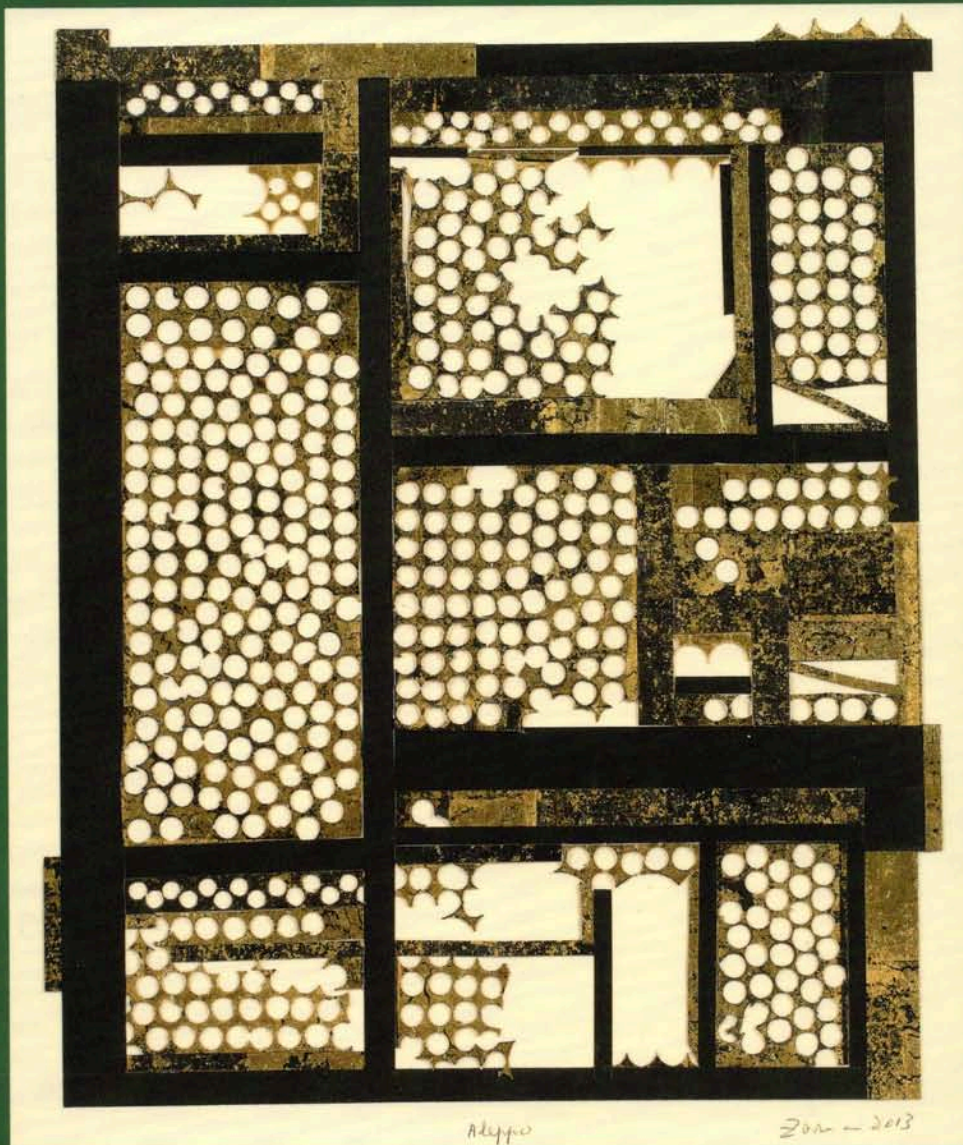


Comparative Studies of

SOUTH ASIA, AFRICA and the **MIDDLE EAST**



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On Artists and Artisans

The Experimental Worlds of Shahzia Sikander

Casey Primel, in collaboration with Anupama Rao and Susanna Ferguson

In May 2014, the editors of *CSSAAME* hosted the first in a series of discussions about artistic practice and its role in deconstructing (and reframing) the often vexed relationship Eurocentric canons of art history and aesthetic theory have with regional art and artists. These discussions intersect ongoing concerns of the journal, even as they open new avenues for collective consideration of art and its curation that extends beyond the attention that an individual art historian or cultural critic might direct toward specific artists, or singular artworks. These questions assume added significance against the backdrop of a rapidly globalizing museum culture, supported by the concomitant rise in museum construction as supportive infrastructure for new sites of spectacle and speculation. As global contemporary art becomes an asset class, so too has the nineteenth-century museum morphed from its original role as a pedagogical medium of bourgeois cultivation into an icon for urban or regional renewal (for example, Bilbao, or new museum construction by the Guggenheim and the Louvre on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island) and a central locus of infotainment where the reliance on information meets the desire for (novel) experience, *including of the museum space*. Hal Foster notes that such transformations index a third moment of museumization—succeeding the bourgeois parlor and the “white cube”—that is coeval with deindustrialization and is defined by repurposing dead spaces of manufacture into living paeans to “big” art (and “big” artists).¹

The focus of this particular discussion was the work of the Pakistani American artist Shahzia Sikander, whose deeply experimental yet sensitive engagements with the interplay of tradition and invention have resisted the homogenizing impulse of global inclusion while centrally engaging its politics.² Sikander's work is at once visionary and fragile. It addresses questions of form and formalism that are germane to trajectories of global modernism while simultaneously calling up another tradition of abstraction, one inspired by a ban on the human image, what may be called Islamicist abstraction.³ Sikander's double move scrambles the developmental temporality of modernism, and it challenges the viewer to teach the eye to see the rhythmic tempo and slight variation beneath apparently static, stylized forms of traditional image making. If the miniature is apprehended *as effect*, through established modes of signaling the

1. Foster, “After the White Cube.”

2. The editors would like to thank Shahzia Sikander for two enormous acts of generosity. She helped us bring together an extraordinary network of theorists and practitioners to take up some of the questions raised by her own work, the result of which is presented here. In addition, she graciously allowed us to use three distinct images from some

of her most recent work on the covers of the three issues of *CSSAAME* 34 (2014). Both of these acts have enabled us to frame a new space of critical reflection and scholarship.

3. For more on trajectories of global modernism, see Kapur, *When Was Modernism*.

presence of the tiny, barely perceptible strokes of brush and pen that compose its totality, Sikander's oeuvre calls attention to the production of this effect by patiently and persistently referencing artisanal modes of production enabled by Islamicate cultures of courtly patronage that supported the rise of miniature painting. Sikander reminds us, however, that artisanal production is marked by the elision of gendered labor, even as depictions of the female form pervade the miniature. Thus in her artwork, the effort to reanimate classical miniature painting and underline its virtuosity is also predicated on representing the missing presence of woman, here figured as body part, of part for whole. Sikander's mode of self-reflexivity demonstrates that labor and creation, production, and reproduction haunt ideas of apprenticeship and submission that have typically attached to the figure of the male master craftsman.

More recently, Sikander's exploration of digitization's endless capacity for reproduction references the question of the original, its repurposing, and its creative reinvention. These issues have become especially pressing in the political context of the post-9/11 world. Sikander addresses the theological political through an oblique reference to philosophical critiques of Islam as a religion that cannot transcend itself, and she shows us that this critique is maintained through an implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, deemed to have a constitutive relationship with the ethical absolute, the dictum of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Fellow artists and critics have often missed Sikander's nuanced engagement with questions of secularity and sacrality in relation to the image, because they operate within a bifurcated framework—us and them, the West and the rest—that serves a less subtle politics.

What follows is the result of a conversation between Sikander and several interlocutors, each of whom brought to the table a distinct perspective grounded in artistic, curatorial, and scholarly practice: Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art and a historian of Islamic art in South Asia; Hamza Walker, the director for education and associate curator for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; Faisal Devji, a historian of Islam and modern South Asian history at

Oxford University; and Karin Zitzewitz, an assistant professor at Michigan State University specializing in the modern and contemporary art of India and Pakistan. Rather than reproducing the entire three-hour conversation, we have chosen to present a summary highlighting the key points of our participants' interventions. As such, the following text is not an exhaustive account. Rather, it seeks to embed the specific comments of our interlocutors in the broader framing of the event.

We highlight three themes for consideration:

1. The question of translation, a concept introduced by Sikander to describe her own artistic practice and engagement with the classical form of miniature painting and the traditional contexts of its production;
2. Considerations of experimental practice, including form and medium, ornamentation and innovation, as these have attached in particular to the reification of miniature painting as national form;
3. The engagement of South Asian artists with global networks of artistic practice and valuation in new sites of presentation and curation.

Translating Traditional Art Practice in Contemporary Society

Sikander describes her relationship to tradition as being based on the premise of translation: how translation relates to the original, the distance traversed between the original and its translation, and the recognition of the translation's novelty as an original on its own terms. In the late eighties, as a student at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, she approached miniature painting not from the standpoint of studying a traditional genre but rather as an inquiry into how a traditional genre could achieve political salience in a rapidly transforming society such as Pakistan.

Miniature painting was not a popular venue for students when Sikander entered the NCA. Ironically, students and faculty alike stigmatized miniature painting as static and traditional, though it was presented to the outside world in celebratory fashion as a defining element of national culture. Associated with craft and local practice, miniature painting was thus in the awkward position of being marked by its specificity, both in its modes of conception and the materiality of its execution, while the practitioners of the plastic arts such as painting and sculpture were understood to be partici-

Editors' Note

Timothy Mitchell and Anupama Rao

In our last issue, we looked at how conceptions of ethics and sacrality structure landscape, environment, and belonging. Another group of essays addressed alternative projects of world making, bringing into focus the work of empire, liberal multiculturalism, and Cold War geopolitics in shaping and facilitating flows of people and ideas.

Our December 2015 issue focuses on how the experience of risk and the reckoning of potential futures can impact and reorganize social life. The opening section on speculation investigates the magical and the everyday practices of anticipation that run alongside, suspend, or displace the formal knowledges of calculation often taken to characterize the economic. While much of the anthropology of finance has taken the West as its point of departure, these essays turn to India to argue that understanding the practices and technologies through which people imagine uncertain, incalculable futures is key to analyzing contemporary global capitalism. They explore the ways in which speculative practices structure not only gambling and illicit finance but also real estate, public-private partnerships, and film. Thus, as Arjun Appadurai suggests in his afterword to the section, the essays show us how “capitalism, normally considered the zenith of scientism, techno-rationality, and calculative reason, can fruitfully be seen as just the opposite of these things.”

A second section, “The Politics of Feminist Politics,” considers other sites in which imagined futures shape political possibility and ethical practice. This section brings together feminist scholars of the Middle East and South Asia who highlight the silences, exclusions, and omissions that mark the imaginative geographies of both “feminism” and “Islam” and suggest points of transregional convergence. These essays turn to specific situations, including the Arab Spring in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, strong-state politics in Jordan and Syria, and shifting power struggles in Bangladesh, to unseat the “common sense” often projected by liberal feminist discourse.

A consideration of the work of Pakistani American artist Shahzia Sikander, accompanied by a visual essay on her work *The Last Post*, draws attention to questions of aesthetic practice, translation, and experimental artscapes in the context of the accelerated movement and high visibility of South Asian artists in emerging networks of artistic practice and valuation in a global field. Sikander's work on form and formalism clearly moves within traditions of both global modernism and Islamicist abstraction, imagining new futures by engaging with the past. Anaheed Al-Hardan's essay on the history of *al-nakbah*, or “the catastrophe,” in Arab thought likewise asks how particular engagements with the past always come to answer to their presents.

pants, albeit minor ones, in debates about the universality of the Western aesthetic tradition. Thus were produced the dichotomies between craft and art, local and global, skill versus critique, and tradition versus the avant-garde: their cumulative effect was to foreclose the possibility of viewing miniature painting as a site of experimental aesthetic practice and to standardize its representation as national art. Other painters had sought to engage miniature painting differently. For example, Zahoor ul Akhlaq sought to bring miniature painting into dialogue with modern abstractionism. Yet Akhlaq's efforts to animate the miniature form were conducted through the medium of acrylic painting on canvas and were thus restricted to a conceptual intervention carried out within the language and framework of Western aesthetics.

Instead, Sikander's project sought to reclaim the traditions of mastery and apprenticeship that defined the classical miniature, engaging the miniature from within its own world—its rigorous training, slow technique, craft language, and structured composition—to reflect on its inherent plasticity. The idea was thus to resuscitate inherited forms as sites for critical, experimental practice, and to do so by submitting to practices of embodied discipline and apprenticeship. Sikander's work has thus challenged the self-imposed limits of classical form by playing with issues of scale, labor time, newness, and translation. At stake, fundamentally, is the question of how one views miniature paintings and the ways of seeing it developed, as well as its formative role in shaping a rigorous aesthetic tradition. Thus Sikander's persistent concern is with how a lost history of the miniature can be called up, reworked, and inhabited for our time.

Digitalizing the Body (Political)

Lowry emphasizes Sikander's subjection to the techniques and tempo of classical miniature production as an important aspect of her art practice. He notes that Sikander turns miniature painting into a performative act by dissecting its constituent parts, so as to recombine them in ways that are visually distinctive but also politically charged. The comparison Lowry draws is with Jasper Johns's use

of the American flag: a banal object in the context of the United States in the 1950s, but one that was infused with its own particular politics unconnected with the concerns of abstract expressionism. Like Johns's resignification of the American flag, Sikander's reanimation of the classical miniature tradition in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not without consequence. Though it was perceived to be apolitical, or insufficiently political, Sikander was seeking to embed the possibility of critique in existing art practice, and by so doing expand the boundaries of the "seeable" and the "sayable."⁴ These concerns also preoccupy Sikander in her more recent engagements with animation and video installation, and they reflect an ongoing effort to think about the politics of the image without reducing aesthetic practice into political image making.

Devji is especially sensitive to the relationship between art and politics, as well as to the necessity of holding them apart. He notes that Sikander's engagement with the practice of miniature painting and the figural form was predicated on, and a response to, the fragmentation of the national body. Her work contested the dominance of calligraphy, a form more explicitly masculine than that of the miniature, which became predominant at the moment when Pakistani art was seeking to gain legibility through its association with Islamic abstraction. Instead, Sikander challenged simplistic claims that Islamic aesthetics objected to figuration in two ways: first, by going back to retrieve the hyperrealism of the miniature form and its inordinate attention to detail at the scale of the manuscript page; and second, by alerting us to the continuities between the detail of the miniature and its mass reproduction. The miniature is not merely a historical object but can be found on the streets, where classical kitsch is reproduced from the lithographed pages of medieval textbooks onto apparently yellow, decaying paper for consumption in the tourist economy of South Asia, for instance. In an ironic comment on this contemporary practice, Sikander takes tourist miniatures, assembles them through collage, and invokes the circularity between the classical and the popular. An example of this technique can be seen in the short

animation *The Last Post* (2010), where Sikander utilizes the Company style of miniature painting to criticize the continuities between colonial officials and European merchants, on one hand, and the national elite, on the other. By drawing attention to these troubling continuities, she short-circuits the putative morality of the nationalist project while simultaneously challenging its linear forms of narration.

