

Siddiqui, Yasmeen and Patel, Alpesh Kantilal, “Imaginary Homelands, Shahzia Sikander in Lahore”, *Hyperallergic*, September 14, 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

PHOTO ESSAYS

Imaginary Homelands, Shahzia Sikander in Lahore

This photo essay tells the story of an artist’s view of her experience at a new and important biennale.

Yasmeen Siddiqui, Alpesh Kantilal Patel 22 hours ago



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir, and Young Children of Traditional Musicians from the Walled City of Lahore, Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort. “Disruption As Rapture” (2018), (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

LAHORE, Pakistan — Earlier this year, New York City-based Shahzia Sikander presented her work for the first time in the city where she grew up. Sikander is well known for how she transfigured the language of miniature painting, a form she learnt as a young undergraduate art student at the National College of Arts in Lahore. She has since mobilized the language of animated film, and one of these — “Disruption As Rapture” (2018) — was recently installed at two outdoor locations: the Lahore Fort and Alhamra

Gardens. The work attests to Sikander’s strong interest, both in playing with scale as well as in collaboration across disciplines, from music to literature, with an eye open to theater. The installations were part of another first — the inaugural [Lahore Biennale](#) that took place this year from March 18–31.

SEANKELLY

Below are images of the installations along with descriptions of the work — often in Sikander’s own words. What will be clear is that the work (among other things) moves beyond the fixity of often timeless national categories towards an exploration of identity as something richer, more complex.

Indeed, countless essays, interviews, and catalogues have largely been unable to disentangle Sikander’s biography from her work. As such, this essay is not meant to be a story about an artist returning “home.” Sikander has been in the United States since the 1990s, where she harnessed educational and exhibition opportunities to test the limits of the skills she had developed before her migration. Our hope is to begin the task of demonstrating, on this occasion, through images composed as a photo essay, the particular, multi-faceted and unstable formulations Sikander puts forward, to trigger a rethinking of all the questions that confuse our struggle to understand the multivalent social and cultural and historical forces that sculpt her ways of seeing.

To put it liberally, perhaps language has not caught up to her work. The authors of this text and Sikander have been in an ongoing conversation about the unfortunate framing of artists (and how to move forward) and we anticipate further essays and curatorial projects tackling this issue head-on. For now, though, we hope the images below spark further thought among readers. They are presented here with commentary by both the authors and the artist, the latter differentiated by blockquotes.

Installation at the Alhamra Gardens, Lahore Biennale 01 .



Shahzia Sikander, “Disruption As Rapture” (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O’Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

One of the two locations in which the animation “Disruption as Rapture” was installed was Alhamra garden, a space open to the public until midnight. The 10-minute film is an interpretation of the 18th century manuscript *Gulshan-i ‘Ishq (Rose Garden of Love)* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s collection. The poem is written in masnavi form in Deccani Urdu and Persian naskh script, the language of the Muslim elite in South-Central India. This North Indian Hindu love story is recast as a Sufi tale for an Islamic court.

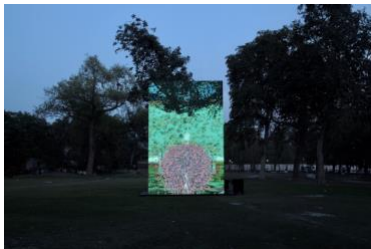
SEANKELLY

Not even the most erudite of scholars can decipher the text of the *Gulshan-i 'Ishq* let alone grasp the story's many layers given its heterogeneous qualities: for Sikander, this was a productive point of entry into the work.



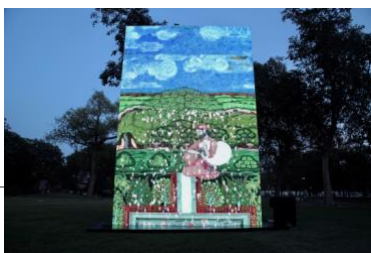
Shahzia Sikander, "Disruption As Rapture" (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

I was keen to develop a multivalent work which could address multiple categories of representation from the provenance of the object, an 18th century manuscript in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection, to the ownership of the narrative within. Also it was imperative for the work to effortlessly engage the historical to the present as a means to imagine the future.



