

INTERVIEW:

Artist Seher Shah and Rachel Adams, associate curator of exhibitions and public programs.

RACHEL ADAMS: You attended the Rhode Island School of Design for both visual art and architecture. How do your overlapping degrees in the two fields translate into your work?

SEHER SHAH: I am interested in the effects of rendering in space and how various constructions are signified through architecture, landscape, and objects. Representing the formal qualities of particular moments in architectural history, I try to engage with those references through drawing, sculpture and photography. There is a difference between an artist who is interested in architectural space and its representations, and the practice of a working architect. The distinction between my interests in architecture and its relationship to space has overlapping tendencies within both fields.

RA: Much of your work is influenced by modernist and brutalist architectural styles of the mid-20th century, especially that of Le Corbusier. His project Unite d'Habitat (Housing Project) is often cited as the starting point for the concrete, fortress-like style of Brutalism, prevalent from the 1950s through the 70s, as well as inspiration for your own work, *Object Relic (Unite d'Habitat)* (2011). How did your interest in this style arise? Was it inherent in your drawing style from your earlier years?

SS: I have been interested in these concepts for some time, and the influence of these architectural styles in this drawing builds on previous works. The hierarchy that exists in the spaces we inhabit, whether on an urban or individual scale, is something that continues to interest me. I consistently research particular brutalist buildings, and I am really intrigued by these structures. The *Object Relic* drawing directly references Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitat project. For this work, I considered how brutalism affects the relationship between the landscape and the object.

Drawing is an ongoing interest of mine and more recently, particular architectural moments inform my work. Whether they are spaces constructed from personal memory, historical events, or modernist structures, I find that drawing always allows for a visceral way to construct these landscapes.

RA: All of the works in *Constructed Landscapes*, as well as many of your past works, have a black and white palette. Can you speak about this choice in color scheme?

SS: I like the simplicity of graphite on paper and the freedom of representation this technique allows. The purity of drawing in graphite on two-dimensional surfaces allows for many references, oppositional and parallel to inhabit the same plane. However, the particular selection of color or monochromes just depends on the work at hand.

RA: This is the first time your monumental drawings *Geometric Landscapes* and *Spectacle of Force* (2009) and *The Mirror Spectacle* (2010) are being exhibited together. Can you speak to the history and process behind these works?

SS: I'm keen to show these two works together for the first time as they were conceived of as the interior and exterior views of a particular spectacle. The Birmingham Photographic Archives, Royal Geographic Society, British Library, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England invited me to research the various spectacles and monuments available in their archives a few years ago in relationship to the South Asian photographic archives. The library archives were particularly interesting as these felt like public archival memory of a past in which monument building, spectacles, and historical events of the empire were celebrated and preserved. I gravitated toward one particular photograph that allowed me to think about the relationship between photographic image and drawing.

My drawings explore power dynamics of amphitheatres, civic buildings, mortuary architecture, and large-scale housing projects by removing hierarchy through specific methods of rendering. These events and objects are simultaneously fascinating and perplexing because they show the power struggles and aspirations of the context in which they are located. Along those lines, the source of my inspiration for these two works was the Delhi Durbar, an amphitheater in Delhi, India that hosted several military events and ceremonies. I reconstructed the semi-circle of the amphitheater through layers of drawing and digital

processes. By intentionally flattening the perspective, I employed a drawing method that created an alternative view into a historical event and removed the hierarchy involved in the photographic image.

RA: Since you have worked as an architect, do you ever see your finished art works as blueprints? With *Object Repetition (Line to Distance)* (2013) you expand from drawing into sculpture, making me think about the process of moving off the page and actually constructing from these images.

SS: I am definitely getting more involved with objects and sculptures and experimenting with the role of mark-making in drawing. I'm slowly working towards studies that incorporate objects and drawing together. *Object Repetition (Line to Distance)* was the initial meeting of this relationship between mark making, objects, and actual site-specific space. There are structures within the drawings that I would like to further develop as the basis of physical objects, but the flattening of the forms within the drawing creates an ambiguous relationship to depth and form. I'm interested in the ways that physical objects could engage with new drawing issues and the three dimensional relationship to space.

RA: While thinking about the relationship with space, it is interesting to talk directly about the geometric forms that populate your work. Can you speak about these forms and how you fuse them with the existing architectures? Are they completely invented or do you appropriate those shapes?

SS: It depends on the work at hand, and how the process of making it develops. Some of the monument forms are based in historical context, while others experiment with pure form and mass. The drawing *Object Relic (Unite d'Habitat)* (2011) uses the forms to explore these formal and visceral qualities of this idealized modernist project by Le Corbusier. The role of the architect, the use of scale, and the contradictory principles inherent in these plans are a few of the reasons I was attracted to the project. But the forms are taken directly from the elevations of the building and then I proceed to flatten out the height and mass, and situate them in a constructed landscape. Aside from the aesthetics of the architecture itself, I am interested in the ambiguous relationship between landscape and object within brutalist architecture.



Unite d'Habitat by Le Corbusier.
Location: Berlin, Germany (1957).
Photograph courtesy of Deborah Rowe

Constructed Landscapes is Seher Shah's first solo museum exhibition and her first presentation in Texas.



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BACK IMAGE: Seher Shah, Detail of *Mammoth: Aerial Landscape Proposals*, 2012, Portfolio of 21 prints, 17 1/2 x 19 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Aerial photographs by Randi Singh

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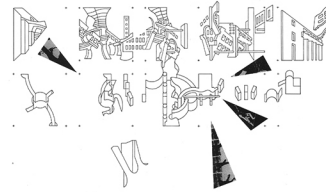
CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPES SEHER SHAH

April 6–June 30, 2013

ARCHITECTURAL MIGRATIONS: DRAWING BETWEEN OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

Igor Siddiqui, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin

To an architect—or any connoisseur of architectural drawing—Seher Shah's work may bear resemblance to Daniel Libeskind's *Micromegas* (1979) or Bernard Tschumi's *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1976–81), two extraordinary suites of drawings that epitomize the tradition of paper architecture.¹ Like these two seminal architects, Shah drafts her drawings from an intricate accumulation of crisp black lines on white backgrounds, both following and challenging the conventions of architectural representation as a means of creating alternative visions of the built environment. Her drawings frequently share the same graphically dense quality that characterizes Libeskind's early drawings, whereby obsessively constructed marks suggest complex tectonic form at one scale and an immersive, highly textured space at another. Variations on the hybrid marriage of crisp lines and chiaroscuro imagery, a strategy from *The Manhattan Transcripts*, echoes throughout Shah's body of work in the form of modified aerial photographs, black backgrounds, and monolithic, heavily tinted shapes integrated into delicate lace-like constructions. Conversely, whereas Tschumi frames such high-contrast images as if they were cinematic frames composed of clearly delineated figure-ground relationships, Shah fills each frame solid, turning it into a figure of its own. Both *Micromegas* and *The Manhattan Transcripts* were produced well over a decade before Shah began her formal architectural education. The influence of these two drawing suites, along with work en masse by the paper architects of that generation, persisted in academia throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the professional practices of these authors started to produce their first significant built projects (including Tschumi's Parc de la Villette in Paris from 1987 and Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin completed in 1999). It seems evident that the work of such figures has impacted Shah, but such an observation also helps pinpoint the moment of divergence between the artist and the architecture world. For these architects, drawing offered a means of articulating their position within the discipline, with their works on paper acting as visual manifestoes and theoretical preambles for their buildings. Shah has, on the other hand, used similar representational techniques along a very different trajectory—to literally draw her way out of the practice of architecture and into art.



Bernard Tschumi
*The Manhattan Transcripts—
Episode 4: the Block, detail
(1980–81)*

