

# ASIAN ART NEWS

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# Cultural Weaving

*Shahzia Sikander's inclusion in a string of successful exhibitions, both at home and abroad, has confirmed her as one of Pakistan's most influential stars of the art world.*

By Reena Jana

**R**esplendent, piquant, feminine, strong; the artwork of 28-year-old Shahzia Sikander is quickly catching the eye of collectors and curators around the world. Currently, a buzz surrounds her inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial in New York City, and she is also being featured in solo shows at New York's Drawing Center (on display through March 26) and at San Francisco's Hosfelt Gallery (April 26 - May 31). A native of Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander refers to the tradition of Persian and Indian miniature painting in her complex work by fusing centuries-old techniques and images with provocative contemporary forms. An example is a figure, recurrent in Sikander's mixed-media pieces, of a veiled voluptuous woman's body with a plethora of extra limbs wielding swords as she balances atop fashionable platform shoes.

The result of Sikander's working and reworking of the conventional, personal, and experimental is a focused yet free vision that addresses universal female identity in a voice that provides the viewer with a deeply sensual and emotional perspective—from both an Islamic woman's "behind the veil" standpoint and the vibrancy of a twentysomething citizen of the world. Sikander's paintings, such as the enigmatic watercolor on paper *Uprooted* (on view at the Drawing Center) and installations, such as the cross-cultural *Knock Knock, Who's There? Mithilia, Mithilia Who?*, which draws parallels between an American community of urban rowhouses and a small village in

India, possess a freshness that is at once dynamic and yet conveys a profound respect for ancient cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic traditions.

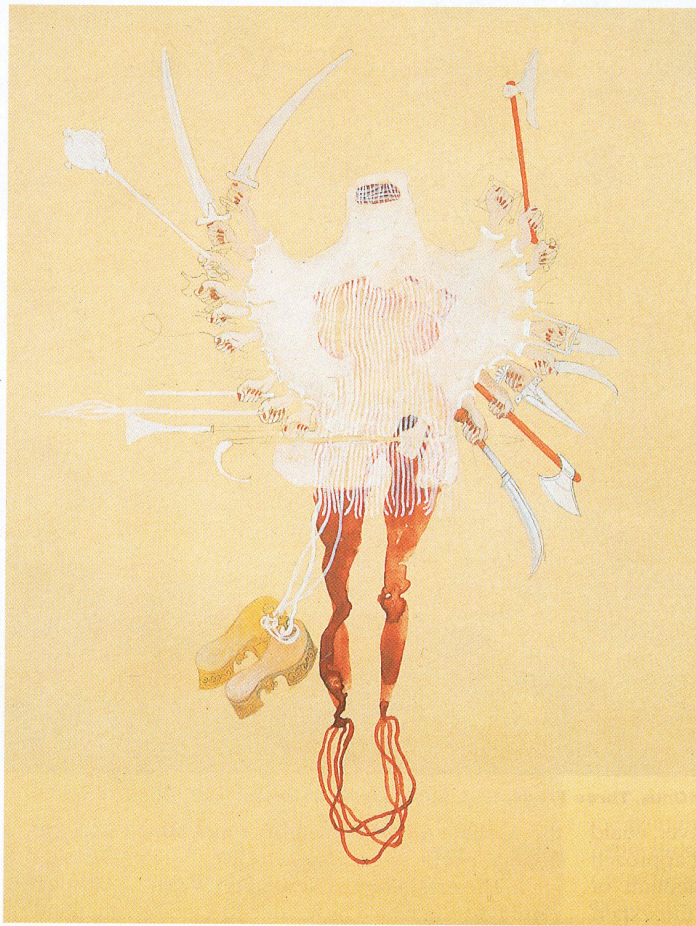
Says Dana Friis-Hansen, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Texas, and former *Flash Art* critic

possibilities of either approach."

Friis-Hansen first saw the young artist's work in 1995, in Houston, where Sikander is currently at the well-respected Glassell School of Art. A close follower of Sikander's unique and timely hybridization of East and West, Friis-Hansen says, "She challenges herself to draw Western ideas about culture, gender, and self into the South Asian context in which she was trained. This cultural weaving is a risky, difficult task, and it will be very interesting to see where she takes it."

Born in Lahore in 1969, Sikander first studied art while still in grammar school. She began creating some of her signature forms—circle and ellipse shapes—which are still recognizable in her work today, as in the haunting miniature *Apparatus of Power*, on display at the Whitney Biennial. Although she wished to continue her studies in art, Sikander decided to pursue a degree in English Literature to please her parents. Following family tradition, Sikander enrolled in Pakistan's Kinnaird College for Women. In 1987, in the midst of Pakistan's rule by military dictatorship—a time when cultural outlets were restricted and women were required to wear veils—Sikander dropped out of Kinnaird and clandestinely enrolled in Lahore's National Collage of Arts (NCA) while her parents were traveling abroad.