Shahzia Sikander, "Disruption As Rapture" (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

"Disruption as Rapture" returns source material to the region and people that it originated from. By installing this work in this park, by putting forward an image connected to a multiplicity of regional cultures — while also dramatically increasing the scale, and expressing the forms through projected light — Sikander asks for whom do we craft stories, using which cultural references?



The work was installed on a 30 foot SMD screen and the audio through powerful speakers. It was visible from the main commercial avenue of Lahore, the Mall Road and the score/music could be heard from afar.

SEANKELLY

Shahzia Sikander, "Disruption As Rapture" (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)



Shahzia Sikander, "Disruption As Rapture" (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)



Shahzia Sikander, "Disruption As Rapture" (2016), HD video animation, original music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, animation by Patrick O'Rourke, duration: 10 min. 7 secs. (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

The audience that visits Alhamra is varied, from students to professionals to pedestrians, rickshaw drivers, motorcyclists, upper middle class driver driven class, basically an audience from a wide economic stratum. I was there every evening to answer questions and share the process of making the work.

Opening Performance at the Lahore Fort, Lahore Biennale 01.

The other location "Disruption as Rapture" was shown *was* the Lahore Fort, an expansive structure, significant architectural site, and major tourist destination in the northern section of this historic walled city. The base structure dates to the 17th century reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar, but has been expanded over the centuries. "Disruption as Rapture," in this setting, was realized in collaboration with Pulitzer prize winning Chinese-American musician Du Yun and Pakistani singer Ali Sethi.

The reference to Sufi enlightenment and Hindu devotional Bhakti is explored through forms created from female hair as well as wings choreographed as particle systems that function as a connecting tissue while carrying the theme of strife and the struggle for truth.

SEANKELLY



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir and Young Children of Traditional Musicians from the Walled City of Lahore, Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort. "Disruption As Rapture" (2018), (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir and Young Children of Traditional Musicians from the Walled City of Lahore, Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort. "Disruption As Rapture" (2018), (all photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir and Young Children of Traditional Musicians from the Walled City of Lahore,

The idea of a "particle system" is a practical device Sikander uses in her animations, that amplifies her intellectual interest in tracking the movement of iconography and ideas over time and space. This method of making animations is highly expressive and allows more freedom than conventional rendering techniques. The basic idea is allowing for controlled chaos to organize and animate a form that has the quality of smoke or other similar natural phenomena.

"Disruption as Rapture" refuses to be contained or straight-jacketed as an homage to heritage, instead it suggests new ways of artists working together across time and media.

...we decided to involve the girls' choir and the children under training of the musicians of the old city of Lahore. The fort is within the old city of Lahore. The video is an animation and the visual vernacular and storytelling is of the region. There was immediate affinity with the work from the young musicians who through their participation also became part of the work. The context of the Mughal architectural site did not seem incongruous as the work itself was dissecting the 'hidden' plurality within the linguistic, musical, visual, religious and spiritual cultures of the sub-continent.

SEANKELLY

Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort.
"Disruption As Rapture" (2018), (all
photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy
Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali
Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir and Young
Children of Traditional Musicians
from the Walled City of Lahore,
Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort.
"Disruption As Rapture" (2018), (all
photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy
Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

The role of audience in the realization
of "Disruption as Rapture" begs the
revisiting of questions about how
participants from the public sphere
should be documented and historicized
when developing critical reception and
art historical writing.



Shahzia Sikander, with Du Yun, Ali
Sethi, Catholic Girls Choir and Young
Children of Traditional Musicians
from the Walled City of Lahore,
Darbaar-e-Aam, Lahore Fort.
"Disruption As Rapture" (2018), (all
photos by Umar Riaz, courtesy
Sikander Studio for Hyperallergic)

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC