

Noor Ali Chagani

House of Bricks





How to Build a Home: The Work of Noor Ali Chagani

“Since his birth, a man carries the responsibilities and hopes of his parents and grandparents. From childhood he is taught to become a strong man, a supporting pillar of a family. He is taught that he has to study really hard so that he can be commercially successful. The foremost thing in his life is the desire for a beautiful home, good job, good car, and a beautiful wife. His life revolves around these basic needs of life. On the time of selection of his professional education he is also forced to pick from subjects that are successful in the current market rather than thinking of his personal interest. His personal choice is always compromised. And this trend does not end with him, it is something he got from his father and he will pass it on to his son.”

– Noor Ali Chagani

In his latest exhibition *House of Bricks*, on view at Leila Heller Gallery, artist Noor Ali Chagani recreates the disparate architectural elements that make up a home in miniature form. In doing so, he enacts the societal expectations placed upon him as a Pakistani man. Painstakingly building walls, columns, floors, and roofs, Chagani enacts the dream of building a structure of his own to protect his family.

In their miniaturized size (each brick is only 29 x 14.5 x 11 millimeters), Chagani's building fragments are reminiscent of dollhouses and children's construction toys. They evoke the early, highly impressionable stage of an individual's life when one's fundamental values are established. Yet despite the toy-like scale of the bricks, each is created using the same technique as their life size counterparts. Earth is packed into forms, sun dried, and then fired. They possess the same architectural integrity as the bricks used to make buildings throughout the city of Lahore.

Chagani subverts the strength of these bricks by weaving them together with fishing and steel wire rather than cementing them. As a result, walls fold like fabric, floors undulate, and columns hang. Chagani's architecture lacks the typically desired qualities of any building. While providing the illusion of strength, these sculptures are fragile. The intention behind them is not to recreate buildings themselves, but rather to provide a visualization of the disconnect between aspiration and reality. It is impossible for any individual to truly live up to the expectations placed upon them.

The installations in *House of Bricks* are intended to be touched and moved. In contrast to the rigidity of buildings, these works are adaptive. Through interaction, the form of these walls can be manipulated, moved around, and ultimately brought back to assume their original form. They are meant to draw attention to the similarity between walls and skin or clothing. Buildings protect that which is precious to us much as our skin does. It shelters us from the elements, yet also bears the mark of time.

A series of columns, tellingly titled *Not so Strong*, provides an illusion of strength, yet they do not support anything. Instead, these pillars hang suspended from the ceiling and float slightly above the floor. This work is a representation of the position of men in Pakistani society. Expected to be pillars of society, often these individuals are forced to create an illusion of strength.

The interplay between reality and fantasy is central to Chagani's work. Pieces often appear hallucinatory as they play with scale and perspective. An undulating brick floor called *The other side*, has the semblance of being alive. It is a functional floor, yet it has an unconventional softness to it. Because it is built over foam padding, the floor lacks the stability required of any building's foundation. It is as if the dream of this structure has something hiding beneath it, leading to its instability. *The other side* has a childlike feel to it, whimsical, yet nightmarish. The work serves as a reminder of how the stresses of the day can work their way into one's unconscious.

From an early age the home is established as a symbol of belonging and stability—a safe space where one can establish one's own rules and way of leading life. It can simultaneously be about family and solitude—a place where one can hide away from expectations and societal pressures. The walls of a home protect the good within from the pressures and evils of the outside world.

In each of Chagani works, he directly references real places and collective experiences and then transforms them. So many of his works draw from the pressures he feels as a Pakistan man, while other works pull from current events in his home country. Despite the geospecificity of his work, he connects to universal desires of belonging and being safe.

In December of 2014 a terrorist attack took place at the Army Public School in Peshawar. Armed militants climbed the wall surrounding the school and killed over 150 individuals, most of whom were children. As a result, the following year a dictate was made that all boundary walls would have to be raised by four feet as a security measure. *It is not enough* is a recreation of the boundary wall surrounding the Punjab Public Library in Lahore. On top of a heavily graffitied wall, sit six rows of clean brick, representing the addition made to meet the dictate. *It is not enough*, questions the semblance of safety that buildings provide.

