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Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy artist's studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY.  
Photo: Matin Maulawizada

“  
Creating  
contemporary  
manuscripts in Lahore  
in the 1980s was a  
radical step  
”

# SHAHZIA SIKANDER

by Olivia Sand

Looking back at Shahzia Sikander's career (b 1969, in Pakistan), which spans close to three decades, her practice has, over time, grown into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: from her miniature works that propelled her to the forefront of the contemporary art world in the 1990s, to installation, video, glass mosaic, and lately sculpture, she has consistently created art with explore literature, poetry, dance, music, film, crafts, politics, history and sociology. As a result, Shahzia Sikander's work recounts private stories and, on a more global scale, looks at contested issues around colonialism, migration, identity, gender, sexuality and race.

Committed to going beyond mere aesthetic qualities, she advocates an art that is part of a social discourse that engages with the important issues of our time. An outspoken and brilliant artist, she has played an active role in redefining the parameters of contemporary art and beyond in her native Pakistan. Based in New York, she embraces new projects, constantly identifying additional ways how art can help connect or cross boundaries.

**Asian Art Newspaper: You managed to reconcile two terms that used to stand at opposite sides of the spectrum: tradition and the avant-garde. How did you go about this?**

**Shahzia Sikander:** This idea of what is traditional covers a broad representation and is worth some thought – and more specifically, who gets to define what is traditional and what is avant-garde? I tend to not think, in general, in binaries, but I am interested in how tradition is performed. Art history is deeply Eurocentric and tends to place art that does not sit comfortably within its canon often as 'other' and rarely as 'avant-garde'. The term avant-garde has often been reserved for art addressed from within the Western art history construct and criticism. For example, conceptually deconstructing pre-modern Central- and South-Asian manuscripts without abandoning the inherent techniques at a time when engaging craft-based traditions were not hip or cool. To create contemporary manuscripts in the 1980s in Lahore, Pakistan, was a radical step for me as a very young artist, when the regional status of miniature painting was mired in tourist kitsch. I would argue that my work *The Scroll* (1989-90) was avant-garde in that it broke open the mould for what could be considered a 'contemporary miniature'.

However, I was seen as a traditional artist in the US when I was doing an MFA in the early 1990s, when neither historical nor contemporary miniature painting was familiar in the Western art-world. It was because my work was



engaging pictorial traditions that did not sit in at the centre of Western art history that it got glossed over, called 'traditional' and straight-jacketed in terms of my biography. This brings me to the point I am making, that my work was seen through the lens of a Pakistani, a female, a Muslim female – an Asian first. Such opaque and broad projection emphasised the work as that of 'the other', an outsider, from another culture, robbing the work of any meaningful and critical read and, instead, being substituted for by the prevalent Western essentialist approach to the third world. To counter this, I started deconstructing exclusionary ideas within race representations, rejecting the colonial and male gaze, and reimagining archetypal characters to tell much richer stories.

**AAN: In your opinion, why did it take so long for miniature painting to be 'rediscovered', all the more so as miniature painting has the advantage of featuring a rich narrative, which is not the case, for example, in Chinese calligraphy?**

**SS:** We need to consider the term 'Miniature Painting' first. It is important to first understand what we are referring to when we say 'miniature'. A singular term cannot encompass a vast history of diverse pictorial languages across many eras and geographies. Miniature is a complex, even a problematic term, part of a European colonial legacy from as early as the 1600s, when European merchants and tradesmen and later European scholars when going to South Asia encountered local paintings and saw an analogous relationship to European miniatures. For sure, the term continues to be used, even though there are many scholars and artists that are making concerted effort to educate and use terms like manuscript painting instead. Broadly speaking, miniature painting refers to the pre-modern syncretic painting traditions of South and Central Asia: book arts, illuminated manuscripts, illustrated folios that sometimes accompanying literary epic poems, religious texts, court events. Within these examples there are many regional schools, styles, patronage, socio-political histories – such as Safavid, Sultanate, Pahari, Mughal, Sikh, Rajasthani, Deccani, Company, etc.

