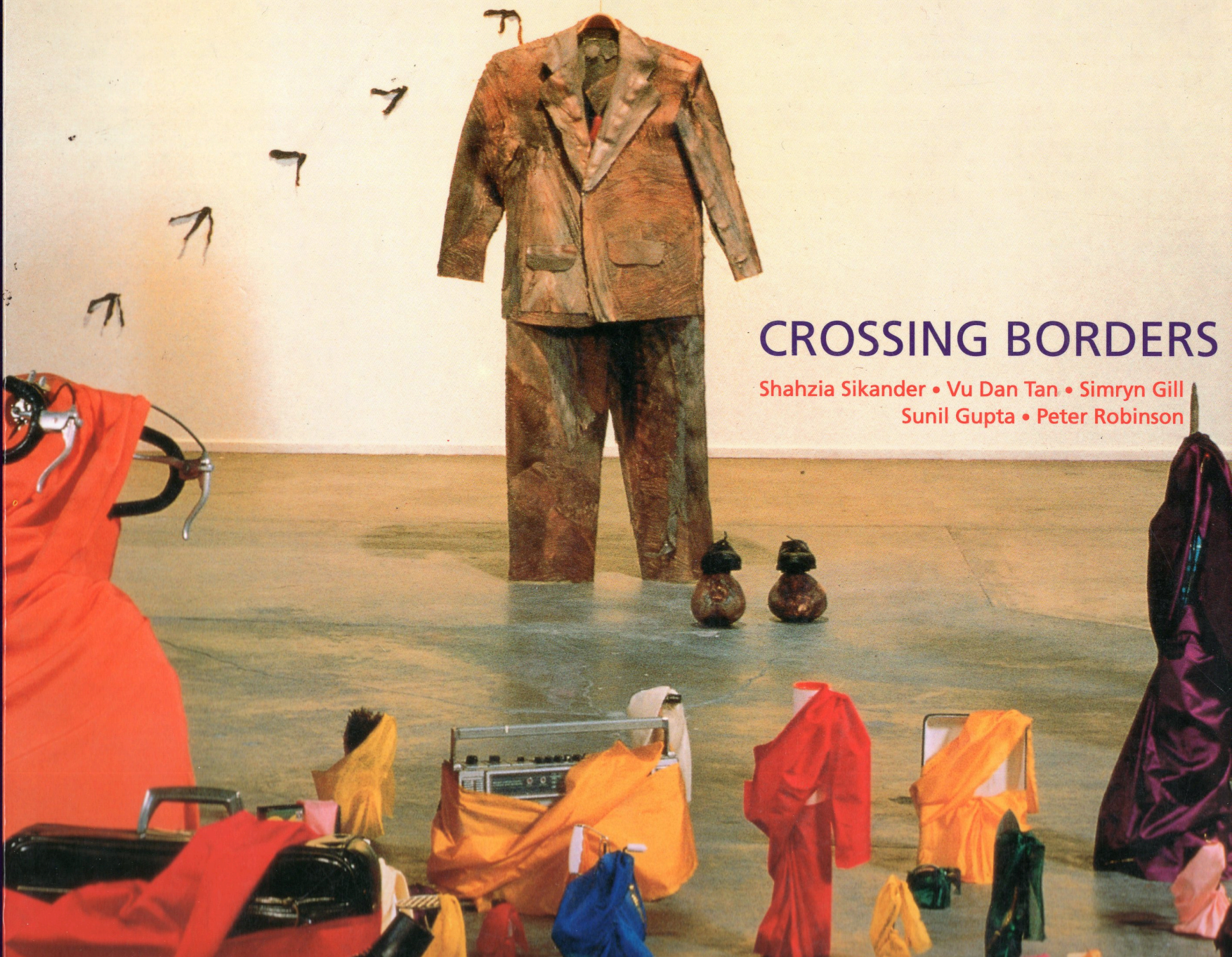


ART Asia Pacific



CROSSING BORDERS

Shahzia Sikander • Vu Dan Tan • Simryn Gill
Sunil Gupta • Peter Robinson

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[commentary]

