



Two Conversations

Seher Shah
Pakistani-American artist

Glenn D. Lowry
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Detail of *The Barbican Estate (#1)*, from the *Studies in Form* series, Seher Shah and Randhir Singh, 2018.
Cyanotype print on Arches Aquarelle paper; 55.8 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Art & the Political Moment

An Opportunity to Shift Perceptions

“I am not naive enough to think that an artist is going to bring about change. Even if one becomes an activist, it is hard. But literature, the arts, any kind of cultural space can shift perceptions.”



For Seher Shah, the practice of the contemporary is a language, at once distant and familiar; it has to do with place consciousness, fragments of things and in-between spaces.



Argument from Silence (broken limb), Seher Shah, 2019. Polymer photogravure on Velin Arches paper; 76 x 63.5 cm. Published by the Glasgow Print Studio. Courtesy the artist.

Marg: Seher, contemporary art is marked by very diverse, often conflicting, uses of materials, techniques and concepts. While it is difficult to adopt any single methodology to study the histories, practices and futures of the contemporary, there is a felt need for some tools of navigation. As an artist, how do you make sense of this space?

Seher Shah (SS): We look to the contemporary as something that is in the present, with a view into the past, and potentially, a projection into the future. These thresholds have become interesting to work with in relation to looking at works which deal with the past. However, when trying to unpack this term, I look at “contemporary” as something to do with place and consciousness; this awareness of place which relates to time in different ways.

I wanted to discuss what the contemporary meant when I was a student in the mid-1990s in the United States and what it means for me now as an artist. The public arts high school in New York City where I studied was extremely diverse, with not only multiplicities of voices, but also disciplines. Later, while studying architecture, I was greatly influenced by “the contemporary”, the deconstructivist movement—thinkers and practitioners, like Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid and Peter Eisenman. Architecture allowed me access into different fields in various ways: perspective drawing, history, space, materiality. This has helped my current practice as well, which fragments information and also takes a slightly confrontational look at classic architecture and established moulds.

In the past few years, alongside moving from New York to New Delhi, I have become more aware of the contradictions inherent within the subject matter I work with simultaneously. This has led to the unlearning and relearning of the knowledge and narratives, accumulated over time from different places.

This also has made fragmentation and in-between spaces quite important for me. I have been thinking about my practice of the contemporary as a language, at once distant and familiar. Moving back to South Asia involved finding how to connect with this language, and understand this moment, which shows extreme nationalist rhetoric; it forces divisions which have come from a colonial past.

What does it mean to be an artist and be confronted with these different shifts? What does it mean to look at the platforms which artists are given, some of them clandestine, some difficult to navigate? For instance, what happens to my practice when it enters a museum space? What does it mean when one sees the works in different contexts and when one sees these works in the flesh?

I am still learning to understand how multiple sets of voices and identities can occur simultaneously and how one could navigate that contemporary as an artist: Some of these are indeed problematic and raise issues of ethics.

Marg: You lead us to the “other” question: What happens to the engagement of an artist with materials, her own identities and with locations when entering the viewer’s space? Your intent as an artist may not be apparent to everyone. For instance, the associations across space and time which you have worked with in *Argument from Silence* may be interpreted differently by others. What could be the factors influencing the reception of contemporary art and how do you respond to them?

SS: Artists who come from a particular background may have a set of anxieties about the categorization and reception of their work as there are so many dominant narratives that try to constrain them. But those who straddle a variety of cultures have operated at multiple scales across geographies and have dismantled these narratives in different ways.

When I started out, I worked on a series of large perspective drawings, looking at spaces through personal memory. The categorization and reception of these in post-9/11 New York had much to do with identity and where I was from. When one is developing as an artist, the question is, how much of the weight of a particular identity does one want projected onto oneself?

In recent years, I have been fortunate to come across projects—the Students’ Biennale at Kochi (2014) and the Dhaka Art Summit (2018 and 2020), for instance—which have opened my ways of thinking and also shown me how many histories are rendered and made invisible till someone brings them to light.

At the Dhaka Art Summit, I saw Vali Mahlouji’s *A Utopian Stage*, which was examining the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts, held in Iran every summer through the decade of 1967–1977, bringing together avant garde movements from within Asia, Latin America, Africa, Europe and the United States. *A Utopian Stage* tried to articulate the implications of that festival and its many kinships and connections.

When I walked into that exhibition at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2018, it was one of the few moments when I felt more connected to *that* contemporary, *that* avant garde which happened many decades ago than anything around me. I saw kinships across geographies and across time as well. When I left that exhibition, a certain history or a certain historical canon, where one can look at practitioners, became important for me and was made visible through the exhibition. None of us works in a vacuum: That was a powerful moment of connectivity.