To assuage her family upon their return, she concentrated on the study of architecture, the most "academic" of courses at an art school. A turning point occurred when Sikander attended a series of lectures on Indian and Pakistani miniature



Shahzia Sikander, *A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, 1995, vegetable color, watercolor, dry pigment, tea on handmade paper, 18 x 15 inches.

of contemporary Asian art, "What is most interesting about Sikander's work and her development as an artist is how she is moving between a tradition-bound, highly structured form of artmaking—the Persian miniature—to more individualistic and expressive means, without losing the rich

paintings, presented by Robert Skelton, an ex-curator from England's Victoria and Albert Museum. "I became truly inspired; I wanted to know more about this genre," recalls Sikander. "I realized I wanted to reinvent traditions then, while still somehow avoiding mere imitations of Western art."

Switching her concentration to miniature painting, Sikander helped establish NCA's reputation as a venue for the contemporary teaching of miniature painting. When Sikander was a student, she had only one other peer studying the genre. Today, the department consists of 25-30 students.

**W**hile a student in Lahore, Sikander was honored with Pakistan's highest award of merit in the fine arts; the Shakir Ali Award/Rudyard Kipling Award, as well as the NCA's Haji Sharif Award for Excellence in Miniature Painting and Distinction Award, all bestowed upon her in 1993. Upon graduation, Sikander relocated to the East Coast of the United States to take up a scholarship from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). While still a graduate student she was the youngest artist featured in the 1994 exhibition *A*

*Selection of Contemporary Paintings from Pakistan* at the Pacific Asian Museum in Pasadena, California. In 1995, she received her Masters of Fine Art degree from RISD with honors. That year, Sikander was featured in the major exhibition *An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan*, which was on display at the Cartwright Hall, Bradford City Museum, in Bradford, England, as well as the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France. In 1996, Sikander built an impressive résumé of shows around Texas, in both Houston and Dallas. Although she has been showing steadily outside of her native Pakistan, her work was also displayed at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts in Islamabad in 1996.

As Salima Hashmi recently wrote of Sikander in the magazine *Pakistan Neusline*, "Shahzia has been through the rigors required of a miniaturist but retains an innovative sensitivity which is essential if she is to grow as a painter of her time.

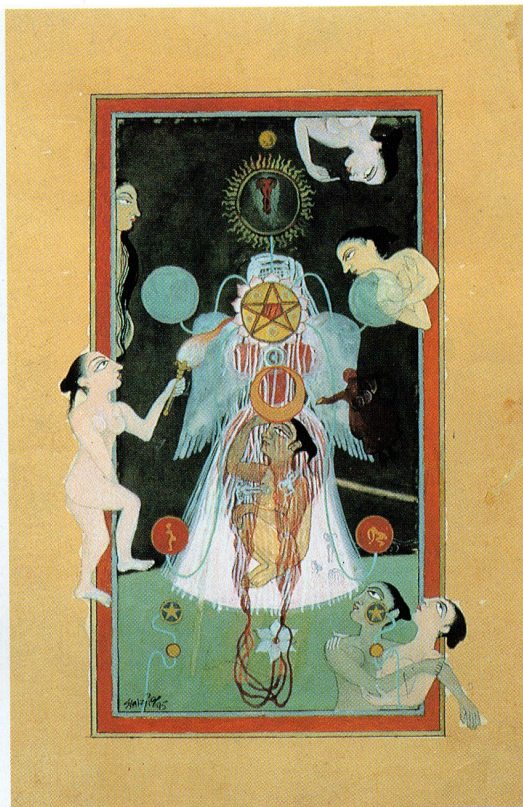
Treading a difficult tightrope of artistic skills and intention, she is grappling with the whole question of the relevance of tradition."

In Sikander's work, which involves the ritualized fabrication of brushes, the preparation of paper and of pigment from vegetable dyes as well as the meticulous brushwork required to achieve both the sharpness and softness of miniature painting techniques, she highlights fundamental issues of misrepresentation, exoticification, and cultural exploitation in a highly stylized, conscious structure. "I strive to break out of the preciousness of miniature paintings," says Sikander. "My work isn't about ethnicity, after all, or using it as some sort of propaganda."

What Sikander's work is about is a heightened sense of self identity, a relentless curiosity that knits together mythology, history, fantasy, and memory, communicated through a visual

vocabulary that has evolved out of the artist's understanding of miniature painting as well as her own personal symbolism. "When it is clear that an artist is curious, others—viewers—become curious as well," says Sikander. "These pieces are not only about my own experience, but the experience that a gallery-goer brings to viewing them."

What's next for this rising new star? "I'm exploring looser, larger work that balances the rigidity of the set rules of miniatures," says Sikander, referring to giant paintings created on gallery walls (examples of these daring new departures are on display at the Hosfelt Gallery show, along with 30 framed works on paper). Sikander is also scheduled to appear in a prestigious solo show at San Francisco's Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens as well as in the group exhibition *Out of India*, on view at the Queens Museum of Art, in Flushing Meadows, New York, both later this year. Taking her cross-cultural stance further, Sikander also plans on coordinating collaborative projects between America and Pakistani artists (she has already facilitated the visiting lectureship of RISD paintings faculty member Bobby Oliver at NCA in Lahore). "Making art is not just about making physical work," says Sikander. "It's also about meeting people, interacting and communicating with them, and making a meaningful existence." Δ



**Shahzia Sikander, Apparatus of Power, 1995.** vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on wasli handmade paper, no dimensions given.



**Shahzia Sikander, Separate Working Things, 1995.** vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on wasli handmade paper, no dimensions given.