



Seher Shah. *Expansion Complex I*. Graphite and gouache on paper. Edition of 5. 2009.

# Assembling Authority,

Meera Menezes decodes Seher Shah's complicated photomontages

POTENT EMBLEMS AND SYMBOLS CROSSED EACH OTHER IN Seher Shah's solo show *Paper to Monument* at Delhi's Nature Morte from the 8<sup>th</sup> of December to the 9<sup>th</sup> of January. None more so than the black cube and the cross. Simple geometric forms, they are culturally loaded iconic symbols from two powerful religions, referencing the Kaaba and the Crucifix.

Shah's largely monochromatic works (drawings and archival Giclee prints) were replete with monuments both constructed and found. They reflected her training as an architect at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, U.S.A. Born in Karachi, she has travelled widely. Her works on show were therefore an amalgamation of the architecture of several cultures – Gothic and Mughal elements combined with Art Deco features to create fantastic landscapes. Despite this use of

multicultural forms, the works struck a chord because of their universal significance. Her winged figure on a pillar in *The Expansion Complex*, for example, recalled the Victory Column in Berlin through a combination of fantasy and reality.

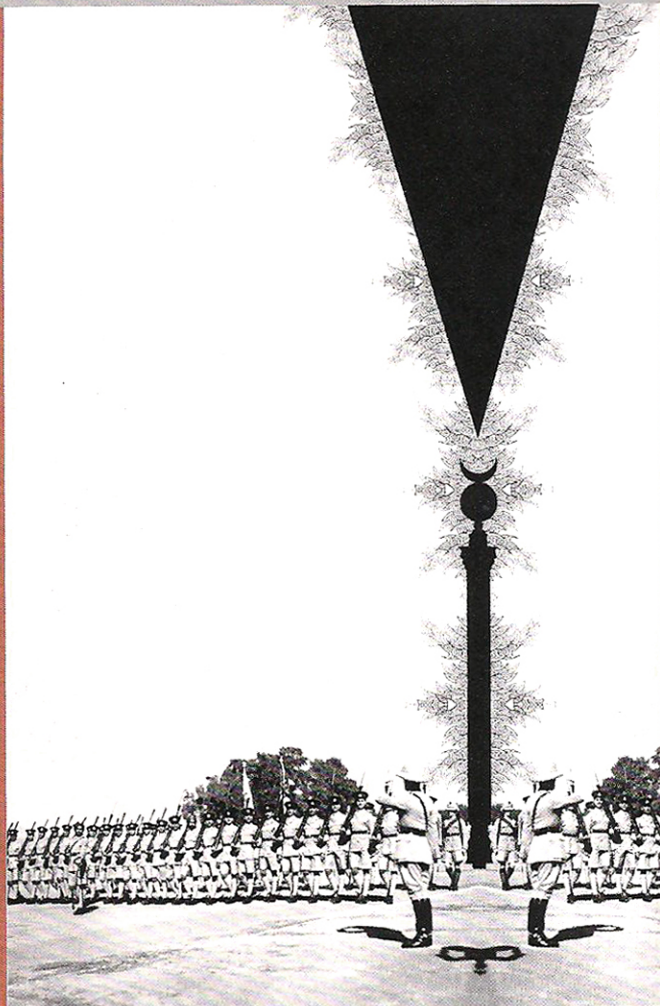
Like a sharp-edged sword, solid black forms cut a clean swathe through the pictorial plane, positing emptiness against a wealth of detail. These dense 'black holes' seemed to possess an energy of their own, so that the artist generated tension through the inter-play of positive and negative spaces.

Shah's exhibition seemed to be a continuation of her earlier solo *Jihad Pop*, which took place at Bose Pacia, New York, in 2008. Both shows were chiefly an exploration of her identity as a Muslim woman





**Seher Shah.** *The Expansion of the First Great Ornamental Age, Monument.*  
Edition of 10. Archival Giclee Prints. Series of 11 pieces. 2009.



**Seher Shah.** *The Expansion of the First Great Ornamental Age, Horned God.*  
Edition of 10. Archival Giclee Prints. Series of 11 pieces. 2009.

# Structuring Power

and drawings teeming with politically inflected forms and images.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and images of iconic Islamic structures (like tombs and cenotaphs) culled from the mass media, personal photographs and various geometric forms were harnessed in an attempt to arrive at a personal visual imagery. However, in *Paper to Monument*, Shah also delved into how symbols of authority and power functioned within urban spaces. Her most powerful work was to be found in the *Expansion Complex* series. The archival Giclee print *Expansion Complex 1* contained images of imperial authority and commerce. It focused on trade routes and ports of exchange. Making use of a sort of utopian photo-assemblage and propaganda poster style, the series combined references to mythology, portraiture and architectural spaces. It was Shah's depiction of motifs with a minimalist use of colour and line that made them so compelling.

In another set of prints, *The Concrete Oracles*, archival photographs of monuments and architecture were manipulated to examine the idea of the architect as empire-builder. Monuments were presented as both relics of the Colonial project and as spectacles in themselves.

What struck the viewer was the complexity of detail in *Paper to Monument*. The eye was carried away by the force of Shah's lines as it traversed large-scale drawings and prints. Both the architecture of Zaha Hadid and the geometric drawings of Nasreen Mohamedi came to mind here. However, while Shah shows herself to be a fine draughtsperson, she has to guard against becoming overly decorative. Juggling the various elements in her work, she has to learn to walk a tightrope if she wants to avoid falling into the trap of pattern making.