

FEBRUARY 1998

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## Photography '98

11 Hot Young Talents  
Inside the Market

Robert Adams: Land Lover

How Artists Begin a Work

UPDATE: Italy after the Quakes





## Shahzia Sikander: Reinventing the Miniature

**S**eldom larger than a page from a notebook, Shahzia Sikander's paintings are luminous visions in which the rigorous art form of classic Mughal miniatures serves the vivid imagination of a 20th-century artist. In a world steeped in images of violence, Sikander creates delicate order, and in a society that so often depicts women as victims, this young artist imbues them with mythic strength and power.

Sikander skillfully applies the precision of her discipline to traditional subjects such as portraiture as well as to convey abstract ideas. In her TriBeCa studio, amid drawings and art supplies strewn across the floor, she explains how understanding her materials is part of the process of constructing a personal vocabulary. To this end, she often prepares her own materials—diminutive brushes made from squirrel-tail hair, paper she has stained and burnished, and pigments she has ground herself.

The artist's hallmark is a floating female figure who wears a white veil and has a loop of ribbons in place of legs and feet. Often depicted with multiple arms that carry a wide range of weapons, she is like Durga, slayer of the buffalo-demon in Hindu mythology, except that in Sikander's version, the weapons are primarily signs of power, not implements of aggression. "She floats to show that she is not grounded in anything other than herself," the painter explains. Sometimes Sikander's figure is blue, the color of a male god. Always, she is a wondrous chimera and a powerful presence.



Sikander applies the technique of traditional Mughal miniature painting (below left) to works that speak to a contemporary audience. *Ready to Leave*, 1997 (above).



This figure doesn't have a name in the artist's pantheon of symbols. Rather, like the *challawa* of Indian myths, she changes form and meaning at will. "Hindu mythology can entertain anything you can imagine," says Sikander. "There are no rules. It's very liberating."

The petite artist with sparkling brown eyes, a lovely smile, and easy eloquence was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1969. The oldest of three children, she grew up in a middle-class, progressive Muslim home and attended an all-girls Catholic school, which she says was "very strict and considered a good, solid education."

She went on to study miniature painting at the National College of Art with Bashir Ahmed, a respected master, and was one of only two students—both female—in the program. Art in Pakistan, she explains, is one profession that is mostly a "woman's thing." Though her peers couldn't understand her choice of such an old-fashioned art form, she relished the discipline and control that it demanded of her. Sikander's thesis project, *The Scroll*, an autobiographical painting, 60 inches long and 12 inches high, reveals the artist's technical mastery and shows her beginning to shatter the form's



# studio

conventions, most obviously with its personal content and emotional timbre.

In the work Sikander depicts herself entering what represents her home in Lahore. The viewer is then led through gardens and architectural spaces and encounters with archetypal family members.

With the equivalent of a bachelor's degree from the college, Sikander left Pakistan to attend graduate school in the United States. The Rhode Island School of Design provided the financial assistance she needed. Two years later, she was awarded a fellowship at the Glassell School of Art in Houston. While there, the Barbara Davis Gallery gave her a one-person show. The experience of going to school in the States, she says, was intimidating but also exhilarating. "And emotionally," she adds, "it was alienating. I was going into something I wasn't really sure of. In Mughal miniature painting, you enter the painting at step one, preparing the paper itself. You invest a certain amount of labor and discipline, and when you finish—when every dot is filled, every line is perfect, and every corner detailed—you have this immense satisfaction that you have produced a painting at the end of a certain amount of time. The first few weeks at the Rhode Island School of Design I worked on one miniature painting. I just didn't have the understanding of the body of work [that needed] to be produced for

where is your veil?" she says. "So I asked my mother to send me one. People responded to me differently. Because people couldn't see my body language, they listened and I had to think twice before saying anything.

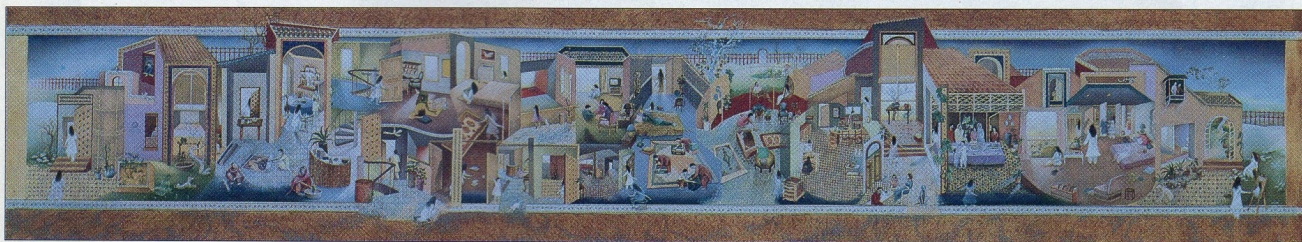
"I also had not thought about how much one's identity exists on the surface," she continues. "For me, it's trying not to get defined—Asian, American, Pakistani, Muslim, woman. Those things

the Drawing Center's associate curator Elizabeth Finch. "Her work is also very beautiful and promotes prolonged looking. You don't walk away from it."

Last summer, Sikander moved to Manhattan. She wants to settle in New York, but for now she has taken a residency in Chicago, sponsored by the Renaissance Society, where she will have a show next month. An exhibition of her new work, selling for between \$4,000 and \$16,000,



ABOVE The artist in her studio. BELOW *The Scroll*, 1992, shows Sikander beginning to shatter the miniature's conventions, with its personal content and emotional timbre.



constant critiques at the graduate level."

Then she had a breakthrough. "I started doing these gestural drawings. Here, suddenly, you're in a vulnerable stage where you never know how to end it—or where to begin." They gave her a great sense of freedom, she says, and at the same time provided her with a way of expressing her feelings of displacement.

Sikander notes that in spite of all the talk of multiculturalism in this country, she is still perceived as "exotic," and is amused by the irony of being a Muslim who never wore the traditional veil—until Americans asked her about it. It became a statement of identity. "Here, the first question everyone seems to ask is,

are very meaningful, but not the end of anything. Understanding that led to a lot of things in my work."

The results of Sikander's formal and personal investigations are enormously seductive, and response to them has been enthusiastic. Her wondrous little paintings were included by curator Lisa Phillips in this year's Whitney Biennial and were acquired by the museum for its permanent collection. They were also a major attraction in "Selections Spring '97," presented simultaneous with the biennial at New York's Drawing Center. "When Shahzia showed us her drawings, it was immediately evident that what she was doing was new and significant," says

was recently on view at Deitch Projects in SoHo, and she is currently included in "Out of India" at the Queens Museum of Art through March 22.

She has also applied for permanent residency, which would allow her to travel freely between the U.S. and Pakistan, carving out avenues of artistic exchange. Like the mythic figure in her work, Sikander knows she can count on herself. Unlike that character, the artist has her eyes focused clearly on what she wants and her feet planted firmly on the ground.

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