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SEHER SHAH

Single Utopias

ART BASEL | STATEMENTS

15-18 JUNE 2017



Seher Shah, *Single Utopias (Golconde I, Pondicherry)*, 2017
Graphite on paper, 127 x 101.6 cm

Utopia is a slippery idea. For as many times as utopian projects have dimly failed, some have left legacies that linger in our landscapes, lasting testament to humankind's idealistic efforts to break with the status quo.

Extending her by now well-known exploration of Brutalist architecture, Seher Shah examines utopia as a succession of single moments—these isolated “uprisings” when ideology and technology fused in an architectural expression of social reform.

For her Art Basel project, Shah continues to work across drawing and sculpture, contemplating the aesthetics of two buildings that encapsulate solemn materiality and sculptural might, but also a singular idealism. Golconde (1935-42) in Pondicherry, India, is a humble building, almost insular in its stance. A dormitory for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Golconde is the union of the Modernist credo with the vernacular context, at the fulcrum of ideology and spirituality. Tokyo's Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972), an emblem of the Japanese Metabolism movement, is a tower composed of modules—that mainstay of Modernism. The repetitive, cantilevered capsules captured a spirit of social reform hovering between pragmatism and idealism. In settling her gaze on these two structures, Shah visually and materially interrogates how architecture responds to ideology.

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Using a drawing technique developed in her *Brutalist Traces* series (2015), Shah almost dissolves the two buildings: the fine graphite lines outline “ghosted” images of these structures, teetering between presence and absence. Both the Golconde’s louvered façade and the metastasizing modules of Nakagin Capsule Tower are eerily freeze-framed as residual after-images. Shah uses line not to faithfully render the repetitive linearity or recurring modularity, but rather to abstract and erase.

If line functions almost as material in the drawings, the floor-bound cast iron installation amplifies materiality into three dimensions. The aesthetic of repetition at work in both Golconde and the Nakagin Capsule Tower is fertile ground for developing the cast iron piece. The drawings inspire the sculpture: not only are formal components of the former echoed in the latter, but their shared materiality is palpable—the leaden graphite, the hazy contours, the craggy surface of the cast iron and its elemental heft. The sculpture further plays with the tension between singular and multiple: just as the Nakagin’s modules fit into a composite whole, or Golconde’s louvered lines comprise a fully mobile façade, so too are the singular components of the floor-filling sculpture inserted into a wider grammar of multiplicity.

For Shah, there is an idealism inherent in the aesthetics of these two buildings; these very aesthetics seem to superintend how the structures are meant to be inhabited. With *Single Utopias*, the artist continues to mine Brutalist architecture, yet shifts her exploration into novel and somewhat surprising realms. In her drawings, she upends the autonomous, almost rebellious stance of the Brutalist building by casting it as an “absent” presence. Yet she fathoms the sculptural quality of the buildings—the burgeoning modules, the layered linearity—extrapolating it into cast iron. Together, the works constitute a confident new chapter in her on-going practice of re-shaping architectural representation, now within the context of utopian moments.

Seher Shah

Seher Shah received her Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1998.

Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include: *Of Absence and Weight*, Nature Morte, New Delhi, India (2016); *The Lightness of Mass*, Green Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE (2016), *Ways of Seeing*, Gauri Gill and Seher Shah, Experimenter, Kolkata, India (2014), *30 | 60 | 90*, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India (2013); *Constructed Landscapes*, AMOA-Art House, The Jones Center, Austin, TX, USA (2013), *Radiant Lines*, Nature Morte, Berlin, Germany (2012); and *Brute Ornament*, two-person exhibition with Kamrooz Aram at Green Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE (2012).

Selected group shows include: *Constructs / Constructions*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India (2015); *Scenes for a New Heritage*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA (2015); *Geometries of Difference: New Approaches to Ornament and Abstraction*, The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY, USA (2015); *WORKING SPACE around memory and perception*, The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India (2015); *Below Another Sky*, Glasgow Print Studio, Glasgow, UK (2015); *The Language of Human Consciousness*, Athr Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (2014); *Observed Ratios*, The James Gallery at CUNY Graduate Center, New York, USA (2013); *Decenter: An exhibition on the Centenary of the 1913 Armory Show*, the Abrons Art Center, New York, USA (2013); *Radical Terrain*, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, USA (2012); *Lines of Control*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, New York, USA (2012); *Drawing 2011: Biennial*, Drawing Room, London, UK (2011); *Eccentric Architecture and Generation 1.5*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, USA (2011); *On Rage*, Haus der Kulteren der Welt, Berlin, Germany (2010); *21: Selections of Contemporary Art*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA (2008).

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