In addition, Sikander's use of figural forms denotes wider connectivity between Asian and South Asian aesthetic worlds. Again, *The Last Post* lays bare the conceits of the nation-state form in South Asia by explicit reference to the millennial interaction between China and the subcontinent. In reanimating Asia as an aesthetic category, Sikander gestures to the pull of an Asian classicism that carries the potential to negate nationalist narratives that present miniature painting as a dead, traditional form.

The engagement with the mass-produced miniature in both its colonial and contemporary form further highlights two distinct modes of artistic transmission, two forms of artistic immortality that mark a divide between the classical miniature and later hybrid forms. The first is a temporal mode defined by the selective survival of the classical form and its limited transmission—now as colonial miniature—through ateliers, patrons, and native princes. This selective and elite mode of transmission, which infuses individual art worlds with temporal endurance, is embodied by the persistence of the classical miniature. The second, spatial mode of transmission is defined not by the miniature's selectivity—its status as aesthetic exemplar—but by the sheer number of people who see it, by its scale rather than any inherent quality of perfection or beauty. Public art is the embodiment of this spatial mode, and the monument its ultimate materialization under the normalizing framework of the nation-state. Yet, the monument as a product of political image making stands in uneasy relation to forms of kitsch whose ephemerality continually disrupt the monument's absolute saturation of the visual field. In her recent move to digital animation and projection, Sikander emphasizes disruption as aesthetic practice by blowing up the miniature, simultaneously scaling it up to the size of the monument while infusing it with

the ephemerality of kitsch. The effect is public art that is monumental but not a monument. Lowry notes that in her animations, Sikander mobilizes the repetitive nature of miniature painting encapsulated in the pattern books where the artist is taught how to break down the body into its discrete parts—into hands, nails, fingers, feet, arms, legs, heads. Rather than working toward a reconstitution of the body politic, which is the task of monumentalization, Sikander's animations point to the inherent fragility of the body, the body politic, and the political body.

South Asia in the Global Field

Sikander's translation of the artistic practices of miniature painting into the new media of digital animation also responded to shifts in the intellectual and material infrastructures of the art world. Walker lays out the context of Sikander's move to the United States: from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) to her first American exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. The relocation to the United States resuscitated the performative aspect of Sikander's miniature painting and set it against the predefined notions of nationality and culture held by her American interlocutors. Her first exhibition helped inaugurate a shift away from the exhausted rhetoric of American multiculturalism toward the then-promising register of globalization studies by raising critical questions about culture and identity that were steeped in experiences of postcoloniality and whose style and aesthetic did not fit the curatorial expectations of the American art world.

Zitzewitz brings the conversation into the present, and by so doing reminds us that monolithic notions of culture and multiculturalism that first brought international visibility to the work of Sikander and other global artists in the 1990s were subject to substantial critique in the intervening years, a process in which artists like Sikander played a key role. As a consequence, differences in artistic practice and taste that might have previously come under the essentializing rubric of regional culture are understood now as both historically contingent upon, and shaped by, aesthetic judgments generated through art markets dominated by a relatively small group of cognoscenti, who are as likely to be based in Lahore or Mum-

bai as they are in New York. Zitzewitz argues that these new art critics challenge Eurocentric practices of collection, curation, and canonization but that their rise as arbiters of taste is enabled by the objectification (and enhanced valuation) of the emergent field of global contemporary art. Consecration and valorization remain the most important functions for this rapidly growing market for global art, and they encourage the solidification of judgment and the sphere of authority of a select few, whose word carried weight well beyond the networks from which they originate. Such judgments constitute the Durkheimian “social facts” of the art world, its efficaciousness secured by disavowing the contingent and provincial nature of the judgments that legitimize this emerging field of artistic and curatorial practice. Therefore a critical attitude to contemporary art production requires challenging the fetish of cultural difference, authenticity, and alterity, the idea that global art is good to think with, while countering aesthetic opportunism at the same time

As traffic in South Asian art accelerates, it activates distinct nodes and networks of judgment that are both spatially distinctive and unevenly experienced. In the United States where the term *South Asia*, and by extension South Asian art, has gained maximal traction, the enduring commitment of South Asian artists to materiality has become a focal point of concern in this regard, though the term is understood not in its standard sense as continued attention to the specificity of the medium, a supposedly modernist preoccupation, but as the commitment to exploring the idea of thingness. In the case of well-known artists like Sikander, Nazia Khan, and Mithu Sen, the concern with materiality can be found in the engagement with old media and new, from drawing and painting, to installation and digitization. Their work has enabled conversation across transregional networks of artistic practice and aesthetic judgment because it appears to resonate with a more general focus on mediation and materiality in the art world. Yet the modalities employed by artists like Khan, Sikander, and Sen can be particularly alienating to audiences in the United States who identify with postminimalist, anti-aesthetic, or postconceptual practices. If alienation is a key affect in the reception of contemporary South Asian

art in the United States, as Zitzewitz argues, it is a strategy Sikander utilizes to powerful effect.

The Sharjah Biennial, for example, is now a significant site for staging art from the South Asia region. Ironically, it is in the Gulf that South Asian artists are most insistently confronted by the Janus-faced nature of late capital as both intimate and alien. Now a major venue for the exhibition (and evaluation) of global contemporary art, the region has long been a terminus for the flows of surplus labor emanating from South Asia. The traces of a much longer history of transregional migration between South Asia and the Gulf are evident in the spectral presence of South Asian migrant laborers, who today make up a majority of the uncounted population of cities like Abu-Dhabi, Dubai, or Sharjah. This is particularly important because the Gulf has become the sole space where a regionally defined South Asian art world is to be found; it is a South Asian cosmopolis where one can find Pakistani, Indian, and Sri Lankan artists who are brought together by curatorial logics and share exhibition space. Sikander’s work “The cypress is, despite its freedom, held captive by the garden” (2012) addresses the fraught nature of Gulf networks and the centuries-long history of their dependence on South Asian labor by revisiting the moving image (cinema) as a metaphor for human mobility.

Sikander notes that during the 2012 biennial she stumbled upon a dilapidated cinema, an apparent anomaly against the rising skyline of Sharjah. Designed by architects and engineers from Karachi, the cinema in Sharjah is historically sympathetic with the cinema architecture of the sixties and seventies, and it stands today as mute witness to the Karachi-style cinema of an earlier time. (Many such cinema halls in Karachi have burned down in recent years.) The death of the cinema, which is a material manifestation of human labor, after all, is like the willed disappearance of the laboring bodies whose toil has enabled towers of glass and steel to rise and commemorate the empire of oil.

The building’s sole caretaker, a Pakistani laborer who had migrated to the United Arab Emirates to help build the cinema, becomes assimilated into Sikander’s revival of the space as an image factory. As human bodies disappear, they reappear as

ghosts in the machine, images from another time now animated by the work of the artist's hands as though to make evident the relationship between mediation and the immediate, between representation and presence.

