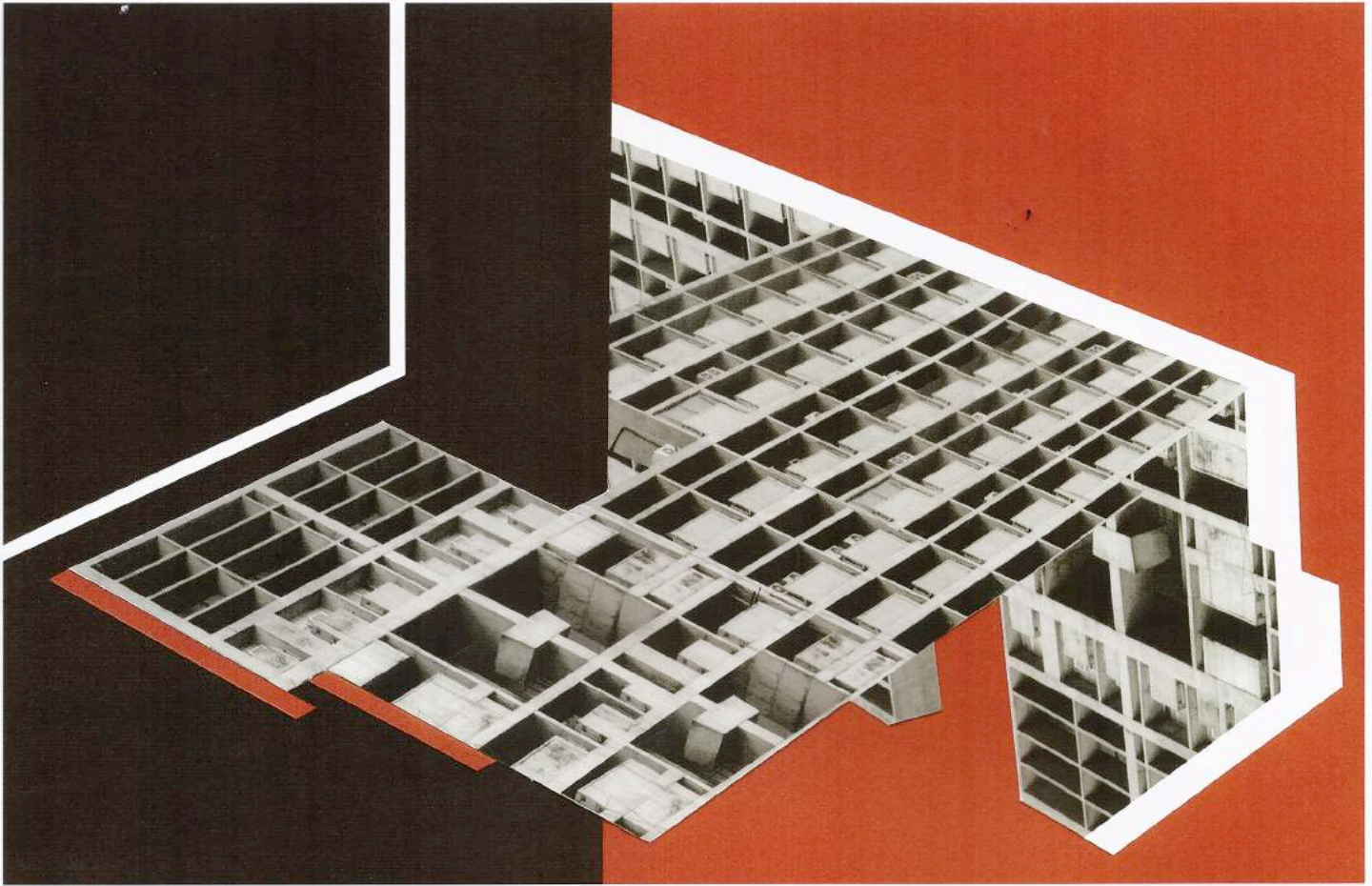
PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES DEE.

### Flatlands and Floating Worlds

Shah's most recent works appear calmer and more abstract, achieving an almost Zen-like grace. Rather than striving to achieve a yin-yang-like formal balance between two opposites, they seem to prefer to tap into the infinite potential of middle ground. Abandoning the heightened drama of one-point perspective, these works search for alternative approaches for creating an illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface.<sup>11</sup> In *Flatlands (scrim)* (2015) (figure 9), a large-scale multi-panel ink on paper drawing, the ground largely consists of a neutral field of parallel horizontal lines. These lines are interrupted at regular intervals in the top third of the composition, resulting in a pattern of alternating grey and white vertical bars. Shah's overall palette is softer and more controlled, as the opposition of black and white gives way to a quiet, delicate spectrum of greys. The intrusive black monolith has been relegated to the flanks. The void—formal, spatial, visual, existential—is no longer encountered as a moment of crisis but as inescapable fact that simply frames rather than disrupts ways of seeing, thinking and being.

