

## Paper cult

For an architect, Seher Shah is good at breaking things down, says **Jane Mikkelson**.

Seher Shah is an artist, an architect and even a soi-disant archaeologist – although instead of a trowel and sieve, she uses pencils and rulers for her excavation projects. The Brooklyn-based artist's first solo show in Delhi is on display this fortnight at Gallery Nature Morte.

The drawings in "Paper to Monument" might be called collages, but this term doesn't quite cut it. Shah took old photographs of monuments and people from Pakistan, Belgium, Zanzibar and other far-flung locations, and incorporated them into the landscape of her own symbols and drawings to "excavate" their multiple meanings. Deprived of the comfort of familiar context, viewers are never sure where, when, or even who or what the subjects of these photographs are. This is exactly the point. "Whether I show my work in Delhi or New York, everyone comes with their own appropriation of these symbols," said Shah, who is trained in architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design. "What's really interesting is that when people come to the openings, they say, 'I've seen this before,' and cite four or five different cities, even though the symbols were completely fabricated."

If one mark of a great piece of art is its ability to generate its own coherent language, then the eloquence of "Paper to Monument" makes it pretty close to masterful. Shah repeats geometric symbols, photographic images and architectural leitmotifs across the pieces in the exhibition, binding them together in intelligent dialogue, although the problem of translating this conversation falls squarely on the viewer. There is no single correct interpretation of her work,



**Iconoclasm?** "Monument" (left) and "The Horned God" (right).

Shah said. Its meaning shifts, the same way that meanings of icons and monuments in cities like New York and Delhi keep shifting with time. Shah's work is also constantly in flux – symbols she used a few years ago have now taken on entirely new meanings. "I don't like the idea of staying static," she said. For example, the ubiquitous cube-and-cross pair she evoked in previ-

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ous pieces was a two-pronged allusion: to the Ka'aba, and to how a cube, unfolded and flattened, becomes a cross. Shah brought these universal symbols back into her current pieces to keep them in conversation with older projects. "It's a simple way for me to look back and reflect on my previous work," she said.

In "Paper to Monument", Shah strips commonplace symbols – like

the cube or cross – down to their barest skeletons, revealing what she called their "essential nature". The exhibition also explores the aesthetics of power, revealing how authority gets foisted onto spaces – urban, intellectual, artistic – by way of these symbols. The deep gash across "The Horned God", for instance, can be read as the void created by an object imposed onto a landscape. It once had an original meaning, which is lost over the years as the object is interpreted, reinterpreted and appropriated by different people for different reasons. This triangular void is placed right above a column (a symbol of power in many places in the world), which is crowned with a crescent, evoking a whole host of associations, Islamic and otherwise. Both, in turn, are superimposed on a photograph of a marching army regiment. This tension between meaning and loss of meaning – concentrated, in this piece, in the almost-meeting point between the void and the crescent – is powerfully present in all of Shah's drawings in the exhibition. *See Nature Morte in South in Exhibitions.*