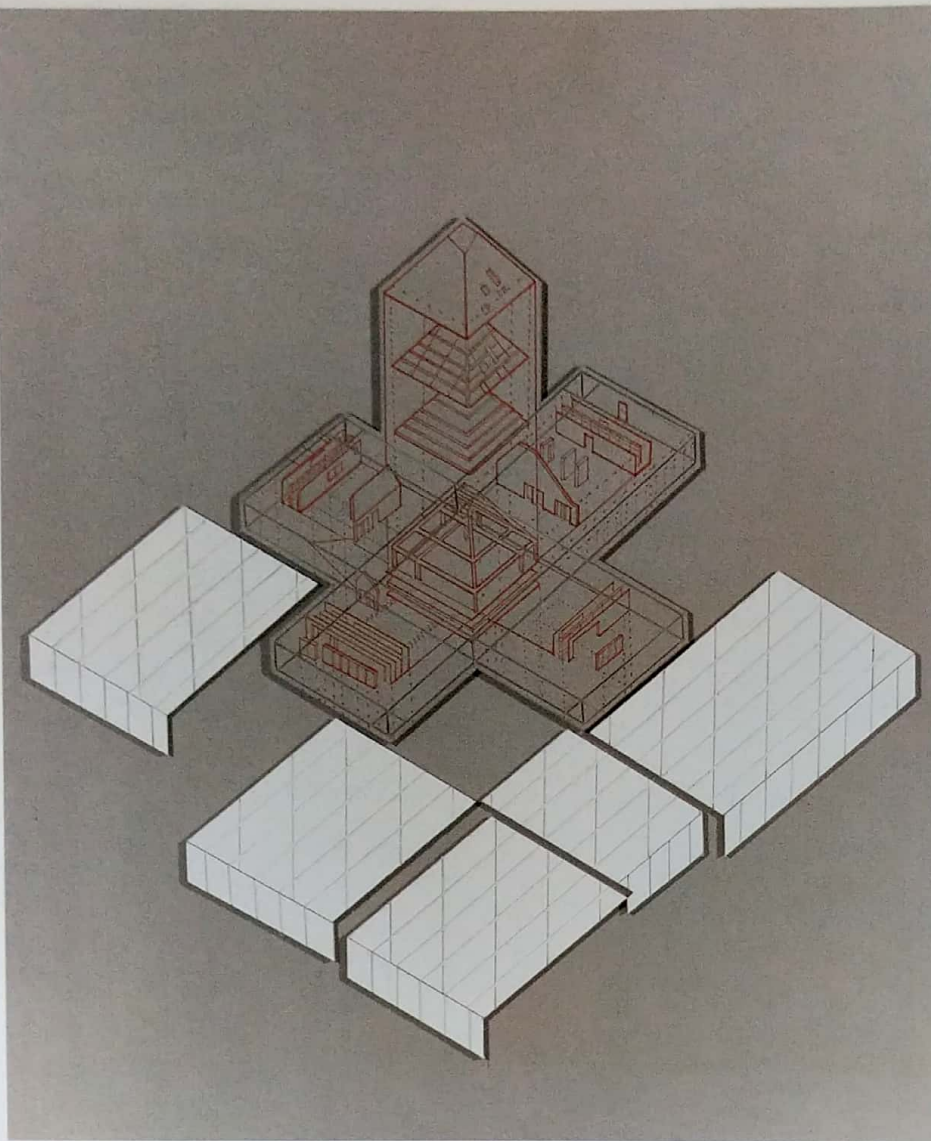


This page:
Concrete Cipher III,
Archival ink drawings and cuts on
museum board, 2018

Opposite page:
Acromonus invasion (diptych),
Archival ink on conservation board, 2018



In his recent body of work, artist Pratap Morey filters out the hustle and bustle of the city, training his gaze instead on the massive modular blocks of construction material used for infrastructure projects. Like pieces of a Lego set, they patiently lie in wait for their moment of assembly, when according to a pre-determined plan they will neatly click into place to create a flyover or the stretch of a metro line. But for Morey, they represent concrete ciphers, waiting to be decoded and put to more imaginative use. Elevating these humdrum, banal, serial and seemingly soulless creatures of mechanical production, Morey gestures at the roles they could possibly play in creating alternate, utopian worlds.

Exhibition Concrete Ciphers

Text by Meera Menezes

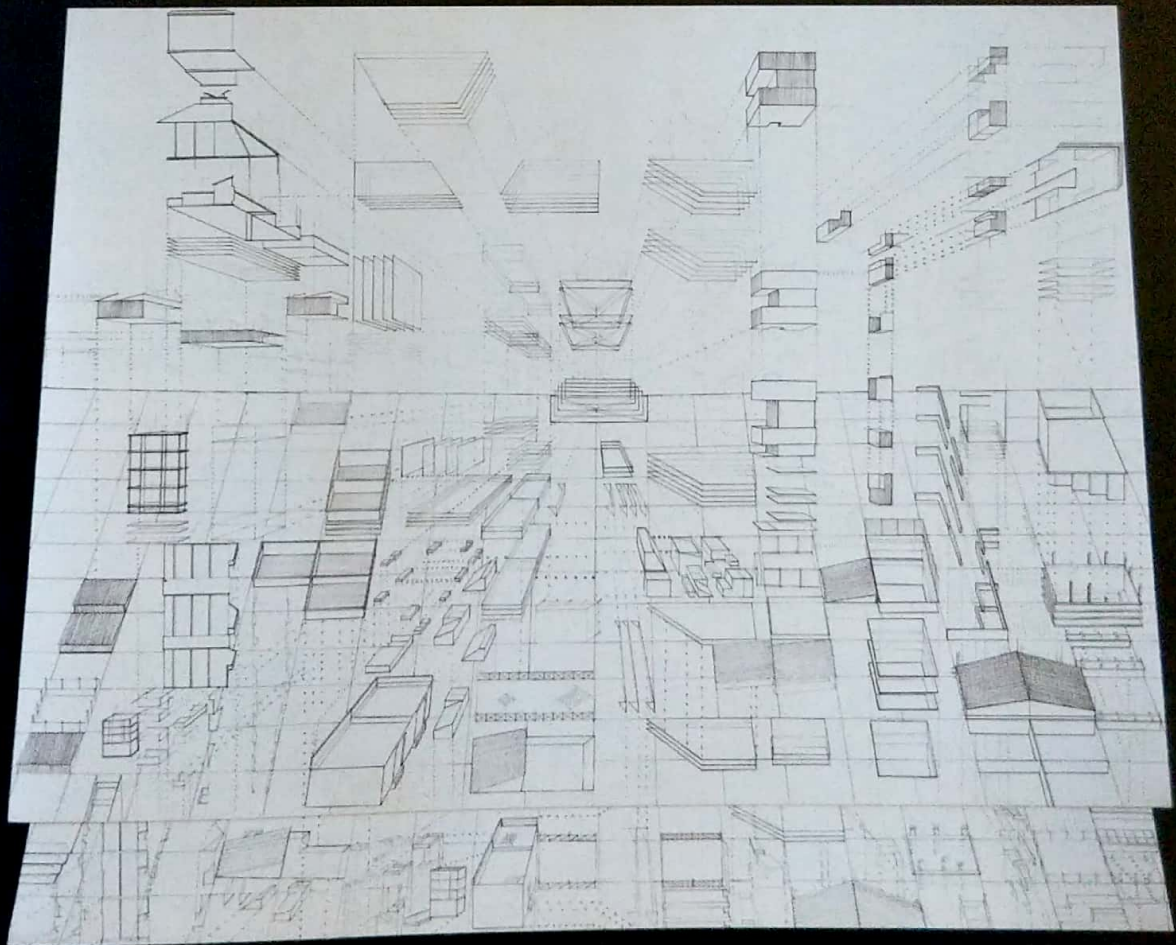
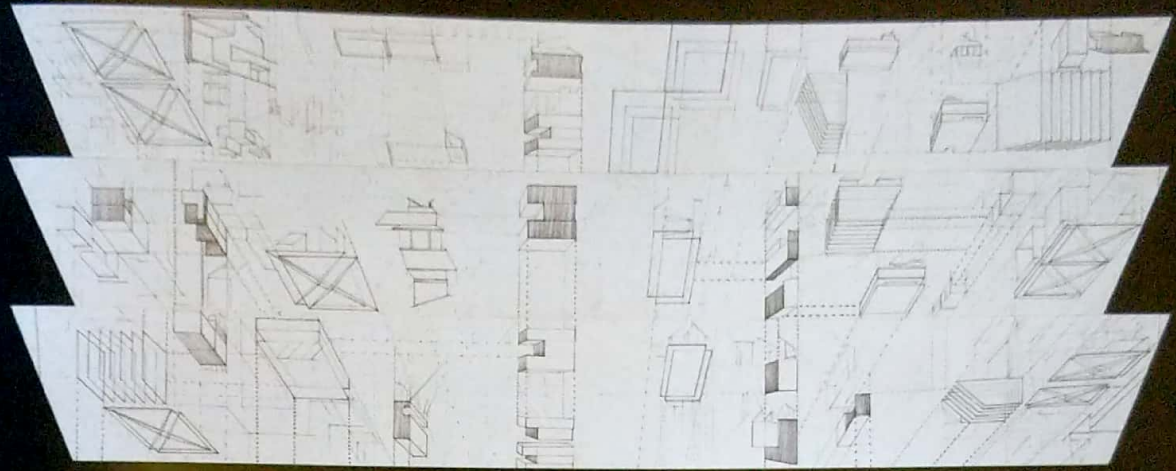
Photos courtesy Pratap Morey and TARQ

