

## Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power

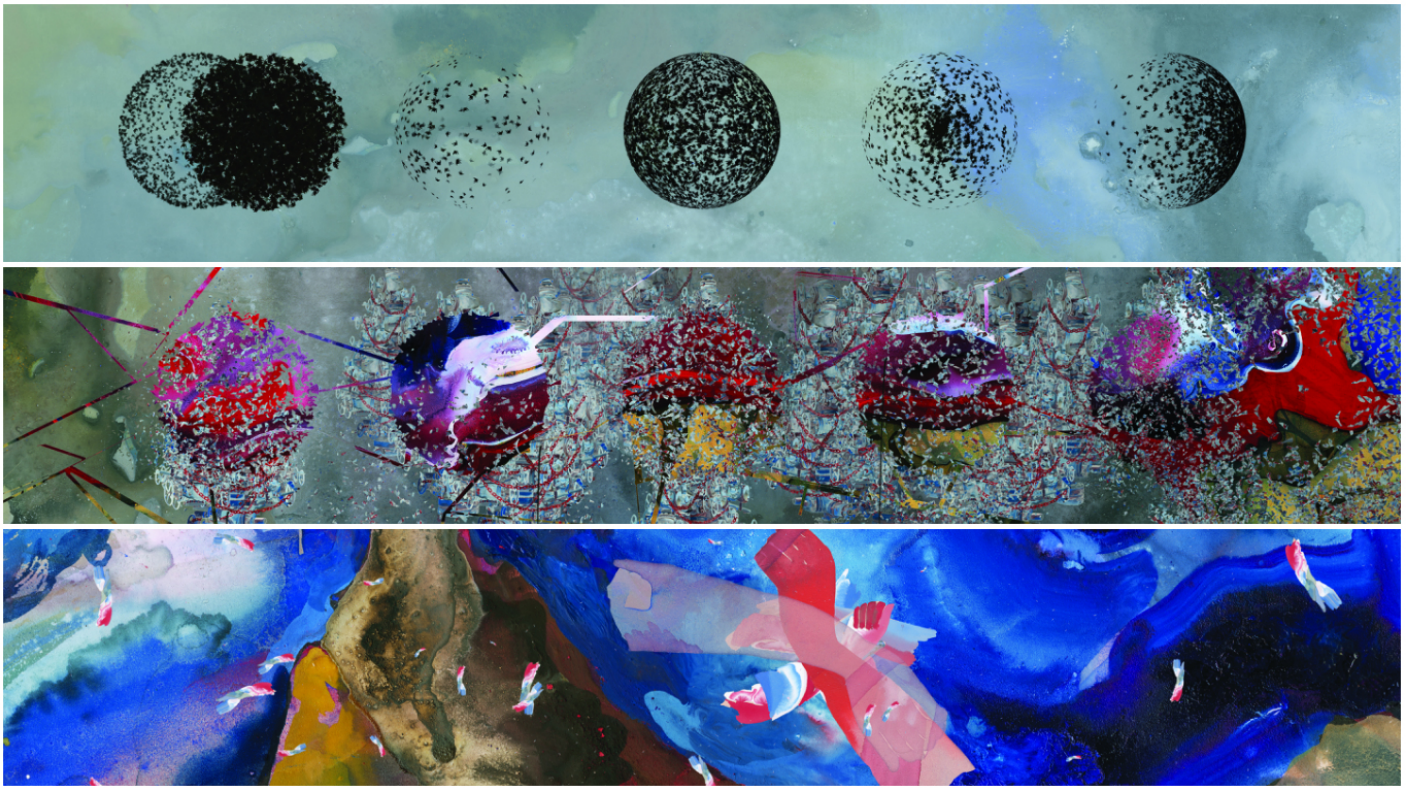
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One of Asian contemporary art's leading lights, Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander has just opened her first major Hong Kong solo show. Charles Seymour-Lyttelton takes a guided tour with exhibition curators Claire Brandon and Ashley Wu



The tranquil and serene Asia Society Hong Kong Center (ASHK) is currently playing host to an exhibition that is looking to make a lot of noise. Apparatus of Power, the first major Hong Kong solo exhibition by internationally renowned Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander, investigates the colonial complexity of our ex-Crown colony, both past and present. Following on from successful exhibitions at the likes of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum and MoMA, Sikander's works will be displayed at the ASHK for a four-month run, with a satellite exhibition at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum in Central.

