

# SEANKELLY

Rafael, Dawn. "Paint Her Way out of Traditional Thinking. Dawn Rafael Questions a Rising Star Who Questions Everything,"  
*The Oprah Magazine*, July, 2001.



Shahzia Sikander  
in her Manhattan  
studio, spring 2001

PAINT HER WAY OUT OF TRADITIONAL THINKING.  
DAWN RAFFEL QUESTIONS A RISING STAR WHO QUESTIONS EVERYTHING.

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# PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN

FROM PAKISTAN TO PROVIDENCE, SHAHZIA SIKANDER LEARNED HO



FIRST YOU SEE THE WOMEN. THEY LEAP; they float; they beckon; they smile, ever so slightly, through a veil. They go about their business. And somehow these luminous figures of 32-year-old artist Shahzia Sikander's invention work their way under your skin and into a place near your solar plexus, where

feelings you cannot quite name reside. It's not until a moment later that you register the intricate designs of which these women are a part. Your eyes take in the men-folk, the animals, the symbols, the thousand little grace notes. Sikander's paintings wow the art world—her work has been exhibited at New York's Whitney Museum, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and the Smithsonian Institution—but her appeal extends beyond the critical realm. She both embraces and subverts the centuries-old Eastern art of miniature painting, saturating her canvases not only with color but with mischief. Traditionally, miniatures depict religious subjects and rituals such as weddings. But Sikander's paintings portray everyday experiences and evoke the inner

life. Her women slip out of the requisite borders; their bodies become weightless, uncontainable. Sikander herself refuses to be claimed, be it by the Manhattan gallery crowd who would crown her its exotic priestess or by the traditionalists of her homeland.

"Art, for me, has always been a ticket for experience," Sikander says, recounting her journey here. Her English is inflected and rapid-fire, her physicality small and intense. Her studio, a loft in a downtown Manhattan industrial building, is tidy and spare, though not unwelcoming. She perches on a chair, leaning forward. "I grew up in a convent in Pakistan," she says. Although Muslim, Sikander, like her mother, received a missionary education. "Till high school, I was studying food and nutrition, home ▶

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