

Whitewall magazine

[Seher Shah](#)

By [Meenakshi Thirukode - South Asian Contemporary Art](#) | February 5, 2010 . Comments Off



We trust the archival image in its historically validated context, than those images generated in the now. Contemporary images are too frequent and too quick for us to comprehend and form an opinion that would seem coherent. That problem doesn't exist with the past. For one, images were not generated at the same rate as is in our present. The past is definite to the human mind. So where does that leave us with the contemporary image? Well, in a state of desperation, seeking conclusions because we have always believed in finding an *end* to the *means*. And so the frustration for both the "viewer" of an image and the "creator" of an image signifies a state of desperation – the easiest way out then is to expect and make literal interpretations by digging into our own archive of pre-conditions.

That it is reminiscent of the black cuboid and triangular volumes within compositions in Seher Shah's ink and gouache pieces such as *Black Cube 1 & 2*. Delicate patterns and scribbles seem to float like soft fibrous, almost organic, forms in these pieces and their existence is dictated by the initial placement of the black shape or volume on the blank sheet of paper. When Shah explained her interest in the relationship between negative and positive to me it was this very term negative that seemed most interesting. The *negative*

has the maximum pull rather than the patterns. So the term negative, which usually signifies the null has a much more lasting effect here than its natural opposite: the positive.



The black in Shah's prints did throw me off balance. While that would probably be literal with some of Shah's drawings because of their monumental scale, this strange uneasiness was more deep and personal. In the globalised world, if humanity's state of desperation took a visual form it would be this black void — not the globalized citizen we all kid ourselves to be. The strength of the pieces then, is that you experience that notion rather than the work making some kind of didactic statement.

Shah is also occupied with the use of certain symbols and iconography relating to power and authority from the archives of the imperialistic past. Some of these include The Greek cross, the half crescent moon and star, the imposing commemorative pillars, a winged figure, monuments and representations of military order. Icons and symbols of a

past that are so definite in their meaning and intent that despite having rendered them in Giorgio de Chirico—esque surrealist landscapes, they still validate the idea of literal interpretations. One cannot disassociate these symbols that represented power from the populist historical meaning even if we are in the 'present' and contexts have (supposedly) changed.

Implied populist interpretations of power and authority icons are for the most part never the actual root meaning but is the one definition that has become conditioned into culture through systems of hierarchy and manipulation. Case in point – The Swastika or the crescent moon and star. It is frightening to see how we use these implied tainted traces to judge, access and then find an answer to get out of the desperate state we find ourselves in the now. We do not see it any other way because we hold the term past and its various facets including the idea of archive and history purely in nostalgic terms. We celebrate it, swoon over it and hold on to it.



It is in this light that I see a lot of interesting and ambiguous layers while interacting with Shah's works such as *The Concrete Oracles*. For this project she went into the the Birmingham Photographic Archives, British Library, Royal Geographic Society and parts of the Victoria and Albert photographic archives. It involved going through, and eventually appropriating images of people as well as monuments – the architectural materialization of power, lest the future forgets who was ruler and who was ruled.

I lean towards her process more than anything else. From traces of the past she attempts to create an interpretation. We see in the past, a record was made in an attempt to ensure a definite conclusion would pass onto future generations, so that they may interpret the past in their quest to understand the meaning of their existence and its relationship to the world. There were definite associations made to define the hierarchy of human relationships through structures, mythologies, symbols and iconography that those in power created. When Shah's pieces therefore rearrange and re-appropriate these images

along with all of its inherent meanings and associations, she is adding on to those tainted historic archives. What it tells us is that while we may in our hearts seek stability, globalization, and abolishing imperial systems of functioning, we find it hard to wean ourselves from a tainted historical past and use that instead to solve the desperate state we find ourselves in now.



All Installation Images: *From Paper To Monument*, Seher Shah, Solo Show at Nature Morte, India. Photos Courtesy Seher Shah.