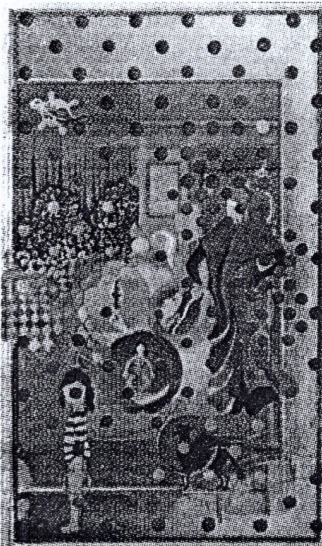


On Exhibit

MUSEUMS

Going to Extremes



COURTESY THE DAKIS IANNOU COLLECTION

"Red Riding Hood" (1994-97) by Shahzia Sikander is on display at the Hirshhorn.

IT'S HALF PAST 10 in the morning, and the staff of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's press office is getting a bit antsy. The guest of honor is already 30 minutes late for her own press preview.

Sight Lines

When Shahzia Sikander finally shows up to walk through her solo exhibition in the museum's Directions Gallery, the refreshingly casual Pakistan-born painter is wearing what looks more like grubby studio garb than museum-meet-and-greet attire: black jeans and T-shirt emblazoned with the ironic legend "A.S.A.P." On her forearms are paint stains from the mural installation she has been touching up as recently as the day before. In her hand is a speckled seashell she'll soon be using to burnish the surface of the one remaining piece she needs to work on before opening her show of watercolors and mixed-media paintings inspired by the centuries-old tradition of Indian miniatures.

Given the meticulous-to-the-point-

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of-fussy nature of the work (based on royal portraiture, idealized narratives of romance and elaborate architectural studies from the 15th century), she surprises, but then again, so does the sprawling, wall-sized painting that initially blocks your view of the more minutely-detailed works for which the artist is best known.

"Part of the attraction," explains Sikander of her relatively recent interest in the mural format, "was a desire to break out of the preciousness of the miniatures," paintings whose rigorous formal and technical conventions have captivated her since her undergraduate days at Lahore's National College of Art. It was there that she first discovered reproductions of the ancient illuminations in (coincidentally enough) a Smithsonian Institution publication. According to Sikander, who shifts easily from the intimate to the oversized format, "Both extremes keep the other in check."

This concern with the balancing of opposites informs more than just the scale of Sikander's art (she also paints canvases in the intermediate eight-foot range, although none of these are on view here). It is an interest that also colors the themes of her many-layered art—which explores issues of female identity in a patriarchal society, of the old vs. the new, of East-meets-West and of the triumph of the imagination over history.

"I'm very interested in hybridity," says Sikander, who since 1995 has divided her time between Houston and New York while awaiting approval of a green card application. "It's the dichotomy of both my experiences which holds the most fascination for me." The artist, who decries the "myth" of artistic authenticity and cultural purity, describes her work as neither wholly autobiographical nor merely about deconstructing the miniature tradition.

"It's more about how to find a space that's neither personal nor cultural but informed by both," she says. "One is a product of so much today. The modern art world is so porous and you have to be kind of a chameleon."

—Michael O'Sullivan

SHAHZIA SIKANDER — Through Feb. 21 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza). 202/357-2700 (TDD: 202/357-1729). Web site: www.si.edu/hirshhorn. Open 10 to 5 daily. Free admission.