Sikander stormed the contemporary art scene in the 1990s with her groundbreaking exploration of the meticulously detailed style of Indo-Persian miniature painting. Her thesis, *The Scroll* (which features in this exhibition), in the then largely forgotten art form – which had evolved in south Asia from around the 1200s – drew global attention, and Sikander was credited with having played an instrumental role in its renaissance. Indo-Persian miniature paintings have been compared to Western illuminated manuscripts, typically the size of a single leaf, and seen as book illustrations or kept in albums called *muraqqa*. Her work at her alma mater, the National College of Arts, Lahore, 'was a breakthrough in Pakistan for two reasons', according to Claire Brandon, curator of the Hong Kong show and a PhD candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. "First, the painting is unique in terms of its scale and format," explains Brandon. "As indicated by the title, the elongated format evokes a Japanese scroll, and the narrative unfolds in a single pictorial plane. Second, the painting's personal content is in contrast to the heroic, mythical, or religious themes typically found in miniature painting – Sikander includes quotidian scenes, such as vignettes that portray her eating dinner, cleaning, and packing at different points within the architecture of a Lahore home."

Although Sikander was trained in the tradition of miniature painting, *Apparatus of Power* displays works across a range of media. The exhibition is also highly relevant to Hong Kong and, more specifically, the exhibition space at the ASHK. Brandon draws our attention to *I am the Exact Imitation of the Original*. In this work, Sikander copied the United States Declaration of Independence (including its chorus of male signatures requesting freedom from British colonial power in the late 18th century), and transposed her own text on top of it, which reads 'AUTHORITY AND ITS NEMESIS TIME'. "It's her [Sikander] phrase suggesting that time is the mechanism that acts to break down authority, and that the enemy of authority is time," Brandon tells us. "Although this work refers to another temporal and geographic break with British rule, I think it has particular resonance here in Hong Kong." This theme is of particular relevance right now, too, not only because of the city's former British links, but also in light of a more robust discourse surrounding an independent Hong Kong, culminating in the establishment of the Hong Kong National Party on 27 March.

*The Last Post*, a single-channel HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound, links perhaps most directly to the ASHK space. The video work depicts an East India Company man – for Brandon, it's 'a play on the stereotype of precisely the figure who would have lived in this building in the 1860s, when it was first used as a

military barracks before it was turned into an explosive magazine compound'. The image is taken directly from one of Sikander's paintings, scanned at a very high resolution before being animated. The artist then inserted wings on his back, titling the work Seraph, after the highest-ranking angel in Christendom. "[Sikander] sees this drawing as the [full stop] that ends the show," Brandon suggests. Displaying at a location with such a rich and embedded colonial history adds an extra layer of meaning to the works in the exhibition that bear this image.

Several motifs appear throughout Apparatus of Power – the most prominent are a red fence and a depiction of a Gopi hair motif. "The red fence was pulled from Safavid miniature painting," Ashley Wu, the show's assistant curator, tells us. "Sikander used it as an editing tool (because of the colour red), a point of entry, and also a means to engage and re-examine the past. She also uses the colour as a way to demarcate boundaries, whether physical or conceptual," Wu says. The artist has interpreted the red fence in various ways across her pieces in this exhibit, such as a red abstracted wandering line and a series of little red arrows, though it is most evident in the background of The Scroll. Both Brandon and Wu point out the use of red for the titles of each chamber within the exhibition, which is a nod to this motif – they also encourage the audience to look out for details like this that are present throughout the show.

The hair motif, meanwhile, was inspired by the goddess Gopi, the consort of Hindu god Krishna. The headpiece and its small chignons have been isolated by Sikander and form the focal point of the motif. "This motif assumes a visual language of its own throughout many of Sikander's works," Brandon says. "The Gopi hair motif takes on different meanings, as it sometimes suggests a swarm of bats or insects or static noise." Appearing in works in the exhibition such as Epistrophe and Parallax, the motif is of particular relevance to the ASHK. "[Sikander once] photographed a large number of fruit bats in motion in a botanical garden," Wu says. "The photos were uncannily similar to the Gopi hair motif that she had developed. Although Sikander has always been aware of the resemblance between the two, that was when the idea came to life. This is also why the Gopi hair, in the work Night Flight in particular, is a fitting choice for our ASHK site – we also have a fruit bat habitat here."

Sikander's global perspective is reflected in this exhibition, and her works are able to speak to audiences from different cultures in very different ways. "Sikander makes work with global legibility," Brandon says as she introduces us to the painting Many Ways of Seeing a Side. Incorporating Arabic and Chinese script, Gopi hair motifs as well as images of football, Brandon explains to us that Sikander's ability and willingness to experiment with multiple themes is very much part of the artist's work, allowing for a wider spectrum of interpretation. And it is this very quality in Sikander's oeuvre that sets her apart from many of her contemporaries.

*Apparatus of Power* Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, 9 Justice Dr, Admiralty, until Jul 9; [asiasociety.org](http://asiasociety.org).

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