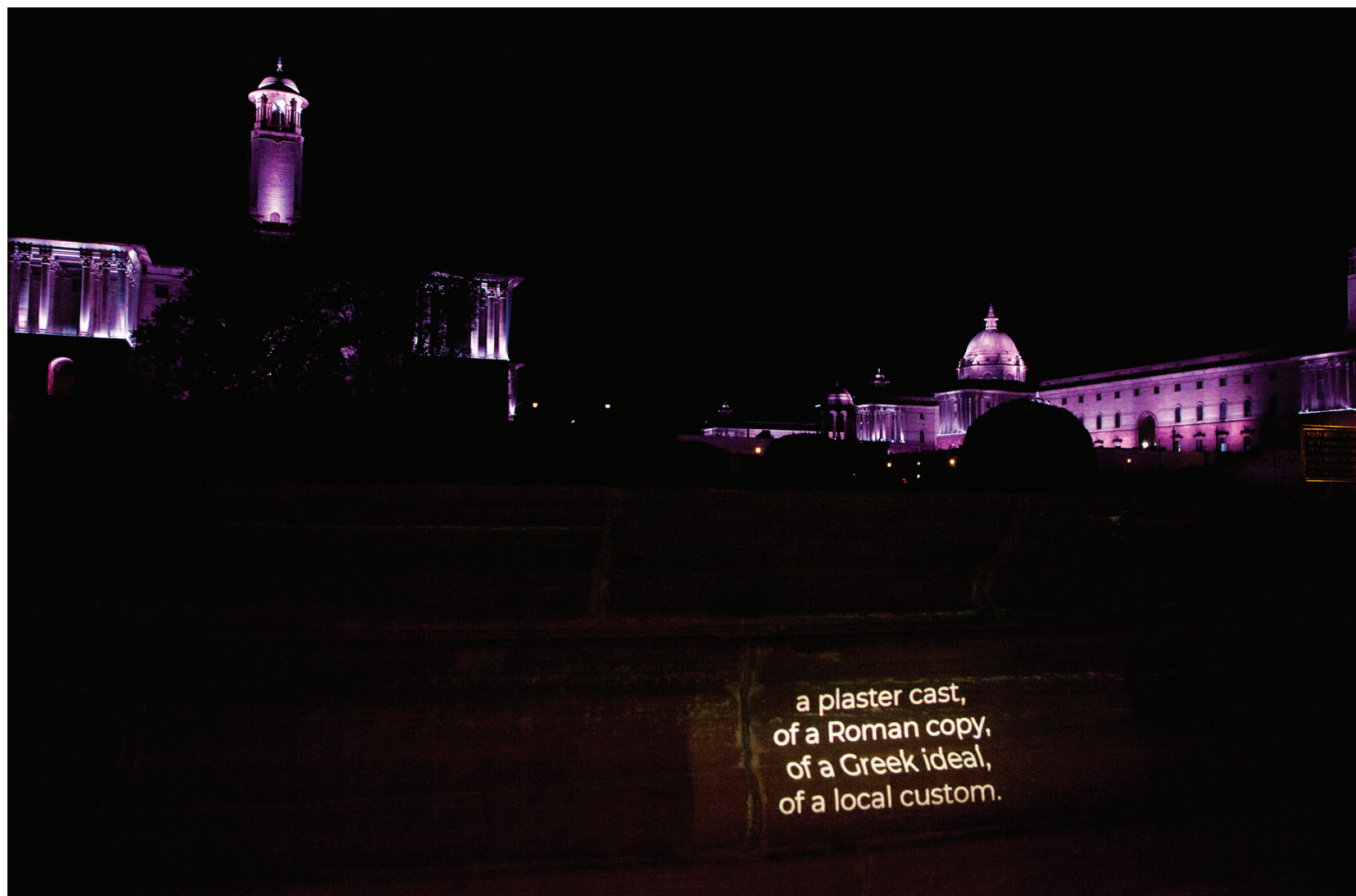


Cracks in the Wall

Ayesha Singh's architectural sculptures and text-based art question cultural puritanism and re-present Delhi's syncretic urban landscape, notes **Adwait Singh**.



Ayesha Singh. *Capital Formation*. Projection of text in public spaces. Text conceived in collaboration with Cat Bluemke. Archival print on aluminium diabond. 22" x 33" each. Ed. 3 + 2AP. 2017-2019. © Shrine Empire and the artist. Photograph courtesy of Shrine Empire and the artist.