The sharp division between the heavily marked up original wall and the clean addition draws attention the role of the wall as an area of free expression. Graffiti

found on boundary walls range from political slogans and advertising to aspirational messages. These walls are unregulated spaces. Upon wall of the Punjab Public library the graffiti reads "the change has arrived," referring to Pakistani politician Imran Khan as well as, "we will change Pakistan," a slogan belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz. Next to these slogans are advertisements for the Pak-China Circus and newspaper clippings addressing building projects. This wall has become a public forum where political values can be played out in close proximity to the entertainment and commerce. The boundary wall of the Punjab Public Library can be seen as a window into quotidian existence in Lahore.

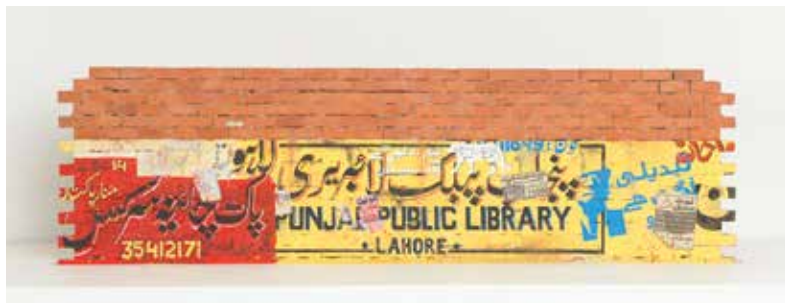
Chagani's depiction of current events bares similarity to the miniaturist painting tradition, which he studied at the National College of Art in Lahore. Historically, miniaturist painting was a record of the time in which it was created. Images of important figures, events, and stories dominated the subject matter. They were a visual record of whatever was of note at the time as well as an informational tool.

In *House of Bricks*, Chagani's architectural elements reference a desire for a better life and familial stability as well as masculine expectations. Similarly mining his childhood for aspirational images, he turned to books. Growing up, Chagani was always told that books were a way to a better life. While he was not necessarily interested in the books themselves, he was fascinated by what they represented.

Chagani has begun using books to create art. In each case he takes a cue from their subject matter and alters them in a manner that he sees fit. Within the pages of a book on masonry, Chagani builds a wall of his small bricks. In another piece he excises the text from a dictionary and fills the resulting lines in with cement. In a worn copy of *India, Pakistan, and the West* he has dug a set of stairs that goes beyond the confines of the book itself and goes down into the pedestal below it. Seemingly bringing attention to the depth and complexity of the political relationships between different countries.

Throughout this body of work, Chagani makes visible his desires and fears. He creates fragmented, facsimiles of homes that, unlike the buildings they are modeled after, have the ability to be moved and relocated. While the societal pressures that Chagani responds to in his work continue to exist, they do not completely echo the realities of contemporary existence. Many individuals are redefining what success is and subverting traditional gender roles. Chagani's work can be seen as an effort to up turn expectation and expand the definition of belonging. From the very earth of Lahore, the artist has created portable places of refuge that anyone can call their own.

Justine Ludwig
Director of Exhibitions / Senior Curator at Dallas Contemporary



It's Not Enough I, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
8 x 25.5 x 0.5 in

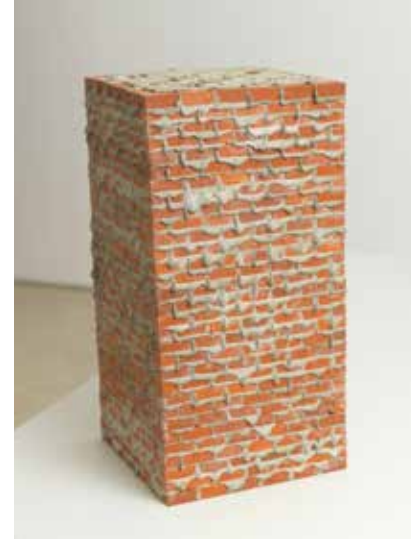


It's Not Enough II, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
8 x 25.5 x 0.5 in

Small Wall, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
5.5 x 22 x 0.5 in



Pixels of my Portrait II, 2016
Mirror frame and cement
30 x 15 x 1.75 in



Small Rectangular Pillar I, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
14 x 6.5 x 6.5 in



Small Rectangular Pillar II, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
14 x 6.5 x 6.5 in