Where others see chaos in the teeming metropolis, Pratap Morey spies a method in the madness. Where others merely see construction sites plied with massive concrete blocks, Morey divines pieces of puzzles waiting to be put together. For him the city is a jumble of modular components, akin to a massive jigsaw. All one needs to do is to decipher its hidden logic and crack the code. By looking beyond the physical attributes of the pieces, he portends their potential, imagining possible futures for them. What if, his works seems to ask, what if?

Building blocks

Much of the grist for Morey's creative mills comes from the city he lives in, Mumbai. The artist never ceases to be amazed by how the metropolis lives

up to its moniker, *Maximum City*. Here the smallest of spaces is territorialised, every inch coveted and fought over by people and infrastructure projects. Like trees fighting for sunlight in a dense tropical jungle, buildings shoot up skywards for the ground level offers them no freedoms to expand. This vertical growth of the city, where a small vacant plot or an old house almost unbelievably metamorphoses into a skyscraper continues to fascinate Morey. By challenging his notions of space, it opens up new avenues of imagining the city and its possible transformation. The development of urban spaces also alters the way we navigate them and Pratap is equally invested in the movement of bodies within the city and their relationship to space, even though the human



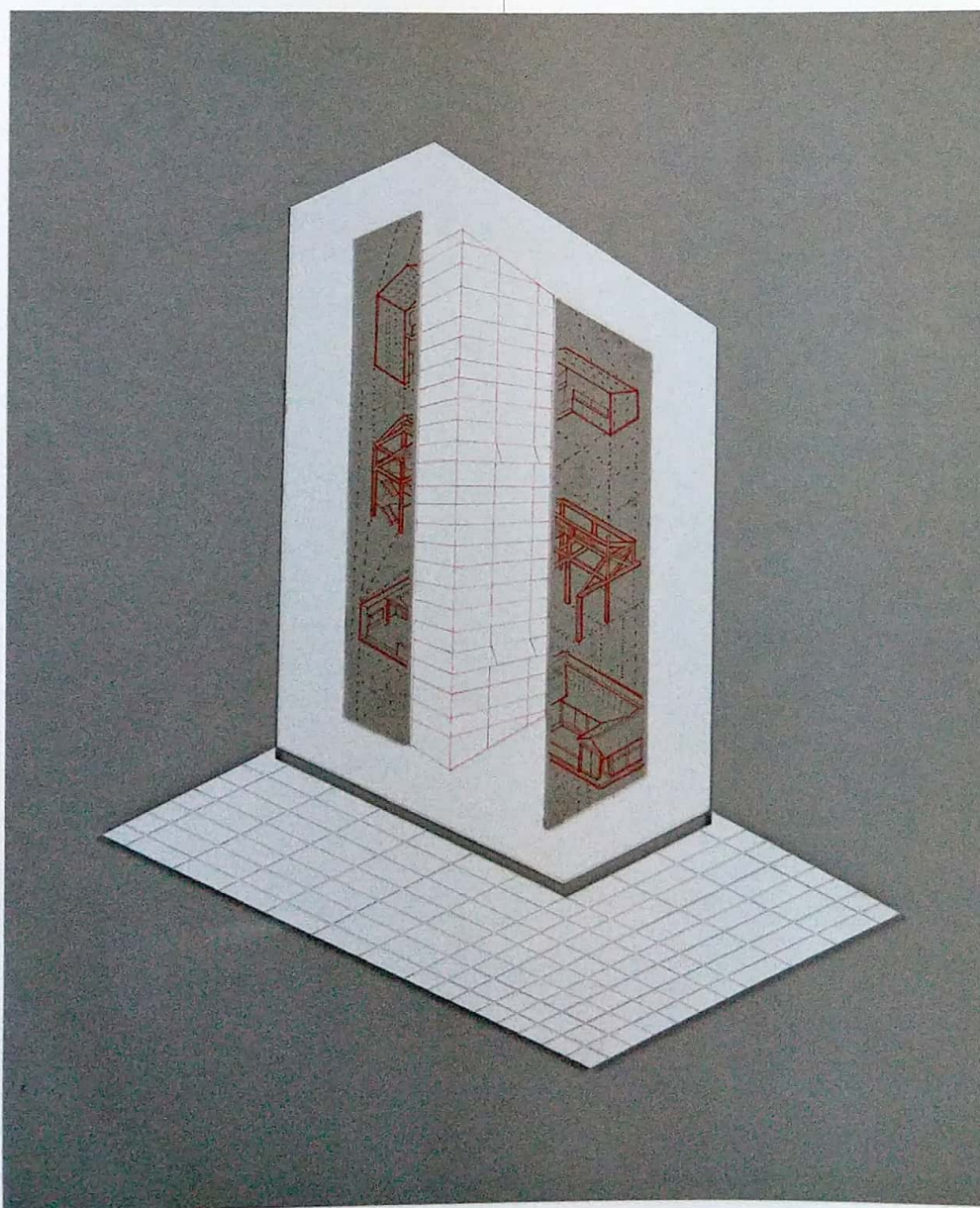
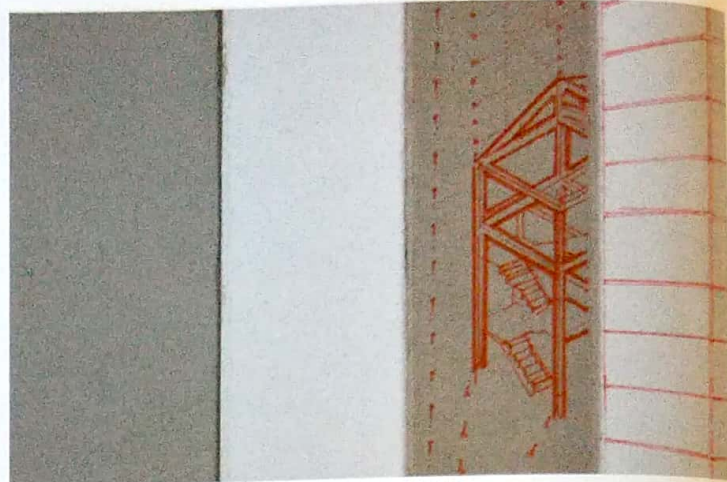
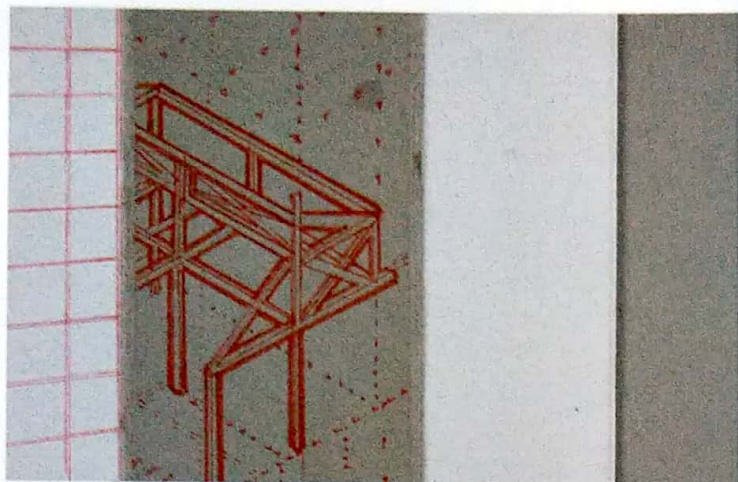


figure itself is conspicuously absent in his works. With their focus on linearity and precision his works are more akin to architectural drawings.

