Smee, Sebastian. “Sikander’s Animated Art Evokes Worlds of Uncertainty,” *The Boston Globe,* October 1, 2015.

The Boston Globe

Sikander’s animated art evokes worlds of uncertainty

Shahzia Sikander’s digital animation “Parallax” at Tufts University Art Gallery includes surround sound.

Combining the techniques of traditional Indo-Persian miniature painting with 21st-century digital technology, Shahzia Sikander makes bewitching animations that cry out for multiple viewings. Her exhibition at Tufts University Art Gallery includes works on paper and photographs, but is centered on a stunning 15-minute animation, “Parallax,” projected on a wide, curving screen.

The film is derived from Sikander’s own paintings in watercolor, gouache, and ink. Their morphing forms, drenching colors, and disruptive details are lent added life and meaning by a haunting soundtrack. Produced by Sikander and the composer Du Yun, this audio helps steer us through the visuals. It shifts between the sounds of a bustling market, words intoned by three contemporary poets from Sharjah, and evocative music.

“Parallax” — the word describes two views of the same thing which are both real and yet incommensurable — is a work that asks to be experienced, then parsed, then experienced again. The middle part, the interpreting stage, can feel like hard work: Sikander’s struggles to give her work “relevance” can veer off, at times, into a free-associative gush.

But the work itself defeats objections, simply because it is so visually and acoustically captivating. With great economy and artistry, it sweeps the viewer into a realm of swirling uncertainty, where world-historical ideas do battle with Dionysian, border-dissolving urges, and a profound sense of human fragility.

Sikander, who lives and works in New York, was born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan, and studied in Lahore at the National College of Arts in the 1980s, where she was trained in the technically exacting and rule-bound Indo-Persian miniature tradition. Her decision to study miniatureswent against the grain of her contemporaries, and

conjured associations, according to the Australian curator Rachel Kent, with both imperialism and popular mythology. Not, in other words, very “now.”

And riskytoo: Sikander’s particular interest in Hindu mythology risked adverse attention in a country then under Islamist military rule. But Sikander persisted. She wanted to get inside the miniature tradition, and she became more and more interested in the finer aspects of miniature picture construction — not just the startling colors, but the stacked perspective and overlooked border details.

In 1993, she moved to the United States to study at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Her work became more elastic and associative, twisting and flipping between abstract shapes and recognizable imagery, and between controlled line and formless puddles and washes.

She began superimposing layers of imagery, one over the other, marking the beginning of a new phase of complexity. And in 2001, she began setting this imagery in motion with animation techniques.

As her reputation took wing (among many other honors, she was awarded a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 2006), she became more ambitious conceptually, too, taking up issues ranging from human displacement and environmental degradation to Middle East politics.

TONY LUONG
“Parallax” uses high definition scans of Shahzia Sikander’s exquisitely colored drawings.

Embracing the globalist catchcry, she has followed an international circuit of biennials and residencies, spending time in, and responding thoughtfully to, such diverse locales as Texas, Berlin, and the United Arab Emirates. If at times, her subject matter has risked dissolving into an academic, cross-cultural, trans-historical goo, her visuals have only become richer and more remarkable.

“Parallax,” which emerged from an invitation to participate in the 2013 Sharjah Biennial, is, conceptually, on the overwrought side. The film makes use of high definition scans of Sikander’s exquisitely colored drawings, with specific motifs superimposed on this slowly shifting base — sometimes on a much smaller, finer scale, at other times swelling and proliferating until they swamp the visual field.

The process of enlarging the drawings lends them a topographic air, which is exactly what Sikander sought. Map-making’s ability to organize different layers of information is key to the work as a whole. Watching its rich colors and shapes swell and spread and scan from side to side, we feel at once elevated far above a haunted landscape, and immersed in an interior dreamscape.

In preparation for the Sharjah Biennale, Sikander took a road trip in the United Arab Emirates. She followed a triangular route, driving along the west coast on the Persian Gulf, up to the tip on the Strait of Hormuz, down the east coast on the Gulf of Oman, and then back through the desert.

While traveling she began to think, she has said, about driving as a measurement of displacement. The associative train that proceeded to make its way into the work included the arbitrariness of borders imposed in the Middle East under colonial rule; the all-important oil industry; the nature of the UAE's population (which is more than 80 percent expatriate; a million of these, or one-eighth of the total population, are from Sikander's native Pakistan); the idea of translation between languages and cultures; and the idea of obsolescence.
It's a bit of a stew. And indeed, much of "Parallax's" imagery is fittingly inchoate, like a god's indifferent view of a distant galaxy. But one also sees gushing oil wells; a giant laboring figure with a bent back (shades of William Kentridge); a proliferation of 1960s multivalve oil wells (known in the industry as "Christmas trees," presumably because they bear great gifts); rotating arms detached from bodies (representing the "hand of fate"); and a remarkable, semitransparent image of two supine bodies, one sleeping, the other a corpse.

These two bodies are superimposed on a flickering field of small black shapes, which are actually the hair of Gopis, female devotees of the Hindu god Krishna. Sikander has been using these Gopi hairpieces in her work for years. As a visual motif, they are small and infinitely adaptable.

In the final stages of "Parallax," they accumulate to suggest black, cascading oil, the swirling ocean, patterns of human migration, birds in wheeling flight, and finally, the "singing spheres" that mark the work's end stage. Sikander has described these as "six spherical algorithmic movements that . . . pulsate, gather momentum, increase and decrease in speed all in response to the thrust of the human voices."

To Sikander, they represent hope. They are certainly seductive.