

er Shah. *Kaaba 3 (Jihad Pop Progression 3)*. Graphite on paper. 50" x 120". 2006.

STRIPPING ILLUSIONS

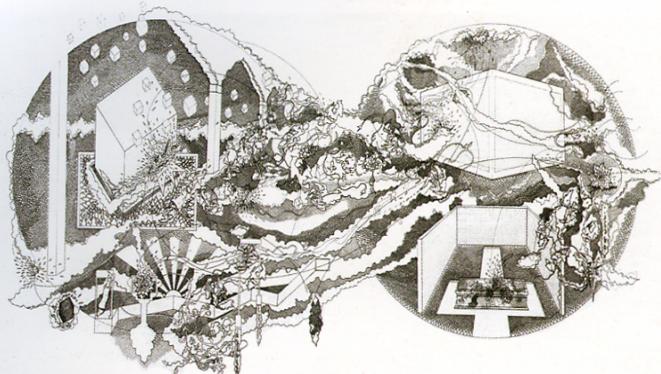
Karin Miller-Lewis looks at
the dialogue between
structure and surface in the
works of Seher Shah and
Allan deSouza.

"THE FUTURE IS IN THE AIR!" TRUMPETS A FRENCH MILITARY PAMPHLET QUOTED by Pablo Picasso in three of his Cubist still lifes from 1912. Published two years before the start of World War I, the propaganda aims to drum up public favour for the national air force. But Picasso's self-contradictory rendition alters the focus and mood of the military's simple pun. On the one hand, set among the pictures' dynamic planes, the pamphlet's rallying cry seems to have been commandeered to hail Picasso's avant-garde manoeuvres. And on the other, its rousing message has been slyly and utterly debunked. Made to jostle for legibility among the leftovers of the artist's lunch, "the future" that "is in the air" concedes that nothing is certain. Everything is up for grabs.

I thought of Picasso's still lifes when I saw new works by Seher Shah and Allan deSouza on display in New York this winter. Both artists draw on the ace Modernist's appropriative and transformative visual practice to react to the rising militancy, paranoia and polarization of our own time. But their responses are ultimately quite different from each other. Echoing something of the high spirits with which Picasso braved a new pictorial world, Seher Shah's large-scale drawings at the Bose Pacia Gallery (in a show, titled, *Jihad Pop*, from January 11th to February 23rd) riffed on the Kaaba monuments, tombs and inner courtyards. These drawings strove to reclaim both the universal and personal significance of politicized terms and cube-like forms. On view at the Talwar Gallery, Allan deSouza's works in a show, titled, (*I don't care what you say*): *Those Are Not Tourist Photos*, from January 11th to March 29th, did not have such idealistic aims. Like Picasso and Freud, deSouza knows that there's nothing like a good joke for revealing truth that is deep and problematic. The wry photo-assemblages and mirror-image prints engaged the spectator with a take on how we create false realities.

Seher Shah's treatment of some of Islam's most important cultural forms and symbols set them free to generate new associations. The Kaaba in *Kaaba 3* was a white cube seen from above, nestled in a shadowy hollow. A diagonal trajectory of planes zoomed through it toward the viewer. Smaller, simpler cubes hurtled beyond it; some became cruciform

