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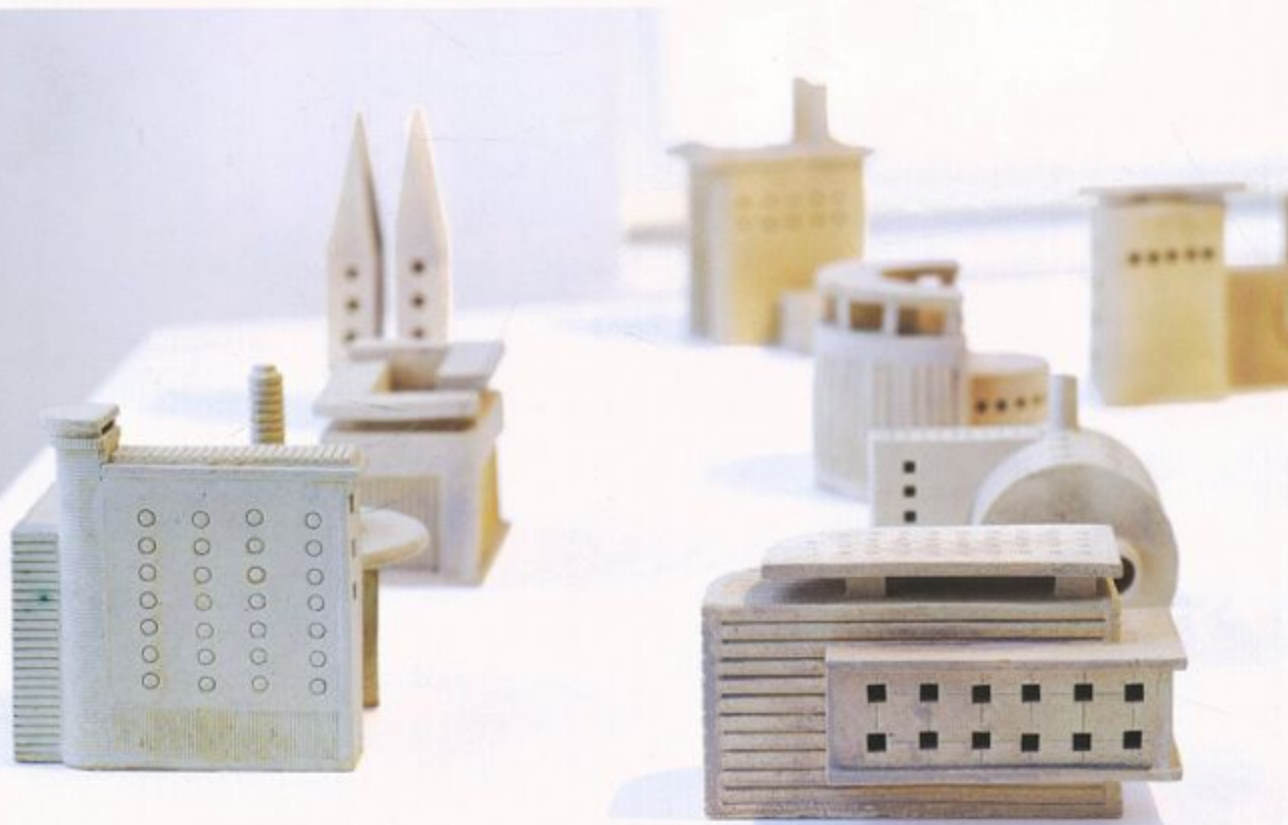
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THROUGH THE APERTURE

A recent exhibition comprising the works of five artists spanning generations delves into the facets of modernist architecture and design through a series of tableaux across various media

