

*Shahzia Sikander: Drawings and Miniatures*

*November 13, 1998–January 10, 1999*

**Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art**

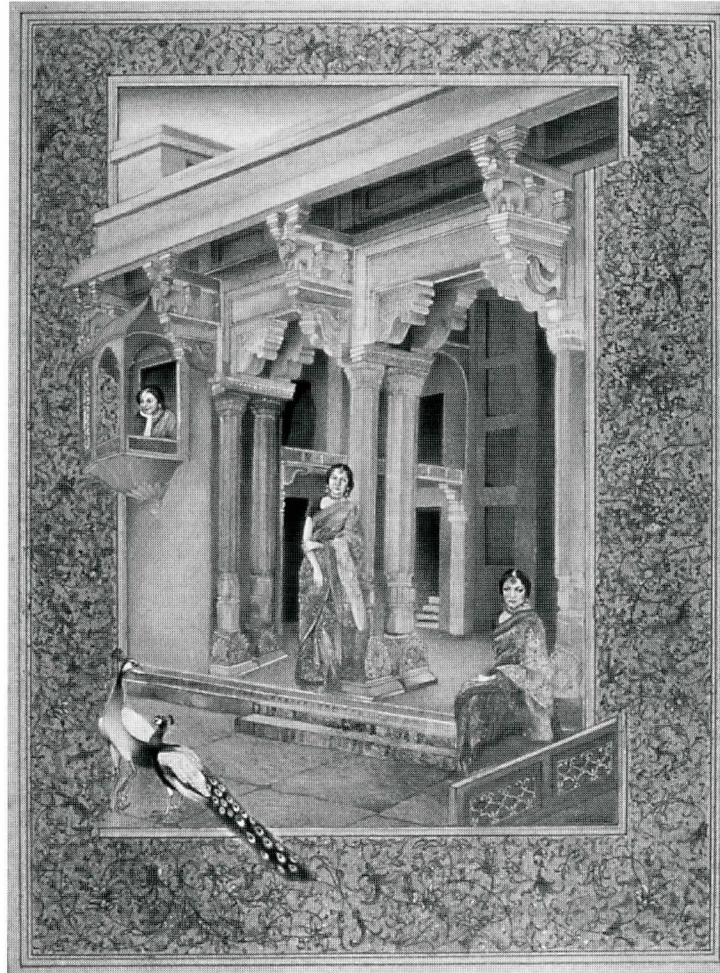
Language remains this inexhaustible reservoir from which noises, proverbs and stories continue to flow when water is scarce ... For memory and language are places both of sameness and otherness, dwelling and travelling. Here, Language is the site of return, the warm fabric of a memory, and the insistent call from afar, back home. But here also, there, and everywhere, language is a site of change, an ever-shifting ground.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha<sup>1</sup>

The visual language of Shahzia Sikander's drawings and miniatures conveys the border crossings and expanded boundaries that constitute the fluid identity of the migrant. Traveling between national, cultural, social, and personal

boundaries, Sikander and artists like her who have left their country of origin to live in another—she came from Pakistan to America—articulate the shifting identities they negotiate. Through narratives of home and displacement, artists of migration demonstrate the physical and psychological journeys they make between home and a new country. Sikander's visual language comprises Indian miniature paintings and Muslim and Hindu imagery which she has co-opted to express the multiple public and private selves of the immigrant and the hybridity of her experience. While the miniature's visual roots are apparent—note the small formats, the corporal gestures, and the figures' dress—Sikander's painting style and subject matter are fluid and quixotic. She pairs painterly passages of abstraction with recognizable images. Figures that may start out highly representative often melt into abstraction. Sikander's abstract painterly gestures affix difference to the excruciatingly detailed miniatures from Indian traditions. Her mixed Muslim and Hindu iconography and hybrid painting style suggest that in her world experience, all mythologies, geographical borders, and cultural codes can and should be called into question.

