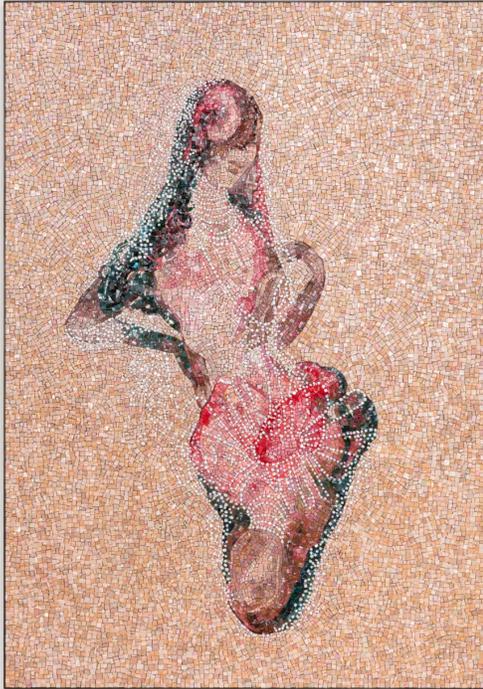


# SEANKELLY

Adnan, M.Z. "Artist, Feminist, Detective: How Shahzia Sikander Disrupts Art History." *The Juggernaut*, January 5, 2022.

## the Juggernaut



*Zarina (2018) by Shahzia Sikander*

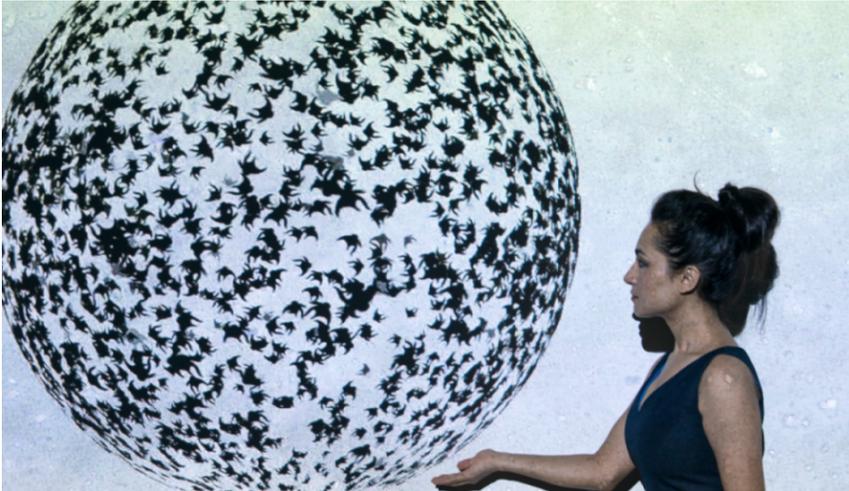
On a stark, white wall at the West Court Gallery of Jesus College at the University of Cambridge hangs *Zarina* (2018), a glass mosaic by Pakistani American artist Shahzia Sikander. Last October, I met Sikander at the opening of "Unbound," an exhibition that included *Zarina*. Sikander, clad in black, was standing in front of the mosaic, which depicts two faceless feminine forms reflected in one another, draped in pearls. It is not clear where one form begins and the other ends. "It is kind of a reflection — a shadow image or a mirror image or a distortion," Sikander told me. "Or it could be one's own distorted view of oneself."

A painting at the San Diego Museum of Art, in the donated collection of Edwin Binney III, an heir to the Crayola fortune, inspired Sikander. But the pose of the figures in *Zarina* evokes that of a recurring archetypal female in the Indo-Persian manuscript painting canon: a woman seated in a window holding flowers, a bird, or pearls. Typically, the unknown woman is painted by an anonymous artist. "That generic representation is perhaps because things have been unbound and

# SEANKELLY

moved around,” Sikander pointed out, “and we don’t know which Western collector donated it to the museum, how it arrived there, how it arrived in the West. All of that is so nebulous, right? The mosaic enables that type of shattering.”

