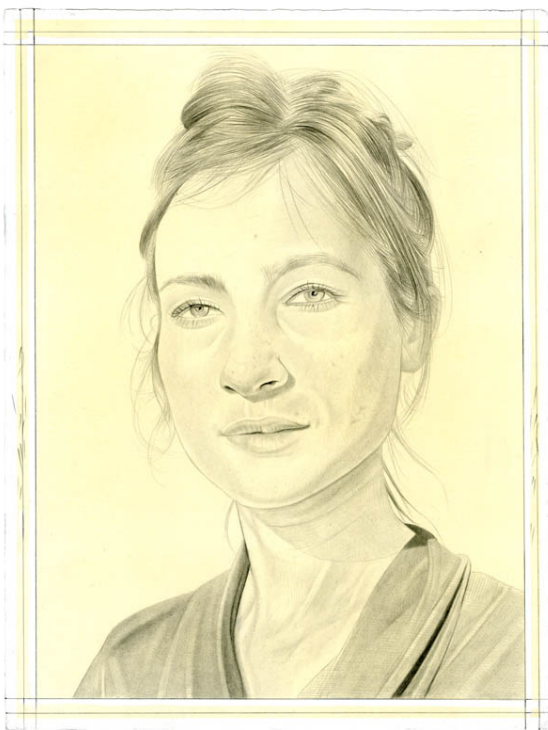


# SEAN KELLY

Cristoph, Sara. "Shahzia Sikander with Sara Christoph," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2016.



## SHAHZIA SIKANDER with Sara Christoph



Portrait of Shahzia Sikander. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Since moving to the U.S. from Pakistan in the mid-'90s, Shahzia Sikander has pushed through boundaries corroded by decades of multiculturalist rhetoric with an artistic practice that reimagines the connections between Eastern experiences and Western perspectives. Sikander is best known for her early mastery of Indo-Persian miniaturist painting—a radical appropriation of a craft formerly considered kitsch—but her recent work in video is immersive, animated, and monumental in scale. She sat down with Sara Christoph to discuss the paradoxes of colonialism and translation, and the narratives that frame history, in the context of today's charged atmosphere of divisive polemics.

**Sara Christoph (Rail):** I'd like to begin by touching on a theme that runs through your work as an artist: the imperative of imagination. You've said it is something that drives you, that "art is an instinct to imagine the future." Let's start there: imagination as instinct, as something that even in times of great divisiveness, binds us all. How would you articulate the role of imagination in your work?

**Shahzia Sikander:** When I think of the idea of the postcolonial, the rhetoric of imagination seems so much more buoyant, so full of visual possibilities, specifically as a foil to the notion of the exile. I think of it as a soaring

and empowering space that is free from constraints. And if you're thinking in terms of inter-connectivity, imagination is what ties all of us together.

For me, lack of imagination is literally death. Because what are we? What is real? When you think in terms of narratives, and how history is determined through narrative, how real is that narrative? The pursuit of truth is so fleeting when it is held hostage to authenticity. Our recent histories are all about redactions, and so everything starts to emerge in a space that is in flux. Imagination is very much about taking ownership of the narrative; it is a fundamentally political stance.

**Rail:** I'm reminded of a line from "Rant," a poem by Diane di Prima, "The only war that matters is the war against the imagination / all other wars are subsumed in it."

**Sikander:** If you reflect on those two words, isn't that what we've been experiencing? In the current political space—and I'm not just talking in the U.S., I mean everywhere—why are we so afraid to imagine that someone else might be similar to us? di Prima's words remind me of the poet Wisława Szymborska. In "The End and the Beginning" she says, "After every war someone has to clean up, things won't straighten themselves after all." Imagination connects the past, to the present, to the future. This is something that excites me, because my work straddles the idea of tradition and inserting one's link to it.

**Rail:** Let's talk a little about your relationship to the concept of "tradition."

**Sikander:** At times I'm at a loss: what exactly does tradition mean? One's relationship to tradition is not about appropriating, but about how to *own*. How does that ownership occur? Today's world is transnational, but certain traditions—like the [Islamic] tradition of miniature painting that I am invested in—are truncated at best.

My first encounter with miniature painting was through a facsimile in the early '80s, meaning a reproduction in a Western museum catalogue. In Lahore at that time, miniature painting was an anomaly amidst the National College of Arts' highly westernized curriculum. It represented the "Other," and for me, it was an epiphany. When I studied with Bashir Ahmed, a master miniature painter, his devotion to tradition was arresting. As a young artist, it was an effort to transport myself from the mindless malaise of the dictatorial regime of Zia-ul-Haq.

Tradition can be seen through the virtuosity of training and skill, but at the same time, tradition is also understood as a label—a certain type of work being done at a certain point in time. As a contemporary artist—again it comes down to imagination—I'm interested in being a witness, in an act of seeing. I want to find that moment where I can straddle history and the present.

**Rail:** Your most recent animation, *Disruption as Rapture* (2016), was just installed in the redesigned Asian Art galleries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and springs from an 18th-century illuminated manuscript, the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq*. When did your interest in this manuscript, in particular, begin?

**Sikander:** There are many iterations of the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq*, and the significance of the manuscript is generally linked to the epic poem. The *Gulshan-i 'Ishq* was written in 1657 – 58 by Nusrati, a court poet who recast a North-Indian Hindu love story as a Sufi tale for an Islamic court, and it was important for me to keep in mind the ethos of that historical and socio-political period.

Attempts at translation—the book in Philadelphia is large, and at least two-thirds of it is text—usually come out of South Asian art history scholarship. Gestures of authority are implied, which have, over time, also lost their authority. Take the narrative synopsis usually provided with any manuscript—we can trace that down to a specific art historian's perspective.

**Rail:** And I would assume those descriptions are written primarily by and for a western audience?

**Sikander:** Yes, and the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq* is written in Deccani Urdu and Persian Naskh script, the language of the Muslim elite in South-Central India. The religious and cultural plurality at play is so important. There are over ninety illustrations, though for me, I never see them as illustrations. They are visually intelligent vignettes. There's almost an insularity to the books as objects. How essential is it to translate the words? I wonder. My instinct is to use them as a point of departure. When we were given the synopsis of the poem, I decided, there's

no way for me to fully understand the story. Because, who's saying that's the story? So, off goes the narrative! [Laughter.]

**Rail:** Right, because short of a line-by-line translation, or even with that, you can't take it at face value.



Shahzia Sikander, *Portrait of the Artist*, 2016. Suite of four etchings, 27 × 21 inches each. Edition of 40, published by Pace Editions, Inc. Courtesy Shahzia Sikander Studio.

**Sikander:** How can you? I cannot even take Picasso at face value, and he is so well represented and analyzed. Not to mention, many of the artists in miniature painting are just placeholders, meaning they never even existed. Slowly, years into the field, I realized the process of determining a very significant history is, again, in the hands of a few. The provenance is what I'm engaging with conceptually. How was the tradition shaped in the 19th century? How does it continue to be shaped?

**Rail:** For *Disruption as Rapture* you worked with an animator with whom you collaborate often, Patrick O'Rourke. How does the animation process relate to your drawing practice?

**Sikander:** It's important that the strength of the drawing is not lost, and that the drawing guides the animation. You can't compete with the virtuosity of these painted manuscripts, and you don't want the work to be subservient to a software. Patrick and I have figured out a particular language which is based on particle systems. We begin by thinking in terms of elements that lend themselves to movement—leaves growing, flowers blooming, clouds floating—things that in nature, are going to move from one state to another. Then, we ask how to complicate those movements.

**Rail:** Here, and in many of your animations, place plays an important role. I mean not simply the physical landscape of trees and flowers, but the histories embedded within the land. Animations like *The Last Post* (2010), which is set within British Colonial India, or *Parallax* (2013), which alludes to the contentions around the Strait of Hormuz, seem to begin with place as a point of inquiry. Do you think of it as conceptual material?

**Sikander:** For me, it starts with what is emblematic of a place—a visual. Why do we assume certain visual motifs represent certain places in history? As I dig through my books, or as I'm starting research, there's always going to be a certain expectation of imagery. I want to challenge assumptions around a space. For example, the East India Company affected trade across the globe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries—



Shahzia Sikander, *Utopia*, 2003. Gouache on paper, 8 × 14 inches.  
Courtesy Shahzia Sikander Studio.

**Rail:** It still does.

**Sikander:** It still does! So, how do you think of geography in that way? This too comes back to movement. Movement can be literal, as in the physical crossing of geographical borders by bodies, species, commodities, and resources. It can also be symbolic, as in the sense of belonging to, or being excluded from, a geographically determined space.

In making *The Last Post*, it came down to the East India Company School of Painting as the fundamental point of reference, when patronage for miniature painting ended after the fall of the Mughal dynasty, and the British Colonial Empire schooled a very particular style of painting. The protagonist of *The Last Post* became the East India Company man, and he continues to live on in new ways. The Princeton work uses his profile as a costume for Adam Smith, playing on the legacy of colonial trade and corporate enterprise. Though in the mosaic I attached wings and he is fluttering in the atrium of the economics building.