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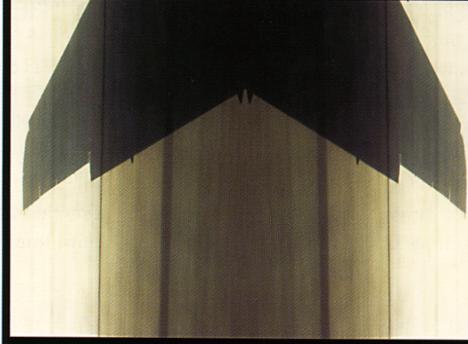
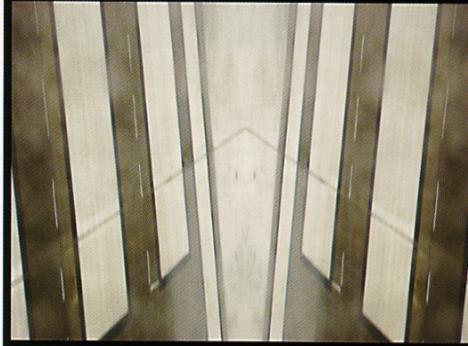
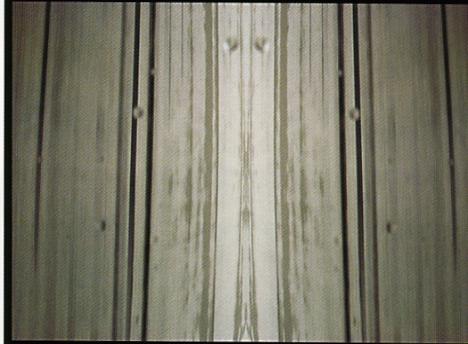
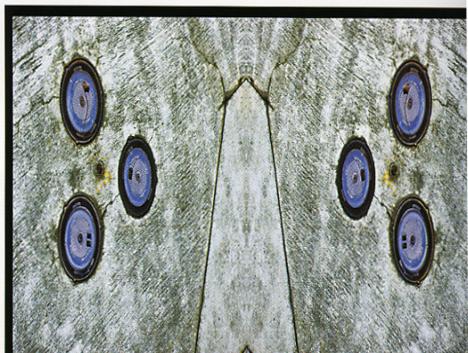
Seher Shah. *Islamica Fantastica*. Graphite on paper. 80" x 144". 2007.
SEHER SHAH'S IMAGES: COURTESY BOSE PACIA GALLERY, NEW YORK.

shapes (like a gift box whose sides had been opened and flattened). Others morphed into tomb-like forms. Another pair of drawings in the group sent similar tombs deep into the receding space of an arched courtyard. The Alhambra was probably the inspiration for the setting. So were many of South Asia's mausoleums, embellished with the lotus, symbol of the regeneration of life. Simplified contour drawings of the bud and its petals constituted the expansive backgrounds of other drawings. The last and culminating work, *Islamica Fantastica*, offered the synthesis of these projecting and receding views. Two circles - like the rings of a stereoscope - framed two views of forms with contrary connotations. The cube on the left floated as if on a magic carpet above an album-cover-art version of the rising sun. On the right, another cube hovered above a decorated tomb. Trailing clouds made of schematic drawings of angels found in Safavid Persian paintings connected the two differentiated realms.

Did these works refer to a vision of dynamic Islam offered in response to rigid orthodoxies? Did the show's provocative title indicate Shah's faith in the productive meeting of opposites? Shah used black and white colours; created push-me-pull-you spaces; invited comparison of Islamic and Christian symbols; and achieved simultaneous tones of euphoria and restraint by marrying the rigour of architectural rendering with the intuitive method of developing compositions.

Shah did not think, however, that her work dealt with spiritual matters. Her focus on the Kaaba, she said, derived from its being a cube, which was a universal form. And her visual language was a vehicle to explore its possible personal meanings. Her title similarly referred to a more circumscribed set of ideas than its surprising conjunction of disparate terms connoted. Shah wanted to take back and bring out the meaning of jihad as "self-analysis." "Pop" acknowledged the importance of graffiti, stencil, and other urban art forms that she had come in contact with during her young, well-travelled life.

At a time when dogmatism and ignorance, fear and hostility are on the rise within and between the world's various communities, Shah's decision to reclaim a contested, misunderstood term was quite brave. Her desire to declare and extol common ground was generous. However, at times, Shah seemed to withdraw from the implications of her project despite her eagerness to incorporate contradictions and tensions in her works. Simply excluding what lay outside her intentions, the work remained callow, the product



Allan deSouza. *UFO3*. C print. 17.5" x 79". 2007.