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Shahzia Sikander Urges a Rethinking of Art History

Sikander's first New York solo show in nine years includes a captivating range of paintings, mosaics, animations, and the artist's first-ever sculpture.



Shahzia Sikander, "Kinship" (2019-2020), ink and gouache on paper, paper: 60 x 96 inches (© Shahzia Sikander; all images courtesy Sean Kelly, New York; photo by Adam Reich)

"I wanted to create an animation that played with the idea of displacement and pollution," explained Pakistani-American artist [Shahzia Sikander](#) in a recent [conversation](#) with writers Ayad Akhtar and Sadia Abbas. Discussing her new artworks, including the single-channel animation *Reckoning* (2020), Sikander continued: "*Reckoning* for me is about the transcendental homelessness of the modern era and the lurking threat of possible eco catastrophe." Emitting luminous visuals and featuring a composition by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer [Du Yun](#) — a regular collaborator of Sikander's for the last decade — *Reckoning* is one of several works that will be on view in *Weeping Willows*, *Liquid Tongues*, her debut show with Sean Kelly Gallery, opening November 5.

Nine years have passed since Sikander's last New York solo show, *Sift, Rift, Drip, Shift* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., making *Weeping Willows* an event of particular interest. Viewers looking for more of Sikander's work following the show, will be able to peruse her forthcoming monograph [Extraordinary Realities](#), out in February 2021. Edited by Sadia Abbas and Jan Howard, the book will examine the artist's earlier works from their

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inception in Pakistan in 1987 to her continued practice in the United States, up until 2003.

These days, Sikander's art practice contemplates global feminisms, climate change, institutional racism, and religious perspectives. Her inimitable paintings and portraits, captivating video animations, meticulous drawings, glass mosaics, and now, for the first time, a sculpture, are rooted in the genre now known as "contemporary Indo-Persian miniature."



Shazia Sikander, "The Shadow's Dance" (2019), ink and gouache on paper, 15 x 11 1/2 inches (© Shazia Sikander)



Shazia Sikander, "Promiscuous Intimacies" (2020), patinated bronze, 42 x 24 x 18 inches, edition of 5 with 2 APs (© Shazia Sikander; photo by Chris Roque of UAP)

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In her forthcoming show, Sikander urges audiences to rethink global histories and shared experiences, by re-examining the canon of Eastern and Western art history through her work. In 2000, she created the drawing “Much Maligned Monsters II,” borrowing its title from Partha Mitter’s 1977 book about European reactions to Indian art history. In the drawing, Sikander entangled a partially clad Eastern Hindu Devata (deity) with a nude Greco-Roman Venus appropriated from Angelo Bronzino’s “An Allegory with Venus and Cupid” (c. 1540–1546). “Promiscuous Intimacies” (2020), the artist’s sculptural debut, elevates this composition into a life-sized bronze. Much like in her earlier drawing, Venus sits on the floor of the gallery space, raising a delicate finger that grasps the Devata’s necklace while the latter deity rests one leg on Venus’s shoulder. The pair lock gazes, oblivious to outside gazes. While the drawing alluded to female identity and hierarchies of power in global politics, the entangled bronze figures suggest queer relationships that are not always visible to the observing eye.



Shahzia Sikander, “Arose” (2020), glass mosaic with patinated brass frame 84 x 62 inches, edition of 5 with 2 APs (© Shahzia Sikander; photo by Adam Reich)

Women of the Mughal courts are another signature motif in Sikander’s works. In her latest glass mosaic “Arose” (2020), as well as in an eponymous ink and gouache drawing, the artist stylizes two identical, unidentified female figures. Drawn very close together and fanning around a central axis, the heads of these figures are missing in all iterations but one. Sikander has worked with headless female figures since the beginning of her career in the early nineties, as a means of alluding to the need to reclaim one’s identity and the collective power of women in contemporary society. Like the sculpture “Promiscuous Intimacies,” “Arose” prompts several interpretations about female companionship: platonic or queer.

Weeping Willows will also include recent paintings that address capitalist modes of production, along with another standout glass mosaic — “The Perennial Gaze” (2018)

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— and numerous other drawings and paintings. As the exhibition makes plain, Sikander is dexterous in any medium she dabbles.

Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues opens November 5 at Sean Kelly Gallery (475 10th avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) and will continue through December 19.