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Pettitt, Chelsea. "30 Artists, 30 Years – Shahzia Sikander." *Bagri Foundation*.
May 2020.



Shahzia working on a new bronze sculpture. Courtesy of the artist. 2020.

30 Artists, 30 years – Shahzia Sikander

Interviewed by Chelsea Pettitt, Head of Arts at the Bagri Foundation – May 2020.

CP: You were the first student to teach alongside master miniaturist Bashir Ahmed in Lahore, and also the first female to teach miniature painting. Can you tell us a little about what sacrifices you had to make along the way and what that journey was like?

SS: I graduated from the National College of Arts, Lahore in 1991 and in spring of 1992 I was teaching as a lecturer in the Miniature Painting Department. Miniature painting had not been a popular subject for my generation. When I encountered it in 1986 it was mostly mired in its prevalent iterations of "tourist kitsch" much more than its "indigenous" status and had been declared derivative. Within its colonial history at the National College of Arts, miniature painting was intimately woven into the English provenance of reviving the Indian crafts. In the mid-80's there was a split regarding who and what could be the "modern miniaturist." Bashir Ahmad's work was restricted to mostly copying historical miniature paintings with some changes; on the other side was the work of painter Zahoor-ul-Akhlaaq who was engaging the language of traditional miniatures through the canon of western painting. It became clear to me that "tradition" in context to the Indo-Persian miniature painting craft was truncated, at best, and its custodian, the master miniature painter Bashir Ahmad,

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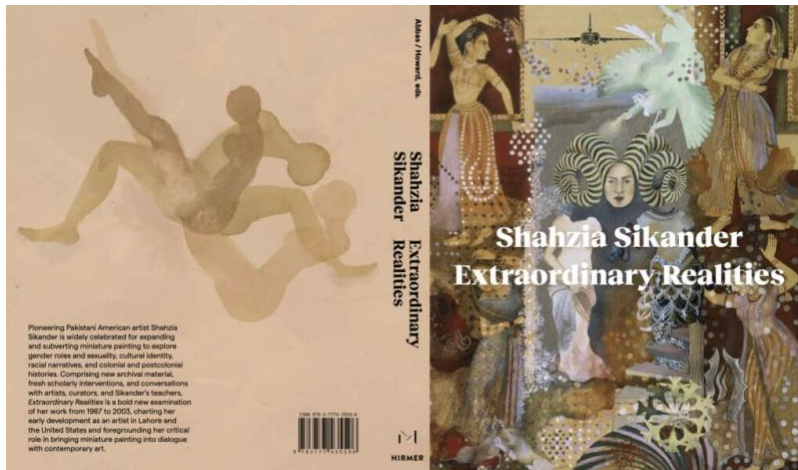
was struggling to find A+ students to work with. Working with Bashir Ahmed as a student meant learning the rigors of a craft in an 'apprenticeship' teacher to student style, with long hours, which left no room to explore other mediums. My thesis *The Scroll* 1989-90 emerged as the tipping point, laying to rest the debate about miniature's inability to engage the youth. It explored the flux of identity and impact of youth as abstract notions in introspective but not ornate detail within the miniature tradition. It also upended the fetishized virtuous figure of the static waiting women in traditional miniature by replacing it with a spectral female protagonist defying bodily restrictions by virtue of its resilient elastic form. This claiming of the freedom of the female body became the defining emotion in the work, a rupture of moving away from the prevalent layers of patriarchy. The arduous task for me was not only of learning a tedious craft but also managing the expectations of mine and others to position miniature painting as a viable contemporary art form. I was aware that I had to involve and win over the non-miniature painting mentors and stake holders at the National College of Arts through my work to counter the prevalent culture of disregard towards miniature painting. I worked 14 hours a day 365 day a year. It didn't feel like sacrifice at that time as that's the way I trained myself to work. Fully devoted. In retrospect it cost me, the inability to disengage from hard work, you can say it made me a recluse!

I was an introvert and a hard worker from a very early age. My journey towards art was an outcome of coming of age during Zia's military dictatorship of the 80's and the Soviet-Afghan-US-Pak War [1978-1992]. This was a time of diminishing women's rights, blasphemy laws, the Islamization project, polarized public and private spaces all geared towards discouraging dissent and creative expression. I was inspired by women leaders like Asma Jehangir, Pakistan's human rights activist. One of my first mentors was the late artist Lala Rukh. In 1986 I also worked with Lala Rukh at Simorgh foundation, a women's resource and Publication center while studying Mathematics at Kinnaird College for women. She was a founding member of the Women Action Forum. Being a part of WAF gave me substantial insight into women's rights and issues, as well as a broader grasp on the intersections of community and art. Miniature painting, with its unresolved national status and deep stigma, captured the paradox of culture and nationalism far more than any other discipline at NCA in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the '80s.

