

Shahzia Sikander at Jesus College: Archives, Contemporary Practices, and Decolonisation
11-12 February 2022

Frankopan Hall, Jesus College
University of Cambridge

The global affiliations of the practice of Shahzia Sikander allows scholars from multiple fields to revisit their own work with a critical eye. This public symposium, *Shahzia Sikander at Jesus College: Archives, Contemporary Practices, and Decolonisation*, held in response to the exhibition *Shahzia Sikander: Unbound* at the West Court Gallery (16 October 2021–18 February 2022), examines Shahzia Sikander's practice and its relationship to several broad themes, including but not limited to: Islamic art, modern and contemporary South Asian art, queer and feminist visual practices, and decolonial politics.

Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) is a world-renowned Pakistani-American artist who has pioneered the study of Islamic and Indian "miniature" painting for contemporary practices. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the U.S. State Department's Inaugural National Medal of Art awarded by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2012. *Shahzia Sikander: Unbound* involves the first-ever outdoor installation of Sikander's bronze sculpture *Promiscuous Intimacies* (2020) and new paintings made in dialogue with the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Shahzia Sikander: Unbound is curated by Dr Vivek Gupta, Postdoctoral Associate in Islamic Art and College Postdoctoral Associate, with the assistance of History of Art undergraduate students, and the support of Dr Jessica Berenbeim, Fellow and Curator of Works of Art at Jesus College. This symposium's organisers, Dr Berenbeim, Dr Gupta, Dr Taushif Kara, and Dr Siddharth Soni, represent a range of disciplines including History of Art, History, and English.

11 February 2022
Frankopan Hall, Jesus College

Introduction

1-1:45pm

Welcome

Jessica Berenbeim, Fellow and Curator, Jesus College, Cambridge

Introductory Lecture

Grasping for her Necklace: Shahzia Sikander Unbound at Jesus College

Vivek Gupta, Postdoctoral Associate, Centre of Islamic Studies and Jesus College, Cambridge

The Multiple Archives of Shahzia Sikander

2-3:30pm

Chair: Siddharth Soni, Isaac Newton Trust Fellow, Faculty of English and Jesus College, Cambridge

Shahzia Sikander: Becoming an American Artist in 1990s New York

Alex Dika Seggerman, Assistant Professor, Rutgers University-Newark

Museum labels, catalogue entries, and newspaper reviews generally frame Shahzia Sikander's artwork as a reflection of her Pakistani heritage and a rebirth of her ancestors' tradition of Indo-Persian painting. This paper will argue that, alternatively, Sikander's work is also profoundly American and a direct result of her education, exhibition, and career in the United States. Based on in-depth interviews with the artist and an examination of contemporaneous art discourse of the first decade of her career, this paper repositions Sikander's American experiences in 1990s in Providence, Houston, and New York City as formative to her art practice.

Following the groundbreaking *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at the Pompidou in 1989, the 1990s in New York City experienced a slow but steady globalization of the art world. Artists from around the world found new success in New York, especially through Deitch Projects and the Whitney Biennial, with many exhibiting at the Venice Biennials curated by Harald Szeeman in 1999 and 2001. In this midst, diaspora artists wove together signifiers of their identity with techniques of conceptual art to respond to curatorial practices that emphasized their difference in short wall labels and cursory catalogue entries. This paper will historicize Sikander's early work in this context, illustrating how she responded to this tokenizing through the subversion of stereotypes but also through continued use of the "traditional" Indo-Persian forms.

Borrowing a term from my 2019 book, *Modernism on the Nile*, I argue that Sikander's work is constellational: it references the art of her forbearers as well as Euro-American art history and contemporary conceptual art. Even though on the surface this technique reads as "foreign," it is precisely the use of these signifiers of difference that is distinctly a result of her formation in the 1990s New York art world.

Alex Dika Seggerman is assistant professor of Islamic art history in the Arts, Culture and Media department at Rutgers University-Newark. She is author of *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (UNC Press, 2019) and co-editor of *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Indiana University Press, 2022).

To permit the visible to shape the invisible: Shahzia Sikander and the question of Islamic art
Taushif Kara, Postdoctoral Associate, Centre of Islamic Studies and Jesus College, Cambridge

This paper invokes the work of Shahzia Sikander to reflect on the aesthetic thought of the poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, by way of his commentary on the Indian modernist painter A. R. Chughtai. In an essay from 1928 introducing an album of paintings by Chughtai, Iqbal made the lofty and provocative claim that, with the exception of architecture, Islamic art had "yet to be born" for it was unable to confront the paradox of allowing "the visible to shape the invisible." Foregrounding Sikander's consistent use of concealment and techniques of invisibility throughout her practice, this paper places the artist in the tradition of both Chughtai and Iqbal only in order to emphasize her engagement with and ultimate departure from it. In other words, it reads the uneven history of Muslim modernism – both intellectual and aesthetic – in the subcontinent as one of the many archives *disrupted* by Shahzia Sikander. I argue that Sikander's work allows us to engage with, develop, and critique Iqbal's aesthetic theory, and in doing so provides novel ways of responding to the persistent question of Islamic art.