Text **Iftikhar Dadi**



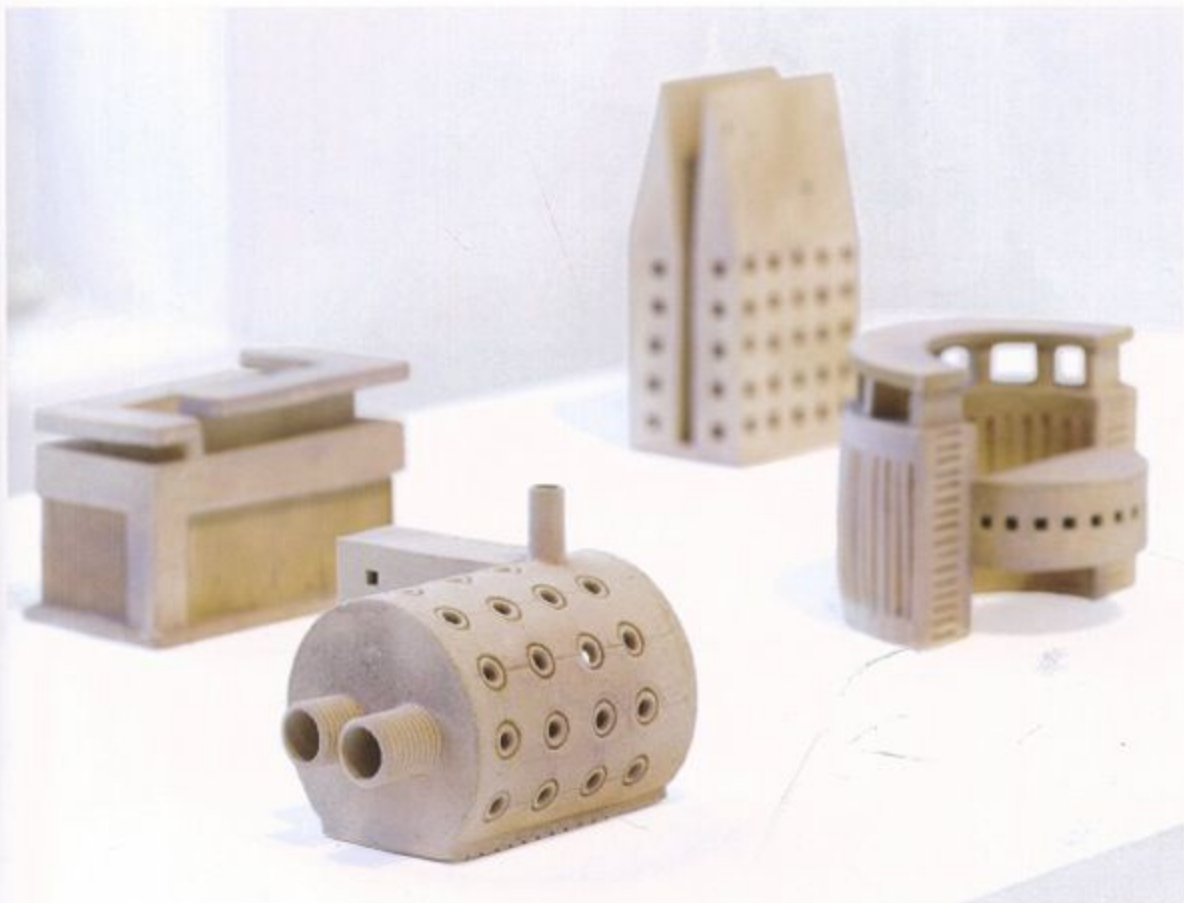
This spread, and next page: *Landscape* by Lubna Chowdhary, ceramic, 15 x 15 cm each (approx), 2012; next spread, right: *Edgeland I* by Lubna Chowdhary, ceramic, 58 x 104 cm, 2017

The works by the five artists in *Windows* are based on a deep awareness of modernist architecture and design. Anwar Jalal Shemza (b. 1928), Simryn Gill (b. 1959), Lubna Chowdhary (b. 1964), Seher Shah (b. 1975), and Ayesha Singh (b. 1990), have lived and worked internationally; their careers span generations. Brought together, their work in diverse media resonates with each others' in unexpected ways, and illuminates also how the presence — and memory — of built form has continued to shape and disturb the imaginations of our individual and shared lives. These artists know that human lives are not lived as abstractions; and that architectural awareness includes specificities of past and present. And of possible futures that might unfold in surprising and unexpected ways.

South and Southeast Asia have for millennia been home to heterogeneously distinctive architectures, ranging from the humble to the spectacular. The forces of modernity over the past two centuries made new trajectories inevitable, and these have

altered not only the physical forms of architecture but also our relationship with the past. Unlike our premodern ancestors, we relate to historic built form only partially through lived experience; now, it is mostly through the dutiful idea of 'cultural heritage', mediated through documentation, preservation, and museumisation.

The legacy of colonialism includes the advent of many new built forms, seen especially in institutional structures such as municipal buildings, hospitals, and schools. This is not to say that schools and hospitals did not exist in a pre-colonial past; rather, that new styles, metamorphic and syncretic, were bound to develop. For example, the British in India arrived at a hybrid form of architecture, termed Indo-Saracenic, which ingeniously combined elements of diverse Indian styles with Victorian Gothic. Urbanisation, and the acceleration of what comes under the umbrella term of 'social change', also resulted in new morphological innovations such as the bungalow, the barracks, and the apartment block. These transformations were often permanent and



large-scale. The development of New Delhi as a new city during the early twentieth century was truly monumental in its ambition and execution. And after mid-century decolonisation, spectacular architectural projects continued to be built — Louis Kahn's massive parliament building and associated structures in Dhaka, and Chandigarh's celebrated capitol complex designed by Le Corbusier, serve as iconic exemplars.

