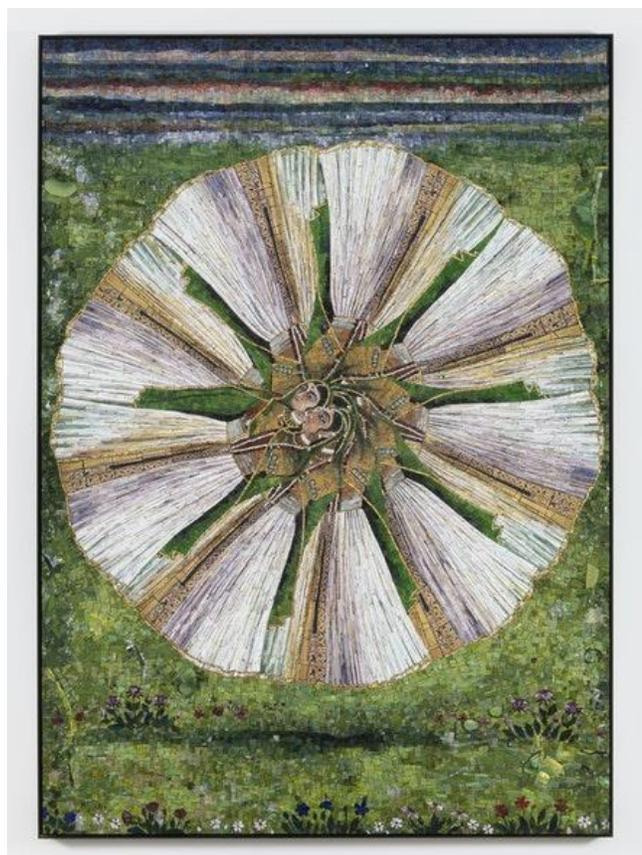


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Corwin, William. "Shahzia Sikander: Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues." *The Brooklyn Rail*. December 3, 2020.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Shahzia Sikander lays the groundwork for a non-European-based methodology of abstraction, utilizing the tropes inherent in Indo-Persian-Turkish art. These paths move independently from the plasticity of formalism found in Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism and the tweaking of time and space that embodies Cubism and Minimalism (among other Euro-centric genres), instead centering on pattern, repetition, the malleability of calligraphic interpretations of the written word, and the fragile truce between order and chaos. Most emblematic of this project are the two works titled *Arose*; one, an ink, gouache, and gold work on paper (2019–20), and the second, a glittering glass white, green, and gold mosaic (2020). Both present a transformative process from one figurative object into another via an abstract mechanism: two entwined women in flowing dresses are rotated around a central axis at their heads, becoming a convincing rose blossom.



Shahzia Sikander, Arose, 2020. Glass mosaic with patinated brass frame, 84 x 62 inches. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

Sikander frequently sources her home turf of miniature painting for images and aesthetic motifs, and the depiction of courtly women from Mughal and Persian painting traditions provide a rich source material with which to expand and abstract, and to glean a feminist message. *Entwined* (2020) another ink and gouache on paper, presents the same pair of figures from the second *Arose*, but they melt into each other, becoming a single unit—while still occupying an unchanged, realistic landscape. For Sikander these transformations are localized; abstract gestures cohabit the picture plane with figuration—a recurring theme

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that allows the artist to weave symbolic, surreal, and pure abstraction into her narrative-based work.

This museum-scale exhibition is bookended by a pair of gargantuan videos, *Reckoning* (2020) and *Parallax* (2013); throughout the static works in the show there is the impression of a constant flux of movement that makes animation seem a natural trajectory. Miniature paintings, episodic illustrations of texts, are naturally fertile fodder for cinematic presentation and Sikander clearly enjoys playing with their anomalous presence amidst the general tendency towards geometric/aniconic representation that defines much of Islamic art. In *Reckoning*, she makes flowers and tree branches into characters and choruses in her animations, and these units slyly coalesce into figures and faces. In contrast, dismembered arms flow in streams and billows in *Parallax*, becoming merely another natural form in this 15-minute abstract ballet. It is also a parable of the colonial plundering of oil in the Mideast and the consequent human and environmental tragedies it spawned. Sitting back and watching the action unfold in the large-scale animations is a dynamic that works well in the brave new world of non-stop art fairs and social media platforms. Still, engaging with the miniature tradition has always been an activity that requires a dedication to observation and careful looking, and it is the series of politically oriented miniatures displayed in vitrines at the center of the gallery that, like *Arose*, engage a new transformative state between figuration and abstraction.



Shahzia Sikander, *Reckoning*, 2020. HD video animation with sound; Music by Du Yun; Animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 4 minutes, 16 seconds. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

The “Empire Follows Art” series of miniature mixed media paintings on paper combines narratives of avarice, sex, violence, and religion. In *Number 10*, a sensual, half-naked courtesan clasping a string of beads tracing the curves of her body is engulfed by seraphim with fiery wings and a swirling miasma of female silhouettes and rich color. The dark, sexual outlines of voluptuous bodies are both the lure of oil wealth and the destruction of the land; the angels both saviors and avengers. Throughout this series, Sikander toys with triggering our impulse through these powerful symbols of angelic wings, flames, and breasts, variously symbolizing innocence and culpability, destruction and rebirth. *The Shadow's Struggle, 2* (2020), (ink, gouache, and gold) is a meditation

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on the American flag. Rippling and fluttering around what seems to be a distorted figure from a miniature, Sikander again accesses that embedded symbolism within pattern and detail that makes traditional Persian miniatures such rich troves of secret knowledge.

Scaling up the energy and tension contained within her earlier small-scale work has been largely successful in the mosaic and animated works. The three large calligraphic works on paper offer an approach to geometric abstraction through text, a colorful concrete poetry that mixes Urdu and western script to create a circular or spherical form in *Constitutions of the Globe*, a cruciform shape in *X*, and a hybrid of the two in *In sand lay Rustum by his son* (all 2019–20). These works continue to explore the alternative possibilities for abstraction and expanded figuration that emerges from Sikander's source material of miniature painting. It is the small delicate pencil drawing *Embrace* (2020) that seems to sum up the artist's goal. A pair of women, entwined as before, are obscured by a filigree of interlocking triangles and hexagrams, five- and six-pointed stars, and various squares and trapezoids. The image is diffracted, but the various geometries, both stellar and banal, heighten the eyes, lips, fingers, hair, and dresses of the pair, and the surface is flattened so that the figure and ground and the organic and geometric attain parity. Sikander's abstraction is less a deconstruction of the picture than a construction of a new reality.



Shahzia Sikander, *Arose*, 2019–2020. Ink and gouache on paper, 76 x 51 inches. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.