Sikander's artworks "reveal their 'promiscuity' with other moments of production and reception."⁵ She takes us back to those bent bodies in the Mughal *kharkhanas* (ateliers) whose individual labor is buried in the social totality of the miniature, but she also invites us to inhabit the large, newly imagined worlds of intercut images and digitized body parts. As artist-artisan she bridges the dissociated domains of craft and creation, of worker discipline and artistic freedom, reminding us constantly of the immersive worlds of the hand and the eye as these have shaped the possibility of a rigorously postcolonial art practice. ■■■■

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Drawing in the Digital Field

Shahzia Sikander's The Last Post (2010)

Claire Brandon

Drawing, the act of making a mark on a surface, is arguably the oldest artistic medium. Artists currently working with digital technology and new media have wrestled with how to engage with drawing in the digital space. In such instances, computer coding, pixilation, scanning, and the very surface of the display screen necessarily mediate the artist's hand. Furthermore, recent explorations in new media implicate technology in the very act of drawing at the level of the implement and of the surface itself, such as drawing with an iPad or with a drawing touchpad for direct display onto a tablet or computer screen. In contrast, Shahzia Sikander's work in animation preserves the performative act of drawing and the physical encounter between ink and gouache with paper. Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010) (fig. 1a–d) is a digital animation made from a series of drawings. A high-resolution scanner translates the image from a work on paper into digital information. Scanned drawings are then mobilized using animation technology. By digitizing extant works on paper and altering them with computer-generated software, Sikander blurs the boundary between organic and synthetic drawing.

Drawing is fundamental to Sikander's practice. She trained in miniature painting, a discipline rooted in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Indo-Persian practice, at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. Sikander's paintings from the late 1980s and early 1990s were made over a period of several years in which she built up multiple layers of drawn material, such as in *Perilous Order* (1989–97) (fig. 2). This painting was made in the span of eight years, during which time Sikander added new imagery to a painting she had begun in 1989 (fig. 3). In the 1989 work, a male figure is seated at the center of the frame, surrounded by several layers of carefully delineated borders. *Perilous Order* disrupts and complicates the layout and formal composition of the initial painting with the insertion of Gopi goddesses and an ethereal female form that transcend borders (fig. 2).

Around the same time, Sikander began experimenting with the space of the wall as an MFA student at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1993 to 1995. Her 1997 exhibition at the Drawing Center in SoHo was the first exhibition of her wall drawings in a museum (fig. 4). Contemporaneously, she became interested in adding material depth to her drawings beyond the two-dimensional sphere by creating ephemeral installations out of multiple sheets of translucent paper placed to create a depth of anywhere from several inches to several feet. From 1997 to 2004, she installed these tissue-paper works in multiple exhibitions, including at the Renaissance Society in Chicago (fig. 5). The work in tissue paper not only gave new depth to her forms in painting and drawing, but also introduced a larger scale to her drawing

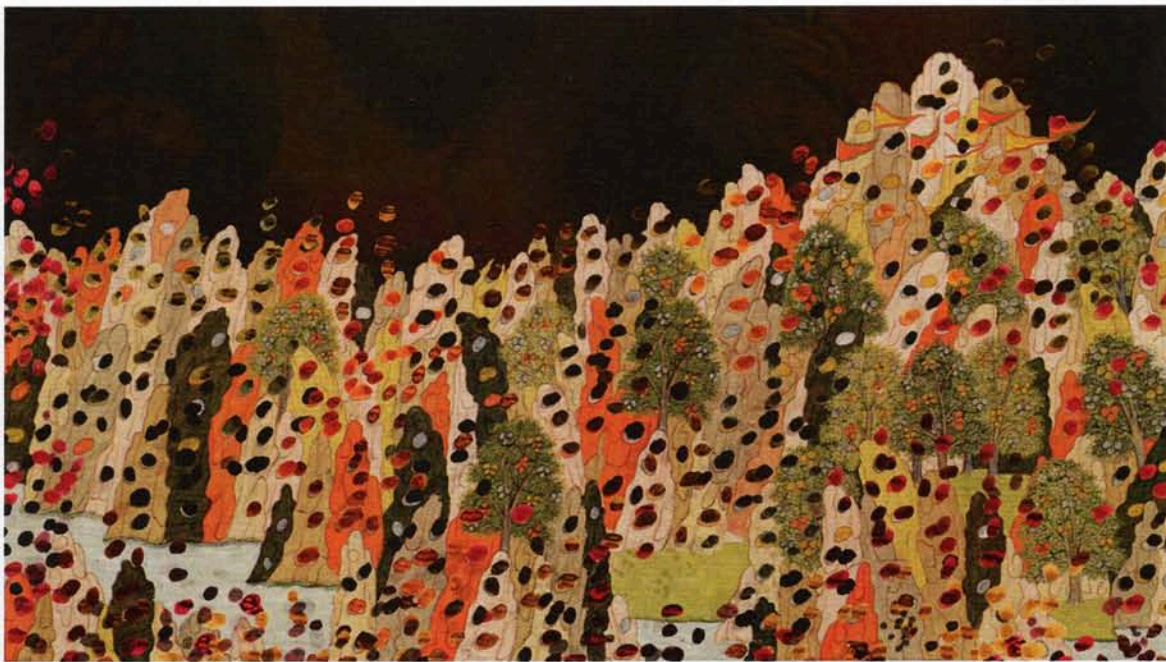
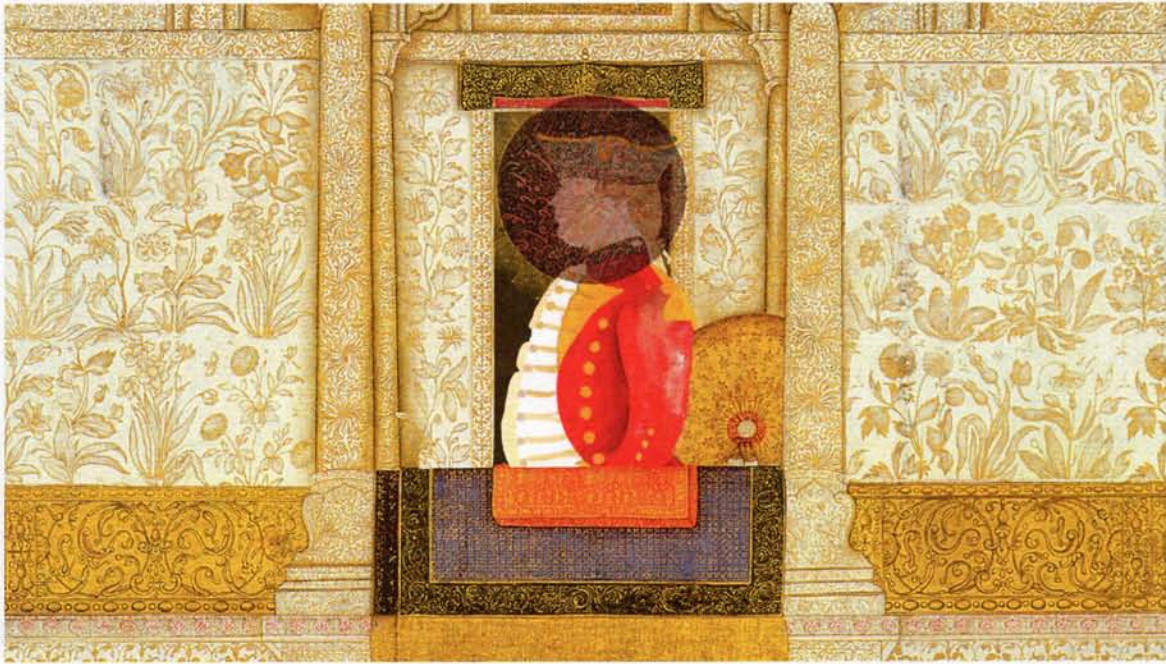


Figure 1a–d. Stills from *The Last Post* (2010), HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound by Du Yun, 10 minutes.
1a: top left; 1b: bottom left; 1c: opposite page top; 1d: opposite page bottom



Figure 1c–d. Stills from *The Last Post* (2010), HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound by Du Yun, 10 minutes.



