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Larson, Vanessa H. "Two Pakistani American women reinvent traditional art with unconventional subjects." *The Washington Post*. February 6, 2019.

The Washington Post



"Eye to Eye: Self Portraits from 1900 to Today" features a self-portrait by Shahzia Sikander. (Shahzia Sikander/Digitized by Mark Gulezian/National Portrait Gallery)

Concurrent with Butt's show at the NMWA, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery is coincidentally also showcasing several etchings by a kindred spirit: Shahzia Sikander, a 2006 MacArthur Fellow who had a well-regarded solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 1999 and 2000 devoted to paintings inspired by Indo-Persian miniatures. (Sikander is the first artist from Pakistan to have her work acquired by the museum and displayed.) Her works on view include two luminous self-portraits — you'll find them in "Eye to I: Self-Portraits From 1900 to Today" — and two portraits of Ayad Akhtar, the Pakistani American writer who won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Akhtar's portraits are on view among the recent acquisitions.

Although Sikander's training isn't immediately evident in the style and technique of these pictures, it comes through in their composition and iconography, which

SEANKELLY

reference traditional Islamic depictions of the Mi'raj, or ascension of Muhammad into heaven. In one mesmerizing portrait of Akhtar, the subject's head is shown in profile on a starry, night-blue background, both surrounded by and overlaid with fantastical images of flames, angels and mythical creatures, evoking the prophet's dreamlike journey.

The practice of miniature painting demands a meticulous attention to detail, and a repetitive — almost meditative — application of tiny amounts of paint. As Butt puts it, you make marks “over and over again, and eventually your marks become visible.” But this centuries-old art form is far from static.

Butt and Sikander have reinvented time-honored techniques for a contemporary audience while retaining their works' intimate connection with the viewer. As these remarkable artists prove, making one's mark sometimes means rewriting the rules.

Shahzia Sikander at National Portrait Gallery

Eighth and F streets NW. npg.si.edu.

Dates: “Eye to I” exhibition through Aug. 18; recent acquisitions through Nov. 3.

Admission: Free.