

BUILT TO FAIL | SEHER NAVEED

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Built to Fail brings together Seher Naveed's latest series of works that investigate the particularities and peculiarities of life in the city of Karachi. Pakistan's largest urban metropolis, and one of the world's largest urban agglomerations, Karachi is a city marked by issues of governance, security, population, planning, land, housing and infrastructure, while simultaneously being the economic engine that drives the country, as well as its main seaport.

Of the three series of works exhibited, Naveed's *Tri-color Tips* and *Shape Shifting* present a continued investigation, documentation and subversion of the visual and spatial impact of the measures of barricading and policing, securitization and militarization that manifest across the city of Karachi – whose persistent presence has rendered them largely invisible to its inhabitants over the years – exploring these as a vernacular design aesthetic of the city. Here, we see the evolution of the artist's concerns, first emerging years ago in the form of large, flat, meticulously painted works focusing on the symbolism of the shipping container. In Karachi, the container is a common sight, both in the context of the port, as well as its use as a blockade in the city, often obstructing major traffic routes and access, particularly at times of heightened security. The pyramidal sculptural forms of the *Tri-color Tips*, emerging from these concerns, rising out of walls and floors, signaling to a future where they may be uncovered as archaeological objects that testify to the checkered history of the city.

In *Shape Shifting*, while the meticulous abstract language of color and form continues, the focus moves between public and private space, recalling an earlier series of graphite drawings investigating the gates of private homes in Karachi's residential neighborhoods, examining the way these, along with the walls of the homes, have become higher, more fortified, and adorned with increasingly hostile design elements, commonly including tall metal spikes and barbed wires. In Karachi, where in past decades, violence has been known to break out and spread across the city within minutes, and economic disparities have resulted in high rates of violence, crime and robbery, it seems the barricades work to protect the city from its citizens, and the walls to protect the citizens from the city. The slick colored surfaces and angular forms of the works in *Shape Shifting* then speak clearly and coolly to a visual language of fortification, as the psychology of fear penetrates from the city's public spaces into its most private spheres. Anthony Burke suggests that security should be viewed as an interlocking system of knowledge, representations, practices, and institutional forms that imagine, direct, and act upon bodies,



spaces and flows. In other words, as a political technology that ensures that the persistent perception of threat ensures the existence of security only in relation to insecurity.^[1]

In his 1968 essay 'The Right to the City', Henri Lefebvre speaks to the rights of all urban dwellers (regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, ability, gender and race) to participate in shaping the city that they inhabit. He refers to, "the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and play, the needs for the predictable and the unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects."^[2] The city of Karachi has been plagued by issues of infrastructure almost since the Partition in 1947, when it saw the first major surge in its population as it became the center of resettlement for the Muslim *muhajirs*. Since then, it has continued to draw a multitudinous population from across the country seeking economic opportunities in this massive metropolis of over 22 million inhabitants. These surges in population had begun to strain the city's infrastructure as early as the 1950s. Today, failures in governance, neglect and corruption have left the city's struggling infrastructure near collapse, always in a state of delayed response, never quite able to catch up. Makeshift infrastructures and quick fixes appear as band aids on a breaking dam, an absurd language of futile repair spoken across the city.

The series *Late Edit* presents a set of colored pencil drawings, with their angular shapes set against flat white or colored backgrounds, within which appear seemingly dysfunctional infrastructural elements and everyday objects. Bridges, pipes, barriers and drain covers are offset by water bottles and design elements seen behind trucks. The flatness of the picture plane is critical in the compression of information within it, speaking to a long tradition of abstract art, that Peter Acheson referred to as "a hard nut containing the whole tree."^[3] This compression also becomes critical in speaking to the complex layers of information contained within the works, and to the viewer's engagement with them. Win refers to the compression lemma, where art is "recognizable not by medium, beauty, or even intention, but by a specific relationship between *compression* — the selective encoding of contextual density by the maker — and *decompression* — the interpretive labor demanded of the audience."^[4]

In doing so, Naveed asks viewers to bring their own interpretive frameworks to her works. In an age marked by issues of safety and security, of rights, access, autonomy and control are increasingly at the forefront of the battles fought in both our public and private spaces, this invitation is significant. As states of exception (see Agamben 1998) increasingly become the norm, this invitation reminds us that many of our fundamental concerns are not as distant as the spaces between us appear to be.

Zarmeene Shah, Nov 2025

^[1] Anthony Burke, 'Aporias of security', in *Alternatives* volume 27, issue 1. pp. 1-27

^[2] Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', in *Writings on Cities*, Blackwell, 1996. p. 147

^[3] As quoted in Chris Martin, 'Everything is Finished Nothing is Dead', *The Brooklyn Rail*, April/May 2003

^[4] Jimi Wen, 'Art as Compression: Toward a Theory of the "Compression Lemma"', *Medium*, May 9, 2025