Figure 2. *Perilous Order* (1989–97), transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, and charcoal on marbled board, 10 3/8 x 8 3/16 inches

practice.¹ Created solely for the time frame of the exhibition and specifically for each space in which it was installed, both the wall drawings and the tissue-paper work are durational and ephemeral.

Animation and Sound: 2001–9

In 2001, Sikander began to work in digital animation during a residency at ArtPace in San Antonio, Texas. That year, she produced the animation *Intimacy* (fig. 6), for which she recorded the phases by which she creates one of her multilayered paintings. This process includes the addition and subtraction of various iconographic elements, including fragments of human figures, text, animals, and geometric abstractions that gradually fill the pictorial field (fig. 6). The video *Intimacy* investigates the form and structure of her drawing practice, and it is a close investigation of the multiple phases associated with applying gouache and ink in her work. The contemporaneous painting was given a title of the same name (fig. 7). Though this first animation did not include sound and is only four minutes and

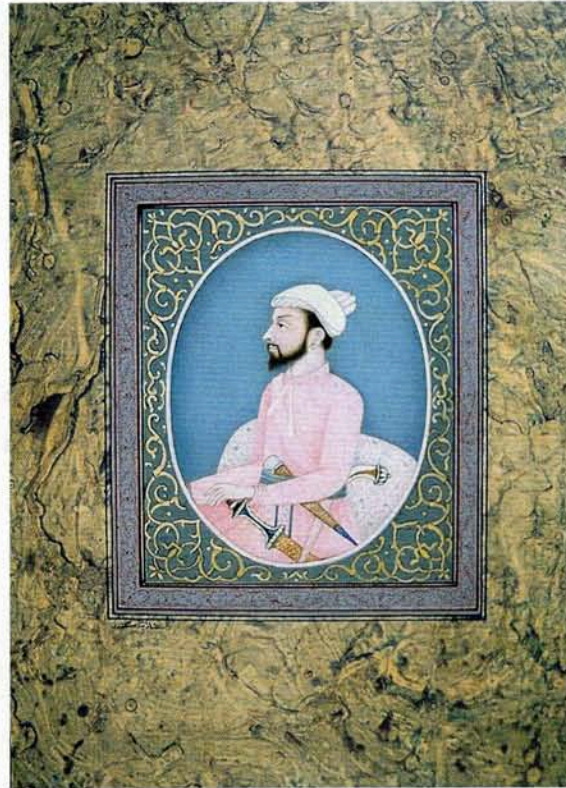


Figure 3. Initial layer of *Perilous Order* (1989), transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, and charcoal on marbled board, 10 3/8 x 8 3/16 inches

twenty-eight seconds long, it introduced the digital as a new immersive dimension in her work. By exploring the mechanics of layering in the digital field, *Intimacy* makes the viewer privy to Sikander's process of creating and removing form.

Sikander made four animations between 2003 and 2005: *Nemesis* (2003), *SpiNN* (2003), *Pursuit Curve* (2004), and *Dissonance to Detour* (2005).² *Nemesis* (fig. 8a–d) is two minutes long and chronicles the formation of a large elephant from smaller animal figures. Over the course of the video, gradual additions of figures coalesce to build an elephant: little rabbits make up his feet (fig. 8a), tigers and impalas form his core (fig. 8b–c), and a monkey rides atop his back (fig. 8d). The animation deconstructs the composite school of painting, in which smaller individual elements make up a larger form. She continued this interest in the composite in her next animation, *SpiNN* (fig. 9a–c), which

1. Other wall and tissue-paper installations include exhibitions Yerba Buena Center (1997), Forum for Contemporary Art in St. Louis (1998), Deitch Projects (1998), Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch

(2000), National Gallery of Ottawa (2001), Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC (2002), Tang Museum (2004), and San Diego Art Museum (2004).

2. All of these videos were made in SD (standard definition) with a resolution of 760 by 1080 square inches.

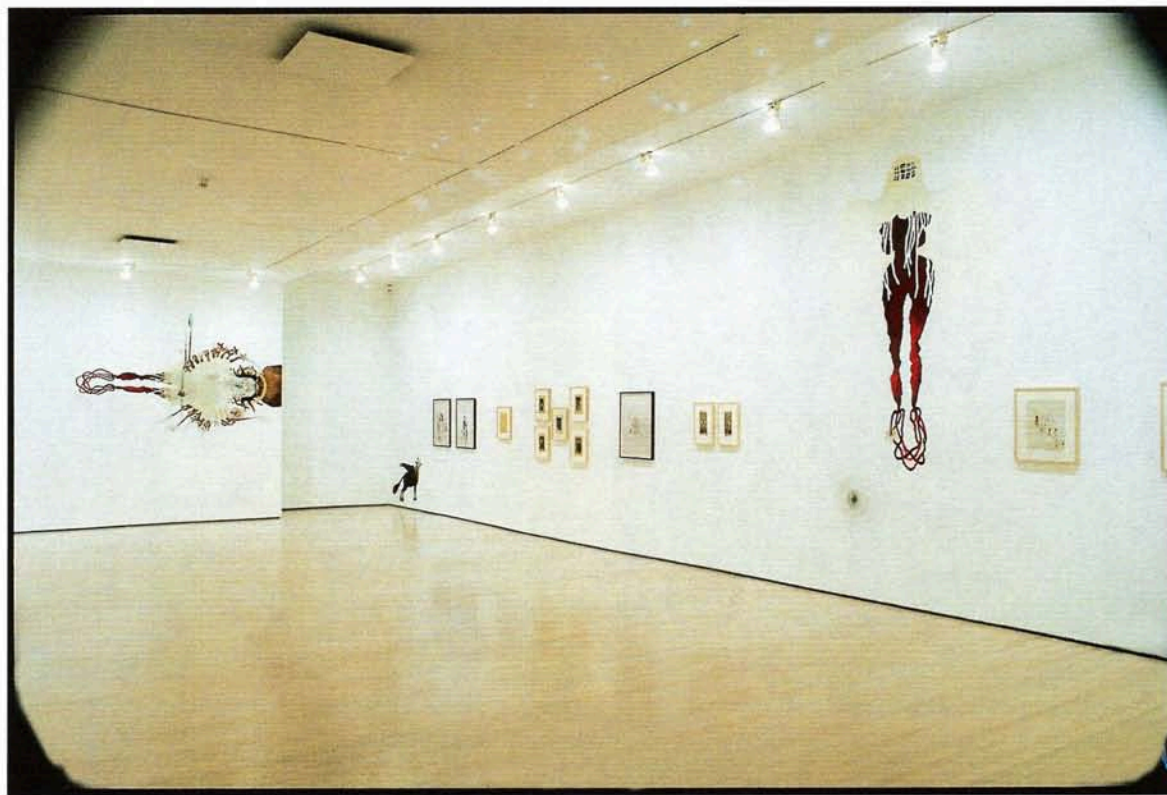


Figure 4. Installation at the Drawing Center, New York (1997)



Figure 5. Installation at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago (1998)



Figure 6. Still from *Intimacy* (2001), computer animation, 4:28 minutes

is six minutes and thirty-eight seconds in length. This animation begins with the backdrop of the Mughal court (fig. 9a), a space typically reserved for men. The main forms in *SpiNN* are Gopis, the female followers of the Hindu god Krishna. Here, they congregate within the masculine space of the Mughal court, disrupting their expected setting. Sikander had been making drawings of the Gopis in the previous years, including in *Turmoil* and *Gopi Crisis* (both 2001). *SpiNN*, however, marks the first time the Gopis appear in animated form. In the animation, the Gopi hair becomes an individual form that moves and relocates on its own (fig. 9b–c). Of this switch from the Gopis on paper to their presence on a digital screen, Sikander has said, “When I first isolated the hair silhouette from the Gopi figure, it was an idea on paper. The silhouette was a static motif. When it was set in motion, it started to create various disruptions with its own history. Through movement, it morphed into insects, birds, beetles, bats, helmets, and many other myriad abstractions.”³ The durational char-