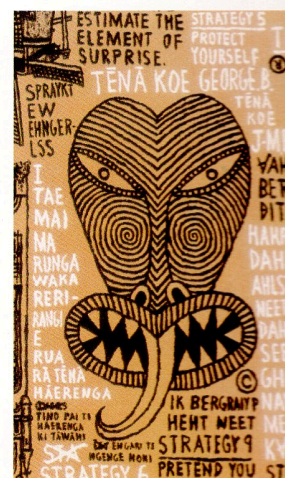
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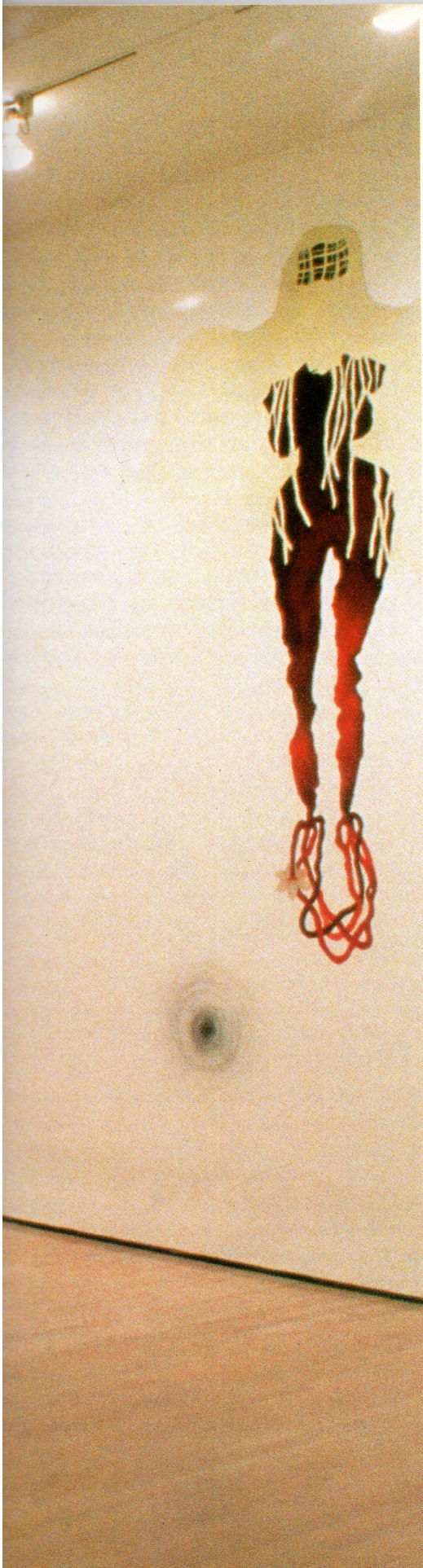
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FULL BLOWN

*The expansive vision of
miniaturist Shahzia Sikander*

Dana Friis-Hansen



SHAHZIA SIKANDER, Uprooted Order, 1997,
vegetable colour, watercolour, dry pigment,
tea wash on wasli, 43.5 x 28 cm.



Early in 1997 the New York art world was abuzz with talk about a young Pakistani artist working in Houston, Texas. Even though the Whitney Biennial selection was more diverse and more carefully considered than in previous years, few of even the most avid artworlders knew Shahzia Sikander's name when it appeared on lists leaked a few months before the much-anticipated opening. To most she was a cipher, an unknown quantity, the proverbial mysterious woman from the East. Excitement grew a few weeks before the biennial opened, when a dashing demonstration on two large walls at the Drawing Center in SoHo introduced the broad talents of this ambitious artist. As I write, New York gallerists are swarming and Sikander has retreated to the relative quiet of Houston where she is preparing for a show at San Francisco's Todd Hosfelt Gallery. Sikander has become a newsworthy phenomenon, but what about Sikander the artist and her art?

When I visited Sikander's studio two years ago, what impressed me most was how she was using her unique vantage point on the visual art of several diverse cultures to make startlingly original expressions. In her works on paper, wall paintings and installations, East mixes with West and tradition-bound techniques and formats merge with those that she invents or draws on from deep within.

Born in 1969 and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander specialised in miniature painting at the National College of Arts (Bachelor of Fine Arts, 1992) in that ancient Mogul city, and then moved to the United States, enrolling at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she focused on painting and printmaking (Master of Fine Arts, 1995). Her two years in the Core Fellowship program of the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, have allowed her the time and space to think through where she stands in this world and to develop her art.

I have been here in the US for four years, and the distance and time has allowed me to become much more objective, allowing me to look back at the work I was doing in Pakistan and it is all making more sense to me now than it did when I was creating it.¹

When she entered the National College of Arts, no-one had majored in miniature painting in ten years, and Sikander was one of two students who, in their second year, elected to study miniature painting under the master professor, Bashir Ahmed. It was a marginalised field because of its connotations as 'tourist art',² and was overshadowed by a modern, western approach to painting, learned from London and later New York. Nevertheless, Sikander was curious to explore this traditional form, even though it carried many rules about process, iconography and format. She became an apprentice in a guild-like workshop:

The whole day would be spent there – you would arrive, take off your shoes, and have your breakfast with the professor. It was

not a very physically engaging process; you would then go to your corner and start working on your painting, on the floor. Plenty of time was spent on observation alone; you would just watch him work, watch what he did, how he behaved, etc. He would occasionally get up and look at your work. He encouraged you to do your own work, but he also wanted to control it.