Another project which had an impact on me was Zahia Ramani’s *Seismography of Struggles* (Dhaka Art Summit, 2020), which looked at journals produced from the mid-18th century to the 1960s and ’70s from non-European vantage points. It is through such projects that I have



The Dhaka Art Summit 2020, Bangladesh. Courtesy Randhir Singh. The summit, unknown 50 years ago, is today a major site for some of the world's best contemporary art.

been trying to unlearn—and also relearn—hierarchies of how aesthetics and histories are shared.

The space of the studio also becomes important; it is the place where I work and draw. The interiority of the studio space is in contrast to the outside framework for the work. When the work leaves the studio, there are anxieties about how it is shown, the language being used to discuss it: I am trying to find a way to deal with these issues. Ultimately, the making of the work is the most critical. To have it seen by different sets of eyes from radically different viewpoints is the privilege of work that has a life outside the studio space.

Marg: You talked about the influence of other artists on you across time and geographies. Do you think artists' experiences and intense expressions at such a time of crisis might inform or influence academic or other public spaces impactfully?

SS: Delhi was already going through such extreme social and political issues when the pandemic struck and the

lockdown happened. When the environment and the context around one are fraught with so many opaque happenings, it is challenging to navigate them—and that will continue.

What we are seeing today is unprecedented. It is a privilege to have a place to stay in. We are dealing with events at a macro scale, and so I am not naive enough to think that an artist is going to bring about change. But I do think that the importance of the arts and literature and any kind of cultural space is in their power to shift perceptions on a singular scale.

This is an opportunity—to learn, to unravel these issues for oneself and speak in a way that has some resonance over time, at least for oneself. How does one think through these extreme moments when there is a correlation between the virus numbers, the governments in place and the ways in which matters have unfolded? I know this is not a political conversation, but everything is, ultimately, political.



Ways to Make the Past Different

“What is contemporary in New York may not be what is contemporary elsewhere. So, the museum becomes a petri dish for the playing out of different issues, a space for different practices.”



For Glenn D. Lowry, the role of a museum should be to look at how the present impacts our understanding of the past as opposed to how the past impacts our understanding of the present.



Installation view of South Korean artist Haegue Yang's *Handles*, at the Museum of Modern Art's Donald and Catherine Marron Family Atrium, Fall 2019. Courtesy MoMA.

Marg: Glenn, you are at once an administrator, art historian, curator, educator. Let us look at the contemporary and its manifestations from your space with its multiple layers.

Glenn D. Lowry (GL): All art is contemporary at one moment and then not. At any given time, there are only a small number of artists who occupy the space of the mind, help one see through the filter of their work and really shape the way one views contemporary art.

My generation grew up thinking the art of the 1960s and '70s as contemporary. But for artists coming into their own today, that is historical, 50 years old and will soon touch a hundred. Again, what we argue to be contemporary in New York, even at this time, may not be the same as what is contemporary in Auckland or Sao Paulo or Mumbai. They may share certain sets of issues, but have very different manifestations.

Yet, my own training as a historian of Islamic art, particularly of India, makes it almost pointless for me to consider that there is a singular location for any one practice. One understands, when studying another culture, that there is a richness to all of them of which we should become aware.

Also, in the last 50 years, a deep recognition has emerged in the United States that as art is being made all over the world, if one wants to be in any kind of contemporary dialogue, it means one is also in a global dialogue.

Now, when one is trying to weave all this into a meaningful understanding of the contemporary, I try to think of what the museum can bring to this conversation. I see it as a petri dish in which different cultures can play themselves out and grow; an interactive space for the

public to experience different practices from across time and space at this moment.

It helps one see that while the kind of work that artists make may change depending on location, it is still their work, engaging with their contemporary. Artists work where they want to work, and for them, the opportunity to operate in different locations provides the possibility of articulating different modalities to their own work and responding to different circumstances. They are interested in making art and pulling together all the resources available to them to create. Museums, in that sense, provide ideal locations for this. They may be different from alternative public spaces, but that is not very relevant to me because we bring to the fore an enormous amount of support for an artist.

So, I look at the contemporary through the filter of the museum. It helps me recognize that the contemporary is a constantly changing set of issues and ideas. It is neither of a moment nor is it of a place. It is an evolving set of often competing and conflicting ideas and our responsibility as a museum is to provide the platform, the space in which these competing issues and ideas can, in a way, debate with themselves.