**Rail:** The Princeton mosaic, which is being installed right now, is the first time you've worked in glass. Can you talk about your relationship to the figure of Adam Smith? With all the layers in your work, I'm sure you were thinking beyond the explicit connections between Princeton's department of economics and Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

**Sikander:** We are still caught in the same old patterns of inequities of wealth. Adam Smith argued against monopolies, using the demise of the East India Company as a case study. In Nick Robins's *The Corporation that Changed the World* (Pluto Press, 2006), he explains the East India Company's story as a tragedy—enormous wealth generated with the cost of great harm. Whether it's the books I'm reading or where I am in the world, one hopes it filters right into the images. That is how the images become more compelling, or how they capture the unsaid. Personally, I am much more inspired by writing.

**Rail:** Really?

**Sikander:** I like the precision in words, but I don't have the means to write. Drawing has always come more easily to me.

**Rail:** One piece of writing you shared with me was the Pakistani-American author Ayad Akhtar's incredibly poignant piece, "The Breath of Miraj." The piece is a luminous argument for the power of mythical thinking, likening the Night Journey of the Prophet through the heavens, the Miraj, to the longing of the artist. He articulates this desire as: "to have made the journey into the great unknown—to have seen the unseeable—and to return to the world as we know it with the capacity to express the inexpressible." It is as if through the mythic trope of Miraj, Eastern and Western traditions could imagine commonality. You, too, have used Miraj as a visual motif in your work, something pulled from Indo-Persian miniatures?

**Sikander:** I have known Akhtar's work for decades. We share a history and a tradition, and a mutual exploration of the Prophet as poet and seer. I love that piece, "The Breath of the Miraj." It was published alongside *Portrait of the Artist* (2016), a series of etchings that cites traditional Miraj paintings. The Miraj is one of Islam's most mystical themes, and my interest stems from both childhood familiarity and artistic exploration. The motif features prominently in miniature painting, and can be read as a metaphor for the emotional trust necessary in seeking artistic truth.

With the Miraj and elsewhere, I keep pushing images, altering them and changing the context to see how far they can go in time, how new associations can be conjured up. What does an image mean when it's unhinged from its own representation?

**Rail:** You're referencing, too, your use of Gopi hair as a motif—the black topknot of female Krishna worshipers depicted in so many Indo-Persian miniatures. After you've pushed and isolated this form so far from its original context and meaning, at that point, does it stay a "feminine" form, or come to represent something else?

**Sikander:** The form is stronger for having been pushed through so much. It is imperative that each of my forms retains its distinct shape, yet is recast in continuously evolving iterations. A single silhouette of Gopi hair has tremendous possibilities. When reproduced in the millions, it operates as a pulsating mass of movement, referencing swarms, birds, bats, even waves of water or oil.

**Rail:** The Gopi hair plays a large role in *Parallax*, which arose out of your time at the Sharjah Biennial, I believe?

**Sikander:** *Parallax* pushes many of my central ideas, specifically the question: what exactly *is* translation? The score, by New York-based Chinese composer Du Yun, was deliberately kept in Arabic. That is the language of the region, but crucially, the concept of what it means to be an "Arab" has become so politicized. As a young person growing up in Pakistan, the emphasis on English as the medium of instruction—despite Urdu being the national language—directly contributed to my loss of a deep grasp of Urdu. At the same time, Arabic was engaged ritualistically in order to recite the Quran without "learning" the language—creating another parallax of sorts.

Throughout the history of Pakistan, language has always been critical. One of the first notions of oppression is to subjugate someone else's language. The eradication of Bengali was such a strong gesture, and one of the reasons that led to the Liberation War in 1971. At the core of it is language, because what right does someone have if they can't speak their own language? These histories were not necessarily in our textbooks growing up in Pakistan. It's ironic, the first time I went to Bangladesh was when *Parallax* travelled there.

**Rail:** It really all pivots around the force implied in translation, authoritarian or not.

**Sikander:** What is informing your way of looking at the world? We're still so elementary, all of us. That's how I feel when I look at the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq* manuscript. It was 1657 when Nusrati, the poet, was writing, a very plural moment. What is so new about our world?

**Rail:** You're talking to someone who grew up in Southern Virginia, who was taught that the Civil War was the "War of Northern Aggression." It's a rhetoric of blindness that keeps violence invisible. Again, it goes back to this pivotal question of who is writing the history. And as a child, it's determined by people out of your reach.