At the heart of Sikander’s practice, which has been the subject of recent retrospective exhibitions at The Morgan Library in New York and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, is a 30-year-long engagement with the manuscript painting — what has popularly, and problematically, been called the “miniature.” Problematic, because the term dislocates these paintings from their manuscript contexts, according to Vivek Gupta, the curator of the Cambridge exhibition. Islamic art historian Christiane Gruber has referred to collectors and art dealers selling manuscripts folio by folio as a sordid practice that turns masterpieces into “master-pastiches.” The size of the paintings is secondary to the import of these works, Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, told me. “These are worlds unto themselves.”



*Shahzia Sikander (Shahzia Sikander)*

Sikander sees herself as a detective of sorts, who fills the historical gaps around manuscript paintings, especially because 19th- and 20th-century Western art histories dismiss, flatten, and erase the form’s stylistic and regional diversity. Artists created manuscript paintings in Afghanistan, Iran, India, and other regions across centuries. Some observers have interpreted Sikander’s art, now part of permanent collections at several museums, including the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a reinvention, or a reimagining of a “tradition.”

For her part, Sikander tells me that she finds the rhetoric of “tradition” boring — a term that she has been stuck with for years because of early press releases about her work. “What is it that we mean when we play with such opaque terms?” she said. “Who gets to determine what is ‘tradition,’ and when in time and space

# SEANKELLY

does it magically appear?” Rather, Sikander is inspired by art history that has no beginning, middle, or end — for her, history is alive and cyclical.

“I want to read [manuscript paintings] differently than what might be suggested to me by a white art historian’s text or gaze. I see them differently, I feel them differently,” she told me. “I’m not bound by somebody else’s interpretation.”



*The Scroll by Shahzia Sikander*

Sikander, who was born in Lahore, first encountered manuscript paintings at the National College of Arts there, where her access to these works was limited to Xeroxed black-and-white copies. These facsimiles were made from the five or six exhibition catalogs of European and American shows that her professor kept in a locked cupboard in his classroom. Sikander and her classmates would copy the Xeroxes — illustrations of the *Shahnameh*, the 10th-century epic poem by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, currently at the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and 17th-century Safavid works at the Met — to hone their skill.

When she arrived at the college in 1987, Sikander’s interest in manuscript paintings was piqued by a dismissive attitude toward the genre, which many teachers at the college viewed as an inferior craft for its reputation as tourist kitsch. By the time she had graduated in 1991, her thesis, *The Scroll*, heralded the arrival of what is now globally known as the “neo-miniature” movement. Referencing Safavid aesthetic traditions, the 12-inch-wide, five-foot-long autobiographical painting depicts Sikander moving through rooms in her teenage home as a diaphanous, ghostlike presence. The thesis received the college’s highest merit award, and Sikander became the first woman to teach manuscript painting there.

# SEANKELLY



*Photograph from Shahzia Sikander's student semester at RISD in 1994. "In the background is a miniature painting that I was working on and which evolved into 'Eye-i-Ing Those Armorial Bearings' (Shahzia Sikander instagram)*

In 1993, Sikander moved to the United States to pursue a master's in fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design. Upon graduating, she moved to Houston, and then New York, where she was part of a community of progressive South Asian creatives. This included individuals like DJ Rekha, a key figure in the basement bhangra movement; others organized around HIV/AIDS and labor issues. In Sikander's experience, the mid-to-late 1990s were an outward-looking period, one that ended post 9/11 "amidst heightened patriotism and policing of any critique of war and dissent."

The historian Faisal Devji, who first came across Sikander's work in the late 1990s, was struck by its novel character. "One thing I found extraordinary was the refusal to dwell upon origins," he told me. "It's not a kind of homage to the past nor simply a way of reviving or reforming or modernizing that past." Her work "takes the past into consideration, but completely turns it around, so as to undermine its sense of origin or beginnings." Devji cites a series of works from 1996, in which Sikander added photographs of herself on top of the "fake miniatures" produced for tourists in India and Pakistan using the pages of old textbooks, with Urdu script deceptively incorporated as a sign of authenticity.

# SEANKELLY



*The Many Faces of Islam* by Shahzia Sikander

Later Sikander works would engage in more overt political commentaries. In *The Many Faces of Islam* (1999), two central figures hold up American currency inscribed with the Quranic verse: “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?” In *No Fly Zone* (2002), Sikander used the Ascension of Solomon — a 16th-century Safavid painting now at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. — as a base for jets and angels with red, white, and blue wings.