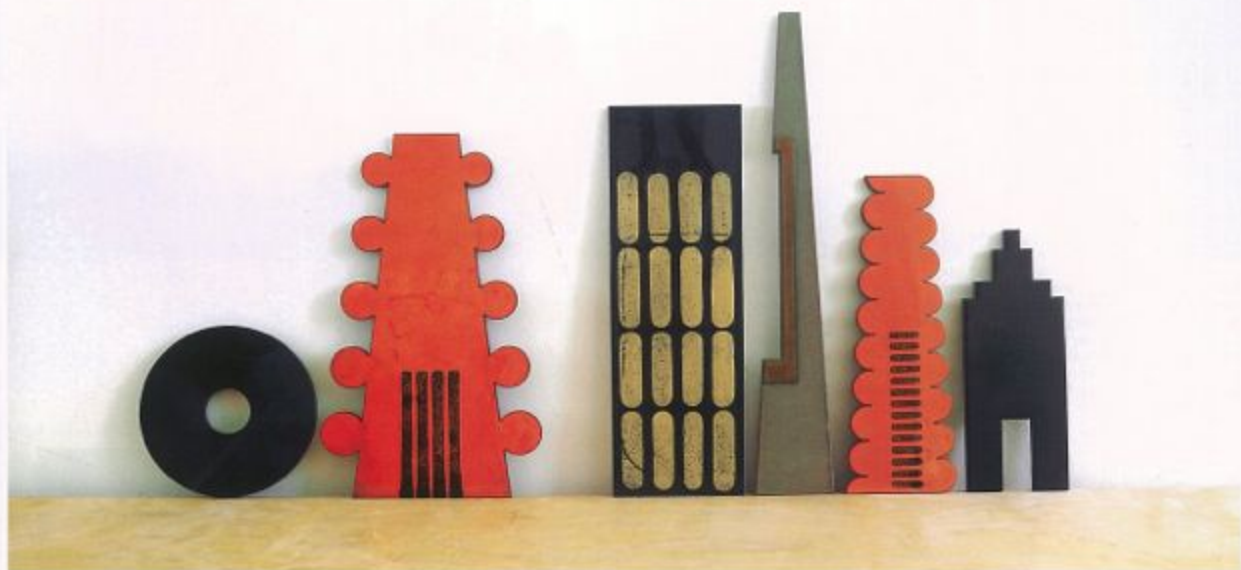
The International Style of architecture held great sway for much of the twentieth century; geographically (and ideologically) its spread was pervasive. This was the promise: bringing efficiency, hygiene, and affordability to larger and larger publics. Planning was paramount. And even though this utopian glow has faded somewhat in recent decades, buildings of this nature continue to proliferate. They take diverse forms, which are sometimes good, mostly bad, and often ugly. Only occasionally are they carefully designed by architects: for the most part, they are planned and erected haphazardly and with prosaic indifference. This overwhelming presence

of modern architecture today — even in its humdrum, nondescript forms — has been severally consequential.

Firstly, the premodern past and lived memories do not disappear in the geometric grid of modernist rationality — rather, they acquire new intensities and haunt the contemporary imagination. The relation between the studied neutrality of modernist architecture and an active sense of the past is often negotiated across passages between inside and outside — thresholds, windows, doorways, and gates. It is prompted also by the inhabiting of space by symbolic motifs and personal belongings. These memory triggers include stylistic reliefs and ornamentation of exterior façades, and the furnishing of interior spaces according to the personal and eccentric proclivities of its inhabitants.

(Gautam Bhatia has examined this phenomenon in his wise and sardonic book, *Punjabi Baroque*.) Secondly, informality of built form continues to proliferate in South and Southeast Asian cities,

