

SEANKELLY

Als, Hilton. “Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities’.” *The New Yorker*. August 20, 2021.

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Art work © Shahzia Sikander / Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly

The Morgan Library’s knockout show “**Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities**” (on view through Sept. 26) surveys the first fifteen years of this remarkable Pakistani American artist’s career, and it’s hard to imagine it being any better. Sikander, who was born in Lahore in 1969, first became adept at Indo-Persian miniature painting while studying at Pakistan’s National College of Arts. Historically, such miniatures detailed aspects of life in the Mughal Empire—scenes of court, landscapes, battles, religious subjects—and were kept in albums for private use and pleasure. When Sikander moved to the United States, in 1993, to pursue an M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design (which organized this exhibition in collaboration with the Morgan), she began brilliantly upending traditional narratives in her work, delving into new political and emotional territories: the ramifications of Islam on her life as a woman, and how best to articulate her experience as an immigrant. With her fine, sure hand, Sikander also uses surrealism to skewer Western ideas of exoticism. In such exceptional pieces as “Pleasure Pillars,” from 2001 (pictured above), made with vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on *wasli* paper (a material favored by miniature painters for centuries), she expertly frames the chaos and the questions about faith, history, and ideology that dominate both her native land and her adopted home.

— *Hilton Als*