Our role as a museum of modern and contemporary art is to look at how the present impacts our understanding of the past as opposed to how the past impacts our understanding of the present. It can help us shift our canonical understanding of the modern itself and see it as a work in progress in the contemporary.

We must make the past different because of what we know today, too; in a way, rearticulate the relationship, precisely because the present has given us new information, new issues, new ideas to contend with and to look at how

that might inform our thinking about the immediate past, in particular.

Marg: In a world which is so fragmented, it is time and space that bring one chances. A museum is a site of possibilities for art studies too. It can bring art practice, art criticism, art history and art education together under a contemporary roof. Where are museums heading?

GL: One of the fascinating trends to have emerged in the last decade or so is that some of the world's best thinking and work are occurring in places that 50 years ago were not necessarily on anyone's map as major sites of contemporary art. The Dhaka Art Summit is a perfect example. It is one of the rare moments when one sees artists and curators doing extraordinary work, taking risks that may have been very difficult to take in Delhi, New York or Berlin. The same is true for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale or the Sharjah Art Foundation.

These spaces have informed our practice too. When we reopened the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, in October 2019, after years of rethinking, it was, on the one hand, to offer a different understanding of our collection—one that was far more complex and nuanced by the introduction of voices from elsewhere in the world. On the other, it also began to unpack the idea that the canonical itself was always under pressure. It was more interesting to think about the museum as constantly changing than it was to think about it as being formally established as an iconic, monolithic idea.

This is important because artists make connections that many of us might never have thought about. So, we consciously invited several artists to intervene. Haegue Yang, for instance, took over our atrium and meditated on the kind of formal language of European modernism as refracted through her own experiences as a female Korean artist. She created these creatures that live in our atrium and are manipulated by performers, invoking the works of artists like Sophie Taeuber-Arp, but also totally repositioning them as almost ritualistic objects which could have been seen in a temple setting. And Philippe Parreno used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create a living being that one encountered, walking into the museum—a kind of breathing, animate object.

Dayanita Singh's work, *Museum of Chance*, which we acquired, is in itself a meditation and what a museum could be. When one introduces the notion of chance, it inverts stereotypical ideas about museums and opens the space for the unexpected: New York-based artist Amy Sillman was invited to play with our collection itself. She came up with an installation called *The Shape of Shape*, which was an undertaking about how artists often look at art. As historians, we may be trained to think about what something means and where it comes from. The

artist looks at it and says, "What does it look like; how does that rhyme with something else I know?" So, Amy brought together from our collection literally hundreds of objects that no curator would have ever thought went together. Yet, of course, she made them into a whole that was utterly magical.

So, today, central to the space which we offer as a museum is the role of living artists to challenge, amplify, articulate, explain what we do.

Marg: Let us look at the institutional challenges that you are facing at this time. As a museum director, how do you deal with the aspirations, conflicts and struggles for continuity that are all simultaneously foregrounded by the current global crisis?

GL: The unfolding of the pandemic, at least in the United States, did reveal the incapacity of a government to meaningfully intervene. We are in a psychological crisis, an existential crisis, which has been made more complicated by the economic catastrophe, with millions of people unemployed and businesses going bankrupt. It is a challenge for every institution—whether a museum, university, library or civic government. But we ask ourselves now: What does this mean in terms of how a museum operates, not just in terms of what it collects and displays? How does its staff come together? How does it negotiate these fraught issues? How does it create a space in which the complex issues of the moment can be discussed, negotiated and resolved in a way that allows for new understandings of art and art history?

We already have this fragility which is shaking any notion of who we are, and add to it, the responses to the death of George Floyd and so many other black men and women, which have caused a rethink and a reckoning around race, justice and equity. So, we're not going to let the crisis shift our attention away from these issues. We are going to stay with them until we arrive at something meaningful.

Whether we are able to do that or not is an open question, but that's how I think of our institution. We have this opportunity. We cannot ignore it, and if we deal with it well, a very different kind of experience can result for our public in the space of the museum because we should be doing very different types of installations, exhibitions and programmes. This moment is a very complicated brew; but I think of it as a unique, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to face realities, which, by and large, we have not done until now.

(Based on Marg's inaugural conversation "Contemporary Art: Histories, Practices, Futures" in the webinar series, Futures of Art Studies, held on September 2, 2020. Transcribed and abridged by Aastha Singh.)

The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Gallery



Museum of Chance, Dayanita Singh, 2013. Around 164 black-and-white photographs taken over a span of 30 years, arranged here on moveable hand-built teak panels. Courtesy MoMA.