In this drawing, depth is shallow, constructed through a gentle angled progression of implied parallel vertical planes that could, if needed, continue infinitely but do not. The space is not, however, stagnant or suffocating; there is room to breathe. Instead of being hurtled back into perspectival space, we are afforded the freedom to float around the central composition. A regular, gridded shell of a building, the *Unité* facade made generic, stands erect on the left, out of sync with the grid underneath it. Spatially disconnected from the foreground, a mini perspectival grid hovers in the back right, like an indeterminate distant background in an Old Master painting, possibly a tongue-in-cheek reference to past work. No longer coerced, our eyes are more





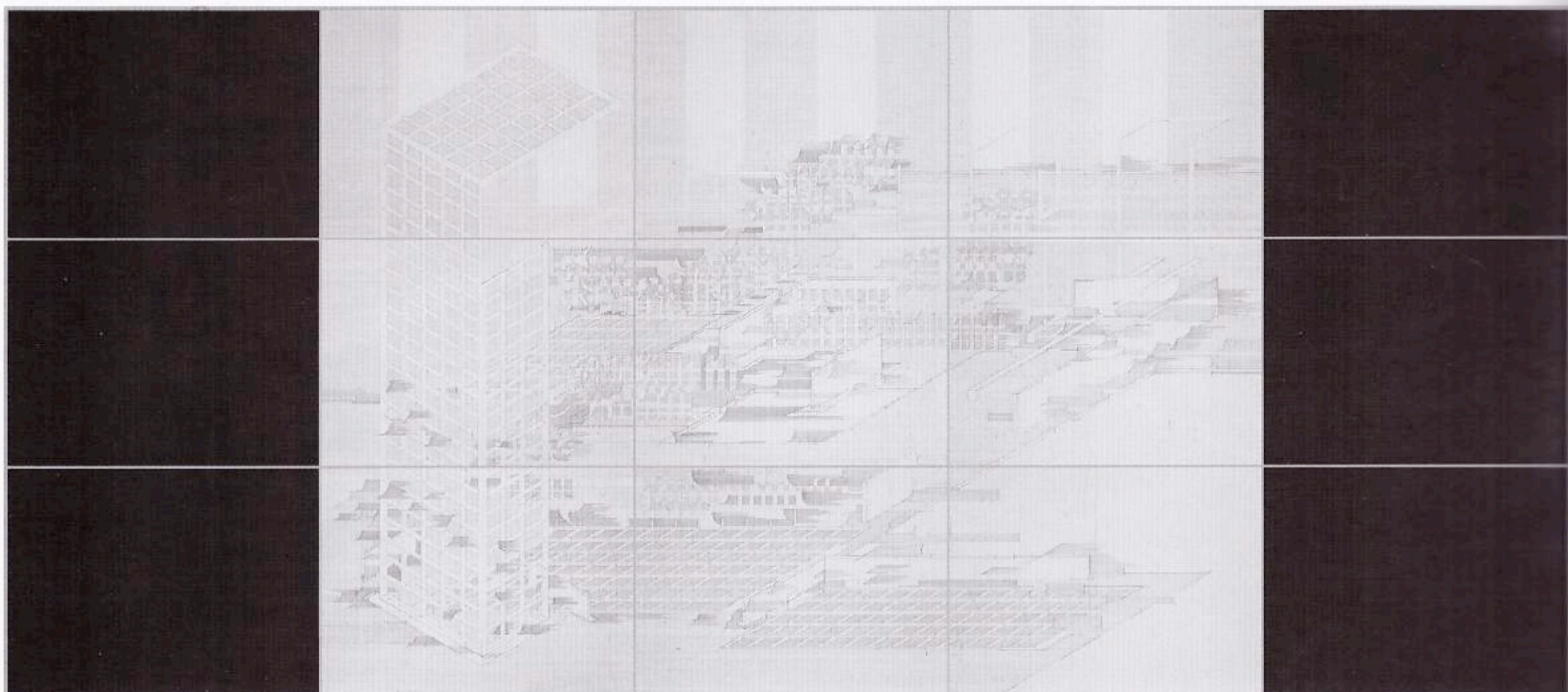
adaptive, retaining and even revelling in their autonomy, as they move slowly but self-assuredly through and around the uncertain and incomplete arrays of grids, walls and columns, more attentive to incidental details. We envision and experience this world slowly and gradually, we are primed to negotiate and compromise rather than confront, to register change in small incremental shifts.