The work I eventually created at NCA received national critical acclaim launching the subject of miniature painting into the forefront of university's visual arts degree program, which is why I was asked to teach there within a year of graduating. *The Scroll* at 5 foot also launched a continuing trend over two decades of 'large- scaled' thesis miniature paintings. I was one of only two students majoring in Miniature painting in 1991. When I started teaching alongside Bashir Ahmed it encouraged greater number of students, many only 2-4 years younger to me, on the sidelines who were wary about prejudices around craft-based work, to major in Miniature and engage it with experimentation. By

1995-97 when my work started showing at US and international museums and biennials, it was signaling to the emerging art scene in Lahore that miniature painting was profitable, prompting many artist as well as curators to start claiming miniature painting as a Pakistani nationalistic artform.

CP: As a pioneer in the field of the ‘neo-miniature’ – a re-envisioning of classical Indo-Persian miniature painting – we are interested to know more about this unique style and how you re-interpret these classical forms.



SS: Miniature Painting, unfortunately is a not the best way to refer to the broad visual and painterly historical practices of a vast geographical area – Ottoman to India. Loosely determined as book arts, illuminated manuscripts, illustrated folios sometimes accompanying literary epic poems, religious texts, court paintings, the Indian and Persian painting styles encompass many regional schools such as the Safavid, Sultanate, Pahari, Mughal, Sikh, Rajasthani, Deccani, Company and others. My interest in this genre was initially sparked by my own lack of general knowledge about visual histories of the region. There was no culture of museums growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s. Much of the art was stolen and dispersed by the English over the course of the colonial rule. The more I became attuned to miniature painting's complicated provenance, the more it yielded to new narratives. Miniatures are often hiding out of sight in Western museum storages or in private collections yet to be published. Mine has been an investigative pursuit of three decades, highlighting the politics of provenance, ownership and narration by taking a closer look at historical works, documents, unarchived materials to use as inspiration for new direction in art history and contemporary visual idiom.

My work embraces uncertainty and flux. I'm not looking to synthesize, but to elaborate and define difference. There are infinite ways to create meaning. When I research historical paintings, I inspire to cultivate new associations for trenchant historical symbols from more than one vantage point. I have employed ideas around time, space monumentality and movement in imagining new relationships with the past. I have used strategies of scale,

SEANKELLY

temporality, light and projection in various artworks created over the years at residencies and museums like the Hirshhorn, Whitney, Yerba Buena, the Drawing Center, MOMA Paris, Lahore Fort, Times Square billboards and recent permanent public artworks at Philadelphia art museum and Princeton University. I have sometimes used the language of illuminated manuscripts to engage pop culture. Formal devices inspired from examining the miniature painting schools can work hand in hand with ideas that are abstract yet prevalent in society. Topics around power, money, beliefs, commodities, patriarchy, fixed historical representations are ripe for dismantling, often with humor or subtle playfulness.

As a Pakistani-American, as a transnational, my work has been part of artistic movements in both Pakistan and America, focusing on themes of language, migration, empire and movement of resources and commodities. It is precisely these urgent, multiple cross currents of re-examining colonial and imperial stories of race and representations, that inspire me.

Much of my iconography breaches national boundaries. For example in the late 1990s juxtaposing Pakistani feminists, writers, poets, like Fahmida Riaz, Ismat Chughtai, Kishwar Naheed, Parveen Shakir, with Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and bell hooks [Gloria Jean Watkins] to understand feminist forms and in turn explore language from specific points and places of women's narratives. By dislocating context and intimacy across race and sexuality to reread the texts from new perspectives and by reorganizing the framing devices of center and margin within the miniature painting, I was able to open up the narratives of gender and sexuality simultaneously. The female forms in my small and large paintings over all as well as the video animations can be monstrous, playful, explicit, evocative. Making iconographies where the female protagonists are proactive, confident, and intelligent, and connected to the past in imaginative ways has been a foremost concern.

Eurocentrism has been operable throughout art history and history. When we inherit false or biased or unjust constructions of the past, of the 'other', we often unconsciously keep marching down the same paths. Artists help pause and reflect, opening up conversations around contested issues, aiding towards more nuanced idea about the world. In this wrestle to decolonize public education and history, it is imperative to also inspect the geographies of inequality through the question of gender to offer counter perspectives to our prevalent hyper masculinized histories and ways of being.

CP: Your beautiful glass mosaic work *Red Lotus* entered the Bagri family collection recently. As your practice spans installation, mosaic, animation, painting, and more, we wondered, is this a journey of discovery of materials that you've taken? Or does the idea decide the material? What direction are you are taking now?

SEANKELLY



Shahzia Sikander

SS: I see myself as a thinker and drawing is my thinking hat. It is a notational tool, a fundamental language that allows me to collaborate with other languages such as writing, animation, music and projection. While studying the language of miniature painting, I simultaneously began experimenting with the wall and floor as a drawing surface in the early mid-'90s, evolving painted murals into densely layered works with paper and light projection. The magnification of scale through the linking of hundreds of drawings on translucent papers, directly led to exploring animation. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction—all essential elements inherent in the process of drawing—become more active through animation and music, linking time-based mediums to the act of thinking. The way I look at drawing is that it is rooted in a human lineage that can communicate across cultures, and has the capacity to be introspective as well as forward-looking. Imagination can be a metaphor for a soaring and empowering space that is free from constraints, that ties past to

present and present to future.

What led me to mosaic was animation. It was the dynamism of the pixel that emerged in my mind as a parallel to the unit of a mosaic. I began experimenting with mosaic in 2015, when I received my first 70 foot permanent public art commission for Princeton University. Glass was a natural direction, as much of my work deals with transparency and light. Even in the free-standing smaller Red lotus, how the material of glass is transformed is intrinsic to the final experience of the work. The compression of space through the detail and density, the uneven un-grouted surface, with varying sizes of glass pieces is intentional to create a sculptural sensibility. The literally explosive nature of the work as in the broken surface plane into numerous glass pieces is also a comment on shattering the trope of 'ideal love' from within the miniature vernacular as in the Red Lotus's illustration of the celebrated love story of Baz Bahadur and Rupmati. The stock character of the 'lovers on horseback' becomes the site of rupture, a destabilizing of the motif of heterosexual love itself.

Poetry inspires me deeply. It's almost as if I strive to make each artwork as a poem. Individually crafted, exploring tensions between power and powerlessness to engage with the intrinsically beautiful and poignant into culturally relevant and transformative. Interest in sociology, psychoanalysis, the space of examining how culture and society shape the imagination is all fodder for my work. How violence, systemic racism, class and cultural fears are deeply entrenched in media and political representations, be it the fear of the unknown, the migrant, the immigrant, the Muslim, the LGBTQ, the 'other' and the various fault lines of

SEANKELLY

race, class and gender also intersect in various ways around capitalism. In this entangled web, the extractive nature of capitalism keeps promising liberty and happiness while saddling many with debt and despair. The idea for my current series of paintings (*The Shroud*, 2020, *Oil and Poppies*, 2020) emerged while researching symbols of extraction. The works transform the oil rigs into Christmas Trees, a comment on the paradox of the culture of extraction. The toxic by-products, accidental spillage in ocean, burst pipelines affecting land, soil, slash and burn agriculture, wreaks havoc on aquatic ecosystems and human costs of displacement and pollution. There is also a related new video animation 'Reckoning' just finished, with my long-time collaborator, the Pulitzer-prize winning composer Du Yun and the work also features the Pakistani singer Zeb Bangash. These days, I am also finishing my very first bronze sculpture titled 'Promiscuous Intimacies' in conversation with a text corresponding to this work by the scholar Gayatri Gopinath, professor of gender and sexuality studies at NYU. The essay is part of a [book on my practice coming out 2020 fall published by RISD and Hirmer Verlag](#) and will accompany my exhibition at the Morgan Library Museum in NYC in June 2021 and will also travel to the MFA Houston and RISD.



Biography

Pioneering Pakistani American artist [Shahzia Sikander](#) is widely celebrated for expanding and subverting miniature painting to explore gender roles and sexuality, cultural identity, racial narratives, and colonial and postcolonial histories. Comprising new archival material, conversations with artists, curators and Sikander's teachers, and fresh scholarly interventions, *Extraordinary Realities* is a bold new examination of her work from 1987 to 2003, charting her early development as an artist in Lahore and the United States, and foregrounding her critical role in bringing miniature painting into dialogue with contemporary art.

Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues (Sean Kelly Gallery NY – November 5 – December 19, 2020) is an expansive, in-depth look into Sikander's recent work, featuring the artist's first free-standing sculpture, a captivating new single channel video-animation, luminous, intricate mosaics, and dynamic large-and-intimately-scaled drawings.

A full biography can be viewed [here](#).