Ayesha Singh's solo at Delhi's Shrine Empire Gallery *It Was Never Concrete* from the 23rd of August to the 28th of September conjures a strange archaeological terrain of collapsed histories, or perhaps an antique shop where a mixed bag of motley monuments from different times parley across the same shelf. The gaze meanders through an architectural maze of hybridised arches and cornices, delineated as black metal frames that break up the white

space, vaguely connoting the syncretic skyline of this ancient city, finally alighting on a swinging kinetic sculpture espied through a broad vertical slit in a temporary wall.

Two zoomorphic wooden brackets, the kind one would recall from temple interiors in South India, joust and collide in an eternal merry-go-round, leaving behind a trail of dust and broken fragments. Titled *Frayed Continuum*, the work proffers a poetic preamble to the exhibition. The twin

figures go faster and wilder as they shed their ideological weight. The torqued dynamism of the sculptures is an obvious reference to historical recycling and continuity whilst the settled remains on the floor offer a much more ambiguous reading and can variously signify constructive friction that would eventually cancel out difference, or historical casualties caught between warring ideologies. As such, this material slough is open to interpretation as exhausted cultural difference or the ruins of a desecrated past repurposed into an eclectic present. Or perhaps both at the same time.

The exhibition title, as the curatorial note by Anushka Rajendran suggests, is a reminder of the fact that even reinforced concrete is vulnerable to wear, in addition to signalling the transience of our built architecture at large, as well as the susceptibility of the emblems of power to subversion. One of the panels from the series *Capital Formation* that photo-documents projected prompts on public spaces, reads 'I appropriate their Corinthian, they appropriate my chai' while the following words appear against the backdrop of a brightly lit Rashtrapati Bhavan in another:

a plaster cast,
of a Roman copy,
of a Greek ideal,
of a local custom.

These words, when viewed in the light of the exhibition title, question the cultural puritanism that pervades the current political atmosphere, revealing and revelling in the rich multiculturalism (literalised by a series of composite architectural drawings *Hybrid Amalgamations* elsewhere in the exhibition) that is writ all over the syncretic urban landscape of Delhi, pointing to a bustling history of intercultural exchange long before globalisation became a thing. Taken together with the injunction 'Let's repeat the definition of an empire' projected onto a police barricade, these textual provocations indicate the recursion of imperial tropes and their modification by modernities time after time. The curatorial note doesn't quite stop at situating these tokens of hegemonic posturing within physical spaces of the city either, extending these well over

to the soft architecture of social media and advertising imagery as well as their intersection with algorithms of power. One hears alarming reports of unauthorised data mining and big data being employed by various corporate and political players to identify and influence their targeted audiences, just as one hears an echo of symbols and regalia of authorities past in our day to day material expressions and aspirations. All this points to the simple fact that although the modalities of power might have changed the directionality and nature of power have not.

The dispersed message that one gleans from these writings on the wall is poetically assimilated by three stacks of commonplace yellow posters squatting on a dais of concrete building blocks right in the middle of the charcoal grey room. This instigation titled *Capital Formation/ No Exit Nation*, conceived by the artist in collaboration with Rajendran and artist Jyothidas KV, comprises several copies of the eponymous poem translated across three predominant Indian languages – Hindi, Urdu and English – to be taken and disseminated by gallery visitors. The performative text that mimics the same collaged aspect as the rest of the exhibition, leaves one with an impression of various architectural units acting as transferred epithets for extant no-exit containments, exclusionary politics, economic disparity and social segregation. The shifting metaphor of the wall recurs throughout the poem and takes on different physical attributes and socio-economic connotations, doubtless to instantiate the multiple locales where the poem would pop up through audience intervention. As the site-responsive import of this work sinks in, slowly and out of the mismatched corners of the city imported into the gallery, a third understanding of the title 'It was never concrete' starts forming. One wades through a thickening sense of treachery as the failed promise of neo-liberal modernity – growth and the neutralisation of difference – dawns. Just like its favoured material – concrete – the promise of modernity has proved to be far from perfect as borne out by the numerous grievous cracks that have appeared in its façade. Once through this doorway of understanding, it becomes impossible to see the exhibition in any other light. /