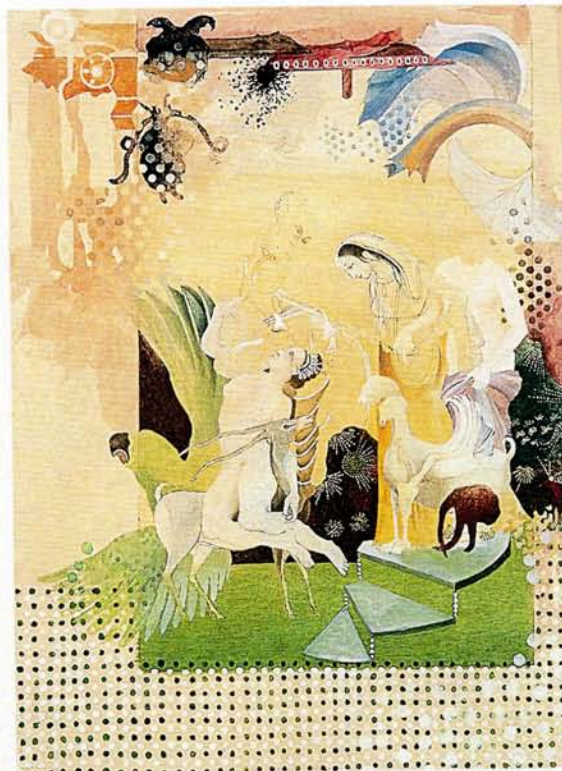


Figure 7. *Intimacy* (2001), dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper, 8 ½ x 11 inches

acteristic of digital animation allows the viewer to follow the physical removal of the hair from the wearers’ heads in a single frame.

Similarly engaged with the gendered and ethnic space of the headdress, *Pursuit Curve* begins with a large mass of orange and red turbans pulsating together in a sphere (fig. 10). They break apart, chase each other within multiple pathways, and find their way to the tops of the heads of a group of men (fig. 10). The animation is seven minutes and twelve seconds in length. While in *SpiNN* the Gopi hair dislocates itself away from the female body (fig. 9a–c), the turbans in *Pursuit Curve* migrate toward the male body (fig. 10). *Dissonance to Detour* also engages with movement patterns. In this work, animated script functions as a unit set into motion. For all four of these animations, Sikander collaborated with musician David Abir to create a unique soundtrack for each work. The music is classical and linear in these projects, with a focus on instrumentals.

3. Sikander, “The Gopi Flux in *Parallax* (2013),” 59.

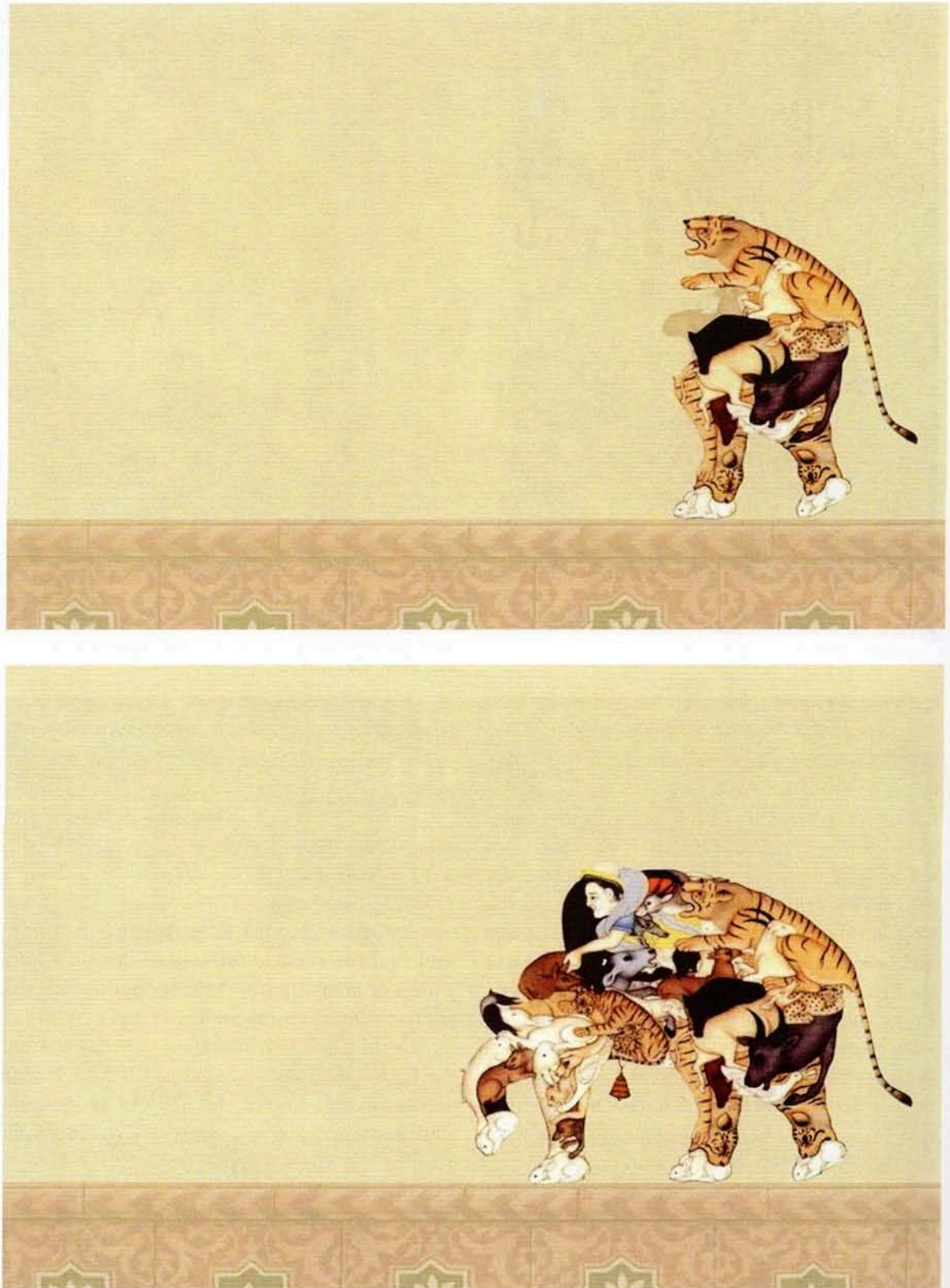


Figure 8a–d. Stills from *Nemesis* (2003), digital animation with sound, 2 minutes. 8a: top left; 8b: bottom left; 8c: opposite page top; 8d: opposite page bottom



