

SEHER SHAH by Yaelle Amir

Momenta Art, Brooklyn NY

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"Jihad Pop," a cultural tongue-twister if ever there was one, is the title of Pakistani-born, now Brooklyn-based artist Seher Shah's portfolio of drawings and prints, representing, according to her online statement, "the marriage of [my] exploration of identity and the simultaneous broadcast of imagery of violence, conflict, and migration." Shah is obviously referring to the current standoff between Islamic countries and the (mainly American) West shown on daily media and in official policy on both sides of the increasingly bellicose divide, where "past associations of both family and lifestyle break down and begin to form new negotiations based on personal values," basically meaning new life principles strung together from the shards of Islamic fundamentalism, Christian hypocrisy, and apparently benign Western-style optimism—or as she summarizes it, "death as a symbol of struggle."

In this series, mainly a travel diary of sorts, though there's definitely a hint of personal jihad as well, Shah incorporates her own photographs as well as found imagery to resolve inner conflict and dislocation through great effort, in this case by a kind of sacred quest into the dark heart of religious implacability, filling the intense void (one could almost say, gross avoidance) with an array of personal memories, experiences, and past surroundings. In the six black-and-white *Black Arch* (2005) series of prints, Shah isolates definitive Islamic architectural elements such as fret moldings, a courtyard entryway, the tip of a minaret, a distant mosque, but at the same time cropping and foreshortening them in a sea of inky blackness, divesting them of their immediate cultural authority—somewhat emblematically, one suspects, given Shah's status as a Muslim woman in the West.

Black Star (2005), another print series, juxtaposes elements from *Black Arch* along with such icons as the Kaaba, assorted Middle Eastern figures, both ancient and modern, and a few rapturous flying crucifixes, as if the Holy Cube had suddenly terror-formed into the Cross of Jerusalem. Spilling over from and between these sets of prints are various arabesque drawings and script, foliaceous swirls and ornamentation, and almost bomb-like shards and billowing clouds, functioning—one presumes from this overall grid of literal and figurative Persian carpets—as triggers for unlocking deeply conflicted media messages in the guise of her own journey of self-discovery. It's all very "edited-for-content," tastefully done, and thus all the more unsettling given similar endeavors in the international media to play down the current contradictions and put a polite face on everything. Somehow it works, as the artist recently received honorable mention in *The New York Times*, booth space at NADA Miami 2007, and pride of place in several museums in Switzerland and Spain. If the world to come looks anything like this, then perhaps religious dogma will disappear under its own skirting of the issues.