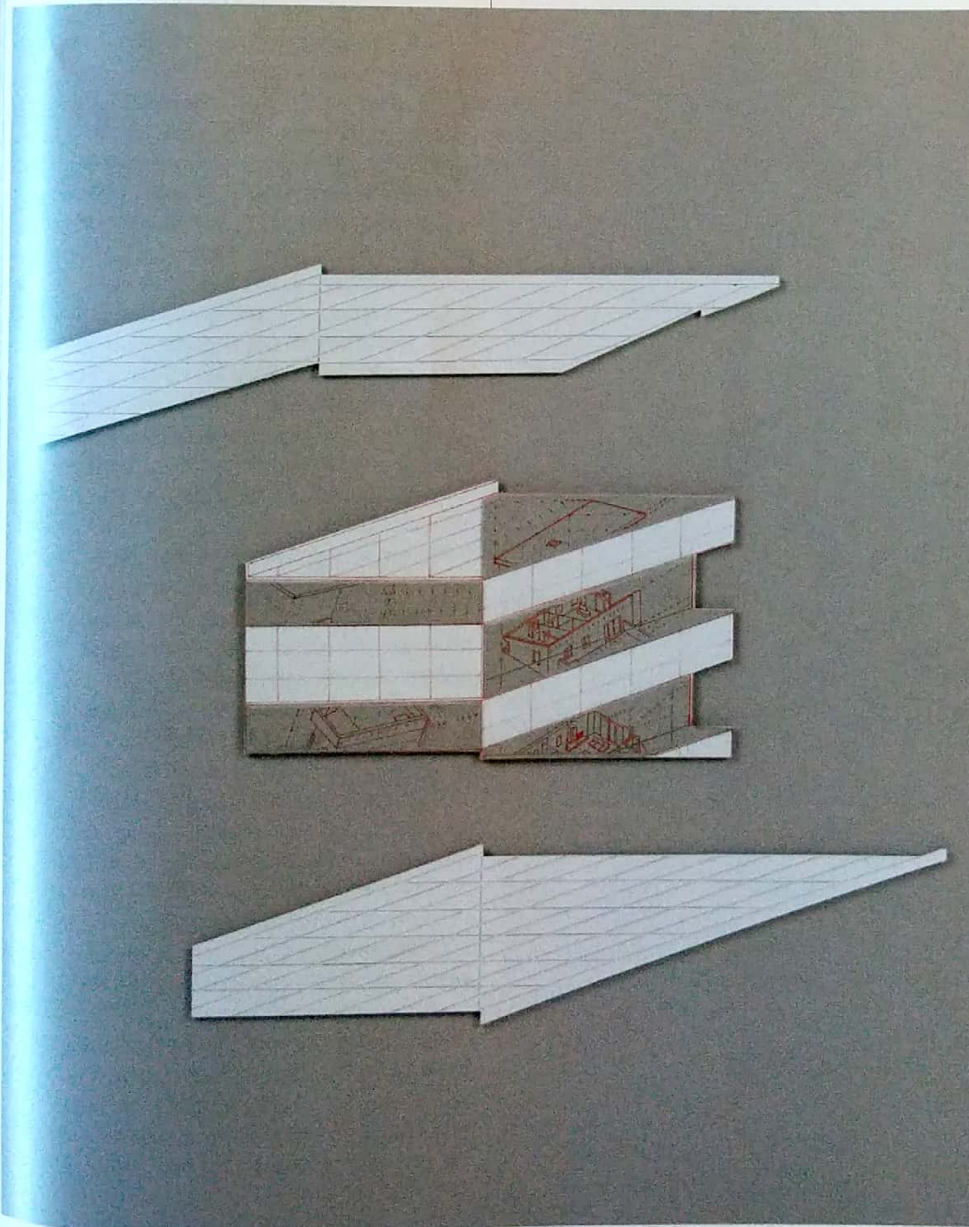
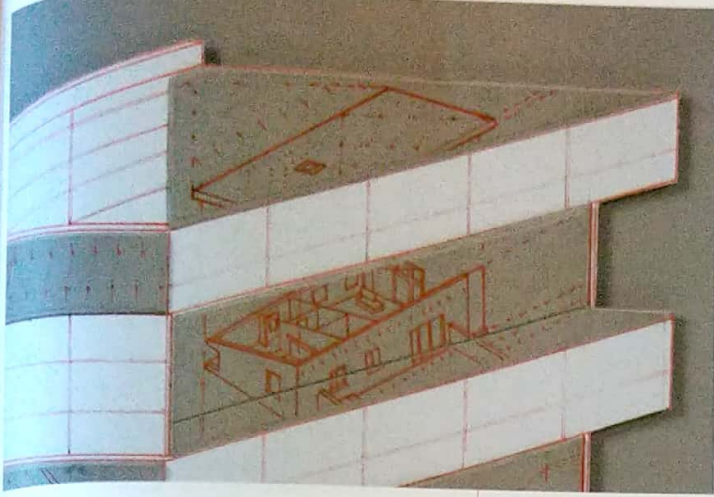
The issues of redevelopment of cities, the displacement they engender and their subsequent transformation have preoccupied Morey ever since he shifted from the smaller town of Amravati to Mumbai. His father's transferrable job meant he was constantly on the move. While changing homes he had the opportunity to observe up close the altering face of the megapolis. Equally fascinating for him have been the modular modes of construction with neatly numbered concrete blocks, segments, piers and pillars being the norm in newer construction projects, among them the Mumbai metro.

Morey has been documenting these shifts in the urban topography by photographing changes in the architecture of buildings. In the past he has combined these digital photographs with elements of collage and drawings to fashion his imaginary urban spaces. By processing and manipulating the images digitally he has succeeded in creating incredibly complex patterns. In several of his works he harnesses the trope of a vanishing point, creating the illusion of parallel lines converging. By offering multiple perspectives and magnifying or zooming in to certain details that he captures with his lens, he adroitly creates illusionary voids or lends his images a giddy sense of propulsion and speed. In earlier series of works such as *Superimpose* he has attempted to collapse the past, present and potential futures of the urban landscape, proffering a sense of rapid transformation and transition.

A concrete conundrum

In his latest body of work, Morey filters out the hustle and bustle of the city with its mass of human bodies, its sights, sounds and smells,

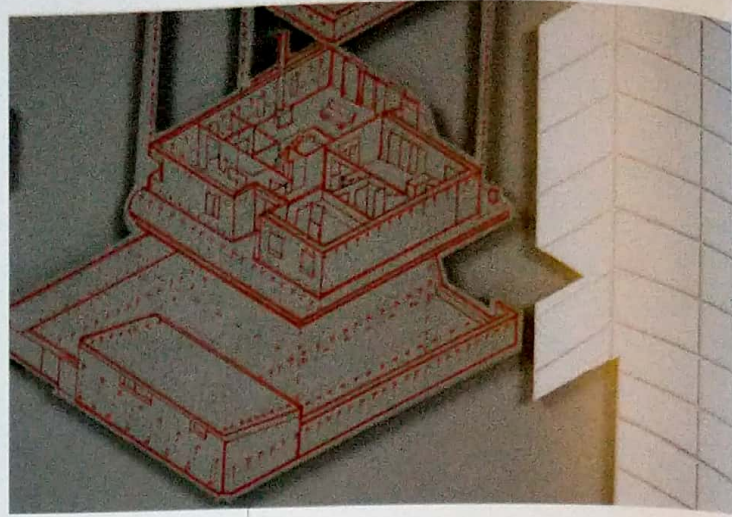
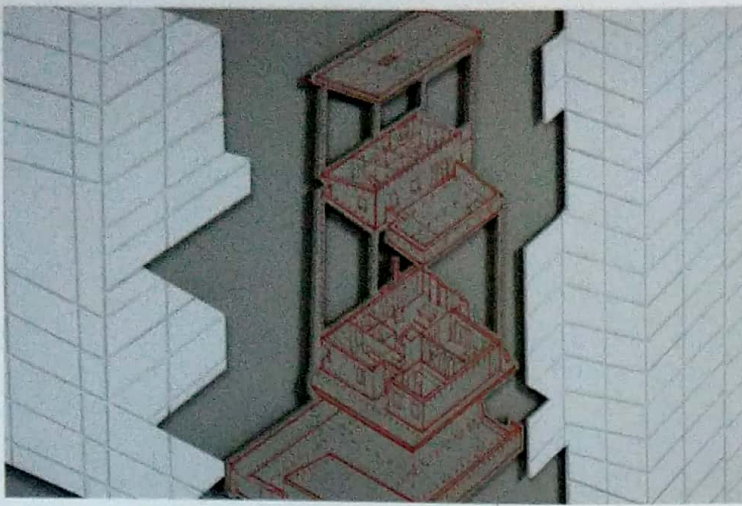
This spread: Details from *Concrete Cipher I & II*, Archival ink drawings and cuts on museum board, 2018



