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ARTNEWS

SHAHZIA SIKANDER: MAXIMALIST MINIATURES



Shahzia Sikander: Her imagery crosses boundaries of geography, religion, and style.

COURTESY THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

A murky black rectangle glistens and undulates on the screen of Shahzia Sikander's laptop as the artist shows a visitor to her New York studio a passage from her animation in progress.

Gradually, the field seems to disintegrate into a dense accumulation of irregular black marks that vanish one by one. Viewers familiar with Sikander's work may recognize that these seemingly abstract black shapes are in fact precise renderings of the stylized hairdo of the Gopi women—worshippers of the Hindu god Krishna, whom Sikander often depicted in her miniature paintings from the 1990s. The hairdos have reappeared, disembodied, in many of the animations that set her repertoire of painted imagery in motion, including *Sp/NN* (2003), in which the hair rises from the women's disappearing bodies and takes flight in a menacing swarm that invades an imperial Mughal court.

"I found the hair had this wonderful silhouette that, if you turned it around, could look like bats or birds—that was a very exciting moment in animation for me," says Sikander. She used this silhouette to create the floating, oily ground in the large-scale projection she was preparing for the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates (on view through May 13).

"I'm still going to the same image but trying to find another way to transform it. I'm not trying to hide where they come from," she says of the hair shapes, "but they need not be associated with their source. I'm interested conceptually in the distance between the translation and the original."

All of Sikander's works, from her small drawings to her room-scale painting installations to her giant animated videos, stem from her study of traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting in her native Pakistan in the late 1980s. "It was a very independent choice—of examining a style, school, genre, and developing a relationship, a language, a dialogue with it," says Sikander, who was attracted to the seductive beauty of the stylized gemlike miniatures and fascinated by the insularity and seeming immunity to translation of the forms.

Since moving to the United States in 1992, Sikander, 44, has been exploring ways to stretch and pull apart the vocabulary of miniature painting in different media and at different scales, creating a hybrid imagery that blurs such polarities as Hindu and Muslim, traditional and contemporary, East and West, representation and abstraction. Fundamental to the work is the fluidity with which Sikander shifts perception and challenges our ways of seeing.

In the 2004 animation *Pursuit Curve*, for instance, a large flowerlike form starts to agitate and break apart, its fluttering reddish parts evoking insects or feathers. Gradually the shapes settle as turbans on a cluster of bearded men. "It's an image which is already loaded," says Sikander of the turbans. "It's masculine. It's got race and religion. When it's flapping around, it's like butterflies and fragile, and then it fits on and all you see is turban. I like that there are multiple reads and facets to a situation, and that the dissociation can be that stark."

"Shahzia mixes history, personal feelings and experiences, and very contemporary art making—firing on all cylinders at the same time—in her masterfully crafted works," says Ian Berry, director of the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York, who in 2004 organized a large survey of her work there that traveled to the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut. "The artwork can respond to people's desires to think about politics and biography, not just of Shahzia's but of their own. And then other people can come to it and respond entirely to line, form, color, movement, and perspective, and the creative things Shahzia brings to that."

The Tang is one of many museums to host solo exhibitions, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., in 1999. Sikander was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2006. Today, she is represented by Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York, where her works sell for up to \$125,000.



Women's coiffures, transformed into black birds, invade a Mughal court in the video animation *SpiNN*, 2003. COURTESY THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

Sikander grew up in Lahore, in a house adjoining those of her grandfather and aunts and uncles. "I have a very supportive and educated family with strong women—writers, academics, human-rights activists," she says. She always drew as a child and happily did all the diagrams for her cousins' science homework. (The nuns at her

Catholic school kept some of her illuminated notebooks.) Her parents encouraged her to apply to the National College of Arts.

There, in 1988, Sikander attended a lecture on miniature paintings given by a visiting curator from the Victoria and Albert Museum, an experience she describes as life changing. Familiar only with the kitschy creations sold to tourists, she was stunned by the “immense range and visual connections” of the images shown by the lecturer. “I felt potential,” she says.

Her idea was to explore personal imagery within the thematic guise of miniature painting, at a time when young people in Pakistan, under Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime, had to behave very discreetly in public. She made the decision to major in miniature painting, working with only one other student under the strict methodology of the master teacher.

“It was a big thing to say, ‘I’m going to embrace something that’s already saddled with technique and ritual and a kind of copying and a certain language,’” says Sikander, who had to spend an entire year working just in ink before she was allowed to use color.

“I submitted myself to that,” she says. For four years she worked 18-hour days, almost always alone, to master the art of traditional miniature painting, learning how to apply layers of paint to build up luminous surfaces. Her final piece was *The Scroll* (1991–92), about a foot high and more than five feet long, in which she mapped out the rooms in her family home, using the genre conventions of stacking flattened-out spaces, and embellishing the architecture and the borders of the piece with painstaking pattern and detail. “You had to play by those rules,” Sikander says.

A recurring figure in the scroll is a young woman with long black hair, dressed in white, always painted from behind so that her face is not visible. She passes almost like an apparition through rooms filled with activity. At the end, she is seen at an easel painting herself. “She is an observer, who is not necessarily comfortable in that space,” says Sikander. “I left soon after.”

In 1992, after graduating, Sikander was invited to install her paintings for one day at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington, D.C. She flew on a standby ticket, carrying her miniature paintings in her suitcase, and decided to stay. Paintings in tow, she toured graduate schools all over the country, and in 1993, she enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence.

At RISD, Sikander explored a new kind of freedom and simplification in her work. “I felt the work should be more about drawing,” she says. She experimented with quick gestures in ink on tissue paper and followed the suggestions that arose from the marks. Out of that process she developed a vocabulary of images, including a silhouette of a female body without head or arms, with tendrils flowing from her legs.

“It was about a form afloat and uprooted,” says Sikander, who felt a kinship with Ana Mendieta’s bodyworks. Her signature nomadic silhouette has reappeared in many finished works, sometimes like a specter feminizing the head of a Mughal courtier, sometimes joined with the multi-armed Hindu goddess brandishing an array of weapons and wearing a veil, like a cross-cultural female superhero.

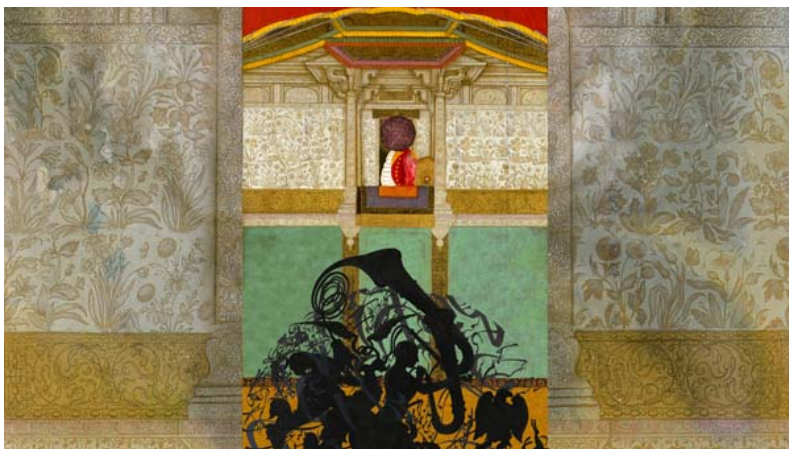


Provenance the Invisible Hand, 2009, was made for an installation of objects Sikander selected from the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.
COURTESY THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

After graduating from RISD in 1995, Sikander spent two years in the Core Residency Program at the Glassell School of Art in Houston. There she began to play with radical shifts of scale. “It was breaking out of the preciousness around my process and testing the viability of a form,” she says of enlarging an image from ten inches to ten feet, and “seeing whether it gains more momentum or maybe becomes more confrontational.” Sikander’s breakout came in 1997, when she moved to New York and her paintings were shown at the Drawing Center and in the Whitney Biennial. “It was a really interesting time in the U.S. for me, before September 11, when things were looking outward more,” she says.

During the next few years she received a flurry of invitations to do site-specific work around the country. At the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, she worked alongside Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen on her own huge ephemeral mural, which absorbed some of those artists’ street-art practices. At various places, including the Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis in 1998 and the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art in 2001, she moved her wall installations into three dimensions by hanging layers of translucent tissue paper embellished with images, sometimes several feet deep, in front of the mural, thus veiling or blurring its appearance as viewers moved through the space.

“I hate the word, but there was a prevailing ‘multiculturalism’ going on in the 1990s,” she says. “That timing was personally wonderful because there was such a focus on exploring identity.” That focus helped bring attention to her paintings early on, but it eventually became a limitation, particularly in the post–September 11 climate, when her work was seen primarily through the lens of her identity as a Pakistani and a Muslim woman.



An officer of the East India Company appears in a Mughal court in a still from the HD video animation *The Last Post*, 2010.

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"I strive for the open-ended," Sikander says. She has an acute understanding of the complex relationship between her homeland and her adopted country, where she has settled with her husband, who is a chemist, and their young son. While Sikander's work isn't overtly political, the instability and flux of her imagery, which often incorporates various kinds of weaponry and martial music, in some way reflects the cultural tensions and misrepresentations between East and West, as well as the potential for transformation.

Sikander made her first animation, a natural extension of her interest in layering, during a 2001 residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas. She was working on a miniature painting and decided to scan in Photoshop each change she made to document the metamorphosis of the work. She hung the painting facing its looped animated version, which would perfectly mirror the painting for a fleeting second, in an installation called *Intimacy*.

"The foundation of my animations and all my work is drawing," says Sikander, who continues to generate her projections from scans of drawn imagery. "The computer is storing and allowing me to move the layers around with amazing freedom and flexibility. The digital space really lets me push the movement."

These days, she is caught up in the possibilities of projection as an immersive theater of light and shadow and sound. Currently, her giant projection that evokes the paradox of Shangri La is on view in "Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art" at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach (through July 14). Last November, her animated video *The Last Post* (2010) filled the courtyard between the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The piece deals with the British involvement in the opium trade with China.

"I was interested in the colonial lens, and the opium-based trade to China was happening by using India," says Sikander, who collaborated with the Shanghai-born composer Du Yun on the dissonant score melding haunting voices with the sounds of static and explosions. Personally, Sikander has a soft spot for older Pakistani music and cheesy Bollywood songs. In her 2009 video *Bending the Barrels*, a Pakistani military marching band plays those songs interspersed with martial music.

Last November, Sikander was one of five artists (the others were Carrie Mae Weems, Cai Guo-Qiang, Kiki Smith, and Jeff Koons) to receive the inaugural Medal of Arts from the State Department through its Art in Embassies program. "For me, what they were recognizing was perhaps opening up the perception of the U.S.," says Sikander. She is currently working with the program on a permanent piece for a new embassy under construction in Islamabad.

"The U.S. Embassy in Pakistan is going to be much more of a fortress than in some other countries," the artist says, noting that embassy exhibitions are typically accessible only to the people who can enter the building.

“For me, it’s a big deal to really push this boundary and make work that is going to be accessible to the outside space and be participatory as well as transparent.”

Sikander understands that she will face strong anti-American sentiment when she returns to Pakistan next year to install the piece. “They don’t understand why you are choosing to live here,” she says. “It can get very personal.”

Even as she is constantly expanding the directions taken with her world of imagery, she always returns to the intimate space of the miniature. “To me, the tenacity and simplicity of drawing is really the anchor,” she says. “It goes forward and back, sideways and back. I’m very cyclical.”