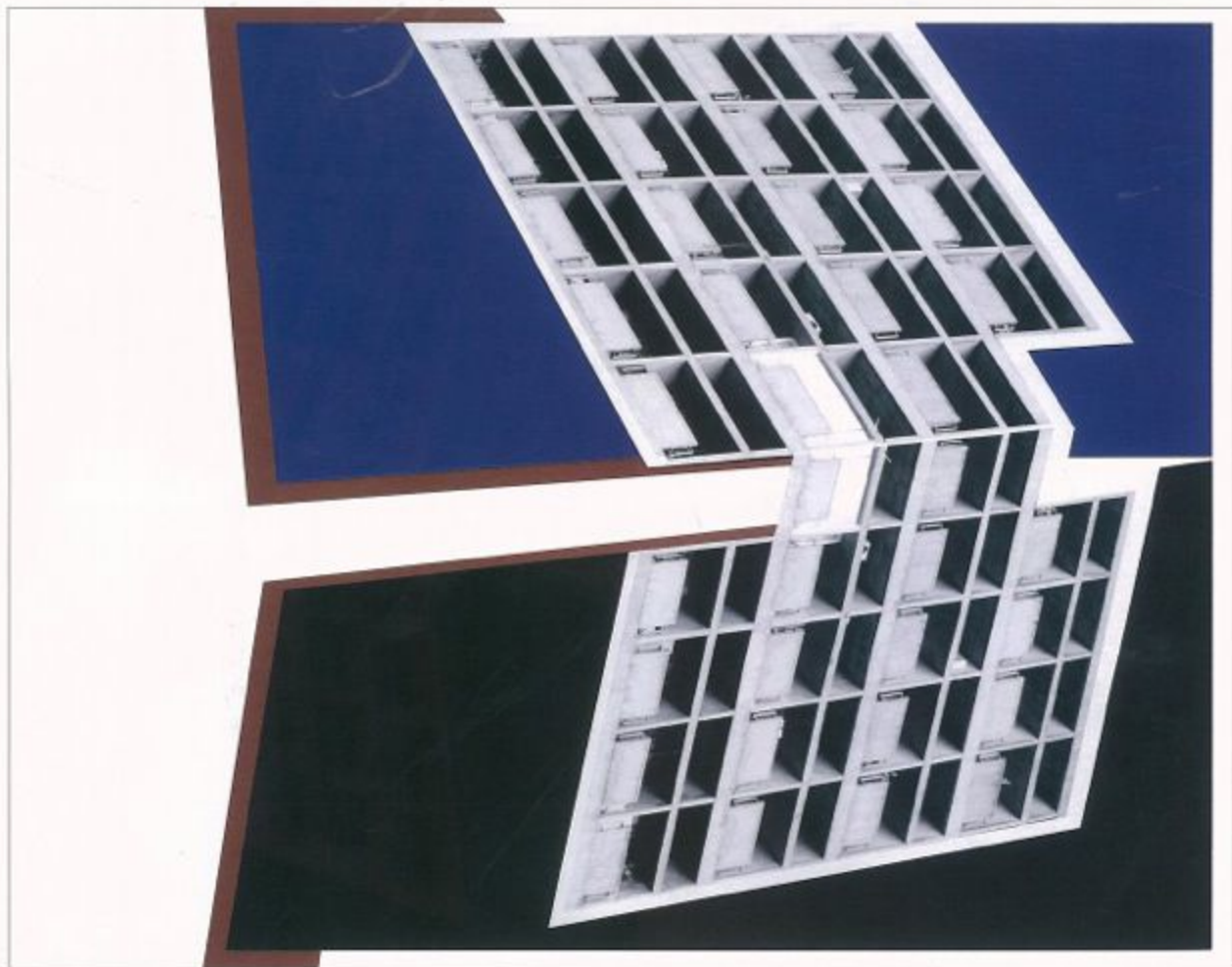


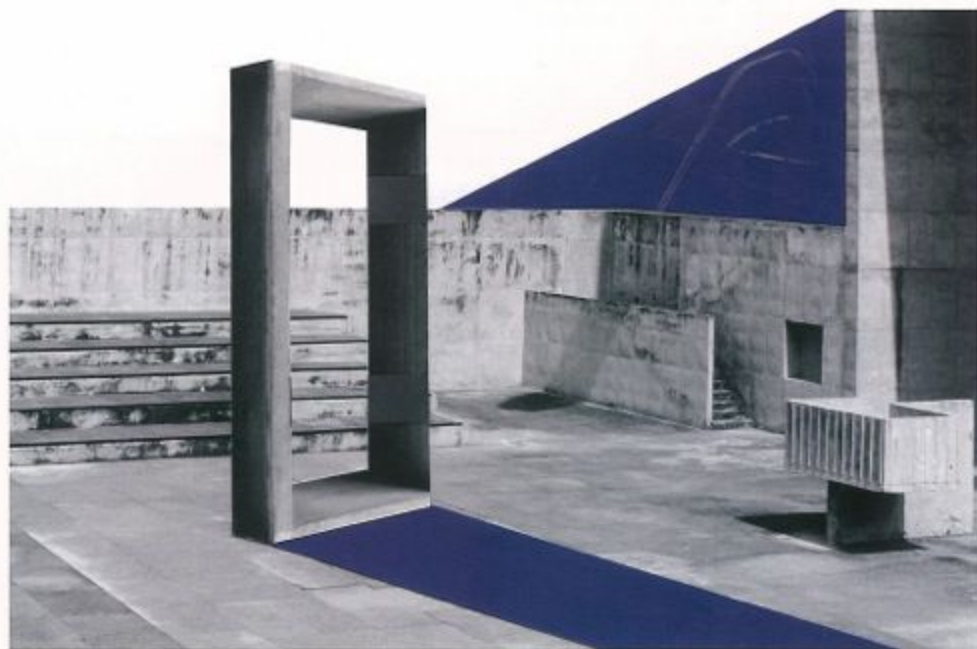
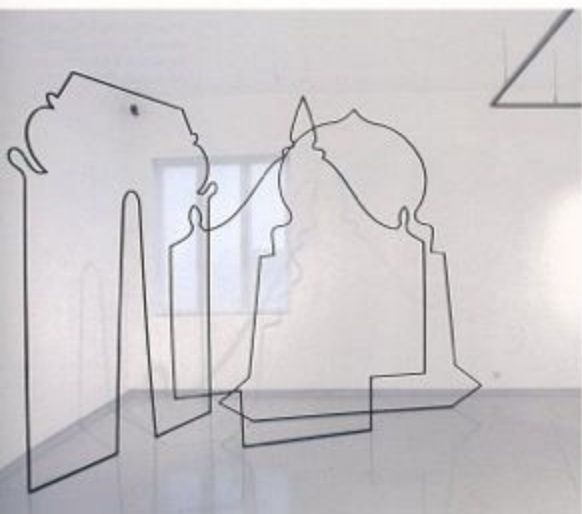




This page, clockwise from top-left: an installation view of *Hybrid Drawings* by Ayesha Singh; installation view of *Edgelands I* by Lubna Chowdhary; *Capitol Complex - Divided Wall* by Seher Shah, collage on paper, 2012

