

# Exhibition Review

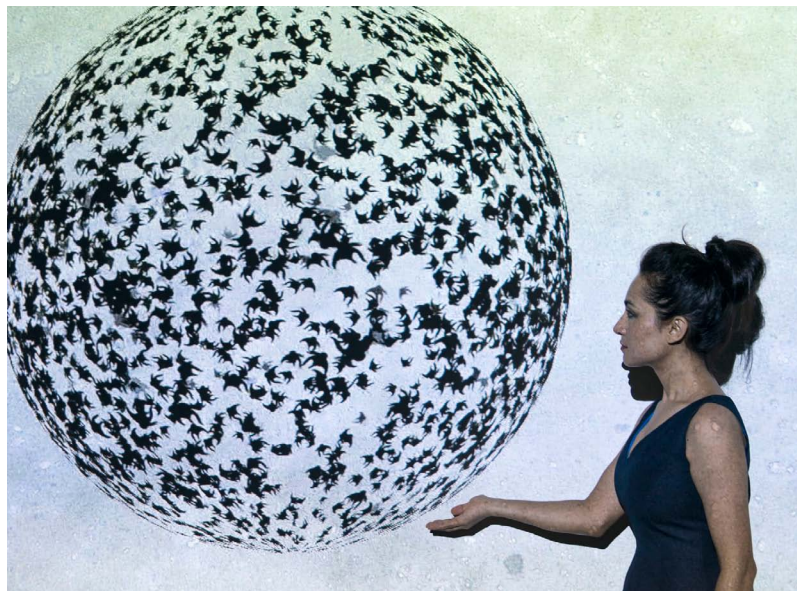
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## 'Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power'

at Asia Society Hong Kong Center, 16 March–9 July 2016

In a 2014 *New York Times* op-ed, 'History is often held hostage by the highest bidder—whoever gets to tell the story ends up defining what happened', wrote Pakistan-born artist Shahzia Sikander. Spanning nearly three decades, her diverse and poetic practice has been an ardent endeavour to ensure that complex dialogues cut across cultural and political boundaries with ease. Sikander, as a transnational artist, is invested in examining the collision of cultures and people with a critical gaze. 'Apparatus of Power' was her first major solo exhibition in Hong Kong and was curated by Claire Brandon, a PhD candidate at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. The exhibition explored the flux of colonial legacies, dislocation and identity through numerous drawings and paintings on paper as well as an immersive large-scale animation.

Shahzia Sikander was born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan and underwent a rigorous apprenticeship-style education under Bashir Ahmed in the Miniature Painting Department at the National College of Arts. Her training in miniature painting heavily influenced her subsequent gouache drawings, paintings, animated films and projections, which are characterized by their skilful rendering, deep colours and narrative complexity. Sikander



Shahzia Sikander

moved to the United States in the early 1990s and rose to prominence in the decade that followed, with survey shows at the Renaissance Society and the Kemper (both 1998) and the Hirshhorn (1999), and a solo show at the Whitney (2000). In 2012, she was awarded the Medal of Art from Hillary Rodham Clinton. Sikander currently lives and works in multiple locations across the US, Europe and Asia.

In her practice, Sikander examines contested cultural and political narratives while exploring the ability of images to function and transform when

moved between contexts. Her visual vocabulary is complex and varied; while some images in her work are adapted from Hindu and Indo-Persian iconographies, such as her 2009 painting *I am also not my own enemy*, which draws from a traditional ornamental aesthetic, Sikander also takes inspiration from contemporary culture, fantasy, mythology and personal experience. Consistent with her impulse to continually push against the grain, her works are often subversive and polemical. One watercolour and gouache painting titled *Many Faces of Islam* (1993–99) depicts

an array of skewed international perceptions of Muslim culture, with an oversized American dollar bill draped like a flag in the centre. The graphite-and-gouache work *Big Ritz* (2009) features a pot-bellied monk balancing atop a sphere of objects, alluding to the dangers of overconsumption. Her work is also often topical: the painting *The World is Yours*, *The World is Mine* (2014) was a response to the Ebola outbreak the same year, and an expression of Sikander's fascination with hyperconnectivity and its twofold ability to spread both information and unease. Sikander has said that she has built her entire understanding of what it is to be an artist on critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, and uses art as a means not only to dissect historical narratives but also to imagine the future.

The well-curated and in-depth exhibition at Asia Society packed in an abundance of works from the late 1980s to the present day. Acting as an abridged career survey of sorts, the show was divided into chambers arranged by theme, beginning with examples of Sikander's early forays into

miniature painting during her undergraduate studies. The artist gravitated towards the medium when it was decidedly out of fashion, seeking a fertile space to open new territories and dialogue. She was the only person in the department. Traditional miniatures are characterized by their cinematic content packed into a small, dense space, and usually depict themes of heroism, lovers and politics. Sikander tested the conventions by shifting the subject-matter into a contemporary context, inserting humour and self-critique into the conventionally thematic space. A highlight of the show was one of Sikander's most well-known miniatures, *The Scroll* (1989–90). Painted in vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour and tea on *wasli* paper, the work is larger than a typical miniature painting and depicts daily life in a modern Pakistani home. A woman dressed in white and with a ghost-like translucency seems to float through the house, the perspective of which has been distorted to show multiple viewpoints, times and rooms. In 2004, Pakistani critic Quddus Mirza wrote in

Pakistan's *The News on Sunday* that *The Scroll* 'carved a new way for generations of miniature artists to experiment in multiple directions'. The curatorial wall-text suggested that the work 'was a breakthrough in Pakistan'. Certainly, Sikander's work quickly reignited interest in the medium in the region, eventually acting as a catalyst for a movement which came to be known as 'neo-miniature painting'.

