

Seher Shah *When Words Disappear into Trees*

Seher Shah penned an intimate journal to accompany her solo exhibition “When Words Disappear into Trees” at Dubai’s Green Art Gallery. The



SEHER SHAH, *Ruined Score*, 2020, etchings on Velin Arches 300 gsm paper, 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

painful prose relates the inadequacy of language to aptly express the full emotional breadth of the sentient experience; as the artist writes, “I have been drawn to the ways that the fragmented and incomplete line falls

between a desire to communicate and the inability to do so.” While coherence and clarity are crucial to Shah, she makes it known that she’d rather her artworks carry the burden of eloquence. “There’s a fragility in expressing your thoughts, but I let the interplay between space and objects do that for me. Together with the viewers, they construct a language,” she explained to me over Zoom. In “When Words Disappear into Trees,” it was a language that spoke to an overwhelming absence.

Upon entry, one is instantly drawn to *Ruined Score* (2020), a set of 12 etchings, displayed in freestanding, glistening glass vitrines that formed an L shape in the middle of the gallery. To take a closer look, one must bend over, head down, as if reading a book, creating an

enhanced intimacy that would not have been experienced had the works been mounted on a wall. The soft textured surfaces of Velin Arches paper enclosed in glass bore the marks of drypoint experimentation using metal sourced from Old Delhi. A continuation of the artist’s long-term study in intaglio printmaking with the Glasgow Print Studio, the etchings combine fragments of architectural drawings and music notations, creating an uncharted visual terrain that communicates neither fully and results in a sort of ocular creole.

Other works engage with the silence that perforates history as a consequence of revisionism. In *Argument from Silence* (2019), a portfolio of ten polymer photogravure prints, Shah and photographer Randhir Singh investigate the Gandhara sculptures that were divided between the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh and the Lahore Museum after long and complex negotiations between the two newly formed governments of India and Pakistan in the wake of the 1947 Partition. Sculptures of various sizes and stylistic denominations are materialized in the prints; the addition of heavy drawing lines in oil and ghostly graphite traces interrupts the scene with a sense of absence that swells and coalesces in the rich tonalities of black. Here, Shah meditates on the fissures in the relationship between object, history, and architecture, zeroing in on the displacement and estrangement of these objects in a foreign environment and the fraught connotations of

the collection’s division during Partition, which irretrievably destroyed tangible and intangible heritage, uprooted 15 million South Asians, and resulted in over a million deaths. This historical event has been refracted through nationalist blame-shifting and occidental bothsiding that underplay the devastation. And both narratives, in their blinkered approach, fail the potential of truth.

Perhaps the loudest display of absence was Shah’s *Night* (2018), a series of oil-on-rag-paper vignettes in which she attempts to articulate space through darkness. Nightfall, overwhelming in its power and consistent in its arrival, manifests the absence of light. The landscape drawings, rendered with heavy oil marks, describe how darkness spatially eviscerates light through hints of weakly illuminated architectural elements such as a wall or a step, and the edges and corners of built environments. “I construct real and imagined spaces,” Shah said. “I have been interested in the weight of the heavy oil mark to describe that.”

Intrinsic to all of the artist’s attempts at articulating and visualizing absence is a recognition of the inadequacies, failures, and omissions in textual language. “I am learning how to listen to a city through the fragments it reveals,” declared Shah, and perhaps, as an extension, to learn to decode the silence between words: a cavity in syntax that has done more to amass truth than words have to obscure it.

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