In *The Scroll*, Sikander adopts the formal style of manuscript painting. Semi-autobiographical, *The Scroll* depicts Sikander and other people—perhaps family—maneuvering through domestic life in Lahore, Pakistan. The broken and varied perspectives are typical of Indian miniatures, as is the simultaneous view of multiple activities. However, Sikander integrates her personal and homey intimacy within manuscript painting's formal construct, changing the nature of the genre and thus blurring the boundaries between history's then and the present's now.



*Mirnat 1*, 1992. photo: Shahzia Sikander

Home is often an emotionally charged idea for immigrants. They have left their homes yet struggle to make a new home in a new land, dangling between conflicting ideologies of that once-familiar and now new and even contested place. As filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha notes,

Home for the exile or migrant can hardly be more than a transitional or circumstantial place, since the "original" home cannot be recaptured, nor can its presence/absence be entirely banished in the "remade" home. Thus, figuratively but also literally speaking, travelling back and forth between home and

abroad becomes a mode of dwelling. Every movement between here and there bears with it a movement within a here and a movement within a there.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of self in relationship to home and new country is also one of conflicting energies. Vishakha N. Desai, writing about her teenaged transition as an exchange student between India and Santa Barbara, California, noted the disparity between her new "Americanized" idea of herself as private and her struggles for privacy upon her return to India, where her family expected an open self. She writes, "This dichotomy between a more familial notion of self, prevalent in much of Asia, and the modern Western one that defines self as a more autonomous entity is arguably one of the central qualities of the predicament of the Asian American experience."<sup>3</sup> In her self-portrait in *The Scroll*,

Sikander is solitary yet actively participates in the lives of the people around her, perhaps suggesting both the bicultural identity she will adopt upon her subsequent move to the United States and how the miniature functions as a vehicle for transformation.

Sikander's adoption of miniature painting is neither nostalgic nor a simple embracing of her cultural patrimony. Rather, she is driven to bring miniature painting into the arena of critical inquiry. According to Sikander, the issues of miniature painting such as how and where imagery developed are rooted in ambiguity. For instance, she notes that Indian Mughal painting evolved under Muslim patronage and is easily available for study in Pakistan, while Hindu Kangra images generally are not. These issues may be obscured to the casual reader by their inclusion in the histories of

Indian art in which using the word "India" to describe pre-modern art can suggest a seamless history. Pakistan's relatively short 50-year history adds to the entanglement of Pakistani and Indian histories. By recognizing these blurred boundaries, erasing borders, and merging differing styles and subjects, Sikander opens a discourse on contested histories.

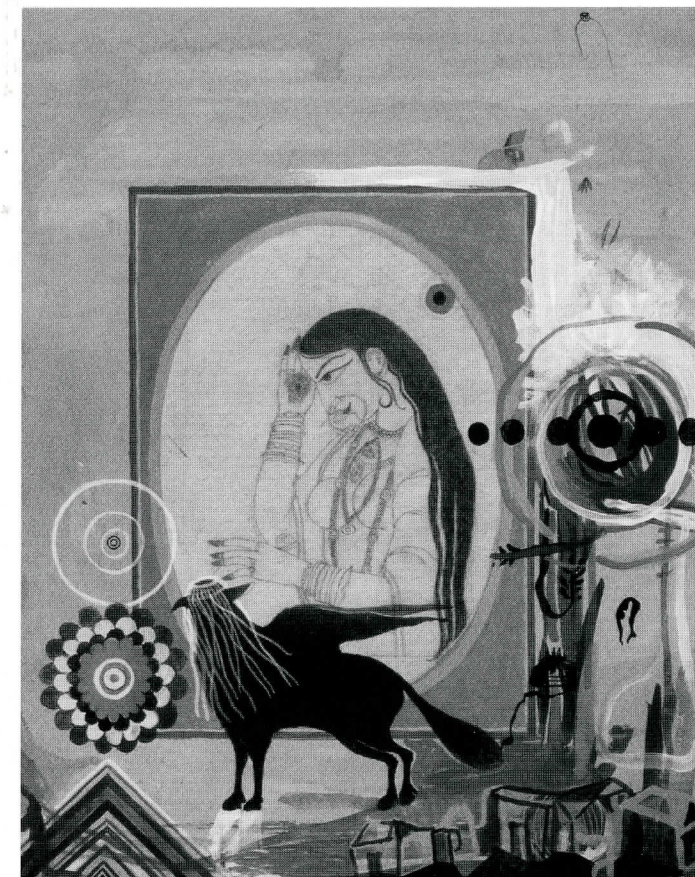
Sikander's consistent questioning of the traditions of Indian miniature painting naturally led her to scrutinize Muslim and Hindu imagery and the effects of their juxtaposition within one work. She deliberately contrasts the abstract, reserved nature of Muslim art with the expressionistic and sensual elements of Indian painting, destroying any borders between them through this intermingling. Thus rigid identification of and claims to a particular style are diluted. The paradox of identity and especially of that of Pakistan and its complicated relationship with India is not, Sikander found, a reality for most Indians, while she, as a Pakistani, finds it of crucial importance. Combining the vocabulary of Muslim imagery, such as the veil, with Hindu mythology, she finds that the intersection of the two provides a new visual language with which to confront problems of identity and who claims what. The resulting hybridity, rooted in fragments of each culture, allows Sikander to make connections between cultures that otherwise might remain buried under post-Partition tension.