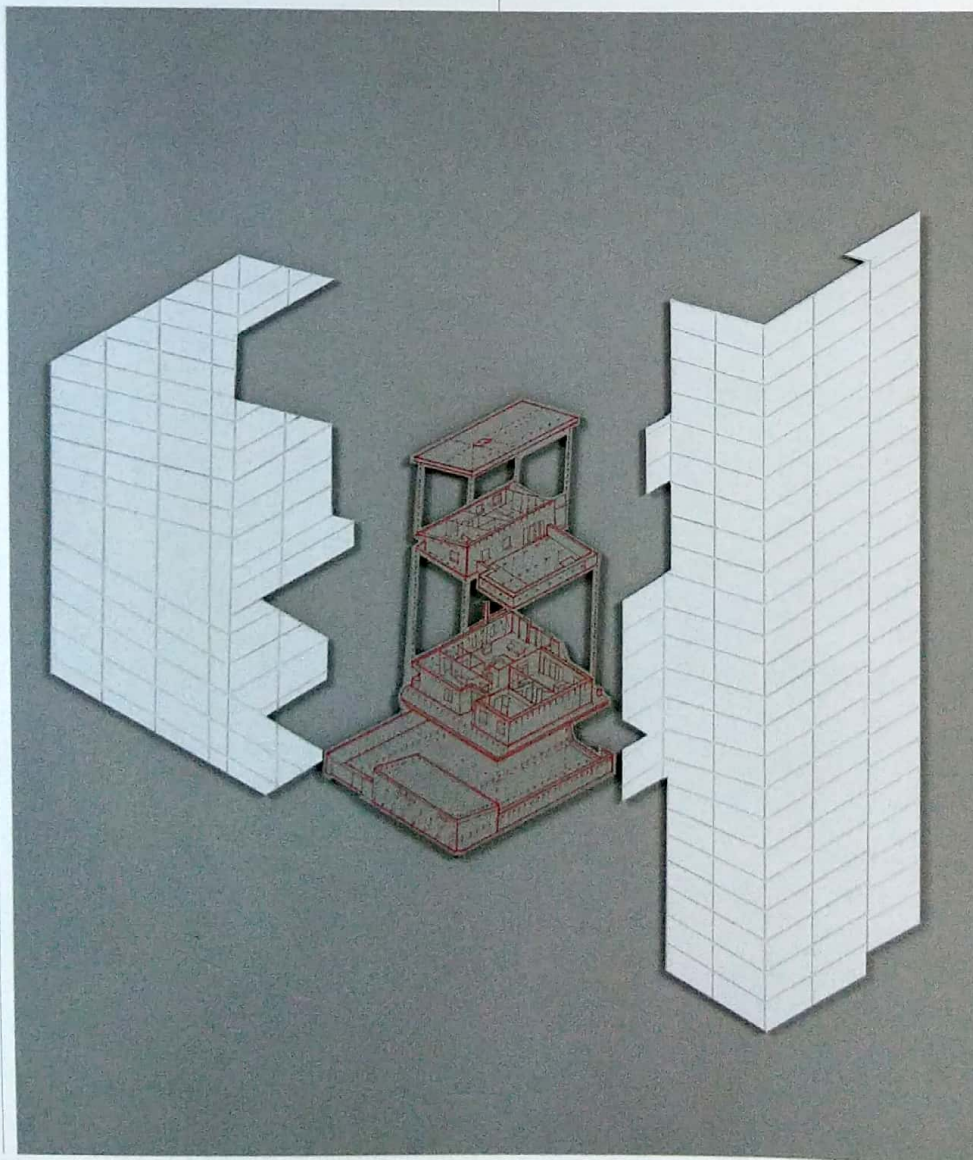
training his gaze instead on the massive modular blocks of construction material used for large infrastructure projects. Like pieces of a Lego set, they patiently lie in wait for their moment of assembly, when according to a pre-determined plan they will neatly click into place to create a flyover or the stretch of a metro line. But for Morey they represent concrete ciphers, waiting to be decoded and put to more imaginative use. Elevating these humdrum, banal, serial and seemingly soulless creatures of mechanical production, Morey gestures at the roles they could possibly play in creating alternate, utopian worlds. By deliberately unmooring them from their surroundings he alerts us to their potential and possibilities. Equally, he aims to create a “visual tension” by removing them from their familiar surroundings and transposing them to unfamiliar ground.

Combining elements of mechanical drawings and early lessons in rendering diagrams in physics classes at school, Morey attempts to put the pieces of the concrete conundrum together. Tapping into an intuitive logic, he offers a seriality of his own with a dizzying array of complex permutations and combinations. His keen interest in geometry is reflected in the compositions that he conjures up by orchestrating together triangles, squares and rectangles. There is a simultaneous sense of assembly and disassembly in the dissected planes and cross sections that he lays bare for our perusal. In doing so he also challenges us to mentally complete the puzzles of his creation or create new combinations of our own. Here medium dons the role of a metaphor with the board that he uses for his constructions mimicking the grayness of concrete.

The structure that underpins several of Morey’s works appears to be the grid, a structure symbolic of modernity within the canon of



This page: Details from *Concrete Cipher IV*
Archival ink drawings and cuts on museum
board, 2018



modern art. Though the grid is a measured and orderly structure devoid of randomness, yet it is infinitely variable. While its order is predominantly one of repetition, it can still offer multiple perceptual sensations. Historically, in the hands of artists, the grid has conferred independence from narration and contextuality, and aided progress towards an absolute visuality. Is it perhaps unsurprising then, that so many visual artists continue to evoke the grid in their works? As the American art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss stated, "The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."

