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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



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Shahzia Sikander, *Hood's Red Rider #2*, 1997, vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-colored "wasil" paper, 10 1/4 x 7 1/4".



Ingo Meller, *Malve bläulich . . .*, 1997, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 18 1/2".

NEW YORK

SHAHZIA SIKANDER/ "OUT OF INDIA"

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OF ART

Shahzia Sikander, a twenty-eight-year-old Pakistani artist currently living in Houston, made a strong impression at the 1997 Whitney Biennial, and even more so in a Drawing Center "Selections" show, with her small-scale works on paper. A number of such works were on display in her first one-person exhibition in New York alongside six executed on a much larger scale: three paintings on canvas, two wall paintings, and a multilayered "tissue-paper collage" of more than thirty sheets pinned to the wall.

If Sikander's intention was to avoid being pigeonholed as a miniaturist or intimist on the one hand, or as a draftsman rather than a painter on the other, then she has clearly succeeded. Her large-scale efforts are, if anything, even sharper than her works on paper. Their polyphonic flurries of discordant images—or not so much images as pieces of stories, since their illustrational origins remain patent even when indecipherable—are as broad in their address as they are hermetic in import. And Sikander's draftsmanship is not wedded to the miniaturist's excruciating refinement and precision; she can work fast, loose, and "primitive" when she wants, as she does in *Beyond Surfaces* (all works 1997).

Still, the fact that the most complicated and ambitious of the big pieces, *Hood's*

Red Rider #1, is also the weakest suggests that the artist is still unsure how to encompass her multiplicity of sources and techniques in a single work. Those sources range from the traditional miniature painting she studied in Lahore to pop culture and Western modernism, all pervaded by a fascination with the historical vicissitudes of the female image, à la Nancy Spero. These concatenated fragments need a certain amount of open space in order to resonate, and this she preserves in the other works on canvas here, *Fleshy Weapons* and *G-endangered*, in which big tracts of unpainted ground allow for implicit rather than overtly constructed space.

The innocent viewer could be forgiven for feeling transported by Sikander's show back to the heyday of the Italian transavanguardia; after all, an artist like Francesco Clemente drew deeply on some of the same Indian traditions in which Sikander was trained. Is it so surprising that, with Sikander reaching from East to West as Clemente did from West to East, the two should have crossed paths? It's a crossing more and more artists are making, as we could see in "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora," which included several of Sikander's "miniatures." If finding a form to accommodate multiplicity is a pivotal issue for her, that task also informs some of the most vivid of her peers' works in "Out of India" as well. In the claustrophobic photographs of Samena Rana, who died in England in 1992, shards of imagery are chocked and compacted, while in Mohini Chandra's *Album Pacifica*, 1997, images are voided: the album consists of 100 photographs of the backs of other photographs, a revelation of the

materiality "behind" the image, and of the evanescence of that materiality as it becomes, itself, an image.

Yet Sikander's subject matter, too, presents a dilemma. Insofar as her far-flung citations build up allegories of female identity transmuted across intersecting cultural contexts, any given viewer will recognize certain references while finding others utterly obscure. So the formal invention and exuberance of the paintings must do a good bit of the labor. It's the artist's off-balance and (in more than one sense) edgy composition that makes a work like *Fleshy Weapons* memorable, not the jazzy iconography. The painting's juxtaposition of sharp and piercing forms with rounded, voluptuous ones tells its own tale about the crossing of aggression and tenderness, terror and desire. It's a tale told with sly wit and a talent for the estrangement that refreshes vision—characteristics everywhere in evidence in Sikander's work.

—Barry Schwabsky

INGO MELLER CHEIM & READ

Ingo Meller, I would hazard, is an instinctive colorist who is making an effort to approach color analytically: his empirical methods seem designed to channel his visceral response to materials. His paintings are restricted in their means and modest in appearance, yet highly physical in impact. They are made on pieces of nearly raw linen that have been cut just a bit off the rectangle and affixed directly to the wall like scraps

of wallpaper.

The darkness of the linen—here treated as a color in itself, not a neutral ground—seems to sink into the whiteness of the wall, a last vestige of the old idea of painting-as-window in these otherwise intently material, nonillusionistic works. Their slight irregularity of shape may owe something to the precedent of Gunter Umberg, and gives the paintings the air of fragments cropped from some larger field. An inspection of the way the oil paint meets the edges of the linen, however, confirms that it was put on after the fabric was cut. The paint has been applied in thick, wide, rather straightforward and inelegant strokes that are generally either loosely horizontal or vertical. When these are widely separated from each other, they suggest a more painterly recap of the splayed grids of much Constructivist painting; when they become denser, jostling one another, they approach the more exasperated manner of certain postwar painting, such as that of Joan Mitchell or perhaps Pierre Soulages. In either mode, one experiences the color in full only after accepting the ordinariness, even the poverty, of the material that is its vehicle—a kind of delayed repleteness.

At times one could think these were simply bits of canvas on which the artist had tried out a number of different paints before using them on a real painting. Even their titles point this way, by simply listing, in German, the names of the oil paints that ended up on the canvas. One 1997 work is called *Malve bläulich*, W&N 400, *Chromoxadgrün feurig*, W&N 692, *Neapelgelb rötlich extra*, *Scheveningen 112*. Yet for all that, the painter's feeling for color is not cool or detached but discreetly naturalistic: his reds are blood red, his greens sylvan, and so they touch on remembered realities rather than chemical properties. Ultimately, materials as such are secondary to the studious, interrogative pressure behind the individual marks and the tentativeness, bordering on diffidence, with which they interact. Probably it is here that the subject of Meller's work resides: not so much in the means as in the entranced incredulity with which he puts them to the test. The emotional clarity of these paintings lies in their peculiar mixture of tentativeness and insistence. And for all that this clarity relies on an apparently austere and analytical manner, it is anything but puritanical in aim. Here color (pace Ingres), the voluptuous, is the probity of art.

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