



**BRUTALISM IN BLUE:
THE ARTISTS' VIEW
LOOKING UP AT
60s MARGATE
TIME FOR ACTION ON
CLIMATE CHANGE**

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Two Delhi-based artists make cyanotype images of brutalist buildings. Catherine Croft spoke to them

ARTIST'S VIEW
SEHER SHAH & RANDHIR SINGH



A spectacular wall of bright blue images irresistibly drew my attention to the Green Art Gallery stand at last year's massive Frieze art fair, held in luxurious tents in Regent's Park. A Dubai-based gallery was showing the work of two Delhi-based artists, and yet here was Chamberlin, Powell & Bon's Barbican Estate. I was intrigued: British brutalism from a fresh perspective, and in an international context.

All the images in their work at Frieze – some of which are illustrated here – are cyanotypes. This is a very basic photographic printing process developed by the scientist Sir John Herschel in 1842, as a way of copying diagrams. When paper coated with a solution of iron salts (ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide) was exposed to sunlight, the salts oxidised and turned Prussian Blue. Any areas shielded from the sun remained white, and after washing away the solution a fixed image remained. Herschel's friend Anna Atkins, a botanist, used the process to record plants and

ferns, and in 1843 published *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, the first book ever to be illustrated by photography.

Several artists have recently explored the process. Jessie Brennen's 2014 graphite study of Robin Hood Gardens before demolition, *A Fall of Ordinarity and Light*, was accompanied by another direct process, taking rubbings of residents' front door mats. Then, at The Green Backyard, a community gardening project in Peterborough that was threatened by a proposed development, Brennen prepared a set of 100 cyanotypes which – alongside oral history interviews – were part of a successful campaign to save the site. With a link between historic processes and the materiality of brutalism already established, I was interested to see it taken further. In fact, Seher Shah and Randhir Singh's cyanotypes are more 'hybrid' than most: rather than directly placing found objects on the paper, a full-sized photographic negative is used.

Above: Artist's Rooms installation view at Jameel Arts Centre, 2019
Opposite page: #1 from 'Barbican Estate' (2018)

Previous pages left: #4 from 'Brownfield Estate' (cyanotype from *Studies in Form* project, 2018)