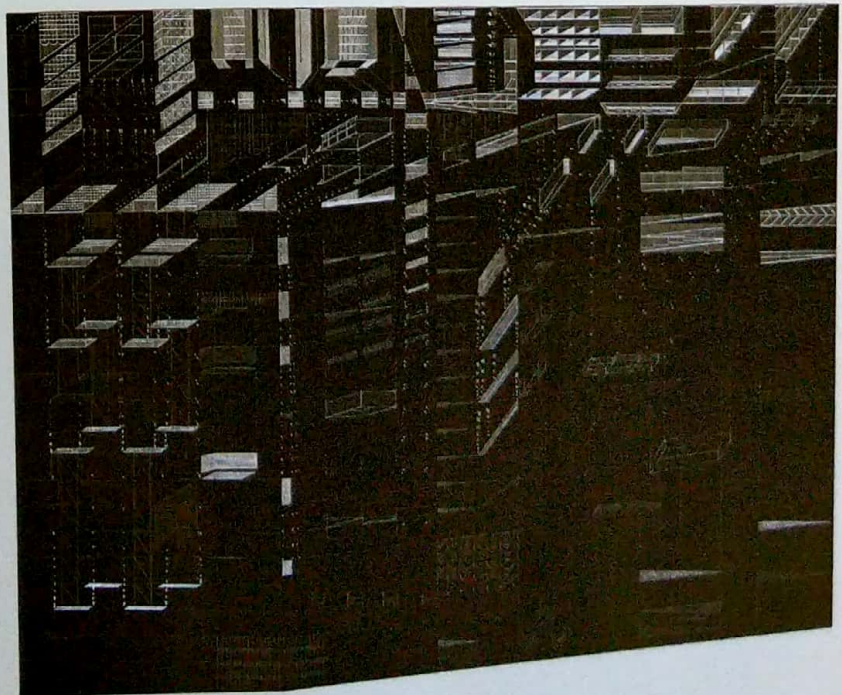
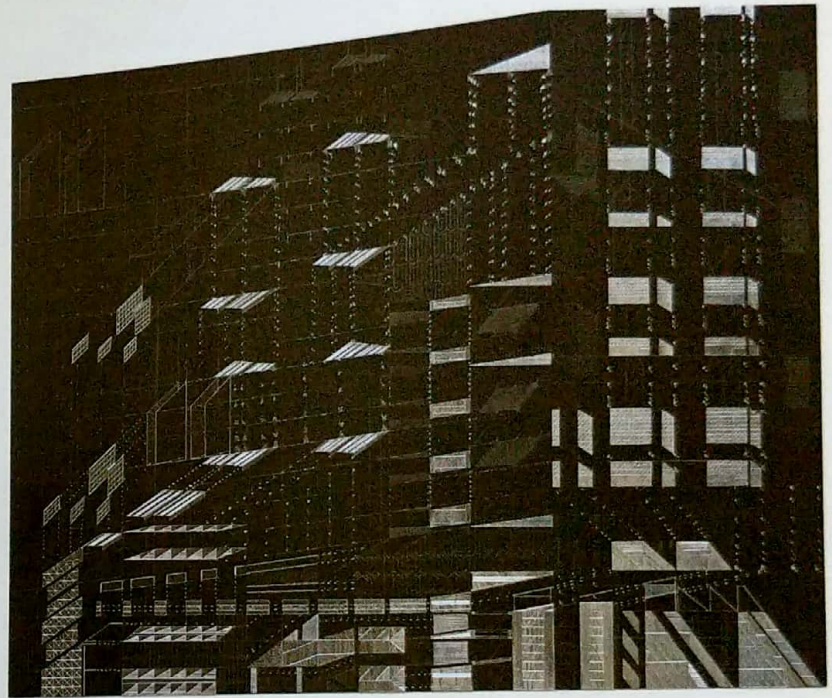
The ordering principle of the grid does appear to inform many of Morey's works. Equally, the infinite variability of the grid also ties in with Morey's ambitions of creating as many geometrical arrangements as he can from these mundane, concrete structures. Further, the grid in its form as a gridiron, also underpins the logic of urban town-planning, doubling its appeal to Morey. On the surface of many of his geometrical shapes the criss-cross of vertical and horizontal lines form grid-like patterns. However, in contrast to classical grids, which appear to stretch to eternity, the meshwork of lines are constricted by strict outlines of the objects, which have been juxtaposed against a monochromatic board.

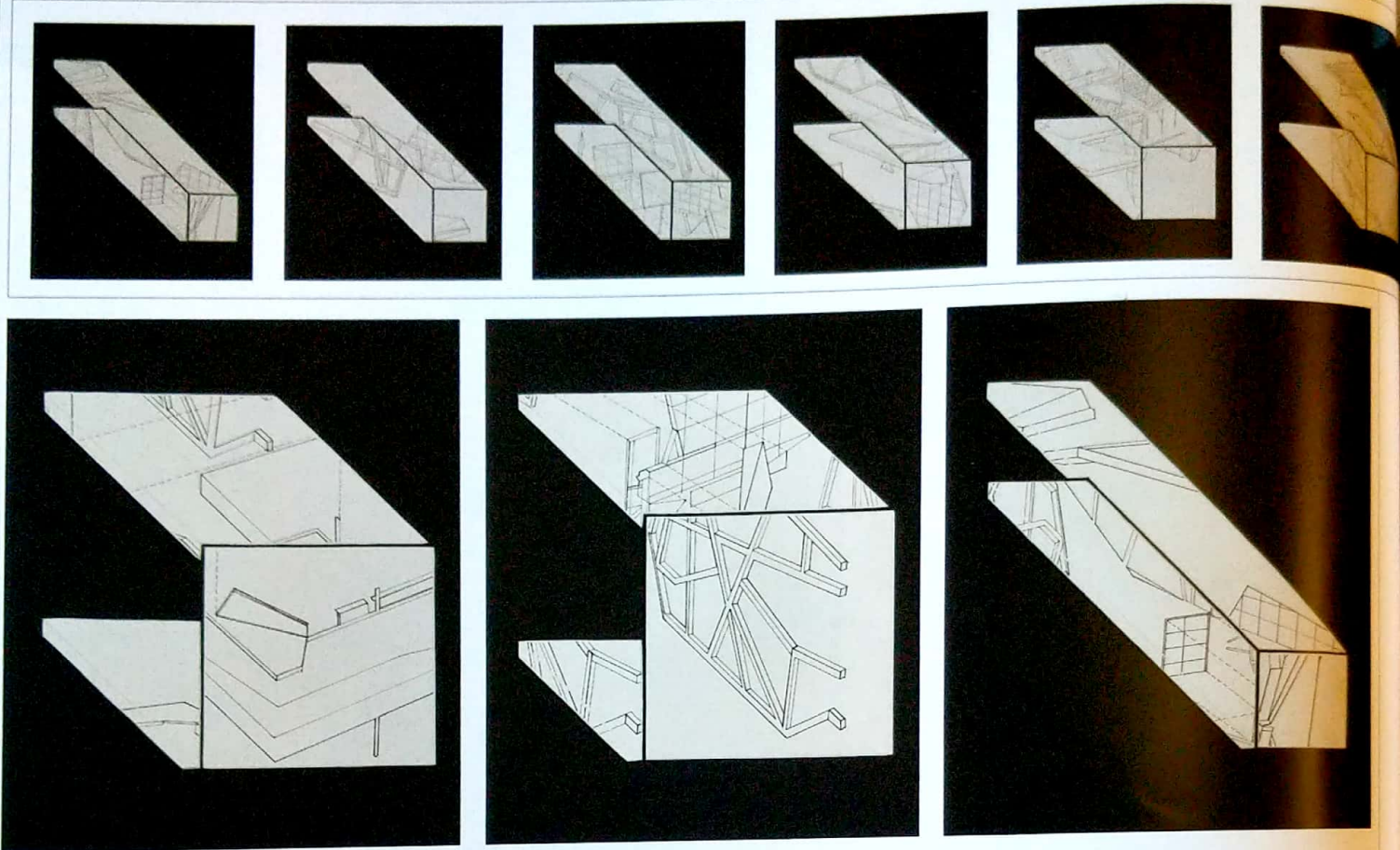
Complex perspectival plays can also be seen in a series of sculptural works fashioned out of layers of PVC sheets. Here the artist interrogates the notion of "useable area" by focusing on the concept of Floor Space Index (FSI) or the ratio between the area of a covered floor to the area of the plot on which the building is located. This ratio must be below or equal to the limits

imposed by government authorities and varies according to the different zoning laws from city to city. The FSI also dictates the number of floors that can be built on a plot of land. In each of the works, using a top-angle perspective the floor plan of the premises is revealed, which is then seemingly replicated across the various floors of the building. In this manner the horizontal floor plan is transformed into a vertical high-rise building. Thanks to the artist's deft machinations, these descending layers or floors appear to expand far beyond their original mandate as they cascade down. You can always find the space for quirky maneuvering and manipulations, Morey seems to suggest.