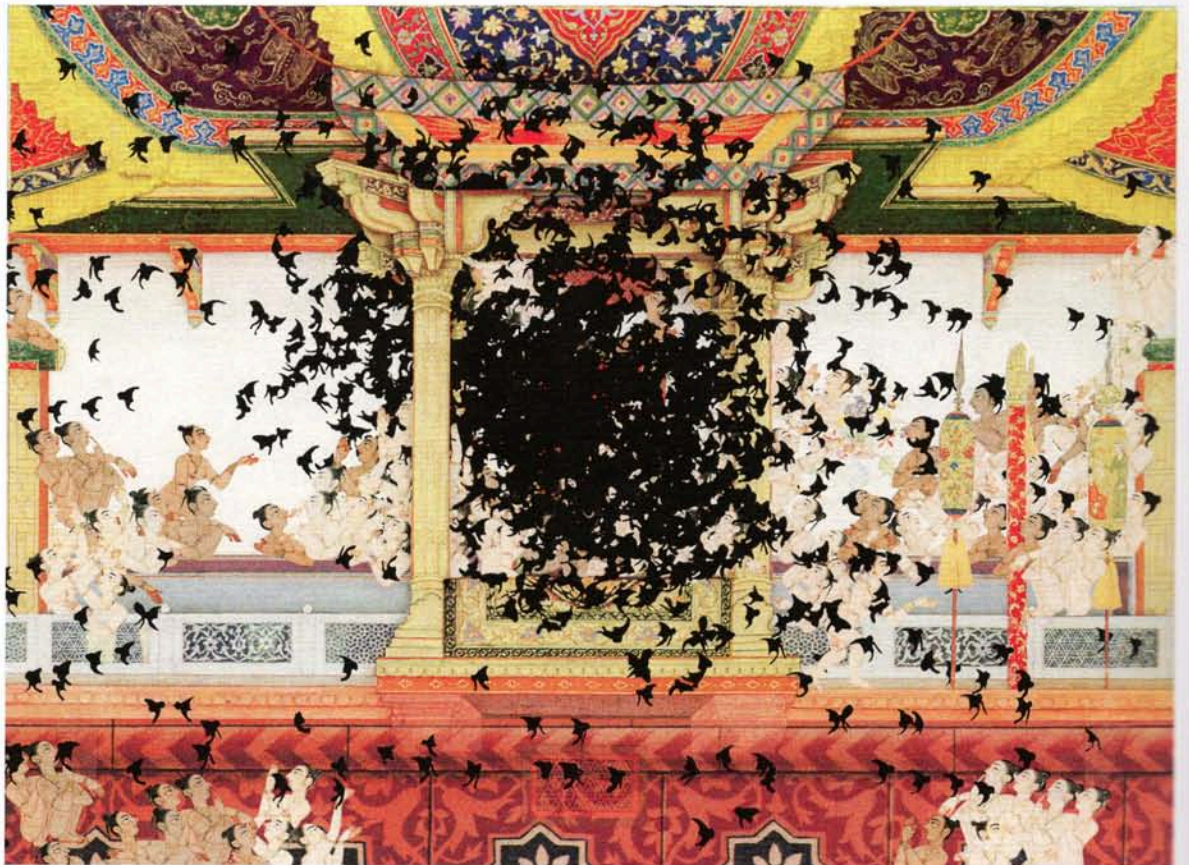


Figure 9a–c. Stills from *SpiNN* (2003), digital animation with sound, 6:38 minutes. 9a: top left; 9b: bottom left; 9c: opposite page top

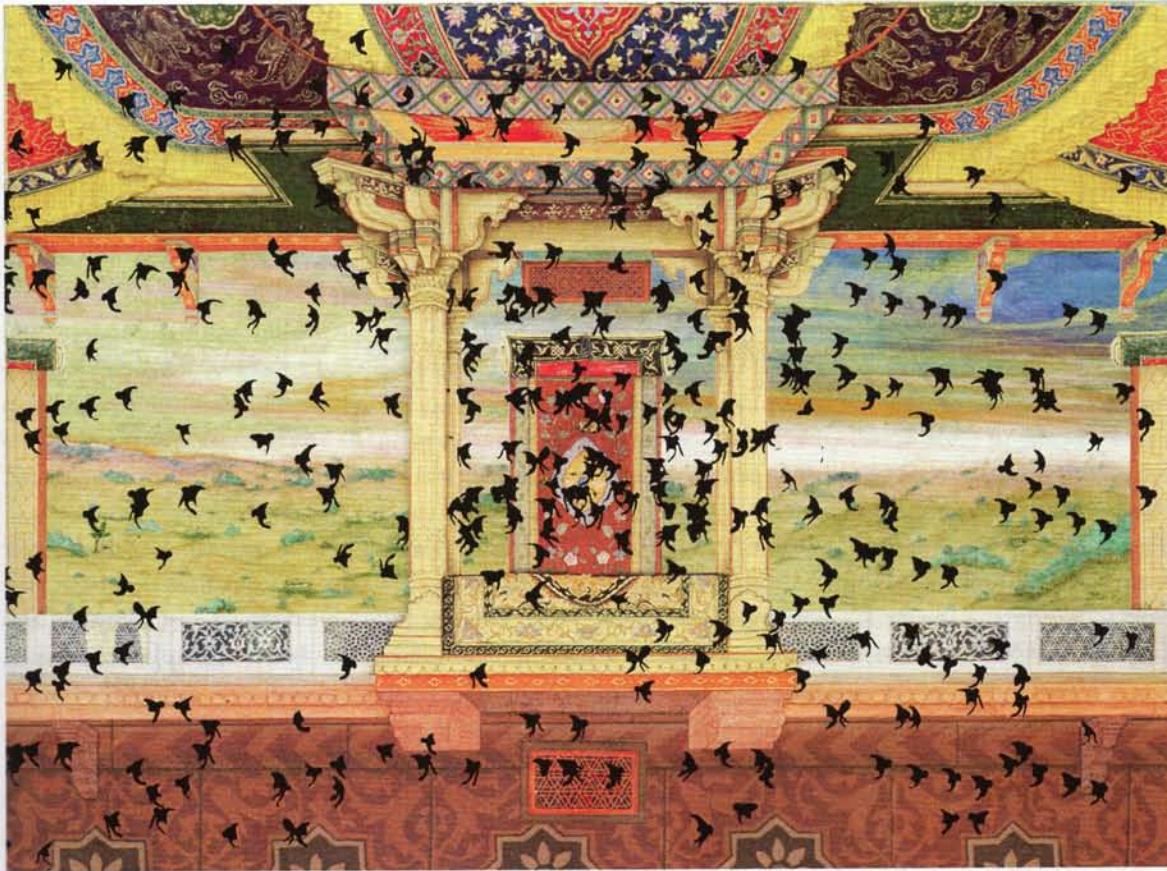


Figure 10. Stills from *Pursuit Curve* (2004), digital animation with sound, 7:12 minutes

Following these animations, Sikander made two other video works, *Pendulum* (2007) and *Bending the Barrels* (2009). While neither *Pendulum* nor *Bending the Barrels* are animated drawings and instead include footage directed and recorded by Sikander, both of these videos signal a new interest in sound that is directly related to the content of the videos. *Pendulum* was made during her residency with The Quiet in the Land at a monastery in Laos, where she drew graphite portraits of monks and novices. The sounds in *Pendulum* are recorded from the monks' daily chants during Sikander's time in Laos. *Bending the Barrels* contains footage of the Pakistani army playing music at the Pakistani Military School of Music in Abbottabad. The sounds in *Bending the Barrels* are of military music associated with Pakistan's colonial past under the aegis of the British army, including the bugle call of "The Last Post," which is performed either at the end of the day or at a commemoration ceremony. In this video, Sikander transposes the rhetoric of military speech by the Pakistani leader Musharraf on top of the footage of the theatrical performance of the brass band. Chanting, lyrics, and poetry come together in these videos.

