

Mind over matter

In Seher Shah's works, archaeology and history point to psychology

BY HIMANSHU BHAGAT
himanshu.b@livemint.com

The "mother country" exerts a strong tug on the diaspora and pretty much defines their identity in the lands they migrate to. This also holds true for most artists who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent—more often than not it is their dominant source of inspiration and ideas.

Born in Karachi, Seher Shah grew up in Europe and the US, and she currently lives in New York City. The intriguing black and white drawings and prints that comprise her latest show, *Paper to Monument*, are clearly inspired by the subcontinent's history, and use its architectural heritage as their central prop. Much of the focus of the show seems to be on the colonial period, or at least much of the imagery employed in it has been borrowed from that



Metaphysics: The Expansion Complex II by Seher Shah, Archival Giclee print.

era—soldiers in period uniforms, people in period attire and impressive columns reminiscent of imperial Britain. "The works use public archival memory as a process to build on the ideas, on the aesthetics of imperial power and monu-

ment building," says Shah over email, describing how she searched for archival photos and other material at libraries and museums in England.

Besides the choice of elements that people her images, it is their composition—a

strong reliance on geometry and wide, open vistas which speak of structure and order—that evokes an utopian and imperial vision.

But Shah's works are hardly a paean to our colonial past. The way images of monuments, sol-

diers and people have been employed in the montages makes her ironic distance from them immediately apparent. Nor are the works an exercise in irony; they go beyond and, with their fantasy landscapes and transcendental tints, can be seen as a commentary or meditation on our minds.

As Shah explains: "I am very interested in working with two significantly different scales—the scale of the self and the individual—and in the same moment to explore the larger perspective of nationhood, historical moments and urban relics in the city fabric." History, architecture and geometry come together in Shah's vision and offer insights about our mindscapes and the ambivalences within with wit and intelligence.

Paper to Monument will show at Gallery Nature Morte, A1, Neeti Bagh, New Delhi, from 8 December to 9 January. For details, log on to www.naturemorte.com