The recipient of several accolades, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 2006, Sikander’s practice is painstaking, with one work unfolding over several years. Her studio is in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, but she often works in an open space at home. Many paintings draw from several visual and literary influences: feminist writers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Fahmida Riaz, and Ismat Chughtai, whom she read simultaneously in the early 1990s. In *Kindred* (2021), whose title refers to Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel, a large oceanic space constructed with Urdu text from a phrase by Mughal poet Ghalib surrounds a female face.

Distilling multiple ideas into a singular, small work requires calmness, and a meditative approach. “You have to still your mind. It’s jumping everywhere because there’s so much different material,” she said. “You have to really guide your relationship between your mind and your hand.” For larger paintings, she works with brush and ink on the wall and floor. “The fluid nature of ink as it pools and drips allows me to equate material with matter, movement with time, and time with history,” she told me. “It is a cyclical process. It’s hard to explain. It’s so fluid.”

# SEANKELLY

Sikander speaks in measured tones, carefully considering her words. There is a therapeutic quality to her speech. In a text message she wrote to me, “The energy about me is also calm, even in its intensity.”



*"Such a treat to see the renowned album of Indian erotic paintings at The Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University" (Shahzia Sikander instagram)*

In October 2017, a curator invited Sikander, during a visit to London, to view the *Padshahnama*, a 17th-century manuscript that the Mughal emperor Shahjahan had commissioned, at the Royal Library in Windsor Castle. Its images depict the emperor hunting lions, his accession, his son Aurangzeb facing off an elephant. The ruler of Awadh presented the manuscript to King George III in 1799. A catalog entry describes the *Padshahnama* as “disbound,” with its “paintings removed from the manuscript 25 years ago for conservation purposes.”

Sikander described the experience of viewing the manuscript — merely two inches from her eyes, through a magnifying glass — as deeply moving. “It is so alive as if freshly painted. None of these details can be captured in an Instagram image,” she told me. “The artist in me wants to scream and announce to the world that everybody should be required to come and experience it.” But the manuscript’s permanent presence in a British archive angered her, hearkening back to how she and fellow students had only Xerox copies of the real thing in art school. “I kept thinking: why is this work not accessible to all, why is it not traveling to Pakistan?”

When her peers suggested that she move back to Pakistan after 9/11 — as Pakistani artists were being feted internationally for work addressing the global war on terror, as Devji writes — she demurred. “This idea of ‘a return’ is often instrumentalized within the art world. Return to where?” she told me. “If the South Asian manuscript archives are mostly in the West, thanks to colonial histories of looting, I’m following the archives, that has always been my interest.”

# SEANKELLY

Deeply engaging with these archives is Sikander's way of remedying existing narratives. "The way art history is produced and taught is still deeply Eurocentric," she said. "Often, when galleries or museums are exhibiting more diverse art, they rarely collect the artworks for extensive permanent collections. Even when museums are collecting works by artists of color, most of that work sits in storage and rarely gets visibility."

Sikander has contended with these very barriers in the United States. Before the Morgan Library picked up a retrospective of the first 15 years of her career, "Extraordinary Realities," Sikander had been in talks with other New York museums. They told her that they were interested in only "blockbuster shows," a notion that seemingly excluded her as a South Asian woman artist, despite her success. Nevertheless, the Morgan retrospective drew numbers that exceeded the museum's expectations. "Whatever one is making or doing, there definitely is an audience out there for whom it matters," Sikander said.



*Promiscuous Intimacies (Shahzia Sikander)*

In this way, Sikander believes that her work helps dismantle the entrenched organizing principles of museums, with regard to what is "contemporary" or "historical." Instead, her art offers ways of imagining the past and the present simultaneously. In *Promiscuous Intimacies*, a sculpture at the center of "Unbound," Sikander depicts a Greco-Roman Venus from a 16th-century Bronzino painting flirtatiously intertwined with an 11th-century Indic celestial dancer, the devata, inspired by a temple sculpture that now resides at the Met.