It's all a game

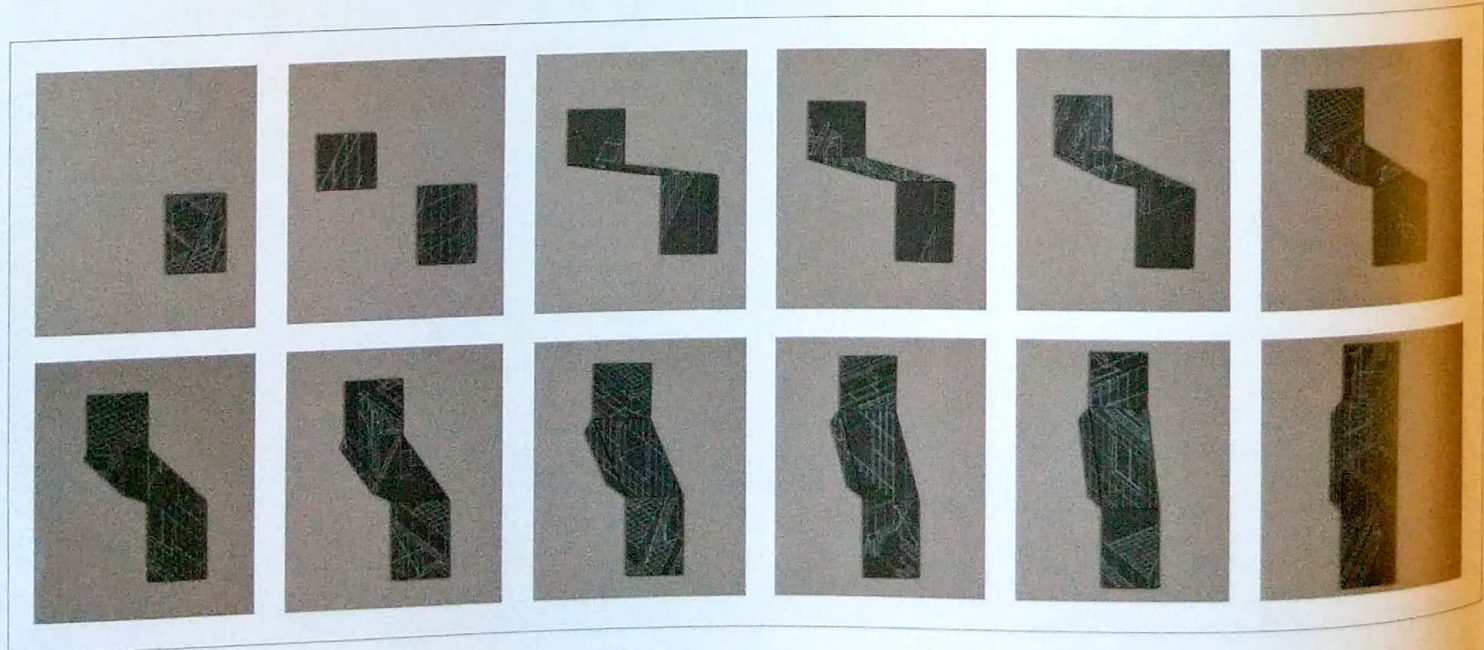
Morey sees parallels between the board games, both physical and virtual, and the jumble of architectural elements around him. The idea of decoding jigsaw puzzles and the thrill of putting the pieces together or in turn creating new puzzles of his own has long held a fascination for him. For his formations Morey also draws from his earlier artistic practice of using the device of a mirror to create self-portraits. This conversation between the image and its mirrored pendant, alerted him to the potential of a dialogue between physical and virtual images. The learning from these early experiments manifests itself in his work in the repetition of motifs and their mirrored doubles. The addictive tile-matching puzzle video game, Tetris, was another favourite of his, pandering to his innate desire to create order out of chaos. In the game, geometric shapes called Tetriminos fall down a rectangular vertical shaft. The player has to manipulate them to create a horizontal line of ten units without any gaps. Equally captivating for the

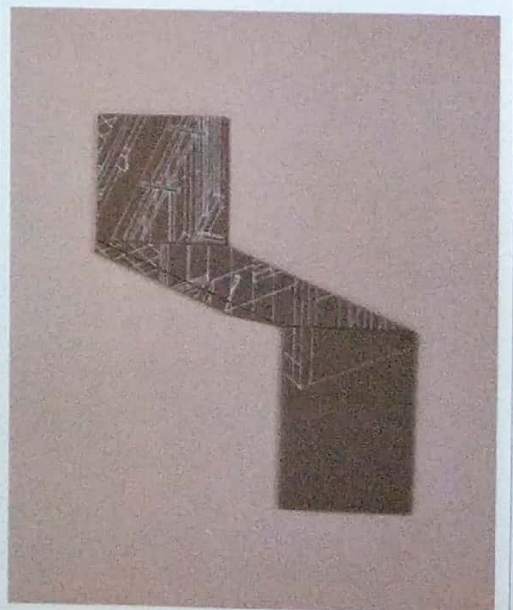
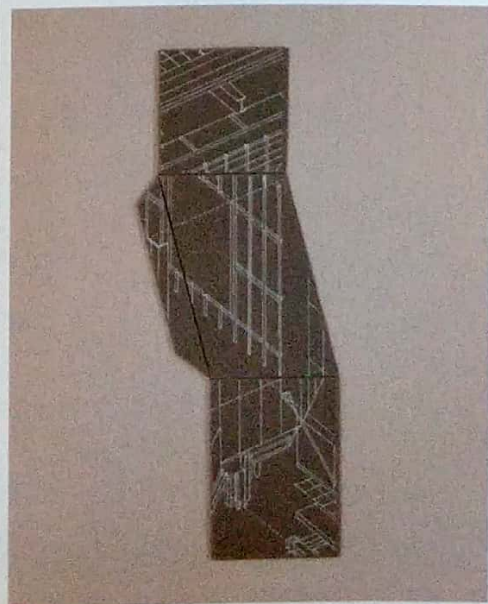
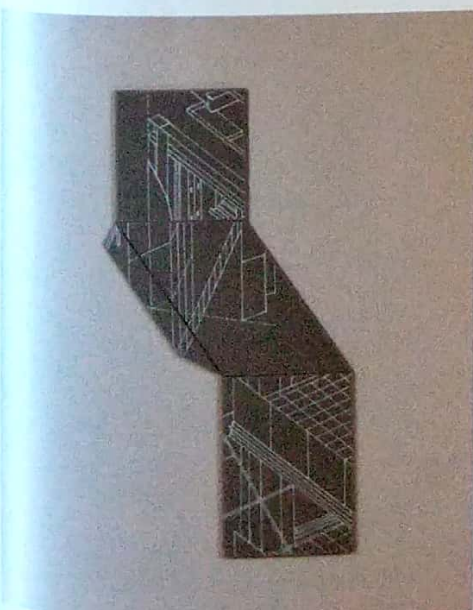
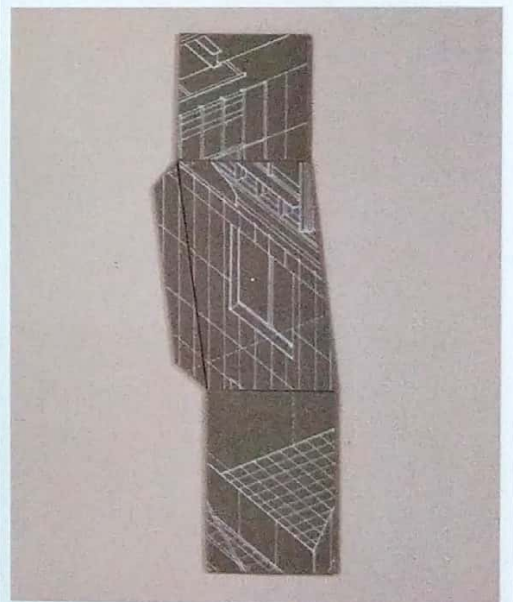
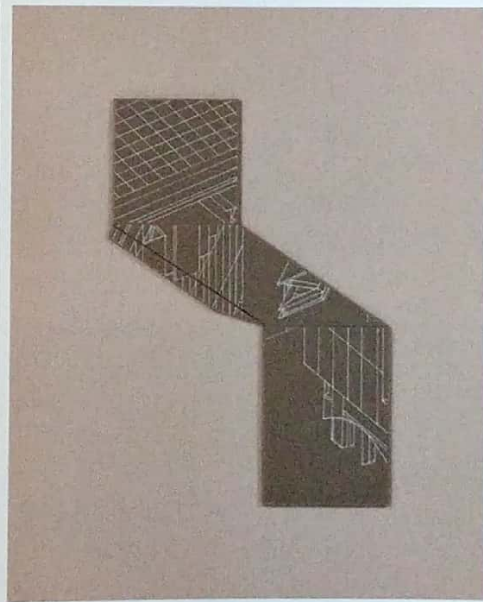
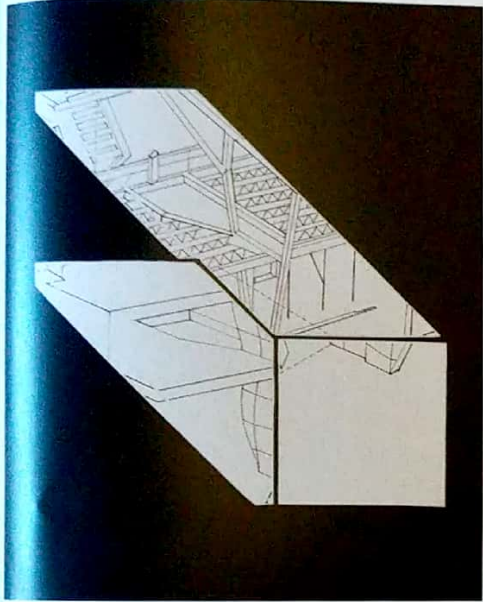
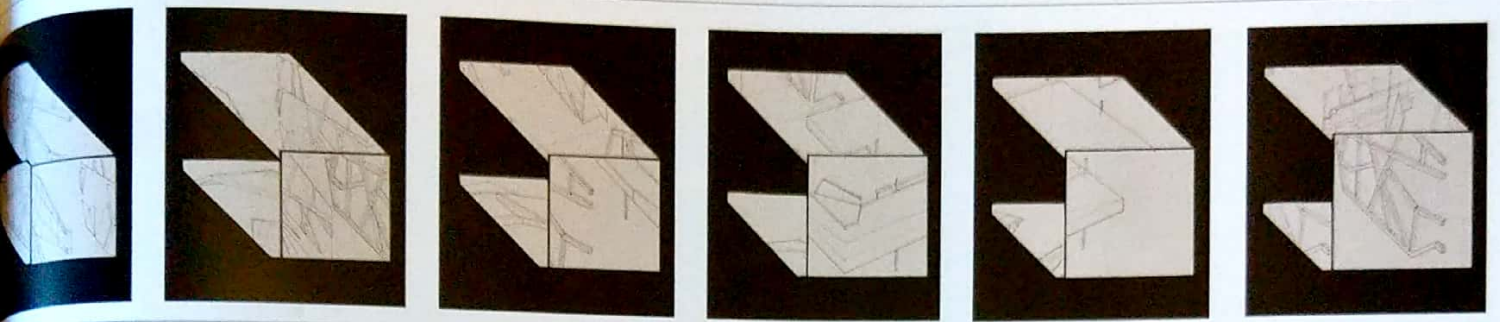


