

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Brick by brick: Noor Ali Chagani (and more)

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Hussain Khanbhai reviews recent works by Noor Ali Chagani and Aditi Singh

If you haven't had your fill of South Asian art at the India Art Week and the Dhaka Art Summit last month, then New York has some in store for you. For those in the Big Apple, this is the last week to check out works by Pakistani artist Noor Ali Chagani and Indian artist Aditi Singh.

House of Bricks is Chagani's first solo exhibition, on view at Leila Heller Gallery from 14 January – 13 February 2016, displaying fifteen new works that include sculpture, paintings and installations. The core of Chagani's exhibition centres on the quintessential South Asian politics of identity, home and belonging.

In true postcolonial fashion, Chagani reappropriates an ancient art practice—Miniature painting—to create modern-day works of art that thematically explore his vision. The artist's early training in Miniature art from the National College of Arts, Lahore, takes a three-dimensional, physical form in this exhibition, actualised through the unusual medium of bricks. Chagani builds small-scale structures that include floors, walls, stairs, pillars and even a roof—the basic foundations of a house, constructed out of tiny clay bricks.

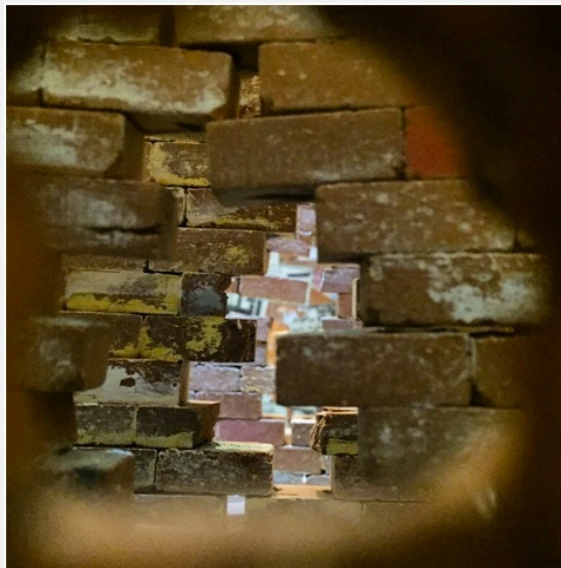


NOOR ALI CHAGANI, *Home*, 2015, Terracotta. Image courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

“The brick is a unit that is used repetitively; it is a unit of strength, power and support. It talks about land ownership and possession. It shows a constant struggle between retaining one’s identity and yet blending with the masses. It also communicates the need to be a part of a strong organization,” he says.

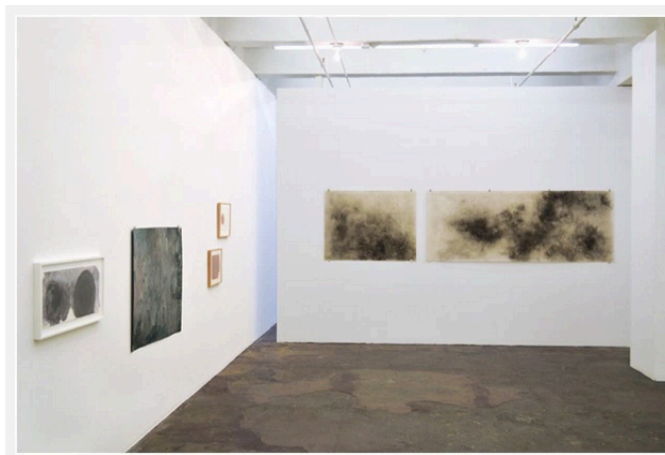
Chagani’s inspiration comes from his homeland, Pakistan, where bricks were the basic component with which houses were built. Through his brick-laden artworks, each furnished with painstaking brush strokes, Chagani refers to his own longing for a stable home, the pinnacle of an individual’s struggles and aspirations: “We spend our lives developing our own house. It’s partly the greatest dream of one’s life. All the struggles, efforts, and savings are to accomplish this wish of building one’s own house.”

In *New Infinity Wall*, 2015, the exhibition’s largest work, Chagani has constructed a free-standing wall that blends in seamlessly with the gallery’s, save for its two brick-lined ends. Within each terracotta surface is a peep hole, turning the viewer into voyeur. The wall’s inner structure is revealed to be a corridor of many smaller dilapidated brick walls, a ravaged but mesmerizing back alleyway. The decay of the wall’s innards despite its unobtrusive white-washed exterior, remains a potent metaphor—one one that resonates in all the works on view.



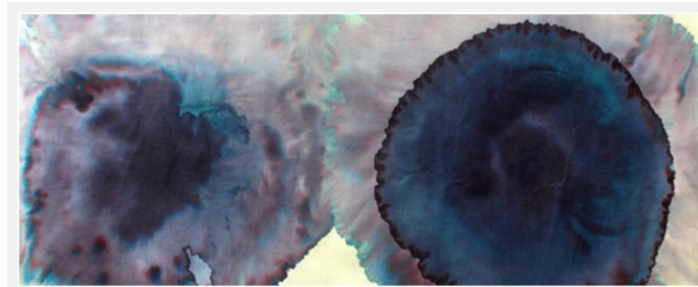
NOOR ALI CHAGANI, *New Infinity Wall*, 2016 (detail), Terracotta. Image courtesy of Lella Heller Gallery.

In contrast to Chagani’s structural composition are Aditi Singh’s abstract works at Thomas Erben Gallery. Visually amorphous, they strike one as cathartic, the result of process driven creation. On sensitively plotted surfaces of paper, Singh utilises a mixed medium of ink, charcoal and graphite. Densely rendered, the works result from the rhythmical application of materials that settle in forms both abstract and corporeal. The artist’s leitmotif, the poppy flower, a recurring symbol in many of her previous works, has the appearance of a vivid stain here, while still retaining its essence and piercing red hue.



ADITI SINGH, *All that is left behind*, 2016 (installation view). Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

Flowers form an allegory for life and death in the artist's work. Similar experiments are evident in this series, in shades of icy blue and deep indigo. These settle like residue on the paper's puckered surface, an allusion perhaps to the transient state of all living things.



ADITI SINGH, *Untitled*, 2015, Ink on washi paper. Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

Singh cites the “transcendental quality of Yoga and art” as her impetus, drawing parallels between the cathartic function that both practices stand to serve, lending the exhibition its title, *All that is left behind*.

Viewings:

Noor Ali Chagani, *House of Bricks*, 14 January – 13 February 2016
 Leila Heller Gallery, 568 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001
 Gallery hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm