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With Her First New York Solo Show in a Decade, Shahzia Sikander Shows a New Side

"The nature of the art world," observes the Manhattan-based Pakistani American artist Shahzia Sikander, "is that if you don't show up every two years in New York City, it's like, 'Where did you go?'" Sikander, 51, a MacArthur fellow and among Pakistan's best-known contemporary artists, has spent the past several years installing ambitious public art projects and screening animated films based on her intricate neo-miniature paintings. But despite living on the Upper East Side with her 10-year-old son, she hasn't exhibited at a New York gallery in nearly a decade, a testament to her laborious painting process—"there never would be enough work to sell," she maintains—and a disinterest in pandering to her market.



Ready to Leave, 1997, transparent and opaque watercolor, tea water, and graphite on marbled paper © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.

This fall kicks off something of a homecoming: This week, Sikander opens "Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues," her first solo show at the Sean Kelly gallery near Hudson Yards. Bookending that, she appeared in the inaugural Asia Society Triennial in late October and will show at the Morgan Library next summer an exhibition of early work organized by her alma mater, the Rhode Island School of Design.

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It's exciting, but taking too New York–centric a view of Sikander's career misses the point. More poetic than didactic, her work “breaches national boundaries,” interrogating systems of power and oppression that churn through history and continue to ripple through our lives. Sikander grew up in Lahore and attended its National College of Arts, where she upended expectations by choosing to study with [Bashir Ahmed](#), eminent master of Indo-Persian miniature painting, a highly stylized, technically exacting art form that had [gone out of fashion in Pakistan](#) with the fall of the Mughal Empire and the rise of British rule.

Widely regarded as handicraft, miniature painting, which tended to illustrate religious narratives or scenes of court life, “wasn't hip,” Sikander admits. But she balked at its easy dismissal as anachronistic or kitschy, judgments seemingly rooted in the same colonial dynamics that had allowed much of this art to be plundered into Western collections. Her senior thesis, *The Scroll*, revealed the form's subversive potential, mashing up the visual style of the Safavid painter Behzad with contemporary Pakistani architecture and the political realities of growing up as a girl under the [Zia-ul-Haq](#) military dictatorship. More than five feet wide, the work broke with scale and content conventions, depicting a spectral female figure, floating cinematically through the rooms of a house, an enigmatic guide to her own interiority.



Red Lotus, 2018, glass mosaic with patinated brass frame © Shahzia Sikander; Photography: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano; Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York Sebastiano Pellion.

Sikander has lived in the United States since 1993, when she came here to show her paintings at the Pakistani embassy, and used that same work to get into RISD (she applied for citizenship in 2015, after years of visa misery). It vexes her that, as a Muslim woman who emigrated to the West, responses to her art continue to feel “straitjacketed in terms of my biography.” (See *Who's Veiled Anyway*, her 1997 painting in which a seemingly chador-clad woman turns out on close inspection to be a male polo player.) Her practice remains rooted in the techniques and iconography of Indo-Persian

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miniatures, but over the decades has grown increasingly conceptual. The Sean Kelly exhibition will showcase Sikander's dynamic range: There are drawings and paintings on paper, mosaics, and three animated films, including the brand-new *Reckoning*, a haunting "symphonic poem" that centers on an image of two jousting warriors sinking into an abyss as skeletal tree branches wave overhead. It seems to be a reflection on the climate crisis, but the audio track—the Pakistani singer Zeb Bangash croons in Turkish over a score by the Chinese composer Du Yun—offers another layer, a nod to miniature painting's cross-cultural roots.



Sikander's Promiscuous Intimacies © Shahzia Sikander; Photography: Chris Roque of UAP; Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

Then there's *Promiscuous Intimacies*, Sikander's first foray into sculpture, a "non-heteronormative anti-monument" inspired by her experience sitting on the [New York Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers](#). Using an image culled from her own 2000 painting, *Maligned Monsters*, she collapses space and time to bring into dialogue two art historical goddesses, a mannerist Venus adapted from Bronzino and a Hindu devata from an 11th-century Indian sculpture, intertwining them in an acroyoga-worthy pose that, though technically feasible—Sikander checked using models—is deliberately tenuous. It's a hedge against the sort of one-sided, winner-takes-all history enshrined in much classical statuary. "They are unstable because I don't want to take those relationships for granted," Sikander observes. "Art is change. It's in sync with the world we live in."

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez 1, 2019, ink and gouache on paper © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.