In this particular universe, the details are more subtle, a rigid set of precise diagrammatic marks: arcs with stacks of horizontal lines extending off of one side, short blip-like verticals that both disrupt and emphasize organizational elements in the composition. Though executed with precision, most likely with the aid of a ruler and other drafting tools, these marks are no less intuitive, according to Shah, than the freehand drawn details in her earliest work. An intuitive mark is not automatically or necessarily gestural. It does not have to be an expression that is free of choice. It can also be the careful and decisive result of repetition and ritual, of training and obsession, of muscle memory as intuition.<sup>12</sup>

Given Shah's medium of choice, formal language and strategic use of abstraction, comparisons with Nasreen Mohamedi are hardly surprising and perhaps inevitable. But despite the carefully drawn arrays of lines and curves, the irregular grids and shallow uncertain spaces, the play with depth and surface, and the disintegration and reassembly of forms—all interests that these two artists share—maybe the strongest point of similarity between them lies here, in their uncanny ability to find ways to somehow balance precision and intuition.

8. Seher Shah, *Capitol Complex (red fold)*, 2014. Collage on paper; 27.94 x 35.56 cm. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.





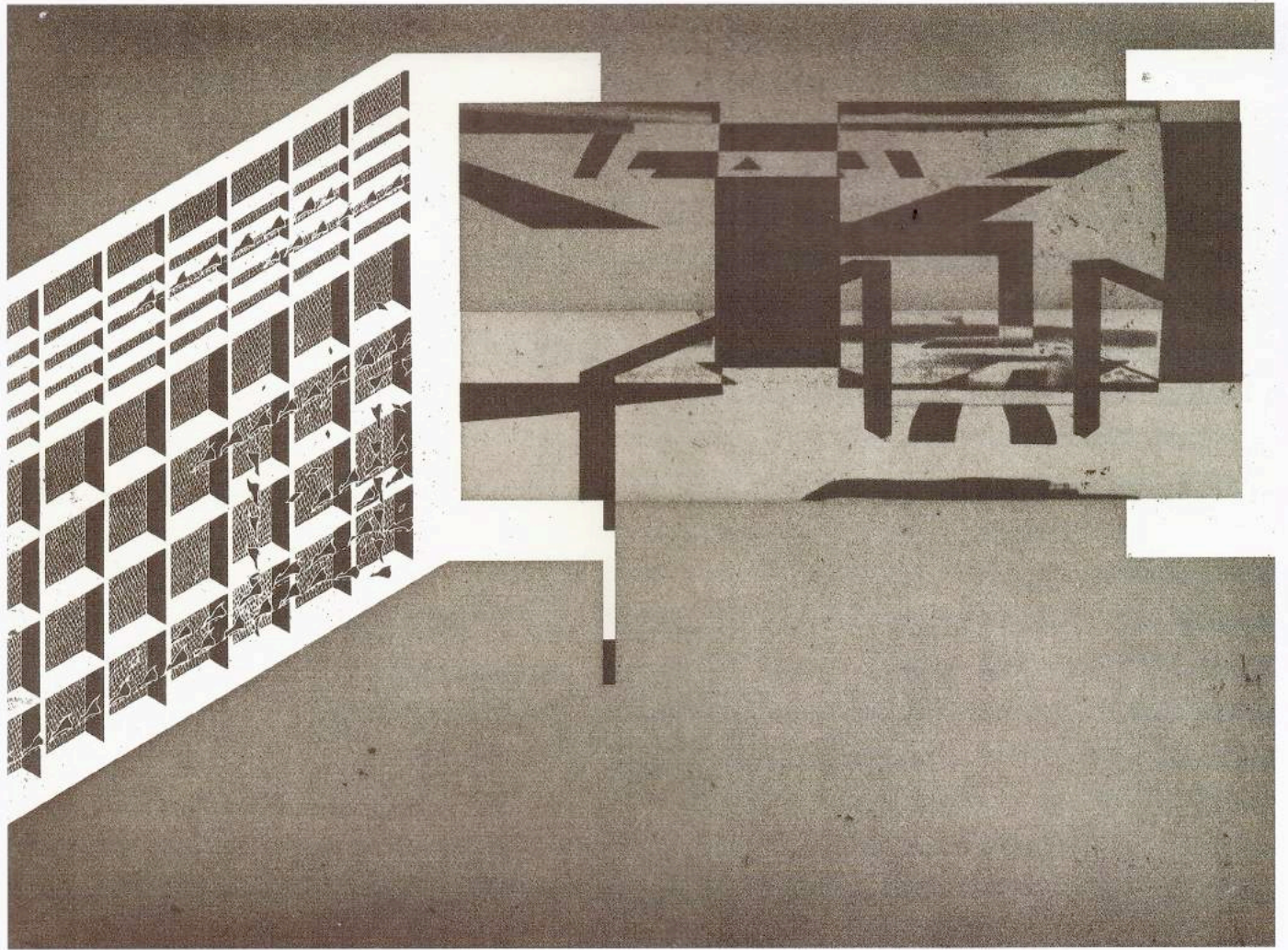
## NOTES

- 1 In an interview from 2007, Shah notes that the structures evoke both the courtyard of Islamic architecture and the nave of a Gothic church. See Tom Finkelpearl, "Jihad Pop: An Interview with Seher Shah", in Tom Finkelpearl and Valerie Smith, *Generation 1.5* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2009), pp. 112–17.
- 2 Alexander Keefe, "Superior Firepower, for now: Seher Shah's Black-light Landscapes", *Take on Art*, Vol. I, No. 1 (January–March 2010), pp. 58–60.
- 3 Tom Finkelpearl, "Jihad Pop". Shah also aligns this element of her practice with the tradition of "paper architecture", stand-alone abstract drawings by architects like Daniel Libeskind and Bernard Tschumi that explored the possibilities of architectural space and structure. See Murtaza Vali, "Ruins and Redemptions: A Conversation with Kamrooz Aram and Seher Shah", in *Brute Ornament: Kamrooz Aram and Seher Shah*, ed. Murtaza Vali (Dubai: Green Art Gallery, 2012), pp. 34–51; and Igor Siddiqui, "Architectural Migrations: Drawing Between Outside and Inside", in the brochure accompanying the exhibition *Constructed Landscapes: Seher Shah* held at AMOA/Arthouse, Austin, Texas, April 6–June 30, 2013.