With her thesis project *The Scroll*, 1992, which took eight months to complete, Sikander started to step over boundaries, and she hasn't stopped since. For example, although miniature painting is derived from illustrated books, she took the proportions of the Chinese scroll,³ and created a 152-centimetre-long work painted in vegetable colour, watercolour, dry pigment, and tea wash on traditional *wasli* paper lined with a traditional decorative border. Yet, rather than make the isolated, frozen court scenes or traditional festivals, weddings, or hunting images, she created an animated 'day in the life' self-portrait, with her own figure moving through a variety of complicated interior and exterior architectural spaces. Some areas, especially when the figure was engaged in activity, were painted loosely, almost translucently, like a blurred photograph. This tour-de-force, which the artist keeps in her studio to study and refer to, is alive with images of people getting dressed, reading a newspaper, seated on the floor talking and watching TV, preparing a meal in a modern kitchen, and even packing suitcases (a signal that travel was forecast for the future?). In technique, form and content this work extended – maybe dragged – the field of miniature painting onto new, contemporary ground.

I had seen other miniature painters in the country, and their work was always thematic, never personal. When you went into the [western] painting program, individual expression was always emphasised. There, you make it your own work. So why did those in the miniature painting section want me to take out the conceptual aspects, and just be consumed by technique?

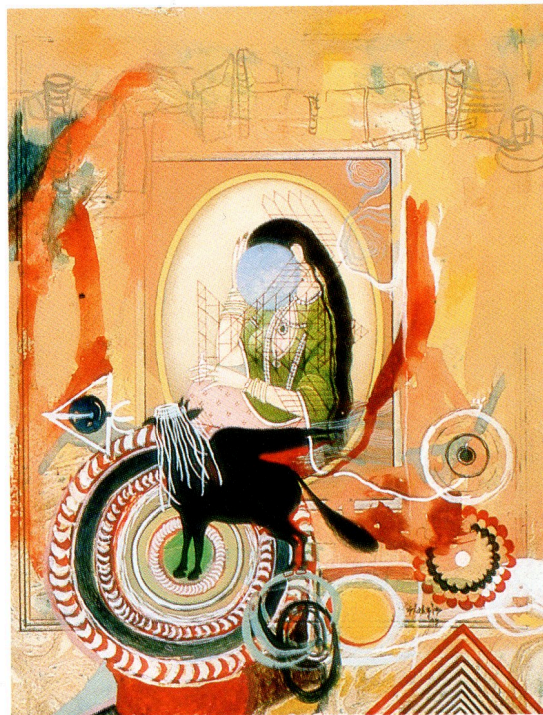
Sikander left Pakistan with an increased urge to experiment, and a deep, disciplined training in a traditional East Asian artform which Americans found exotic. Sikander's profile fitted right into the art world's appetite for 'multi-culturalism', and because of the mystique of her medium, she was accepted by every graduate school program to which she applied. Nonetheless, the allure had its downside.

Despite the buzz about Third World artists, when you go deeper, there is no framework for us. You always have to drag your culture and your history around with you just so that other people have the slightest notion of what you are talking about. The most common question was, 'Where's your veil?'.⁴

When she arrived in the United States she was exposed to new critical theory about cultural identity, feminism and individual expression, topics purposely not part of the academic training of miniature painters in Pakistan. The opportunity for new dialogues, and exposure to new ways



above: **SHAHKIA SIKANDER, *The Scroll*, 1992** (detail), vegetable colour, watercolour, dry pigment, tea wash on *wasli*, 33 x 152 cm.



left: **SHAHKIA SIKANDER, *Ready to Leave*, 1997**, vegetable colour, watercolour, dry pigment, tea wash on *wasli*, 30.5 x 25.5 cm.

'Despite the buzz about Third World artists, when you go deeper, there is no framework for us. You always have to drag your culture and your history around with you just so that other people have the slightest notion of what you are talking about.'



SHAHKIA SIKANDER, *Our Racial Veils*, 1994, vegetable colour, watercolour, dry pigment, tea wash on *wasli*, 30.5 x 20 cm.

opposite page: SHAHKIA SIKANDER, *Weighed I*, 1995, gouache, ink, graphite on clay and paper, 71 x 56 cm.

of thinking about art and the artist's role, seems to be the most important impact in her graduate and postgraduate work. Visually, Sikander's work retains much of what she learned in Pakistan as its base, yet she has slowly broadened the range of techniques, layered the imagery and mixed the metaphors in ways she would not have dreamt of doing four years ago.

Sikander's studio arrangement is revealing. One wall forms a giant bulletin board; on one half hang her own miniature works and colour photocopies of completed works, snapshots from Asia she has taken for visual reference, and so on. On the floor is a tray with clamshells used for mixing her special miniature pigments, and a line of brushes, some of which she has made herself. She kneels here to work on the special paper which she has prepared across the room by layering old drawings with materials ranging from clay to gesso, glue to copper sulfate, and then burnished to an even surface.