***The Last Post* (2010)**

The Last Post marks a point of departure in both Sikander's work in new media and in her drawing practice. With the availability of high-definition (HD) images with a resolution of up to 1920 by 1080 pixels per square inch and 5.1 surround sound (able to capture very high frequency), *The Last Post* is visually and sonically distinct from the animation work from 2001 to 2005. The durational component of the video is also a departure from her earlier work, as its ten-minute duration was up until then the longest of the animations. Her more recent animation *Parallax* (2013) is fifteen minutes in length. *Parallax* is a three-channel single-image video animation made for the 2013 Sharjah Biennial (fig. 11). The imagery in *Parallax* engages with several geographical, historical, and political aspects of the United Arab Emirates and the global maritime trade. The technological advances reflected in the recent animation work since 2010

are a product of the wider technological changes in the digital capture of both image and sound. Sikander has said that digital media have allowed her to experiment by further destabilizing the space of the miniature: "Working digitally allows me to exacerbate the space of *pardakth*, whereby the use of transparency and opacity are critical factors in the layering of images. These micro or non-visible layers emerge as a clearly defined and quantifiable space to work in the digital realm, as opacity and transparency become a field to navigate on a numerical scale."⁴ Digital technology not only makes visible but also magnifies what was previously indiscernible to the naked eye in miniature painting: the intricacies of layering multiple images.

Sikander seeks to transform motifs in order to cultivate new associations for trenchant historical symbols. She has said, "Layering works as a strategy to juxtapose overlaps of culture, politics, art history, and commentary culled from newspapers, journals, and media."⁵ *The Last Post* deals with the history of colonial struggle and international trade in India. The animation takes as its subject an "exploding" East India Company man (fig. 1a), a riff on the figures of authority associated with the British trading company of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Clad as he is in the traditional red coattails, shoes, hat, and other accoutrements associated with such a figure, the man's facial features are indiscernible. He first appears ensconced in a court theater apparatus, looking out of an opening in the structure. This visual language is culled from courtly portraits of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Company man was historically a figure in the East India Company who derived the majority of his wealth from perks of the trade, not from his salaried position.

The iconography in *The Last Post*—including rich architectural details and depictions of vegetation—alludes to the Company painting school, a style of painting developed in the eighteenth century among local artists hired by officials and advisers from Europe to depict India's plants, animals, and architecture. In this ethnographic and anthropologically oriented style, artists incorpo-

4. Sikander, interview by the author, June 21, 2014.

5. Sikander, "The Collaborative Terrain of Drawing and Animation."

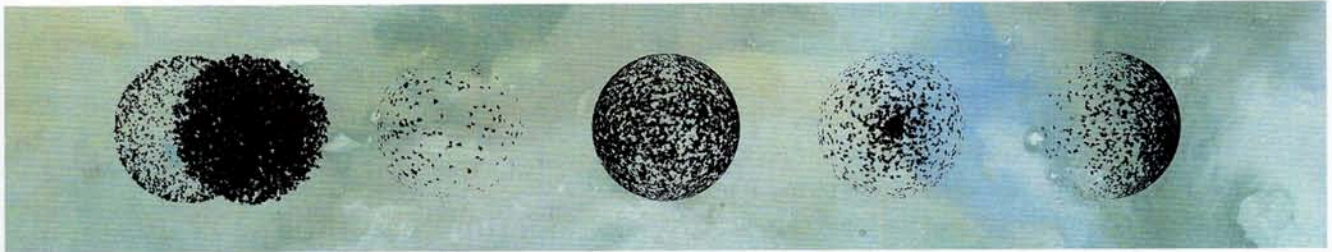


Figure 11. Still from *Parallax* (2013), HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound by Du Yun, 15 minutes

rated portraits of British officers into their work in miniature. There was a change in subject matter in these miniatures from grand themes to mundane life: inventory functioned as subject while color became subdued and drawing paramount. One scene in *The Last Post* includes representational trees interspersed among shapes indicative of vegetation, abstracted and dotted with brush marks (fig. 1b). This amalgam of documentary-style drawing, abstraction, text, and color study is a recurring trope in Sikander's work. Other natural and built landscapes appear, disappear, and fracture over the course of the video, while at other times a rich expanse of gouache drawing creates a panorama of ink and pigment.

The Last Post features a soundtrack composed by Du Yun. It is the first of three collaborations to date with the composer: Sikander and Du Yun subsequently worked on *Parallax* for the Sharjah Biennial and *Pivot* for the Istanbul Biennial, both in 2013. The music in *The Last Post* begins at the same time as the animation, opening with an analog-like sound of scratching vinyl simultaneous with the falling of a wall or curtain to reveal the interior court in which the Company man sits (fig. 1a). The movement of the "grand drape" to reveal the onset of the durational work is intentional on the part of Du Yun and Sikander, who are both interested in the space of the opera.⁶ *Parallax* opens with a similar structure, when a mass of Sikander's signature Gopi hair-forms cascades down, as would a curtain onstage. Du Yun sees opera is a framing device and sonic tool for building sound within the space of the animation. Of this structure, Du Yun has said,

"I think of the sound for the animation as having a prelude, a statement/sonata, resolve, development, and a comeback. In *The Last Post*, the statement of the theme occurs in the landscape scene [fig. 1b], and the climax moment is when the monk appears on top of the sphere of florid and abstracted forms and then topples over [fig. 1c]. The grand finale is the disappearance of the fragmented colonial landscape as represented by the figures and objects in the spherical silhouette [fig. 1d], when there is more acoustic symphonic sounds and the voice escalates."⁷ The music combines Du Yun's own vocals with the instrumental, including the bugle call historically associated with the British army. The music combines many different sonic variations, from the bugle call to a woman's voice singing softly and Buddhist chants. Instruments feature in the visual repertoire of the video, as exemplified in a scene in which a French horn appears and spins atop much fainter depictions of bugles.

The last scene of the animation includes a charcoal image of a figure smoking a pipe that morphs into a tuba (fig. 1d). This image alludes to the East India Company's opium trade with China, in which the subcontinent was employed as a critical site in the production and dissemination of the drug.⁸ The East India Company had a lasting impact on strategies of corporate operations and commercial activities. In a recent book on the history of the company, Nick Robins claims that "just as the East India Company monopolized the textile production of India to force down prices and exert greater con-

6. Du Yun, interview by the author, June 21, 2014.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *The Last Post* premiered to the public in China; it was made for the exhibition "By Day by Night, or Some (Special) Things a Museum Can Do," curated by Hou Hanru at the Rock-

bund Museum, Shanghai, in 2010. It has since been exhibited in the United States, India, England, and Turkey.

trol, so many of today's major commodity chains have become highly concentrated, generating powerful downward pressure on the prices of goods exported by developing countries."⁹ The legacy of the colonial economy is still very much alive today, as corporate monopolies and terms of production operate under some of the same entrenched mechanisms that characterized Europe and Asia in the seventeenth century. *The Last Post* refers to this period not only to subvert the historical implications of the East India Company, but also to challenge the very economic and commercial pillars that uphold modern corporate practice.

In today's era, in which the global transmission of information occurs primarily through digital mediums, the format of *The Last Post* calls into question how images and ideas circulate over time. Curator Hou Hanru writes that the artist's "use of animation, as well as her layered images and the play between representational and abstract forms, visually embodies [her] central concerns of transformation and societies in flux."¹⁰ The movement among various sounds and sets of visual information speaks to Sikander's interest in trade routes and the trajectories of objects and information. The East India Company's trade circulation primarily occurred via waterways and, as such, the aquatic routes by which both humans and objects were transported became deeply connected to the history of colonial dominance. Through her process-based work, Sikander continues to examine the contemporary implications of these colonial legacies and the forces at stake in their contested cultural and political histories. ■■■■

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9. Robins, *The Corporation That Changed the World*, 212.

10. Hanru, "Shahzia Sikander," 204.

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