Taushif Kara is a Postdoctoral Research and Outreach Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies, Cambridge, and an historian of the Indian Ocean world. His research focuses on the history of Muslim political thought during and after the colonial period. Before coming to Cambridge, Kara studied Islamic history and philosophy at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and served as a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Religions and Philosophies at SOAS.

Not All Who Wander Are Lost: Dislocation in the Art of Shahzia Sikander and Zarina
Aparna Kumar, Lecturer in Art and Visual Cultures of the Global South, University College London

This paper brings together the work of two contemporary South Asian artists in the United States: Shahzia Sikander and the late Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020). Taking the lead from their retrospective exhibitions, *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities* held at the Morgan Library in 2021 and *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* organized by the Hammer Museum in 2012, my aim is to re-evaluate the role of dislocation in their respective artworks.

Dislocation, as an embodied experience of displacement, separation, and movement, powerfully entangles Shahzia and Zarina's artistic practices, which are otherwise quite distinct – in style, medium, materiality, process, and timing. While Zarina's engagement with paper and approach to printmaking was forged across a lifetime of nomadic travel, following the partition of 1947 and the loss of her childhood home in Aligarh, India, Shahzia's radical interventions into traditions of South Asian manuscript painting beginning in the late-1980s have grown in part from her movement between cities, institutions, and archives in South Asia and North America.

Pushing beyond questions of mobility and biography, however, this paper will probe dislocation as method and material in Shahzia and Zarina's work. I am interested, in particular, in how both artists fuse dislocation with the portability of paper and pigment to engender new, decolonial forms of history writing. My analysis will be anchored by a comparison of two large-scale, multi-part installations, Shahzia's *The Pink Pavilion* (2002), and Zarina's *Home is a Foreign Place* (2001), whose constellation of narratives not only capitalize on the frictions between mobility and site-specificity, but rupture identity, culture, and history from place.

Aparna Kumar is a Lecturer in Art and Visual Cultures of the Global South at University College London. She received her PhD in Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2018. Her research and teaching span modern and contemporary South Asian art, twentieth-century partition history, museum studies, and postcolonial theory. Aparna's research has been supported by fellowships from the Fulbright-Nehru Program, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the American Institute of Pakistan Studies. In 2021, her doctoral dissertation, "Partition and the Historiography of Art in South Asia," was awarded the inaugural UC Berkeley South Asia Art and Architecture Dissertation Prize.

3:30-4pm Coffee

4pm-4:15

"Double S: Notes, Infinities and Shards" by Bhanu Kapil, Professor and Fellow, Churchill College
Poem written in response to *Shahzia Sikander: Unbound*

Bhanu Kapil is a poet and Fellow of Churchill College. She is the recipient of a Windham Campbell Prize from Yale University, and a Cholmondeley Award from the Society of Authors. In 2021, her most recent book, *How To Wash A Heart*, won the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Keynote Discussion

4:15-5:15pm

Shahzia Sikander, artist

Glenn Lowry, The David Rockefeller Director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Dorothy Price, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, The Courtauld Institute of Art

Glenn D. Lowry became the sixth director of The Museum of Modern Art in 1995. Leading a staff of over 750, Mr. Lowry continues the Museum's legacy of enriching public life through exhibitions, educational programs, publications, and digital tools that challenge conventional ideas about modern and contemporary art and design, and initiatives that bring MoMA's renowned collection and research to audiences worldwide.

Dorothy Price joined The Courtauld in September 2021 from the University of Bristol, where she was Professorial research lead for the Transnational Modernisms Research Cluster, and a founder member and inaugural Director of the Centre for Black Humanities, an interdisciplinary research centre dedicated to researching the histories, art and thought of people of African descent. Her work has a particular emphasis on modernism in Germany and post-war art in Britain and demonstrates how critical race expands readings of the visual.