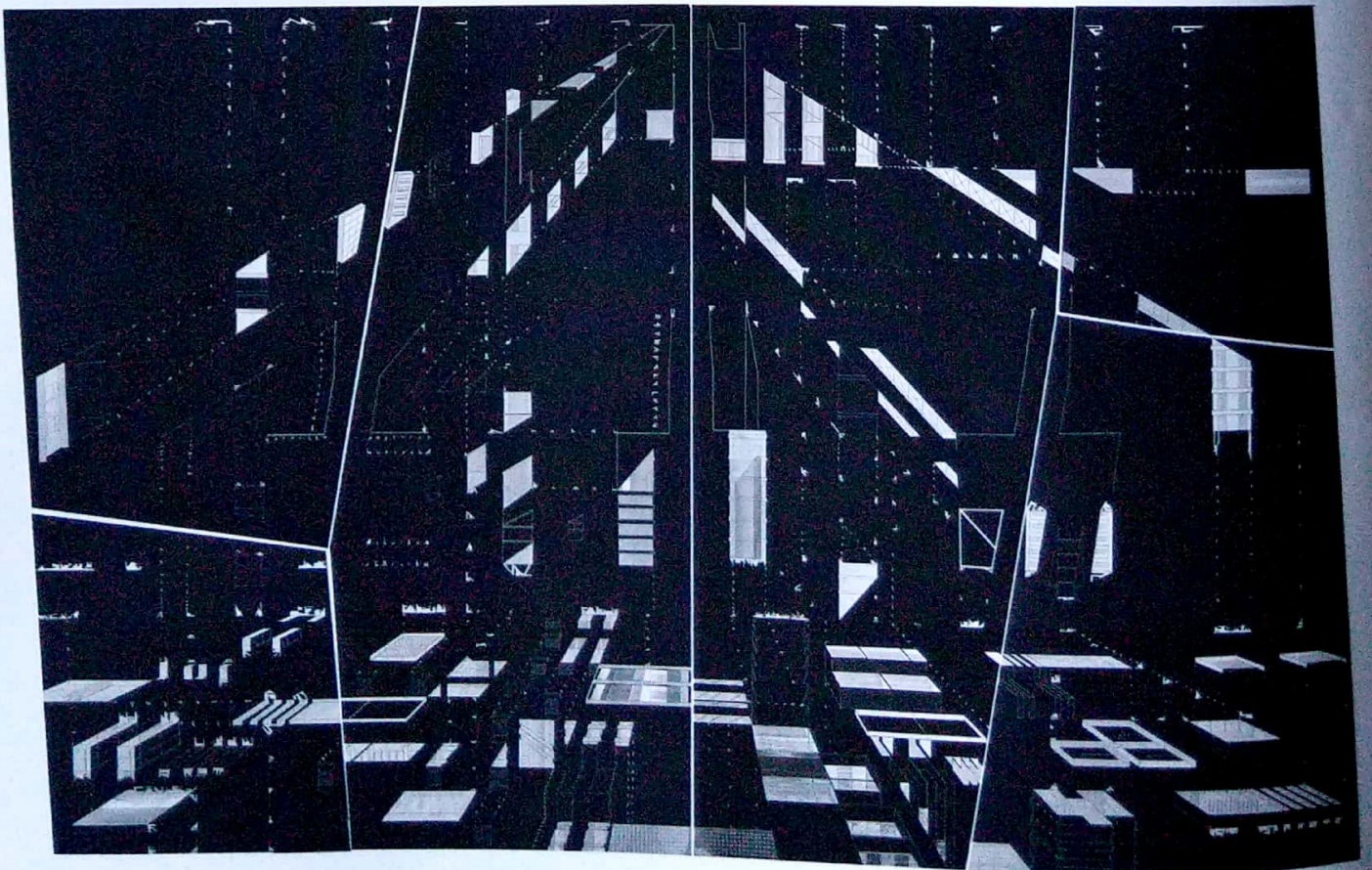
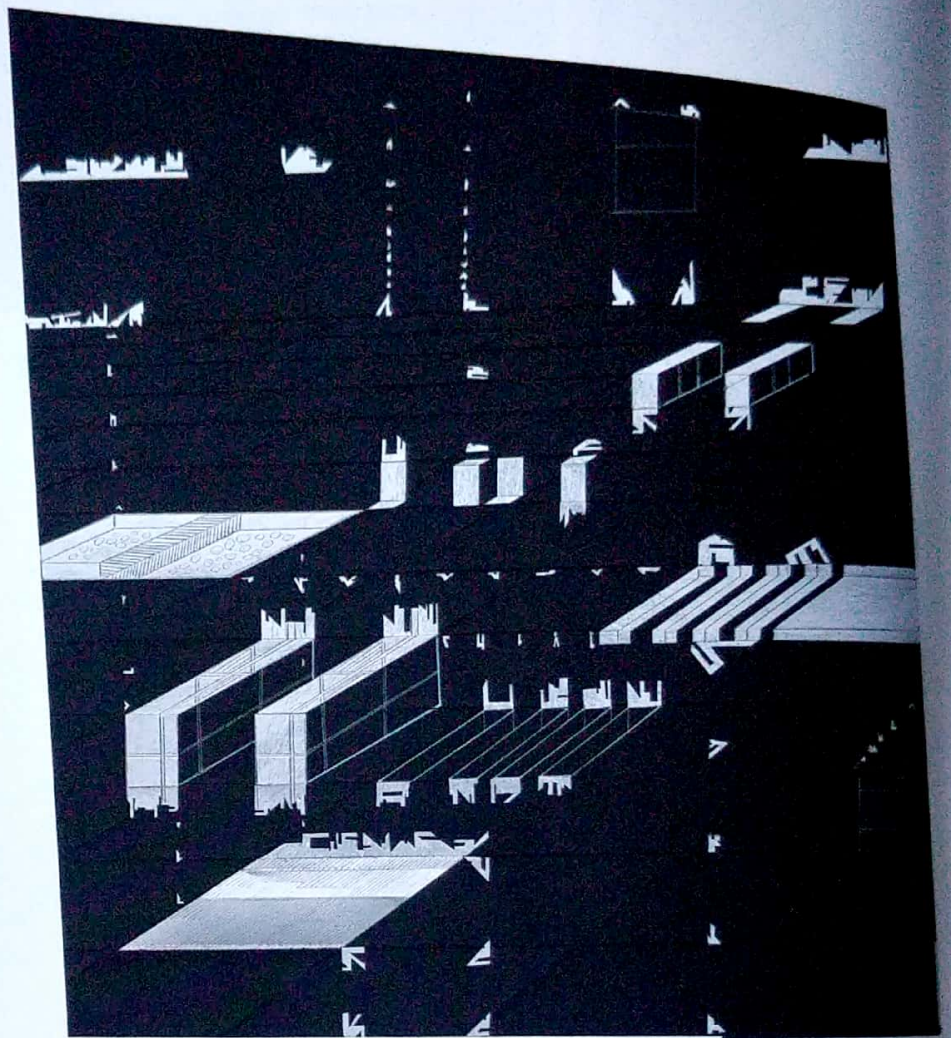
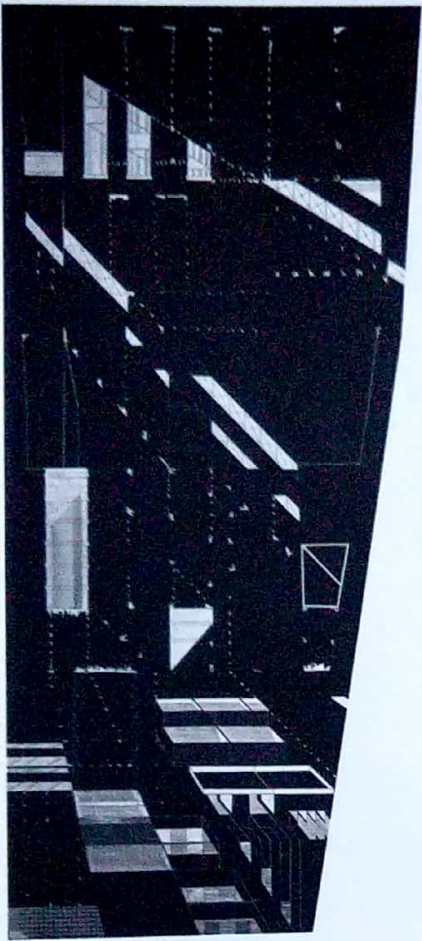