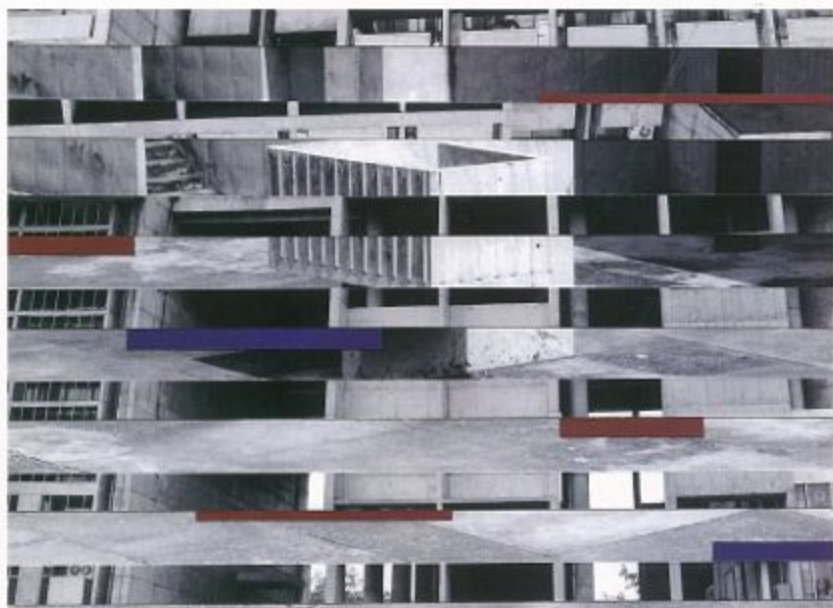
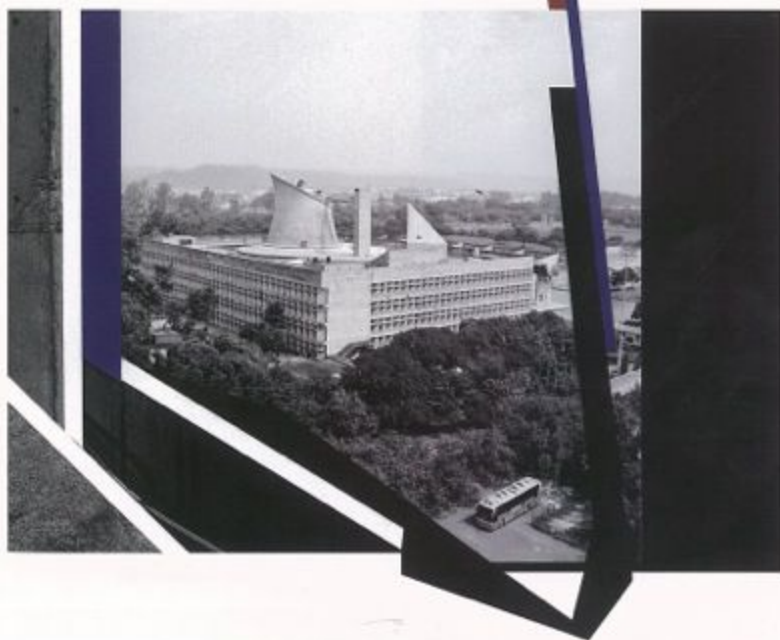
Opposite page, clockwise from top-left: an installation view of *Hybrid Drawings* by Ayesha Singh; installation view of *Windows* by Simryn Gill, C-type photograph, hand-printed, 2011/2017; *Capitol Complex - Blue Courtyard* by Seher Shah

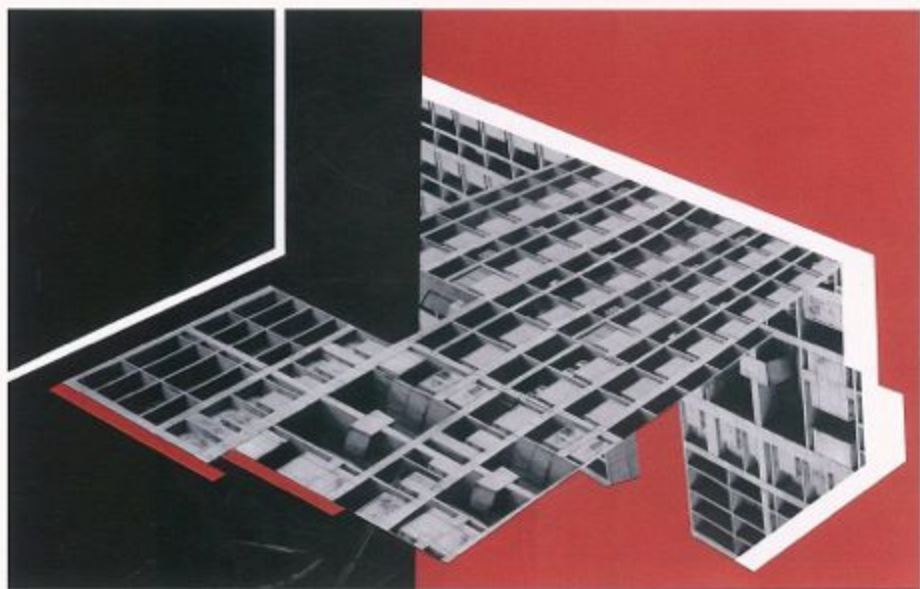




This spread: from the series *Capitol Complex* by Seher Shah, collage on paper, 2012