Through this migratory move, the artist has produced an impressive body of work that is not only about architecture, but also inevitably reflects her subjective relationship to it. Shah occupies the world of art belonging to the architectural diaspora, a coined term that refers to a population of architects dispersed and operating across various disciplines, while maintaining some level of identification with the native environment. The generalist nature of architecture has always perpetuated such outward migrations and the resulting patterns of disciplinary movement are not dissimilar to Shah's biographical narrative. As an individual whose places of genealogy, birth, residence, and practice are defined not by a single set of geographic coordinates but rather a global network of vectors, the architecture of her personal experience—like that of her art practice—may be best

understood not in terms of complete plans, whole figures and total environments, but rather as an accumulation of fragments, segments, shards, and open-ended assemblages of meticulously crafted details. Each drawing as such is not a window into a single architectural proposition, but instead acts as a frame that collects such itinerant forms. Likewise the landscape that resides in the exhibition's title unavoidably references the terrain shaped by planners, landscape architects, and politicians, but can perhaps more productively be interpreted as a medium that binds Shah's various personal itineraries—from architecture to art, but also connecting Karachi, London, Brussels, Lahore, Providence and New York. Art critic James Elkins has argued that, like the body, "landscape is something that we inhabit without being different from it: we are in it, and we are it."² It is because of this inextricable connection between the subject and the landscape, he explains, that the discourse surrounding landscapes has the capacity to veer toward the subjective. In this way, Elkins writes, "Philosophy melts into impressionism; logic deliquesces into reverie. The object isn't bound by our attention: it binds us."³ The positioning of the subject within and as a part of the landscape—rather than outside of it—describes a model for art practice in spatial terms and such spatiality is in Shah's case reflected back on the work itself. Field becomes volume and the exterior is inverted to form interior space.

The works included in *Constructed Landscapes* at first glance appear to privilege exteriority. In *Mammoth: Aerial Landscape Proposals* (2012), for example, the photographs that form the background of each of the twenty-one prints position the viewer at an elevated level, hovering at a great distance from the actual landscape below. *Object Relic (Unite d'Habitat)* (2011), depicts an intricately drawn perspective of exploded architectural forms, is constructed with its horizon line and vanishing points that similarly locate the viewer as a distant observer. Despite this distance, Shah's body of work has a spatially immersive quality and its apparently exterior character, under some scrutiny, exposes its counterpart—the interior. The reciprocal relationship between inside and outside is most evident in the pairing of two works, *Geometric Landscapes* and *Spectacle of Force* (2009) and *The Mirror Spectacle* (2010). The two extraordinarily intricate multi-media prints, based on fragments of archival documentation, feature unfolding vistas through the architecture of the coronation ceremony at the Durbar, in Delhi India. In one, the ornate architecture is unfolded to reveal the exterior, while in the other the viewer is positioned to witness the spectacle within. Shah differs the political difference between inside and outside by constructing them as formally reversible, but also complicates the preconceived hierarchies between the figure and the ground (and thus between the body and the landscape) through the graphic flattening of perspective. A sense of flatness is further exploited in the series *Mammoth* throughout which solid black forms are simultaneously perceived as two-dimensional fragments that selectively cover the field and as monolithic markers volumetrically extruded from the ground up. Within the series, exceptions do occur where flatness yields to perspective and the landscape takes on interior character. In one image, a one-point interior perspective depicting a skeletal modernist structure is superimposed onto the landscape striated with transportation infrastructure, drawing the eye into the landscape as if it were a room. In another, the form inserted into the photograph casts a shadow across the landscape, effectively containing it and turning it outside in. Finally, *Object Repetition (Line to Distance)* (2013), the sole three-dimensional work in the exhibition, further articulates the inside-outside dynamic in physical space and in real time. The sculpture is a room-sized landscape constructed from arrayed components whose organization is—unlike that of the formally similar fragments from her two-dimensional drawings—dependent on gravity. Here it will be the building's interior, rather than the aerial photographs, that act as the substrate and binder for the accumulation of Shah's itinerant forms—precisely, but tenuously dispersed across the surface of the gallery's floor.

¹The term refers to the dissemination of radical architectural ideas exclusively through representation rather than full-scale construction (often presented as works on paper), and reflects an ideological stance that views such theoretical projects as fully realized works of architecture in their own right. The exhibit *Perfected Acts of Architecture*, curated by Jeffrey Kipnis and presented by both the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY and Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, OH, captures exemplary works of "paper architecture" of the period between the early 1970s and the late 1980s, including *Micromegas* and *The Manhattan Transcripts*. See Jeffrey Kipnis et al., *Perfected Acts of Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001).

²James Elkins, "Writing Moods," in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Rachael Zady DeLure et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 69.

³Ibid.