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PULLING APART, PUTTING TOGETHER

Shahzia Sikander's art has gone from careful challenges to beloved forms to outright experimentations that shatter boundaries and expectations.

STORY RYAN SWIFT
PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH GAY

To enter into an exhibition by Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander is to enter a world of dissolution. Lines and forms in paintings are broken or made to seem as if melting away. But this sense of breaking boundaries is somehow respectful of those boundaries. Welcome to the artistic ethos of one of Pakistan's most prominent artists.

Chinese contemporary art continues to enjoy pre-eminence in so many exhibitions and auctions, owing in part to the willingness of so many deep-pocketed collectors to spend big on big-ticket items. But South Asian art also offers plenty of interesting perspectives, often drawing on a host of life experiences.

Born in 1969, Sikander was first introduced to art at the National College of Art in Lahore, Pakistan. In particular, she was drawn to the very niche art of miniature painting, an art form specific to Iran, Turkey and the Mughal parts of the Indian sub-continent. Miniature paintings require expertise, patience and discipline. Sikander began her studies in the arts

under the tutelage of Bashir Ahmad, who had been championing miniature painting since 1976.

When Sikander began her studies, it was in the late 1980s, a time when General Zia-ul-Haq had been leading Pakistan for over a decade, and had insisted on a much stricter adherence to Islamic law, as well as instilling a militarisation of society, according to Sikander. "Zia put in ordinance that limited rights for women, personal freedom... co-education was going, religion being institutionalised... that was from 1979 to 1989. That's where you learn different ways of behaving, in public versus in private."

The change in Pakistan under General Zia was a sharp one. In the 1960s and '70s, Pakistan was a much more liberal place. Sikander recalls that her parents' generation embraced a much more hippy lifestyle. "I remember radio stations with English (popular) music, and the different type of social environment. If you look at old photos, women dressed differently."





In person, Sikander is diminutive but bright and, despite being horribly jet lagged and having had a rather full day of press appearances, still seems full of energy. She combines a soft-spoken manner with an adventurous outlook on life.

When she embarked on a career in the arts, it was under the stultifying environment established by Zia with the encouragement of her father, who passed away in a mysterious plane crash in 1988.

Sikander was drawn to miniature paintings as a means for subtle rebellion against order – a theme that comes up frequently in her work. As a traditional

art form, heavily reliant on craft, it was officially encouraged – the kind of thing that foreign dignitaries would be made to appreciate on state visits as an example of traditional Pakistani culture. It was also politically harmless.

But Sikander found a way to express controversial thoughts slyly – in a way that dodged unwanted attention. There was also the “basic hypocrisy” of bringing out a relatively unloved art form for foreigners to see but not truly caring for it. And in the dedication of the professor who taught it, she found a passion that was going unnoticed.

01-02 *Gopi-Contagion*, a graphic art using the gopi hairpiece, shown at New York's Times Square in October 2015



HER WORKS HAVE BUILT ON THE SENSE OF DISSONANCE SHE GREW UP WITH IN PAKISTAN, TAKING ESTABLISHED FORMS AND UNDOING THEM

“He was the heir to past master teachers. He was an apprentice to them as a young boy,” Sikander recalls of her former teacher. Though the miniature paintings were not considered new or interesting at the time, it was that anonymity which drew Sikander. “It was so low on the totem pole that it was not on anybody’s radar,” she says. “Instinctively, I felt that’s where the space was for me, to create a relationship, whatever it would be and to really get into it.”

That effort has paid off handsomely. One of Sikander’s first works is a miniature painting (*The Scroll* – on display at the Asia Society) which showed the deft touches that would come to be her trademarks. For while the painting sticks to the style, it is the boundaries that come under attack, literally. Borders are crossed by figures of Sikander’s house and home life; conventions are broken in numerous ways, even while living up to the standard of miniature painting.

Sikander describes *The Scroll* as a “symbolic representation” of her house. “I grew up in a multi-generational house, with tonnes of aunts and uncles and grandparents and parents. My parents built the house in the backyard of my grandparents house.” Having so many people around also coloured her views of the house that would become *The Scroll*.

“I grew up in a multiplicity. My grandparents



were practicing Muslims, and I grew up with an emphasis on education. Public life and private life are very different and complex," she says. "Pakistan is such a multiplicity of ethnicity and immigrants coming together. So there's no homogenous nation; there's varied practices of religion and spirituality. That dynamic, which was in the private space, was not echoed in the public space."

Sikander therefore gravitated to the arts, and to miniature painting, to find her own way of self-expression. The balancing act that developed in Pakistan, between a militarised and Islamicised public life, and a heterogeneous and varied private life, was a source of inspiration as well as a "waste of energy".

While Sikander was learning an ancient art, she also became enamoured with artists such as David Hockney, a man credited with shaping the face of pop art and culture in the 20th century. Hockney presented to the world a series of photo montages known as "joiners", which created a narrative out of a set of images of the same person or landscape. The disjointed yet harmonious look was something that Sikander seems to emulate in *The Scroll*, albeit in a traditional Persian format.

Sikander caught her big break in the early 1990s. In 1992, she approached the Pakistani ambassador to the US about showcasing her students' work in the US. But it was Sikander's work that ultimately took the spotlight at the Pakistani embassy. Shortly after, she was asked to travel with her selection of works around the US.

She went to the US to be a part of a showcase of her work, but nothing sold. Reduced to tears, her father provided her with the necessary encouragement to keep going. Instead of returning home, she called several art schools in an effort to put her work in front of them to gain entry. Her tactic worked, and she wound up at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she graduated with a master's degree in 1995.


From there, her works have built on the sense of dissonance she grew up with in Pakistan, taking

established forms and undoing them. Classic scripts are melted into page and incongruous elements are brought together in a single work. Her focus has graduated from rethinking miniature paintings to the nearly boundless possibilities of multimedia work.

The key display at the current exhibition at Asia Society's is *Parallax*, a 2013 multimedia work that takes up an entire room. It is a series of images, coming together and falling away on a 15-minute loop, with a haunting background track by Chinese composer Du Yun and spoken Arabic poetry. The work has appeared in the US and Europe, as well as the Sharjah Biennale.

Sikander's growth as an artist has been fast, and displays a desire to incorporate more and more elements of other art forms. She speaks fondly of collaborating with popular US rapper Nas, and working with Langston Hughes, the writer. She contributes opinion editorials that examine the difficult relationship between Islamic countries and the United States, a question that has been thrown into sharp relief in a tumultuous presidential election.

In October last year, Sikander created her most public work yet – *Gopi-Contagion*. Every day of the month, from 11:57pm to midnight, all the electronic billboards of New York's Times Square were lit up with her eclectic visual creations. The gopi refers to a kind of traditional Hindu hairstyle, and in *Gopi-Contagion*, drawings of a gopi are multiplied and used to create larger shapes.

Such large, public works in such an openly diverse place could only have seemed like a vindication to Sikander. She maintains a home and studio in her native Pakistan and visits three or four times a year, by her reckoning. But she is not a child of immigrants who seeks to understand a long lost homeland. She saw her chances and took them to the farthest extremes. 

Shahzia Sikander Apparatus of Power, is at Asia Society Hong Kong until July 9, 2016.

03 Shahzia Sikander, *The World Yours and Mine*, 2014, Gouache and ink on paper