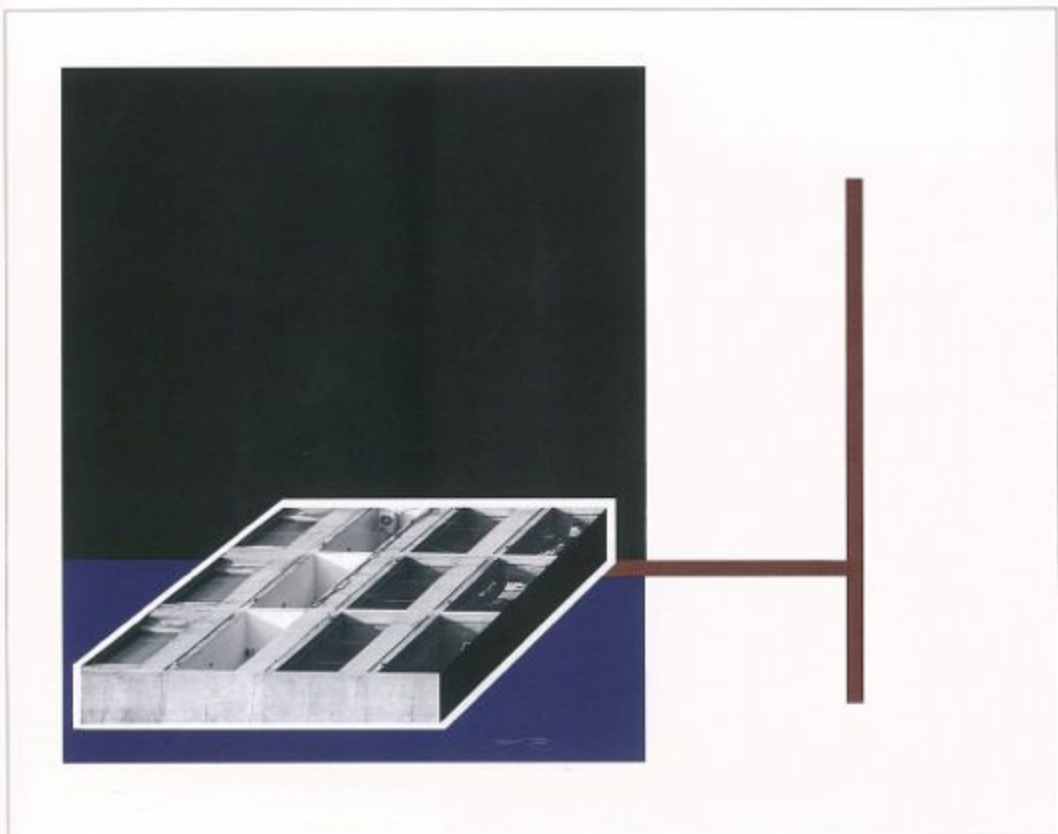


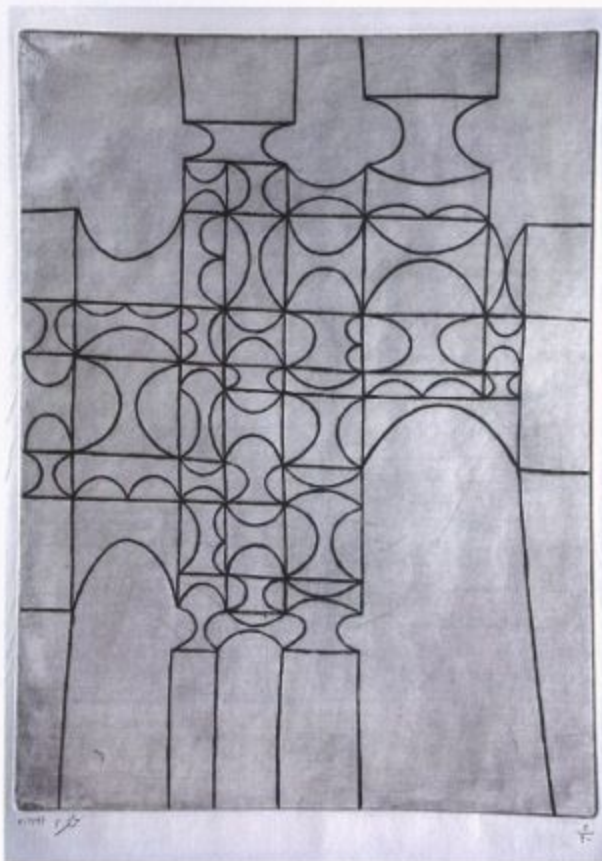




This spread, top: from the series *Capitol Complex* by Seher Shah, collage on paper, 2012; bottom: from the series *Windows* by Simryn Gill; C-type photographs, hand-printed, 2011/2017