The title of the exhibition, 'Apparatus of Power', refers to the potential of an image to communicate in multiple contexts, forms and formats. Throughout her career, Sikander has developed a personal vocabulary or alphabet of sorts, in which forms serve as stock figures, transcend environments and become distanced from their original meaning. One motif introduced in the Asia Society exhibition is *Mi'raj*, the physical and imaginative journey of the Prophet in the Islamic tradition, as a metaphor for the realm of imagination. A form that is now synonymous with Sikander's work, appearing several times over the past decades and many times in

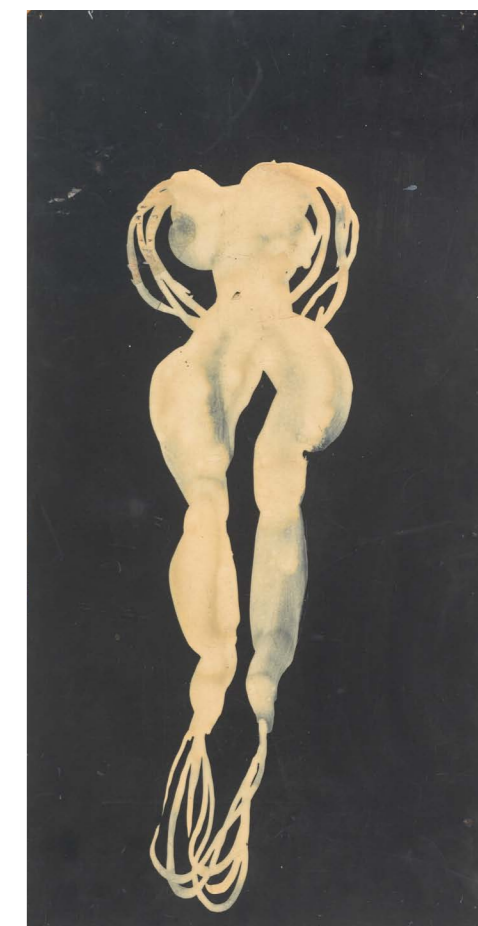
the show, resembles a woman's headless body: all curvaceous hips and breasts, but eerie circular shapes where the arms and feet should be. If the woman were to stand, she would not be able to move or speak. Another symbol that is seen in several works looks rather like an oddly shaped bird but actually has a more earthly origin. The shape is derived from the hair of *gopis*, who, in Hinduism, are girls who herd cows to show their unconditional devotion to Krishna. To Sikander, repeating the shape of the *gopis*' hair represents a feminine space and a multiplicity of female presence in a single frame. The motif functions as an entity of its own; sometimes it appears as a flock of birds, or is layered to create patterns, density and shapes.

Portraiture also played an important part in the exhibition, particularly in a grouping of highly rendered graphite drawings. Sikander produced the 'Monks and Novices' series during an artist's residency in Laos, when she noticed that tourists were often attracted to the long line of orange-robed monks performing their morning alms round. She realized that foreigners' observations and depictions of this ritual perpetuated stereotypical and simplified portrayals of the monks, which Sikander resisted. To highlight their individuality Sikander drew over fifty highly detailed portraits, a strikingly different aesthetic from the work in the rest of the show. Yet Sikander insists on its consistency within her practice, as portraiture is an important tool for her to examine the characters of both people and 'things'. A series of drawings of heptagons (a shape that, according to the

artist, can never be reproduced to mathematic exactitude) called 'The Langley' (2009) shows the form in different environments, presented as a grouping of portraits, acknowledging their unique characters as symbols.

At the far end of the exhibition space was Sikander's impressive 2013 three-channelled video projection *Parallax*, first unveiled at the Sharjah Biennial. Sikander's largest and longest animation to date, the work is made up of hundreds of small drawings inspired by countless hours spent driving around the Emirate of Sharjah. The drawings were digitally animated and layered to juxtapose overlaps of culture, politics, art, history and social commentary, while preserving the performative act of drawing on paper. Sikander uses layering as a tool to accumulate a high volume of information in one place, a strategy also employed in her two-dimensional paintings. While there is loosely rendered topographical imagery in *Parallax*, the animation offers no clear narrative. The *gopi* hair motif re-enters in droves as thick clouds, flocks of birds, oil or rain. The lack of a discernible story or image highlights the artist's interest in the difficulty of acknowledging and intellectualizing experiences while actually undergoing them.

The colonial complexity that Sikander's practice addresses is a particularly pertinent concern in Hong Kong, and the exhibition's housing in the Former Explosives Magazine Compound at Asia Society Hong Kong Center was a pertinent curatorial decision. The structure was built by the British army in the mid-19th century for ammunition and explosives storage, and was later turned into



*A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*  
By Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969), 1993  
Gouache and gesso  
on board, 78.7 x 48.3 cm  
(Image courtesy of the artist)

a production plant for artillery before being abandoned in the 1990s. It was later granted to Asia Society by the government for adaptive reuse. Placed in a site that has a legacy of violence, power struggle and dislocation, and by virtue of its diversity and ever-evolving state, Sikander's work assured its audience that for better or worse, meaning and history are constantly in flux.

*Elliat Albrecht*

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*The Scroll*  
By Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969), 1989–90  
Vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour and tea on *wasli* paper, 50.8 x 177.8 cm  
(Image courtesy of the artist)