Also important is a little background on the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore. Miniature painting's academic history was part of the colonial project linked to the English provenance of reviving Indian crafts. It is interesting to note that the school's first principal was the British colonial officer John Lockwood Kipling, father of the author Rudyard Kipling. Western models of teaching art were prevalent there, and although the miniature had long been taught at the NCA, a major had only been established in 1982 by Professor Bashir Ahmad and it was not yet appreciated as a path for an ambitious artist. When I joined in 1987, there were barely any students majoring in it. When I took up the traditional practice of miniature painting in 1987, the medium was deeply unpopular among young artists and was put aside as derivative. Miniature painting, with its unresolved national status and stigma, captured the paradox of culture and nationalism far more than any other discipline at NCA

in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the 1980s.

My interest in pre-modern manuscripts was sparked in response to a dismissive attitude, as well as my curiosity to learn about pictorial vernacular that was not from a Western-painting canon. What got me deeply hooked was understanding how European colonial legacy shaped miniature painting's fate, as many South-Asian manuscripts were dismembered and sold for profit. Many important historical paintings from Central and South Asia reside in collections at the British Museum, the V&A, The Met, the Royal Library and Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, and are not accessible for many students studying in Asia. It was a revelatory experience to see the real *Padshahnama* manuscript (1650s) in person recently, under a magnifying glass, luminous and sublime, after having studied its black and white photocopied versions as a student. Another iconic manuscript, the *Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp* (1524), illustrated by Firdausi, is a good case study of dispersion of non-Western historical art via colonial legacy.

I studied closely with Bashir Ahmad from 1987-1991 and in 1992, started teaching with him in the miniature department at the NCA, becoming the first female and his first student to teach there. Transforming miniature painting's status from traditional and nostalgic to a contemporary idiom became my personal goal. I carried that burden as an MFA

student in the 1990s in the US, when the art form was not familiar in the contemporary international art world. For more than three decades, I have examined the painting traditions of South and Central Asia by digging into archives in the Western museums. Mine has been an investigative pursuit highlighting the politics of provenance, ownership, and narration. I have learned that tradition is not static and the discourse benefits from fresh perspectives.

**AAN: With regards to your practice, one often reads that you broke the boundaries of miniature painting. Can you elaborate on this in your own terms?**

**SS:** My NCA thesis *The Scroll* (1989-90) emerged as the tipping point, laying to rest the debate about miniature's inability to engage the youth. It launched what is now called the Neo-Miniature movement. I studied with the miniature master painter Bashir Ahmad and although the thesis requirement then was to produce detailed miniature paintings the size of a notebook page, I made instead a singular five-foot miniature painting. The work created over a year and a half has intense detail, some of it done with a magnifying glass. It depicts various stages of youth, and the young female protagonist defies bodily restrictions by becoming an elastic, transparent, moving, morphing ghost-like form. This claiming of the freedom of the body is one of the defining emotions in *The Scroll*.

*The Scroll* (1989-90), watercolour and gouache on tea-stained wasli paper, 34.3x162.2 cm. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY



WATCH  
Shazia Sikander  
Art21



READ  
About the sale of album leaves from the Shahnameh in New York in 1996



WATCH  
Weeping Willows,  
Liquid Tongues

Quintuplet-Effect (2016), glass painting, 6.5 x 4 m. Permanent site-specific commission. Julius Romo Rabinowitz and Louis A Simpson International Building, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY. Photo: Richard Barros

I started researching for this work in 1988, as the 1980s was marked by diminishing women's rights in Pakistan. I was inspired by Pakistani women activists, artists, poets, playwrights and many of my female friends. The fact that I chose to focus on a house was also because looming Hudood ordinances (a national bill that would diminish women's rights) were such that as a young single woman you could not freely roam around the city without a male chaperone. It made sense to me to locate the work in the house, where I was bound to be spending the majority of my time. The work is a comment on the dynamic of a domestic space, including invisible labour performed by women and different class structures in the local Lahore society.

The painting reads left to right. You see the young woman stepping over a threshold, symbolised as a frame, taking herself and others (the viewer) along into a new territory, a new beginning. The woman in *The Scroll* is trapped in all her internal conflicts, too, yet remains an active agency, which was a departure from the trope of the woman often depicted in historical Indian paintings, like those of the Kangra school, as a passive figure at the mercy of an event yet to occur. This work marked the beginning of my depicting women as proactive, intelligent, witty protagonists connected to the past in imaginative and abundant ways, a theme one can identify in my work through the years.

*The Scroll* was conceptualised as an epic poem. As such, it intended to capture an unfolding of an event, a story, a day, a lifetime. I worked on it for almost two years, sometimes 14-18 hours a day. The painstaking work was challenging, but also meditative. At the same time, I was also looking at Indian folk art, Bonnard, David Hockney, Behzad, and especially Safavid painting for their depiction of metaphorical space. The various patterns for animate and the inanimate surfaces in the painting were created from observation, and then stylised by understanding Safavid pictorial language. The patterns are not lifted from old miniatures. I also analysed Chinese scroll and landscape painting and the structure of narrative in some films known to me then, like Satyajit Ray's use of narrative and Akira Kurosawa's use of multiple staged motion. As a result, the interwoven framing devices in *The Scroll* are creative takes on the function of sacred geometry in Islamic architectural spaces, how negative space creates rhythm and emotionality.

For me, the process of locating a relationship to tradition was to not mimic, but to regurgitate all that I devoured while researching and learning. What is originality? How does one create something anew? Imaginative possibilities abound within the world itself, not just within the realm of the mind. The world is full of mystery, containing within it a variety of distances between the real and the imagined. I am interested in history, in politics and also in the dynamism of form: form as something alive and in conversation with its time, space and language.

While I was developing iconographies via detailed small, dense, and elaborate miniatures in the 1990s, I simultaneously started to expand the images and ideas via murals and large-scale paper installations

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NEWS IN BRIEF

nature of society in Saudi Arabia. Sofia Karim (b 1976, UK) is an architect, artist and activist. Her *Turbine Bagh* project was inspired by the 2019 protests in Shaheen Bagh, a neighbourhood in Delhi, against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act. Jana Traboulsi (b 1979, Lebanon) is an artist and graphic designer. Stemming from research into Middle Eastern book-making traditions, *Traboulsi's Kitab al-Hawamish* (Book of Margins), 2017, explores margins and marginalia in Arabic manuscript production. And finally, Bushra Waqas Khan (b 1986, Pakistan) was originally trained as a printmaker, but today designs and constructs intricate dresses at miniature scale. Her inspiration and source material is affidavit paper, which is decorated with national emblems and Islamic patterns, and used for all official documents in Pakistan.

LONDON BOOK FAIR GOES DIGITAL

This June, the annual London Book Fair is being hosted online as an interactive event throughout the month. Conferences are running between 7 and 10 June, and the digital event will then follow for two weeks from the 21 June. This will create an opportunity for a larger global audience to come together to do business, learn and share ideas.

USC PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM OPENS

After being closed for more than a

year because of the pandemic, the USC Pacific Asia Museum is preparing to reopen this month and just in time for a major milestone their 50th anniversary. The museum opened its doors during Memorial Day weekend, on 29 May during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

SOVEREIGN ASIAN ART PRIZE, HONG KONG

The Sovereign Art Foundation (SAF) has announced the names of 30 mid-career artists shortlisted as finalists for The 2021 Sovereign Asian Art Prize, the 17th edition of the prize for contemporary artists. Finalists in the running for this year's prize come from 17 countries and regions across Asia-Pacific, of which Australia has the strongest representation with five artists shortlisted, followed by India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and South Korea with three artists each. Amongst the finalists, 28 artists have been shortlisted for the first time. This year, the prize also achieved a record breaking 744 entries from 30 countries and regions in Asia-Pacific.

MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK

After the devastating fire at the Museum of the Americas in New York over a year ago, the museum has launched a digital platform with Google Arts & Culture, Trial by

Fire: The Race to Save 200 Years of Chinese American History, to make hundreds of digitised images of their treasures available online while the physical building is under repair. Fortunately, about 95 percent of the holdings had survived, despite some water damage. In the autumn of 2020, the museum discovered that they had been awarded a US\$3.1 million grant as part of the Ford Foundation's America's Cultural Treasures initiative. The grant, received as a lump sum, has allowed the museum to upgrade its website and other technical projects, with the bulk of the grant going to support conservation of the objects. The museum's director, Nancy Yao Maasbach, is also seeking to establish a consortium of 28 other small Chinese American historical museums around the US, including the Chinese American Museum Los Angeles, the Chinese Historical Society of New England, and the Hawaii Chinese History Center.

ISTANBUL BIENNIAL 2021 CANCELLED

The Istanbul Biennial has announced the postponement of the physical edition of its 17th edition, scheduled to open this September, to 2022, owing to a spike in Covid-19 cases in Turkey. The new dates for the biennial are 17 September to 20 November, 2022.

COLOMBOSCOPE

This year's festival is still scheduled to open in August, with the theme 'Language is Migrant'.

Summer 2021

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Empire Follows Art: States of Agitation # 11 (2020), ink and gouache on paper, 16 x 11 inches. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY. Photo: Jason Wyche

Pakistani-American, or Muslim-American – different class stratifications, movements across and from one culture to another, and back, the range of cultural differences, aspirations of immigrants, the various sites of conflict. Reading about displacement can vary dramatically depending whose perspective is shared. I was recently reading illuminating essays by authors like Viet Thanh Nguyen, Maaza Mengiste, Aleksandar Hemon, Porochist Khakpour and Dina Niyari, and in each recognising a moment of truth that I too had experienced.

Much of my recent work touches on themes of struggle and conflict, memory, migration, tradition, and of course, the ultimate frame against which experience unfolds, death and its opposite, life. Particularly works such as *Parallax*, *Oil and Poppies* and *Flared*, are critique and meditation on symbols of extraction, with links to nature, to imagination and art as sources of abundance as opposed to the desiccating logic of extraction. Art and imagination replenish, breathe life, and sow seeds of growth.

The power seen during the time of the East India Company (1600-1874) is not really all that different from today. Power is exercised across nations and boundaries through a network of corporations and supranational institutions. Empire is now expressed by a transnational ideology of global privatisation. All resources are gathered in the rubric of monetisation: language, labour, human intelligence... *Disruption as Rapture*, *Reckoning*, *The Last Post*, *Empire Follows Art: States of Agitation* are works that allude to the interstices, the transitory, the myths of the migrant and the citizen, women and power, the colonised, the artist, all that which is caught between worlds, artistic vocabularies, cultures, practices and histories.

**AAN:** In today's world, where communities and social groups have increased exponentially and taken on an unprecedented importance, would you agree that all of us are in a way caught between worlds?  
**SS:** Absolutely. There are more uncertainties common to more of us, and inequities of class and wealth, uneven access to resources are creating more unstable global situations. The space between the migrant and the immigrant, the citizen and the foreigner is in flux, a space more and more communities are now defining on their own terms, telling stories that remind us of the complex,



Promiscuous Intimacies (2020), patinated bronze, 42 x 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY



WATCH  
Midnight Moment,  
Times Square

**Uprooted Order 1** (1997), watercolour and gold paint on tea-stained wasli paper, 25.4 x 11.4 cm. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY. Here, the ghostly figure merges with Radha, who is often depicted in Hindu iconography as the preferred lover of Krishna. Here, to focus on Radha's power, I removed Krishna from the equation. She is seen holding onto a hybrid creature that I crafted, a 'chalawa', here it refers to the poltergeist, my take on a creature that typically cannot be confined. With her one foot, she pins down a ghost-like shadow, a metaphor for the paradox of rootedness.

dynamic, and evolving world we live in. Yet, when events such as war and sanctions and exploitation of resources reverberate across the world, those affected most are ones with less power than those buffered through wealth. In a sense, what unifies us more now than ever is the age of finance and commodification. I recently explored this theme in a series of paintings in conversation with the Pakistani-American playwright Ayad Akhtar through the lens of his book *Homeland Elegies* (2020).

**AAN:** When completing a work of art, you conceive it 'like a poem'. Can you elaborate?  
**SS:** I have a deep affinity with poetry as a catalyst, its ability to liven up language and to pack so much expression in a condensed form. I read poems for ideas for inspiration around detail, layer, tone, rhythm, metaphor, emotion, sentiment. Intersections of feminism and poetry go hand in hand. Fahmida Riaz, Parveen Shakir, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Solmaz Sharif and Wislawa Szymborska are some of the poets that I have studied at various stages in my life. Artists assist in new ways of thinking, reframing history and imagining new possibilities as part of the broader processes of transformation in a society. Poetry marks moments of change in stark illuminating visuals. I love digging for such societal shifts when reading certain poets especially women, as they can offer counter perspectives to our prevalent hyper masculinised histories and ways of being.

**AAN:** An artist repeating himself is a comment we occasionally hear in the art world. You are part of a small group of artists (female and male) with the ability to express their ideas in many different ways, as you are mastering a whole range of media. Throughout your career, you went from two dimensional to three dimensional, from small miniature painting to large site-specific installations, from paper to mosaic to video and sculpture, from static pieces to animated videos. While still a student at the NCA in Lahore, did you ever imagine becoming such a diverse and accomplished artist?  
**SS:** I actually did, in not such literal ways, but definitely knew that I was too restless and curious to keep making the same work  
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that evolved into video animations and collaborations with poets, lyricists, dancers, composers. Learning how to drop fear and embrace vulnerability to live the true potential of the mind with burning questions was exhilarating and painful. The search to create work that demanded internalising also meant dealing with the frustration to unlearn. It was never as simple as branding myself as the contemporary miniaturist by creating small paintings exclusively in the miniature style. Though I continue to work in a variety of mediums and seek a multivalent and interdisciplinary approach to process, I do think my work is deeply connected to the act of drawing. I try to bend and collaborate genres using drawing, drawing inspired from examining manuscript painting, how one can traverse all sorts of boundaries and dimension. I see my use of drawing as writing, where fiction meets non, prose meets poetry. Cross border, cross cultural. The beating heart is drawing that carries the DNA of manuscript painting. I do see myself as part of the great lineage of manuscript painters. Does that make me traditional? Claiming one's place in proximity to one's cultural heritage, dispersed for years because of colonial legacy is another reorientation of boundaries.

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I try to bend  
and collaborate  
genres using  
drawing  
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more than ever before. In your opinion, what led to that endeavour taking place today?

**SS:** My intent through the work I create is to help pause and reflect, and open up conversations around race, power, sexuality, empire, aiding towards more nuanced ideas about the world. The wrestle to decolonise public education and history has been going on for a long time. It is imperative to also inspect the geographies of inequality through the question of gender.

My artistic process starts with reading and research, engagement with community, and careful listening that includes precisely these urgent, multiple cross-currents of re-examining colonial and imperial stories of race and representations by working across genres, fields and media. Gathering stories that include women who have been denied agency in the art world for a long time. What is our sense of self verses someone else's idea of us? Which myths are worthy of retelling? I also take inspiration from books. In the stories, I imagine many turn of events as happening in my own life. I am the seer and the seen, creating intimate portraits that explore race, culture, nature, gender, class and human intimacy. There are also paintings that depart from specific portraits to broader themes about economic histories and inherent violence to underlying currents in the political divisions of American society as well, keeping in mind the interplay between both sides of the hyphenate reality,

**AAN:** You address a number of issues (race, gender, sexuality among others) that all societies or countries need to discuss, today

7-12 SEPTEMBER 2021

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Segments of Desire Go Wandering Off (1998), collage with watercolour and graphite, on tea-stained washi paper, 24.3 x 50 cm. Courtesy Artist Studio and Sean Kelly Gallery NY. Many hyphenated identities clash and shift. Being Asian-American today encompasses not only South Asians but other new immigrant groups, for example, Cambodian-Americans and West Asians, or Arab American. These new immigrants are not only expanding the historical and geographical parameters of the term Asian-American, but they are also redefining what being American is about.

again and again! I think of art as a language, a tool, a means to communicate. At its heart is a pursuit and fruition of an idea. Ideas can take shape in multiple forms. I am a research driven artist and need to move in many unanticipated directions. Creatives think and express in many ways. I do not often hear male artists like William Kentridge being asked why he works in so many diverse languages? Right? I have seen him work in video, theatre, collage, drawing, performance, mosaic, installation, etc. I do think that there are at times different standards for describing artists of colour, and women artists in particular are expected to perform and stay within their determined zones. I have been called a 'miniaturist' many times and asked why I do not stick to just making the small paintings. I think it is more of a concern of a commercial art world that tends to create a brand around an artist work, something that is tested and recognisable and can be banked upon safely.

**AAN:** Within your diverse practice, what led you towards glass mosaic?

**SS:** What led me to mosaic was animation. It was the dynamism of the pixel that emerged in my mind as a parallel to the unit of a mosaic. I began experimenting with mosaic in 2015, when I received my first 70-foot, permanent, public art commission for Princeton University. Glass was a natural direction, as much of my work deals with transparency and light. This work for Princeton University's economic and international departments building was conceived by sketching the over-arching theme of human economic inter-connectivity and struggle for truth with references to history, religion, and literature to create a visual poem.

**AAN:** Your last solo exhibition in New York in the autumn of 2020 featured sculpture, which represents a major development. What triggered you to move in that direction?

**SS:** I was in conversation with the scholar Gayatri Gopinath and inspired by her essay on my work, and decided to cull out the female protagonists from my paintings into sculptures. The title *Promiscuous Intimacies* refers to the title of her essay, where she speaks of the 'promiscuous intimacies' of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, bodies, desires and subjectivities. The sculpture's sinuous entanglement of the Greco-Roman Venus and the Indian Devata has a suggestive embrace. The intertwined female bodies bear the symbolic weight of communal identities from across multiple temporal and geographic terrains. The archetypes of females are drawn from the Indian temple

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I travelled  
around the  
wings of my  
imagination,  
carrying my  
roots within  
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sculpture (I am citing the captive apsara's torso in The Met's collection). I added limbs to her truncated form and entwined it with a Mannerist Venus, drawing attention to the overlaps and intimacies of Indo-Greek histories.

I first sketched out the female characters in 2000 for a banner for MoMA, when I worked with the curator Fereshteh Daftari. I was culling art history's classicism and ethnocentric reactions to Indian Art, as per Johan Joachim Winckelmann's doctrine. I was also making a point by entangling Mannerism, the anti-classical impulse within the Western tradition, alongside Indian art, both as accomplice witnesses of a one-sided history. In the sculpture, the women evoke non-heteronormative desires that are often cast as foreign and inauthentic, and instead challenge the viewer to imagine a different present and future. From the Indus valley excavations to the Chola bronzes, bronze and metal casting has had a long history in South Asia, where often the sacred and tangible objects interacted in essential and functional way with human activities and socioeconomic practices. The bronze sculpture coloured in various patinas highlights that classical painted statuary was polychromatic and not necessarily 'lily white', as often constructed over time in popular imagination. 'Colour prejudice' points out the historian Sarah Bond, is 'how we colour or fail to colour classical antiquity is often a result of our own cultural values'. For me, connecting the patina to the larger discussions on colour in classical sculpture also links the issue of classicism with American monuments and memorials, that are often revered as symbols of patriotism in their classicism aesthetic. When asking what stories and whose perspectives get commemorated in public spaces, BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other people of colour) are the least represented. One such current heated conversation is around the removal of colonial and confederate monuments.

**AAN:** As this is an important and multi-faceted issue, how do you think that art, and your art in particular, can contribute to the discussion?

**SS:** In 2017, I had the opportunity to be part of the New York City Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers and during that process, hearing differing public opinion, studying public monuments, their complicated histories, historical reckoning and tensions between communities regarding representation, I felt the urge to respond to the overt male representation of historical monuments through an anti-monument. I think my sculpture does offer alternative ways to engage the past without glorifying it.

**AAN:** In your videos, music plays an important part. You have worked on several occasions with music Pulitzer-Prize winner Du Yun (b 1977, in China). What appealed to you about her work and how did the collaboration with her come about?

**SS:** I met Du Yun when I was leaving the Bellagio Center in 2009, after finishing a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation. It was some months later that I called her to collaborate on a work for the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai. It made sense to me to engage Du Yun, as she grew up in Shanghai and was a New York transplant like myself. What strikes me as the fundamental enabler of our collaboration is our mutual investment in a multivalent, multidimensional form and state of experience. Du Yun's interest in the polyrhythmic, or maybe the polytextural, is very much about building sound density in ways that parallel my employment of layers of colour and varying opacities to craft depth. Du Yun's aesthetic is bold and wide, and the immensity of her sound works well with my use of intensely saturated colour as an emotional tool. Our shared straddling of the classical/traditional and its transformation with a degree of improvisation is both playful and utterly serious. Since we both have tremendous respect for tradition through our training in craft and technique, our inventiveness is intrinsic to an internal dismantling not an external effect.

**AAN:** Your exhibition at the Morgan Library, New York, which stays on throughout the end of this summer, is entitled *Extraordinary Realities*. What realities are you exactly referring to? Also, can you present the exhibition?

**SS:** This exhibition is an in-depth survey of the first 15 years of my practice (1987-2002) and its pioneering role in bringing painting traditions from South and Central Asia into dialogue with contemporary practices in Pakistan and tracing the early years in the US, when the work catapulted into international prominence. The exhibition is book ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, and examines my work's engagement with the cultural and political shifts that define the 1990s decade.

The exhibition was conceived first through the accompanying book, edited by professor Sadia Abbas (author of *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*, published 2014) from Rutgers University and Jan Howard from the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. All the voices in the book intersected with me in significant ways in the 1980s and 1990s, including artists Julie Mehretu and Rick Lowe, curator Vasif Kortun, historian Faisal Devji, Gender and Sexuality professor Gayatri Gopinath, art historian Kishwar Rizvi and my teachers Bashir Ahmed and Dennis Congdon.

The exhibition travels to RISD Museum (autumn 2021) and MFA Houston (spring 2022), following the trajectory of where I created the artworks. The vocabulary and themes around gender, sexuality, race, and history that I explored in the late 1980s and 1990s



**WATCH**  
Disruption as Rapture, 2016. HD video animation with 7.1 surround sound. 10 minutes, 7 seconds, music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi; Commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art



**WATCH**  
Parallax, 2013. Three-channel, single-image HD video animation, with 5.1 surround sound. 15 minutes, 26 seconds, music by Du Yun



**WATCH**  
Reckoning, 2020. HD video animation with 7.1 surround sound. 4 minutes, 16 seconds, music by Du Yun featuring Zeb Bangash

continue to resonate in contemporary discourse. The exhibition historicises and coalesces the ideas, themes, and multiple languages in the work from perspectives both within and outside of the US. Polarising dichotomies that have long existed such as East-West, Islamic-Western, Asian-White, oppressive-free, my encountering such prevalent binaries in the early 1990s led to an outburst of androgynous forms, fragmented bodies, headless torsos, and self-rooted floating half-human figures that refused to belong, to be fixed, or to be stereotyped. Many female iconographies from comical to dark started resisting categorisation. I was responding to my inability to locate Brown South-Asian representation in the feminist space in the 1990s art world and art history books. Back then, the monolithic category often used in art history books, 'third-world feminism', was limiting.

**AAN:** Your latest project, *Roots and Wings*, is a children's book. Whose initiative was it and what is your message to the future generation of art enthusiasts, artists, and most importantly, young adults?

**SS:** Five years ago, I was invited to do this by Charles Kim, as he was working as an editor with MoMA Publishing. The project fell on the side and then got picked up in 2018. I felt it was important to do this book, especially when a Muslim ban was placed by Trump and there was a steady rise of anti-Asian hate. I was introduced to a few children's books illustrators and ended up working with Hanna Barczyk, as her bold female iconography in editorial illustrations had synergy with the feminist thrust in my work. Initially, I was invited to write, but realised that writing for young children is far more complex than I understood. I was thrilled to find Amy Novesky to co-author with. She is a Director for Cameron Kids, a division of Abrams, and I loved how she had written about Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, and Georgia O'Keeffe.

I did not grow up with books about young girls becoming artists, and specifically painters. Even now, there is a dearth of books encouraging young girls of colour to follow their creativity. Another reason for me to do this book was to loosen up some of the persisting representations around Asians as well as Muslims. Asians are regularly woven into images of doctors and engineers, migrant workers, but never into artists. There are also very few books about Muslim children being just children and not siloed into stereotypes. Cultural details abound in this book, but are not reduced to token representation. What I wanted to convey through the book is that curiosity and the desire to engage and express, is universal. The story is based on my growing up in Lahore in a multi-generational home with paternal grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins. As a young child, I was into nature, outdoors, maths and exposed to stories through books. I ran around in the neighbourhood with other children, playing crickets, roller skating, climbing trees, flying kites and drawing. To reflect upon my childhood was a fresh opportunity for me to be reminded how creativity surrounds us in ordinary and unexpected ways. One of my early childhood memories is of an abandoned school bus converted by volunteers in the neighbourhood into the Aleph Laila book bus library. Books fed my soul and imagination as a child and continued to inspire and ground me as an adult. Through books, I travelled around the wings of my imagination, carrying my roots within. Art is how we learn to tell stories about our truths, and how we negotiate a place in the world for future generations. My advice to the youth is to practice introspection and resilience, and to think of creativity as a catalyst, a way of living and enriching community.

● Shahzia Sikander: *Extraordinary Realities*, at the Morgan Library, New York, from 18 June to 26 September 2021, themorgan.org

# THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

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