This spread, top: *Dismantle study III*,
A set of 12 works, Archival ink on museum
board pasted on conservation board with
archival glue, 2018

This spread, bottom: *Dismantle study II*,
A set of 12 works, Archival ink on museum
board pasted on conservation board with
archival glue, 2018



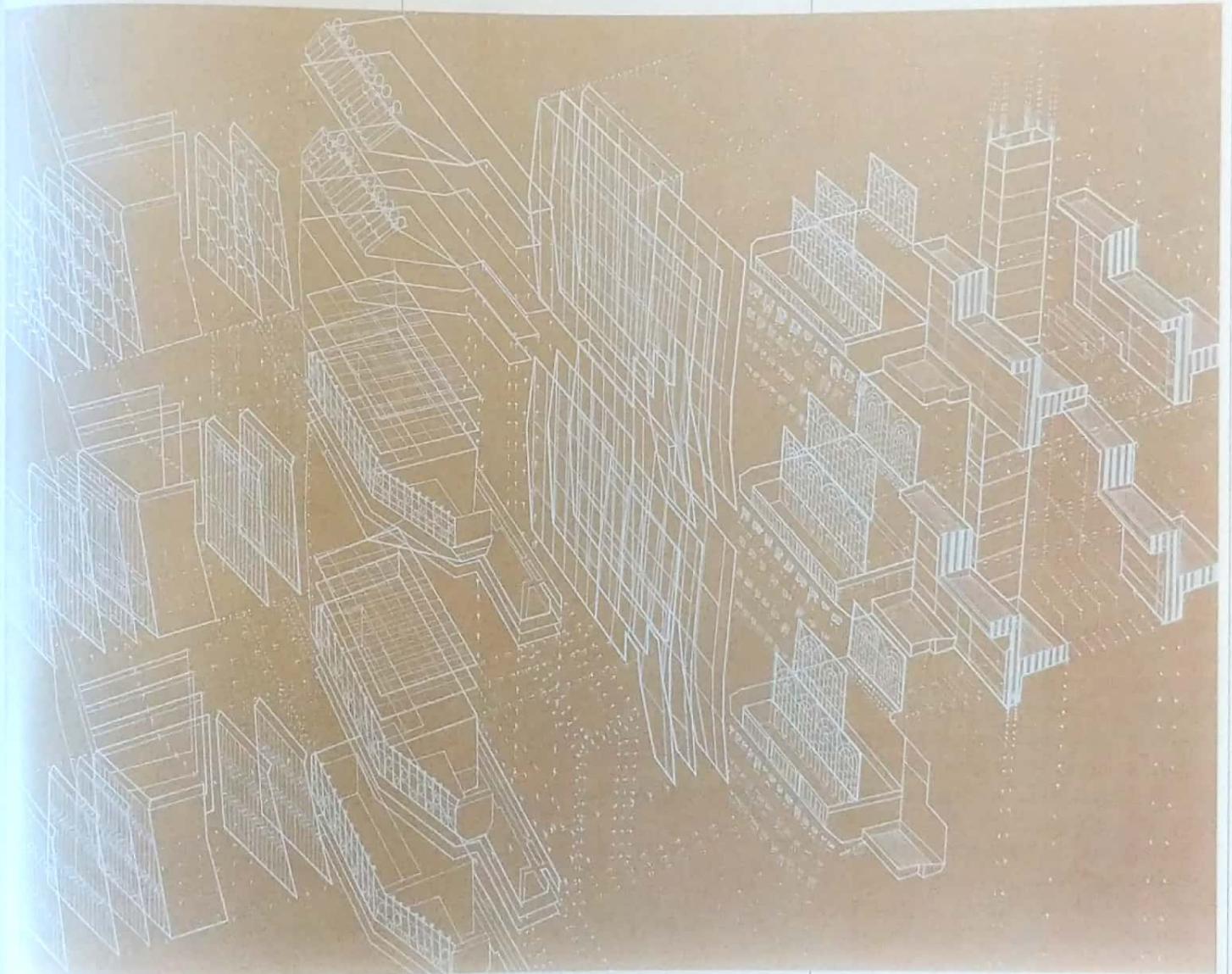




This page: *De/Re construction site - II*, Archival ink on museum board, 2019

Opposite page: *Lost Right Angle - III*, Archival ink, graphite drawings, engravings and metallic canson paper pasted with archival glue on conservation board, 2018

The exhibition *Concrete Ciphers* featuring the works of artist Pratap Morey was on display at TARQ, Mumbai from 16 January to 28 February 2019. All images and texts featured here are with the permission of the gallery.



Artist was a variant of the Tetris called the Brick Game, which was a popular handheld game console.

In his current suite of works, Morey draws inspiration from the Chinese dissection puzzle, the tangram. It consists of flat shapes comprising five triangles, a square and a parallelogram, which fit perfectly into a square box. The aim of the puzzle is to form a specific shape when only its silhouette, using all seven pieces without any overlaps. Morey combines these basic shapes to invent a plethora of forms. But

it is the box that houses the puzzle that takes his fancy as evidenced in *Lost Right Angle*. Here he queers the pitch by tilting a rectangle and shifting its symmetry. Morey also proves to be a masterful illusionist as evidenced in two sets of twelve works each. Here by making imperceptible changes to the arrangement of geometrical forms he succeeds in radically altering the space they occupy. In doing so he reveals to us how seemingly subtle shifts in our urban landscapes over time are responsible for fundamentally changing the very face of

our cities. But more importantly, in his quest for creating order out of chaos, Morey takes cities with their entropy and transforms them into fantastical, future worlds.

1. Rosalind E. Krauss. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1986. Page 12.