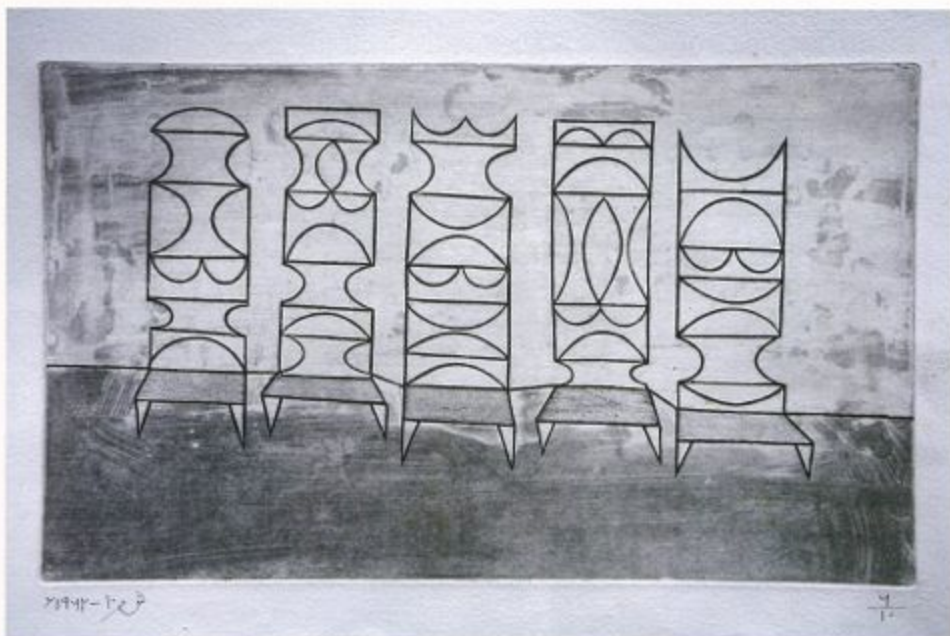


some of which are now among the largest urban centers in the world. Built form is often inhabited in unexpected ways that elude and even escape rational planning. Façades are adorned by vernacular signage, interstitial spaces are squatted upon by the less fortunate, and outdoor spaces are occupied by peddlers. Architectural purists and rational planners might balk at these unwanted encrustations, but the pulsating vitality of so many Asian cities is impossible to imagine without these 'deviations'.

Finally, despite its intention of clearly delineating interior space from the outside, modern architecture is inevitably 'tropicalised' in the region. Distinctions — between nature and culture, and between human life lived in confined, planned spaces and the primordial vastness outside — are continually violated; and this only becomes more evident with the passage of time. These breaches create an intuitive sense of one as part of a larger ecology, in which foliage, insects, animals, and humans inhabit overlapping spaces, rather than occupying discrete and hermetic niches.

In all these 'compromised' ways, built structures in South and Southeast Asia bear the potential to give new inspirations to the imagination, as it shuttles between historic forms, modernist purity, and informal reuse — and as it mines familial and childhood memories that have inhabited these spaces. Visual artists have long explored these affects and phenomena by engaging with what might be called the very grid of modernist architecture. The minimalist neutrality of modernism itself provides a formal platform for artists to examine these complexities. Again, the valences valued here are as much in the messy quotidian — a shard of broken glass? some encroaching foliage? the stubborn memory of an ornamental detail?—as in abstract theories of living

This spread: works by Anwar Jalal Shemza. Clockwise from top: City Gate, intaglio (etching), 62 x 49 cm, 1961; Edifice, aquatint and intaglio, 20.9 x 16.5 cm, 1959; Five Chairs, aquatint, 31 x 49.5 cm, 1962



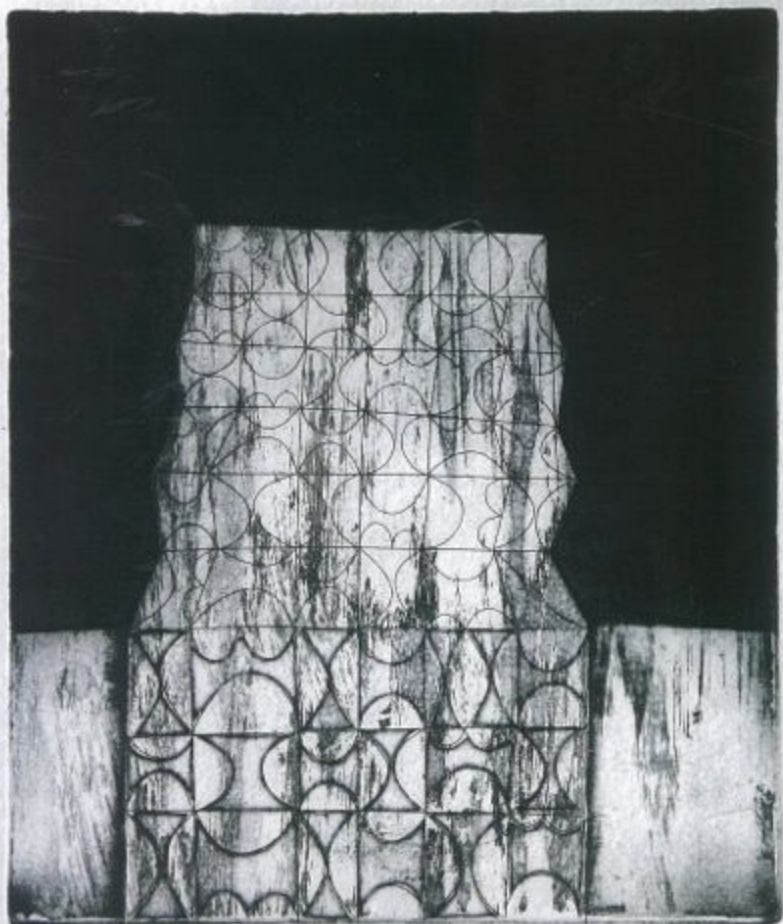
in modern architecture. But let the artists' work speak, and be described, for itself.