**Sikander:** There are so many writers who have spoken about these issues, but if they're not part of a curriculum, then what? You discover them later in life—one would hope—but the burden of that is so significant.

**Rail:** All of these issues—language, translation, historical redaction—also appear in your large works on paper. I'm thinking of *I Am the Exact Imitation of the Original* (2013), and *I Am Also Not My Own Enemy* (2011). I cannot read Urdu, and so for me, when I look at these works there's a kind of lyrical release. I see a short-circuited connectivity, a kind of paradox for our hyper-digital age.

**Sikander:** That's so interesting you say that, because the energy lent to the work is what I was trying to dig at. So much of it was just standing in front of the page and writing, writing, writing. Both works were done in India ink, which is so faint that you can't see it until it dries. The phrase itself is a fragment from an Urdu poet, Ghalib,

about unrequited love. There's a political dimension to the way he's using it, and by repetition, it transforms from a statement into a question. I am also not my own enemy? It became very musical, which is why I added the musical bars.

**Rail:** Music seems to play a twofold role in your work, both audio and visual. In the score of *The Last Post*, for example, the sound of a bugle call is heard throughout.

**Sikander:** That bugle call is prevalent in many countries that were colonized by the English. It signals the end of the day, or the death of a soldier—it's the same call that the Pakistani army still performs.

**Rail:** And this performance, with all the subsequent military pageantry, is what makes up your film *Bending the Barrels* (2009)?



Shahzia Sikander, *I Am or Am I Not My Own Enemy*, 2011.  
Ink and gouache on paper, 82 × 51 inches. Courtesy Shahzia Sikander Studio.

**Sikander:** Yes. The drawings, like *I Am Also Not My Own Enemy*, are not independent, they are an extension of having gone to Abbottabad, Pakistan to film *Bending the Barrels*. You know, I filmed the music school in 2009, and a few months later we found out bin Laden was five minutes from where I was! All of a sudden, the work has so much more resonance. But that's what an artist does—it's intuitive.

At the end of the two days in Abbottabad, I struck a chord with many of the Army musicians as artists. We began to talk about classic Indian films—a very important subject for any Pakistani because they were banned for so long—and they began to belt out these love ballads, very classic, romantic music from the 1950s and '60s.

**Rail:** Enlisted Pakistani army musicians singing love songs from films that were suppressed in their country for decades—there are so many layers.

**Sikander:** It changes the temperature of the piece altogether.

**Rail:** I'm fascinated by the pageantry of the military. There's an important aspect of respect and honor built into it, but at the same time the performance—whether it be in Pakistan or Washington D.C.—seeks to put forward a clean, palatable, even righteous visual symbol of what the military should mean to civilians.

**Sikander:** It's all the same around the world! It is theater in operation. But it's dark. Behind that façade—

**Rail:** —there's the messy reality of what is at stake.

**Sikander:** Growing up in Pakistan, through so many different coup d'états and regimes, your relationship to the military is love/hate. Who is the lesser of the two evils? There's also theatrics to the democratic process. Pakistan is still fundamentally a feudal culture, and those who come into power are representatives of extreme wealth.

**Rail:** This brings up a tension that I sense in much of your work between beauty and violence. Some of the topics that you are grappling with, like the oppression of colonialism, or the power of the military, are painful to reckon with. Yet the works themselves are strikingly beautiful. Do you think about that balance at all?



Shahzia Sikander, *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, 1993. Gouache and gesso on board, 31 × 19 inches.  
Courtesy Shahzia Sikander Studio.

**Sikander:** Absolutely. All of it. A very signature image for me is the feminine form that has roots—rather than feet—but does not have a head. So much of the shared history between India and Pakistan dates back centuries, and the idea of the female divinity was very present within a complex system. That's been expunged from so many cultures and religions, specifically Islam, and the headless form—for me, a beheading—emphasizes the removal of the feminine.

Sometimes I see the forms I've made after going into these zones, and think, "Oh my god, what does this mean?" It's inevitable that violence is present. If I look at Goya and think about beauty, it's about power. The encounter with the sublime is to face something in awe or in fear, and that tension is the essential beauty that I strive for in my work. I'm not interested in a precious or embellished ideal of beauty—that's where it falls apart. I remember when I made that form; it happened with quick, gestural sketches. That is the moment when one is most charged as an artist, when you are thinking *with* your brush. Some of it will be uncomfortable. In so many ways, taking the route of art is not to seek stability in uncertain times; it is to confront the uncertainty.