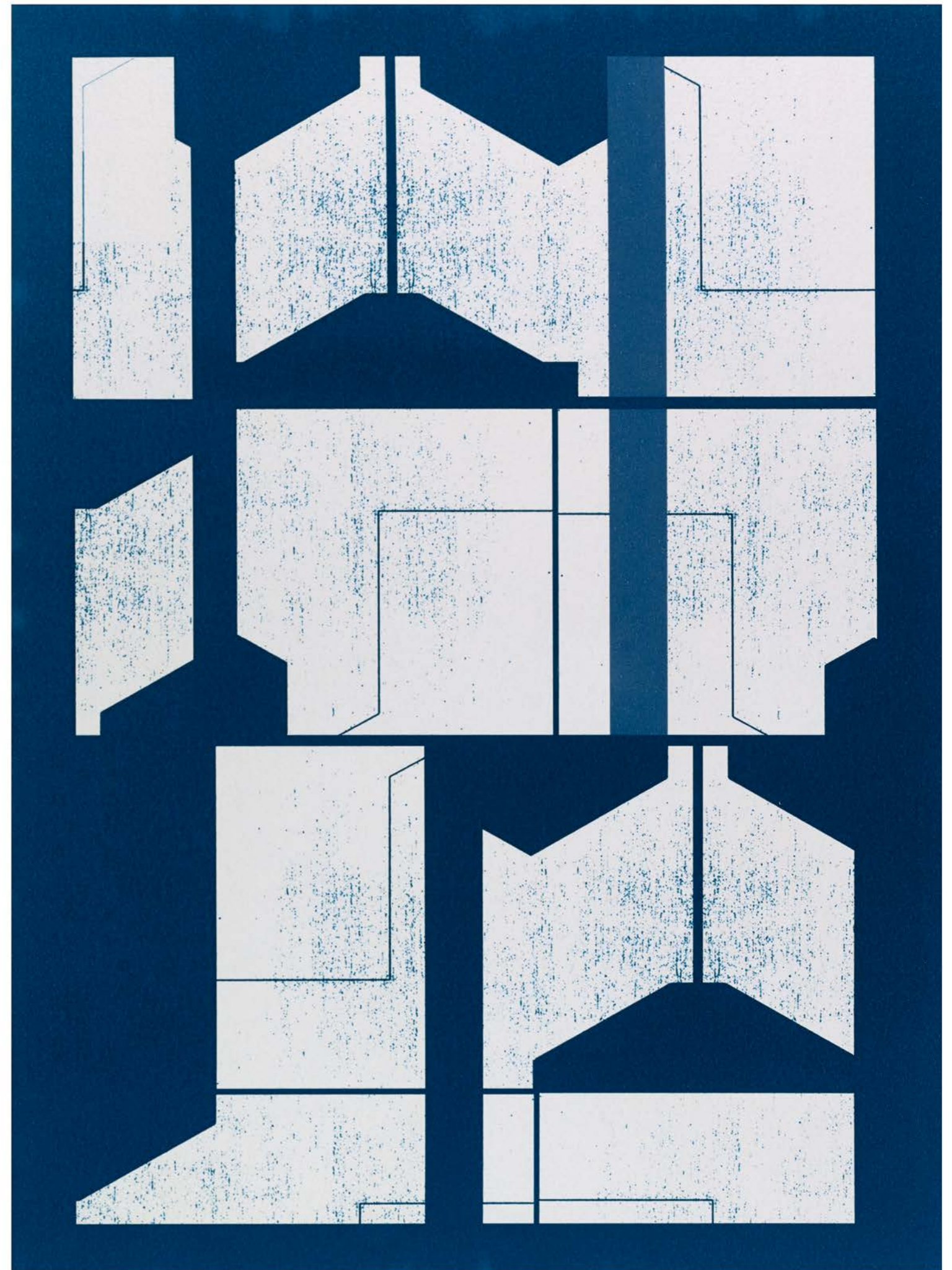
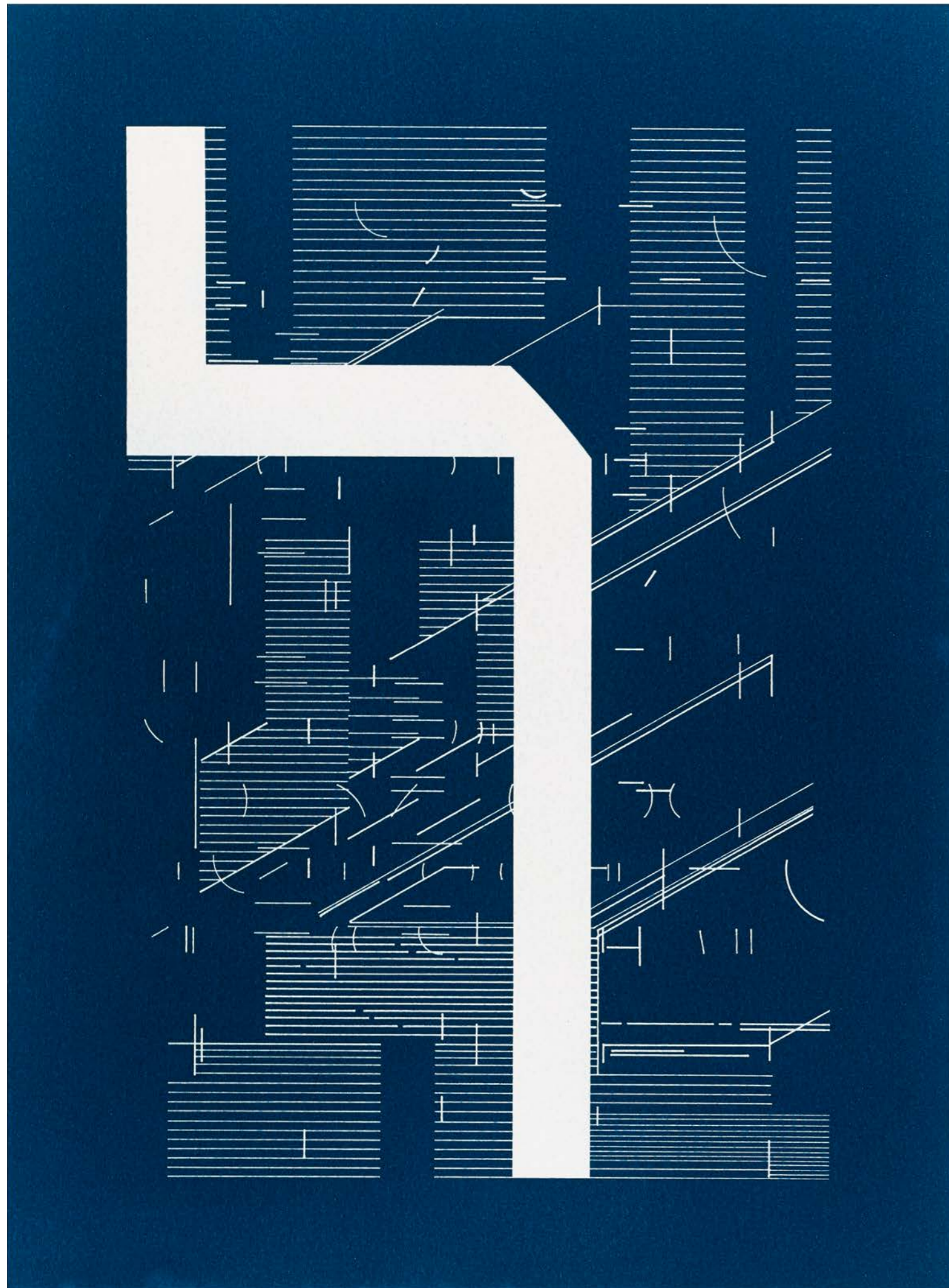
THEY WANT TO EXPLORE THE GROUND BETWEEN 'THE PRECISE FORMALISM OF A BLUEPRINT AND THE INTUITIVE NATURE OF DRAWING'