The works by Anwar Jalal Shemza in this exhibition focus on his extended engagement with architectural motifs. Shemza moved from Lahore to London in 1956 and developed his later career primarily in the UK, though he remained deeply engaged with South Asian and Islamic architecture and design. *Five Chairs* (1962) serves as a good example of his reworking of personal memory with reference to modernist form. Reminiscent of carved low chairs from South Asia, Shemza's spare rendering of these objects translates traditional ornament in new geometric compositions. Figure and ground distinctions are upended. The line marking the wall from the floor runs in a zigzag across the spine of the chairs, collapsing their projected dimensionality — they are puzzlingly both 3D and flat. This is a formal analogue to the way objects and space are remembered

later — they are perceived as being vivid and present, while also remaining impossibly distant. Ayesha Singh deploys a spare line that traces architectural ornament in her *Hybrid Drawings*. Her line, however, is a black metal armature suspended vertically in a gallery space. She draws on motifs of architectural hybridity that encompasses Mughal, sacred Hindu, Victorian, Indo-Saracenic, and brutalist styles, and which are found not only in South Asia but also in western metropolises such as London. Singh simplifies and enlarges these motifs to outline thresholds and gateways that tempt the viewer's body to move through them, creating — unveiling — a phenomenological encounter with the memory of built form. Their scale and immersive character invite reflection on the complex encounters between styles, peoples, and cultures over extended time. They also remind us of the hollowness of claims based on nationalist and identitarian purity that permeate so much contemporary public discourse worldwide.

Simryn Gill's *Windows* is a series of large colour photographs of an abandoned housing estate in Malaysia. The artist has engaged with this site in another series, *My Own Private Angkor*, in which she documented the rectangular glass plates carefully left behind by scavengers after stripping the aluminum window frames. By contrast, in *Windows* she turns her camera to look outside towards these hollow window sockets, which appear as rectangles punched out of the cement walls. They situate the view framed by these apertures against the decaying state of the mostly hollow interiors. The outside views variously show glimpses of sunlit sky, surrounding abandoned structures, and foliage. In some photographs, one sees the jungle beginning to venture into the interior. Light from outside often floods and overflows across the window rectangle even as the interiors are dimly lit. Unlike the evenly lighted, glossy, and clichéd architectural photography in design magazines, the artist's crepuscular photographs strike at a deeper level of consciousness. By blurring or confounding the foundational distinction between nature and culture, they underscore an elemental tension of modern life.

Seher Shah's work navigates the many permutations of personal and historical collective spatial memory through powerful graphic



constructions. In the Flatlands drawing series, Shah deploys repetitive minimalist lines to demarcate ground, against which architectural forms such as walls and columns emerge. The multiple horizontal lines are bracketed by isometric volumes and scored with an intermittent mark-making composed of small vertical arcs and lines. These volumes and marks striate the picture plane, producing a layered and complex visual puzzle, in which space dilates and contracts dimensionally between ground and perspectival space. And in her Capitol Complex collages, the artist reworks imagery from Le Corbusier's famous Chandigarh buildings. Shah extracts precise photographic fragments of the repetitive geometries from the concrete façades. They are then rotated, recombined, and reframed into new geometric constellations.

Lubna Chowdhary brings her considerable experience in ceramics to two new series of works. Edgeland is a series of flat shapes arrayed on shelves, and glazed with colours and finish that recall mid-century architectural ceramics. The

shapes are reminiscent of silhouettes of industrial structures or parts of a machine. However, the subtle skewness of their outlines and their repetitive but slightly irregular patterns and colours introduce a sense of levity, as if they were objects that hover between the arena of work and the realm of play. The Landscape series also displays this sensibility. Here the 3D objects are defined by curvilinear sculptural contours, scored with repetitive patterns, and finished in subdued colour. They reference architectural models of modernist and industrial buildings, the now-retro design of appliances from the mid-twentieth century, and utilitarian machine parts. Arrayed horizontally in clustered groups, they also recall city skylines. This delightful condensation of significations in Chowdhary's works demonstrates just how pervasively modernist sensibility has shaped and continues to shape the way we view the world around us. @