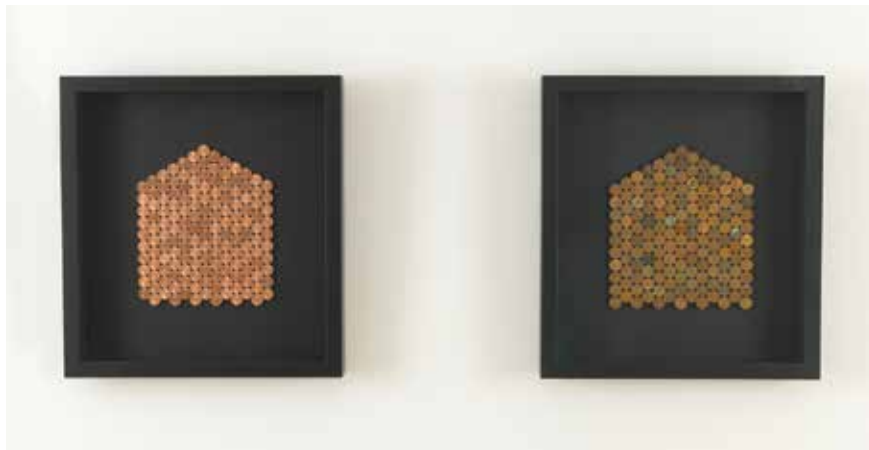
Home, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
8.5 x 9 x 7 in



Lifeline with Colored Bricks, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
40 x 54 x 0.5 in

New Infinity Wall, 2016
Terra cotta bricks, false wall
14 painted terra cotta small brick wall
Installation size: 84 x 98 x 13 in





House of Coins, 2016
USD and PKR coins on paper
Diptych: 19 x 17.5 in (each)



Golden Wall, 2015
Terra cotta bricks and goldleaf
11 x 8.8 x 0.5 in



Silver Wall, 2015
Terra cotta bricks and silverleaf
11 x 8.8 x 0.5 in



The Other Side, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
59.5 x 32.5 x 0.5 in



Roof Vertical, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
24 x 19.25 in



Roof Horizontal, 2015
Terra cotta bricks
11.25 x 28.5 in



Hand-carved Book, 2015
Carved book and terra cotta bricks
9.25 x 12 x 1 in



Endless Stairs, 2015
Carved books
7 x 8.5 x 1 in



Weight, 2015
Gouache on paper
20 x 15.5 in

NOOR ALI CHAGANI

B. 1982, Karachi, Pakistan

Lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan

EDUCATION

- 2008 BCS, Sir Syed University of Engineering & Technology, Pakistan
- 2004 BFA, National College of Arts, Pakistan

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *House of Bricks*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2014 *ETHEREAL*, curated by Dr. Amin Jaffer, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
SINDH – Reverberating Sounds, Echo through the desert, Koel Gallery, Karachi
Lets' Take it Outside, Gandhara Art Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2013 *Group Show: Adam Buick, Noor Ali Chagani, Dee Ferris, Dominique Gonzalez, Corvi-Mora*, UK
Two-man show – Noor Ali Chagani + Farid Saleem Kamboh, Joye Gallery, Belgium
Alwaan 2013, Al-Riwan Art Space, Bahrain
- 2012 *Rijksakademie OPEN 2012*, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam
Laberintour, Satrang Gallery, Pakistan
In Praise of Red, Royaat Gallery, Pakistan
Letters to Taseer, The Drawing Room Gallery, Lahore
- 2011 *Home Spun* curated by Girish Shahane for the Devi Art Foundation, Delhi
The Jameel Prize, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Pakistan – A Symphony of Sounds and Colors, presented by Embassy of Pakistan in Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 2010 *Two Folds*, Rohtas Gallery, Islamabad
Mashq – An Endless Lust, Green Cardamom, London
The Architecture of the Self, Gandhara-Art, Lahore & Hong Kong
Landmarks, JTM Gallery, Paris
Beyond the Page, Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA
Resemble Reassemble, curated by Rashid Rana for the Devi Art Foundation, Delhi
New Art from Pakistan, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, NY
- 2009 *Other Side*, Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi
Miniature Pakistan Contemporanee, Galleria Gomiero, Milan
Pushing Boundaries, National Art Gallery, Islamabad
Drawings, Gallerie Patricia Dorfman, Paris
Miniature Painting, Orens Art Gallery, Karachi
Mapping the Journey, Vogue Art Gallery, Lahore

AWARDS

- 2011 Jameel Prize, V&A Museum, UK (Shortlisted)

RESIDENCIES

- 2013 Alwaan 338, Arts Residency, Al-Riwaq Art Space, Bahrain
- 2012 Guest Residency, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam



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