# SEANKELLY

Sculpture is a new art form for Sikander, who produced *Promiscuous Intimacies* after serving on the Mayor of New York City's Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers. That said, *Promiscuous Intimacies* is the translation of a sketch that Sikander produced in 2000. And, even in sculpture, Sikander views its purpose differently than most. "My work is already very anti-monumental because it doesn't glorify the past. But because it's small drawings on paper, nobody will ever see it in that light," she told me. The sculpture asks viewers multiple questions. Is the devata using the Venus, or is the Venus wanting her attention? Who is the more powerful figure? Like in *Zarina*, the boundaries are blurry.

Gayatri Gopinath, a scholar of queer and Asian diaspora studies, helped name the sculpture. She understands Sikander's work as "promiscuous in the sense that it surfaces the intimacies...of apparently discrete aesthetic and cultural traditions, histories, and geographies," she told me. "There's clearly a desiring, sensuous, erotic relation between the two figures. So to me, this sculpture produces the art historical archive as a queer archive."

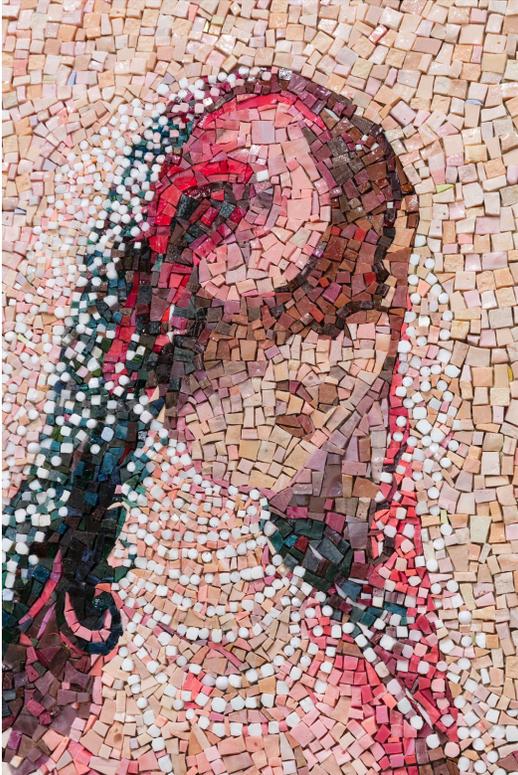


*Infinite Woman (2021) by Shahzia Sikander*

A week after the opening of "Unbound," Jesus College, mired in debates over the legacy of its early benefactor, slave trader Tobias Rustat, became the first British institution to repatriate a Benin bronze to Nigeria. "The timing was definitely interesting, layering yet another context to *Promiscuous Intimacies*," Sikander said, reflecting on institutions displaying her work when they are also considering their complicity in cultural theft.

# SEANKELLY

Sikander's oeuvre, too, invites deeper reflection, rather than delineating what is "decolonial." It, too, draws on global discourses, including symbols like Christmas trees and oil wells, the red and white uniforms of British soldiers, and the goddess Venus. Her titles, which often have several meanings, point to larger histories: *Explosion of the Company Man. I Am the Exact Imitation of the Original. United World Corp. Oil and Poppies. Walled States.*



*Zarina (2018) by Shahzia Sikander*

Take *Zarina*, for instance. The title references a character in Ayad Akhtar's play "The Who & The What," the epithet of a Mughal calligrapher, and Indian American artist Zarina Hashmi, who received acclaim for her early work much later in life. "In the art world, women get attention, a serious type of attention, much later, if they're lucky. It's such a cliché, unfortunately, but so much of it is true, especially for women of color," she told me. "You have to tell your story not just once, you have to keep telling it again, and again."

For Sikander, this attention should include not only exhibitions, but also an acknowledgement that their art contributes to the canon. "The question is, why did it take so long, like 20 years, to get a museum exhibit and a nuanced, meaningful conversation about my work in the city where I live and work?"

Despite the facelessness of the reflected female form in *Zarina*, she stands defiantly. She is a ghost whose origins are constantly shifting. Her existence is disruption. But she is calm, even in her intensity. She refuses to — and cannot — be erased.

[M.Z. Adnan](#) is a writer based in London.