- 4 I have made a comparable argument about Kamrooz Aram's oil paintings from the mid-2000s. See Murtaza Vali, "Kamrooz Aram: Of Flame and Splendour/Perry Rubenstein Gallery", *Bidoun*, No. 18 (Summer 2009). In 2012, I further explored these conceptual congruence by juxtaposing these bodies of work in a two-person show titled *Brute Ornament: Kamrooz Aram and Seher Shah* at Green Art Gallery, Dubai. See Vali (ed.), *Brute Ornament*.
- 5 Valerie Smith, "Seher Shah", in Finkelpearl and Smith, *Generation 1.5*, pp. 108–11.
- 6 Shah is not alone in evoking this double meaning of the black square/cube. It is also acknowledged in some of the early works of Babak Golkar, amongst other postcolonial/diaspora artists, and was one of the strands of inquiry in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015*, a 2015 exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery. See Iwona Blazwick and Magnus Af Petersens (eds.), *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015* (London: Whitechapel Gallery & Prestel, 2015).
- 7 In addition to the resemblance to Goeritz and Barragán's *Towers of Satellite City* (1957–58), Alan Gilbert suggests that these structures "also evoke the seven grouped structures constituting the original World Trade Center site and, more hauntingly, the cluster of angular buildings proposed for its rebuilding". See Alan Gilbert, "Utopian Shards: Seher Shah's Recent Drawings", in Vali (ed.), *Brute Ornament*, pp. 18–33.
- 8 While there are many subtle feminist positions adopted in Shah's work, this critique may be the most explicit.

9.  
Seher Shah,  
*Flatlands (scrim)*, 2015.  
Ink on NT Rasha silver paper  
with NT Rasha shikkoku black  
paper; 15-panel drawing;  
236 x 546 cm.  
Courtesy Green Art Gallery,  
Dubai.

PHOTOGRAPH: RANDHIR SINGH.





- 9 The phrase “singular forms” is borrowed from Pepe Karmel, *Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms 1966–2009* (New York: Mnuchin Gallery in association with Matthew Marks Gallery, 2013). Though they may lack his vivid colour, Shah’s shapes do seem to share the elementary presence and power of Kelly’s shaped canvases.
- 10 Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” [1908],

in Adolf Opel (ed.), *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1998), pp. 167–76.

- 11 Massimo Scolari, *Oblique Drawing: A History of Anti-Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).
- 12 Seher Shah, personal interview with the author, April 10, 2016.

10.  
Seher Shah, *Unit Object (landscape view)*, 2014. Etching and aquatint on Arches paper; 58 x 66 cm. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.