The other side of the wall is layered with tissue-paper sheets on which fluid ink and gouache figures float, leap and twist. With the sheets of fragile tracing paper, which let the ink run freely if it wishes, she might work on both the back and front, pinning up an arrangement several drawings in layers. These forms were inspired in part by ritualistic, talismanic village wall paintings seen on a trip to the Indian town of Kutch, and also Mithilia village painting, done exclusively by women on mud walls and floors to create a communal, spiritual experience, and passed on matrilineally through the generations. Sikander also uses sheets prepared with a clay ground, which provides a dull colour tone and dry texture upon which to work. The forms derive from intense doodling during a meditative state, and there is a joyful looseness of line, an informality in the materials, and a sense of primal physicality that seems worlds away from the controlled frame of the miniature painting. Viewing Sikander's tissue paper or clay-coated paper works, a westerner might be reminded of the drawings of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Nancy Spero or Kiki Smith⁵ with their profound exploration of the territory between anatomy, memory and deep sexuality. For example, one motif found frequently is a headless female figure with an interconnected tangle of threads in place of feet. This wide-hipped, full-breasted form suggests an omnipotent, all-nurturing earth mother, as in *Weighed I*, 1995, which bends and squats in *Can We Connect Our Minds*, 1995. 'Painting in this way is spiritually and intellectually liberating; with miniatures you work eight hours and cover an inch, so the spontaneity offers a release.'

Last year Sikander started taking her tight and contained drawings to a larger-than-life mural scale, painting her evocative imagery directly onto the wall for temporary exhibitions. The initial wall works were frontal and framed properly by the wall's edges, but an ongoing interest in archi-

ecture led her to stretch and wrap the images into and around corners or to run right to the edge of a wall, jump over a passageway, and continue on the other side, such as the bold work, *Is It Me, Is It You, Or Is It Our Racial Veils*, installed at the Drawing Center in February and March 1997. She plans to create an architecturally scaled installation of tissue-paper drawings for her San Francisco exhibition.

Two years ago the two sections of Sikander's studio wall were completely segregated, yet slowly the fluid figures have danced over into the imagery of the tightly painted miniatures, creating an exciting postmodernist conversation about culture, visual languages, and the possibilities offered by living outside your culture. For example, issues of female identity were further explored through another motif, a net-, house- or cage-like form that represents the Islamic veil torn or unravelling – perhaps hinting at her own freedom from an arranged marriage. A complicated symbol, it offers shelter and yet is porous, pierced with holes. Formless, it derives shape from the object it covers, accentuating what is hidden. She uses these delicately engulfing arabesques to cover female figures and, more recently, a variety of other forms, including the ever-elusive griffin and portraits of African-American artist and curator Rick Lowe.⁶ Another motif drawn from Indian art iconography is a Hindu Kali-like figure with multiple arms, each holding some sort of weapon, from a dagger to a thread, some more threatening than others. The circle of arms echo other flower-like cosmic circles which appear in the work – an extension of the artist's interest in sacred geometries. In the Drawing Center wall painting, *Is It Me, Is It You, Or Is It Our Racial Veils*, 1997, the horizontal work merges Lowe and the multi-armed figure in a veil. It is a melange of meaning, offering many clues, cues, questions and no right answer.

Sikander's work is still in transition. In fact, more appropriately, it is about transition. Her solution is to explore, even exploit, the change and transformation that she herself is going through, creating works that are layered with culturally imprinted East Asian motifs and those lifted from her new environments, such as an African-American neighbourhood in Houston. Images from classical miniatures float over and within scenes from contemporary everyday life, and mix with more personal, inner forms. Sikander's art provides an expansive vision made rich by a transcultural existence.

1 Interview with the artist, 2 April 1997. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from this interview.

2 Currently, due in part to Sikander's example, the miniature painting department is enjoying great success, with twenty to thirty students enrolled, an additional faculty, and former students of the program hired.

3 In an ironic incident of postcolonial crossover, it was David

Hockney's scroll-format paintings that Sikander saw in a book (not actual Chinese scrolls) which inspired this selection of a format.

4 Carol Lutfy, 'Asian Artists in America: Shahzia Sikander', *Atelier Magazine*, Tokyo, no. 832, December 1996, p. 50.

5 When she arrived in the United States and began these works she was unaware of all of these artists.

6 In early 1996, Lowe invited Sikander to create a temporary installation at Project Row Houses, an alternative space in a black Houston neighbourhood, and she produced a dramatic work, *Knock, Knock, Who's There? Mithilia, Mithilia Who?*, 1996.

All photographs courtesy the artist.

Dana Friis-Hansen is Senior Curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He lived in Tokyo from 1991 to 1995 and has written and lectured on, and organised exhibitions of, international contemporary art, with a focus on recent developments in Asia.