5:30-7pm

Exhibition Closing Reception & Screening of *Disruption as Rapture* in the Frankopan Hall

12 February 2022

10:30-11am Coffee

Sikander's Queer Optic and Contemporary Practice

11:00am -12pm

Chair: Alyce Mahon, Professor of Modern & Contemporary Art, and Fellow of Trinity College, University of Cambridge

Promiscuous Intimacies: Shahzia Sikander's Queer Curatorial Practice

Gayatri Gopinath, Professor; Director of the Center for the Study of Gender & Sexuality, New York University

This paper places the work of Shahzia Sikander within the framework of “queer curation” that I lay out in my book *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. In the book, I understand the project of queer curation as one that values that which has been deemed as without value, and that stages collisions and encounters between aesthetic practices that may seem discontinuous and unrelated. A queer curatorial project seeks to reveal not co-evalness or sameness but rather the co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies, and temporalities. Using a queer curatorial lens through which to situate the work of Shahzia Sikander brings to the fore the ways in which her work radically disrupts dominant rubrics of both gender and sexuality. But this lens also makes clear how Sikander herself engages in a queer curatorial practice: Sikander consistently brings together seemingly disconnected historical traditions and unearths the resonances between them through queer desire and embodiment. In this sense, we can understand Sikander herself as a curator in the sense that she places these different art-historical traditions in intimate relation to make apparent the impossibility of their discreteness.

Gayatri Gopinath is Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University. She works at the intersection of transnational feminist and queer studies, postcolonial studies, and diaspora studies, and is the author of two monographs: *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2005), and *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2018). She has published numerous essays on gender, sexuality, and queer diasporic visual art and culture in anthologies and journals such as *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *GLQ*, and *Social Text*, as well as in art publications such as *PIX: A Journal of Contemporary Indian Photography*, *Tribe: Photography and New Media from the Arab World*, and *ArtReview Asia*.

Disorienting Time: Shahzia Sikander's Artistic Research and its Queering Agency

Denis Maksimov FRSA

One of the legitimate functions of artistic activity is making the invisible apparent and shedding light on phenomena that are silenced by normalisation, ideology, politics, or other forms of domination. In my paper, I argue that Shahzia Sikander's practice disorients time and queers artistic archives. Developing the notion of "disorientation" introduced by Sara Ahmed, I expand on what constitutes queering as an inclusive agency rather than an exclusive identity. The practice of Sikander destabilizes binaries of culture, gender, geopolitics, and sexuality, which effectively constitute the removal a certain identity in relation to the past, present, and possible futures. Her "detective work," as she refers to it, research practice unveils the discrepancies that are uncomfortable to the proponents of straight, defined, categorised, and disciplined approaches to a narrative of a culture. The semiotic richness in the sculpture *Promiscuous Intimacies* (2020) is the subject of my close reading.

Denis Maksimov is a curator and co-founder of Avenir Institute, a think tank and artist collective. His research initiates the dialogue between classical antiquity and postmodernity, queer and futures studies, political theory, and visual cultures. His projects were presented in the Victoria & Albert Museum, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Museum, Marres House for Contemporary Culture; in the context of the Venice Biennales of art and architecture, São Paulo Biennale, Ural Industrial Biennial. His writing was published in Doppiozero International, Ocula, Obieg, Moscow Art Magazine, Arts of the Working Class.

Shahzia Sikander and Global Politics

12:15pm-1:15pm

Chair: TBD

The Miniature Explodes

Faisal Devji, Professor of Indian History, University of Oxford, St Antony's College

Often seen as a major contributor to the revival of the miniature tradition, Shahzia Sikander should in fact be recognized as its foremost undertaker. Recuperating the elements of this tradition only to fragment it, her work has served to dismantle all such inheritances, real and imagined, from religion and civilization to nationality. Having written both for her first and most recent exhibition catalogues, I shall trace the changing meaning that Sikander's aesthetic of destruction has attracted over the course of her career, from the globalist 1990s to the War on Terror and beyond.

Faisal Devji is Professor of Indian History at University of Oxford, St Antony's College. He is the author of four books, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (2013), *The Impossible India: Gandhi and*

the Temptation of Violence (2012), *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (2009), and *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (2005).

Still Standing

Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology, University of Oxford
with Victor Ehikhamenor, artist

This talk takes stock of the themes raised by Shahzia Sikander's crucial question: *Can decolonisation entail forms of intimacy?* The talk moves between two bodies - a sculptural intervention by one of us, Victor Ehikhamenor, in London - and the disembodied name of "Pitt Rivers" above the door of the institution in which the other of us, Dan Hicks, works. Reconsidering the connections between sculpture and pos-memory — from statues and plaques to medals, and to the 125th anniversary of Benin 1897 — this talk attends to the permeabilities between archive and practice, and thus between knowledge and gesture, and thus between artworks as objects and anthropology and art history as subjects.

Dan Hicks is Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford, and author of *The British Museums* (Pluto 2020).

Victor Ehikhamenor is a Nigerian visual artist, poet, and photographer, and was 2020 National Artist in Residence at the Neon Museum, Las Vegas, and a 2016 Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Fellow

1:15-2:00pm, Lunch