Sikander loads her works with images, textures, decorative elements, and figures that she varies from painting to painting. The veiled griffin in *Ready to Leave, Series II* appears in several of Sikander's works. It is a character, by definition, of hybridity—part eagle, part lion—underlining the notions of hybrid identities Sikander examines in her paintings. Of her repeated figures, Sikander notes, "Some of the recurring symbols in my work, like the shredded veil, the griffin, the multiarmed goddess with the veiled head and no feet, are laced with humor, the desire being to displace the stereotype."<sup>4</sup> Disrupting the trajectory, stereotyped views of immigrants in America is often critical to the migrant experience. Overwrought expectations of certain dress, habits, and religious practice can obscure immigrant identity. Sikander has noted that once some Americans knew she was from Pakistan, where the dominant religion is Islam, they asked why she wasn't wearing a veil, expecting that she would. Thus to simply go about daily life as an immigrant in America becomes a political act; it is

to declare that one's identity is not fixed within a particular culture, suggesting that one can have plural and even contradictory identities. Sikander's paintings and miniatures, as a fusion of Muslim and Hindu imagery and her own contemporary inquiries and artistic methodologies, convey the struggle to dismantle facile assumptions and stereotypes about private and public identities.

By stacking Indian miniature painting traditions with her own painterly investigations and conceptual narratives, Sikander suggests that the time between then and now no longer exists in any tangible or rigid form.

Time collapses, dragging along cultural attitudes and traditions, which, compressed with contemporary life and living, sustain the mélange that signifies Sikander's work. As Salman Rushdie observes about his own book *The Satanic Verses*, "Melange ... is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives to the world, and I have tried to embrace it."<sup>5</sup> Sikander's impetus for *Venus's Wonderland* was both miniature book illustration—note how the painting seems to conform to the format of a book page—and the rather bizarre aspect of children's tales. Sikander was specifically thinking of a story of a crocodile and a monkey in which both tried to coerce the other to their territory, suggesting her own desire to exchange cultural icons. As in all her works, the symbolism evolved,