The couple, who are married, work both independently and in collaboration. They both trained as architects in the US (Seher studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, and Randhir at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a private research university at Troy, New York) before working as architects for several years in New York City. They feel that this combination of architectural education and design-office experience has been fundamental to the way in which they approach their current practice. Seher is an artist, while Randhir is an architectural photographer who undertakes commissions for publicity and exhibition purposes alongside his art practice.

They explain that 'how to think through space and architectural aesthetics, how architecture is situated in the landscape, and what issues that brings about' are aspects of their work that have connected their education to their respective practices. They are also interested in the communication tools used by the architectural

profession: often working with representational methods such as plans and elevations, they want to explore the ground between 'the precise formalism of a blueprint and the intuitive nature of drawing'.

The work at Frieze was the 'Barbican Estate' chapter of *Studies in Form*, a major, ongoing collaborative project which has six components. These include four multi-image explorations of individual sites, including the Barbican and Erno Goldfinger's Brownfield Estate, the latter dominated by Balfron Tower. The two others are the Dentsu Head Office in Tokyo (Kenzo Tange, 1967) which is the headquarters of an advertising agency, and Akbar Bhavan, New Delhi (Shivnath Prasad, 1969), which was once a hotel but now houses a university and the Ministry of Overseas Affairs. Each building is represented by a portfolio of cyanotypes, of which there are 127 in total. The photography was not undertaken specifically for this project, nor is it important which of them shot which





Previous pages: left, #7 from 'Flatlands Blueprints' and right, #14 from 'Hewn Blueprints' (2018)

Above: #6 from 'Akbar Bhavan' (2018)
Top: #2 from 'Denstsu Head Office' (2018)

'FRAGMENTING THE ARCHITECTURE WAS A WAY TO EXPAND OUR INTERESTS IN THE SCULPTURAL NATURE OF THE SITES WE WERE DRAWN TO'

image, as they are drawn from an extensive joint archive. The UK buildings were first visited after Seher completed a residency at a print studio in Glasgow in 2014.

There is a range of broad and more closely-cropped angles of view, with considerable manipulation of the photographic raw material using a range of processes. They explain that 'fragmenting the architecture was a way to expand our interests in the sculptural nature of the architectural sites we were drawn to. How light falls onto a stair, the openings and thresholds of buildings situated in the landscape, and the textures of the elevations were all aspects we wanted to explore.' Seher points out that it's not possible to get an overall idea of the Barbican from *Studies in Form*; instead it is an 'experiential immersion' which is offered, and an opportunity to compare the physical forms and textures of the place and the different sites shown alongside. For them, the social and economic contexts of the buildings

hold less interest than the sculptural and formal correspondences. The remaining elements of *Studies in Form* are a series of cyanotype drawings, 'Flatlands Blueprints', and a series of woodcut-based prints, 'Hewn Blueprints'.

Mastering the cyanotype process has been a challenge. Achieving a wide tonal range as well as really crisp lines was important, and took many attempts to perfect. It was important to place value on the handmade, says Seher: a particularly pertinent point, as the highly-crafted construction of brutalist buildings is often overlooked. The printmaking process involves coating each sheet of archival watercolour paper by hand and then exposing it, along with a negative printed on transparent plastic sheet. Rather than sunlight, they used an ultraviolet light-box with a vacuum table, exposed for 24 minutes per image. The print is then washed, dried and flattened.

When first shown at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2018, the elements were simply pinned

on to the wall in a loose way 'like a college crit', and the boundaries between the different 'chapters' were merged, so that it wasn't totally clear where one building ended and the next took over. At the second exhibition, at the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai last year, everything was framed much more formally. In part this was a pragmatic response to visitors' compulsion to touch the prints (they do have a compelling physicality to them) and each building had its own defined portrait. They would like to add further buildings for subsequent showings, and no doubt explore other methods of display too.

While each of them still pursues their individual work, it seems fairly clear that both will continue to be inspired by the buildings of this period and the ways they are seen and described. The results are both viscerally beautiful and intellectually challenging.