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Oil and Language: Q+A with Shahzia Sikander on "Parallax"



Walk into the Honolulu Museum of Art's spacious Henry R. Luce Gallery and you're bound to see people draped on a couch in front of a 45-foot-wide screen. On it is Shahzia Sikander's immersive 15-minute video animation *Parallax*, a complex, mesmerizing swirl of images set to a haunting soundtrack by Chinese composer Du Yun.

Trained at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan (she holds dual Pakistani and American citizenship), Sikander first became internationally recognized for her work in revitalizing the traditional practice of Indo-Persian miniature painting. She has since become a leading international contemporary artist, expanding the physical and conceptual boundaries of miniature painting in startling ways. *Parallax* consists of hundreds of painstaking, hand-drawn images that form a symbolic visual language of motifs pregnant with subjective meaning. These images were converted to digital format and translated into a monumentally scaled, three-channel, single-image, audiovisual installation. Du Yun's operatic score combines new poetic compositions in classical and colloquial Arabic by three contemporary Sharjah poets to provide a tapestry of multiple independent voices woven into a greater unified harmony. The result is a multisensory experience with a constantly shifting narrative. You'll want to sit through the entire thing many times—just ask the people sitting on that couch how long they've been there.

First created for the 2013 Sharjah Biennale, *Parallax* was inspired by Sikander's road trip through the United Arab Emirates. It explores contested histories of colonialism, political-economic power and cultural authority that characterize the area's complex history. Certain themes, such as the importance of oil, presented through surging black flows and pipe-and-valve constructions deliberately resembling Christmas trees, are specific to Sharjah; other motifs are universal, questioning shared values of personal and collective identity. The result is a work of regional and global, individual and societal relevance that operates on multiple levels.

At the opening reception for the installation in March, Sikander told the audience that Honolulu plays a role in this work—she made her first forays into digital art as an artist in residence at Shangri La: A Museum of Islamic Art, Culture and Design in 2008.

The busy New York-based artist—check her **Instagram feed** where she’s posing with Meryl Streep at the Pen America Gala in New York one night, and speaking on a panel at Harvard the next—answered some questions about *Parallax*.



***Parallax* isn’t only an impactful visual experience—language also plays a big part. Tell us about that.**

Keeping in mind the ethnic and racial complexities of the Gulf, origins, genetics, histories and migratory movements, variety of spoken languages and dialects as well as variations in cultural and religious practices, “language” became a relevant point of entry in the making of the work—the language of image-making, the language of poetry, of words, of color, of music. The variety of autonomous languages coming together in an experiential manner allows the work to be deeply experienced.

Language, geography and identity remain charged notions of inclusion and exclusion, always in flux. A “creolized” identity implies a nonfixed identity, where differences can coexist in multiple layers. The dynamic of the individual is equally informative in the exploration of difference, and it is with such an attitude that I engaged in the making of *Parallax*. The search for an epic experience from a very personal act—drawing—came also from my experience of [Derek] Walcott’s epic poem “Omeros” and [Urdu language poet Muhammad] Iqbal’s poems “Shikwah” and “Jawaab-e-Shikwah.” The Palestinian Samih al-Qasim is another poet whose simultaneously introspective and vast language allowed me to look into the “Arab” culture through another’s eyes.

Why did you choose to have poetry play a big role in *Parallax*? And can you tell us about the poets you worked with?

I was keen on using poetry as a means of agency via local poets for the score. I met the poets through the Sharjah Poetry House, and the collaboration that ensued was organic. We discussed various aspects of the colonial legacy of the Strait of Hormuz. The poems address geographical and emotional cartographies, describing how possession, ownership, rule and battles can take place in both a concrete physical location and the elusive terrain of memory and minds. The texture of the language is dimensional, the vernacular classical and colloquial. Idioms from the Arabic are present, adding a visual layer to the poetics of the spoken. The tracks of the six poems are heard simultaneously, in and out of various sequences.

The three poets we worked with were from Sharjah. Two were women; one of them, Shaikha Mutari, is a woman in her early 20s whose delivery has the urgency of a rapper’s. She uses a familiar imagery of romantic desire from classical poetry to underscore the non-nostalgic. In her work, the memory of unrequited desire is superseded with innate youthful curiosity. Her poem “Remnants of Nostalgia” chronicles the meeting and subsequent separation of two lovers who choose not to disclose their emotions while aware of their respective feelings. The poem is a comment on the power of silence as a language. In her second poem, the woman chooses an alluring city over her lover.

The second poet, Hamsa Younes, is, in her own words, a feminist. Her poem jumps between the metaphorical fingertips of time, bouncing between minutes and seconds. These leaps and dance steps are a means of navigating the sea of human emotion. She finally lands on a tune that resonates with her soul. Now, rather than jumping, she can fly, soaring until the heights make her weary. The poem serves a cathartic function: The strong energy of emotions takes over the poet's physical being, leaving her out-of-body experience a witness to extreme passion and emotional independence.



SHAHZIA SIKANDER WITH SHARON TWIGG-SMITH, WHOSE SUPPORT MADE *PARALLAX* POSSIBLE.

How did your United Arab Emirates road trip fuel *Parallax*?

Driving across the UAE was an intentional choice that provided me with a navigational sense of the landscape. What I discovered was beautifully lit and shifting topography, smaller and far less expensive towns, and the importance of the Strait of Hormuz's maritime trading history.

I thought of driving as navigating the terrain of a drawing, and conversely I gave my experience a narrative form in drawings that function like a libretto for *Parallax*. Driving always gives me a sense of mobility, independence and competence as I establish a relationship with a place. It is something I have embraced my whole life. As a child, I took lots of road trips with my family, driving across northern and southern Pakistan. Those childhood adventures had a profound effect on me, developing my awareness of time within moving imagery framed by a window. Later on, when I moved to the U.S., my curiosity about the mythic proportions and exalted representation of the American landscape in literature, poems and films ignited my urge to drive. I needed to explore the real and the imagined, the subversive and the sublime, the historical and the manufactured, the political and the personal through the act of driving across the U.S., following different routes from east to west and north to south.