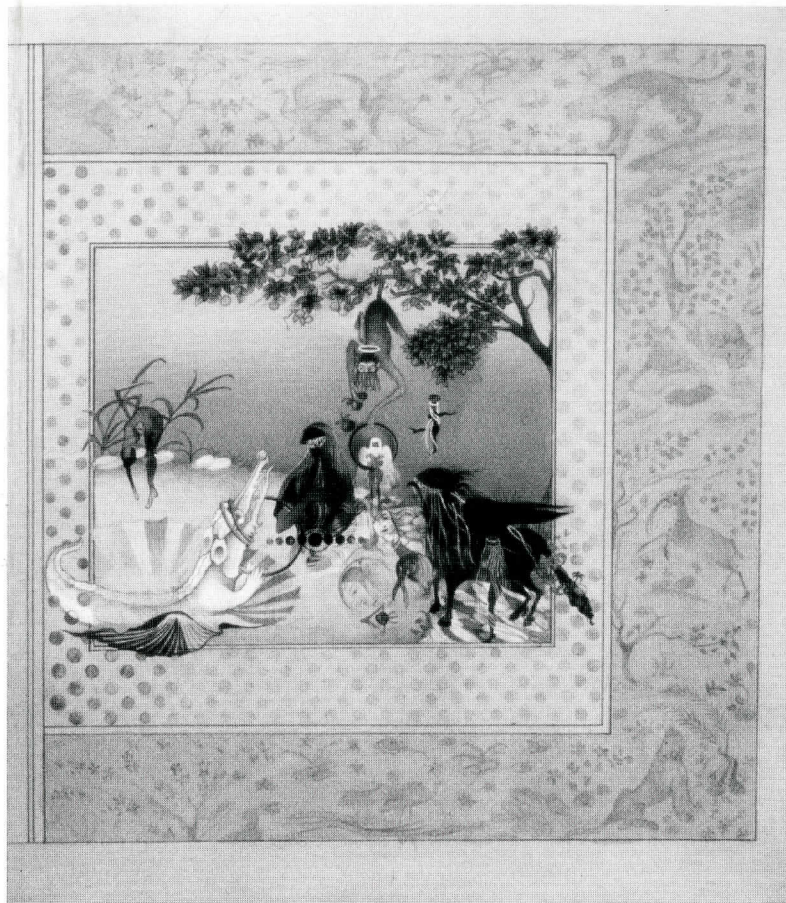
*Ready to Leave, Series II*, 1997. photo: Almac Camera

figures were added, taken from other works, and fragmented to exist within this particular painting.

In *Venus's Wonderland*, all the figures are veiled, including the primate dangling by his tail. Of the veiled figures, Sikander notes,

The veiled figure refers to different levels of women's experiences. It is a marriage veil, it is a dressed form. It is a celebration of femaleness and not about oppression! It is a far cry from how some viewers perceive it—it isn't symbolic of women's traditional roles or symbolic of my own experience. It isn't a political symbol; it is supposed to represent a universal experience. I paint it with memories of childhood in my mind, of growth.<sup>6</sup>

The veil is critical to Sikander's works, for it appears in many of her paintings. Yet it is, in her words, "buoyant," allowing the forms to float in space, to exist where they might otherwise not.<sup>7</sup> The veil often shifts into wings, or clothing, and when placed on a monkey or a griffin, even becomes humorous. The veil is also almost always



*Venus's Wonderland*, 1997. photo: Tom Powell

white and threaded, Sikander's formal choice that links her works to each other. Conceptually the veil is rooted in her own experiences as an immigrant in America and is a direct response to the questions she bore about *not* wearing a veil. In 1993–94 performative actions, Sikander wore a veil in public spaces such as airports and “other strange zones,”<sup>8</sup> finding that people treated her enormously differently once she was veiled. The device allowed her to experience not only complete anonymity, but her own identity fluctuations which changed according to others' perceptions of her. Just as we may adopt a different persona when we wear a particular article of clothing—leather clothing may excite feelings of dominance—Sikander felt the identity change that an article of clothing may engender, demonstrating that clothing is a powerful vehicle by which to manipulate identity and other people's judgment of who we are based on what we may cover our bodies with. Thus the shifting female figures in her works that have veils, wings, flowing gowns, and no feet, are deliberately dislocated, yet self-dependent. Sikander's intentional shape-shifting allows them to remain identity-less and mutable, demonstrating how identity is fluid, sometimes rootless, and can exist on the surface of things. Sikander's shifting and accumulative images sustain agency in all the works, creating a coherent body of related imagery. Like all of her paintings, *Venus's Wonderland* is a transgressive apparatus by which Sikander manipulates traditions—cultural, geographical, and painterly—leaving any ultimate conclusion indeterminate.

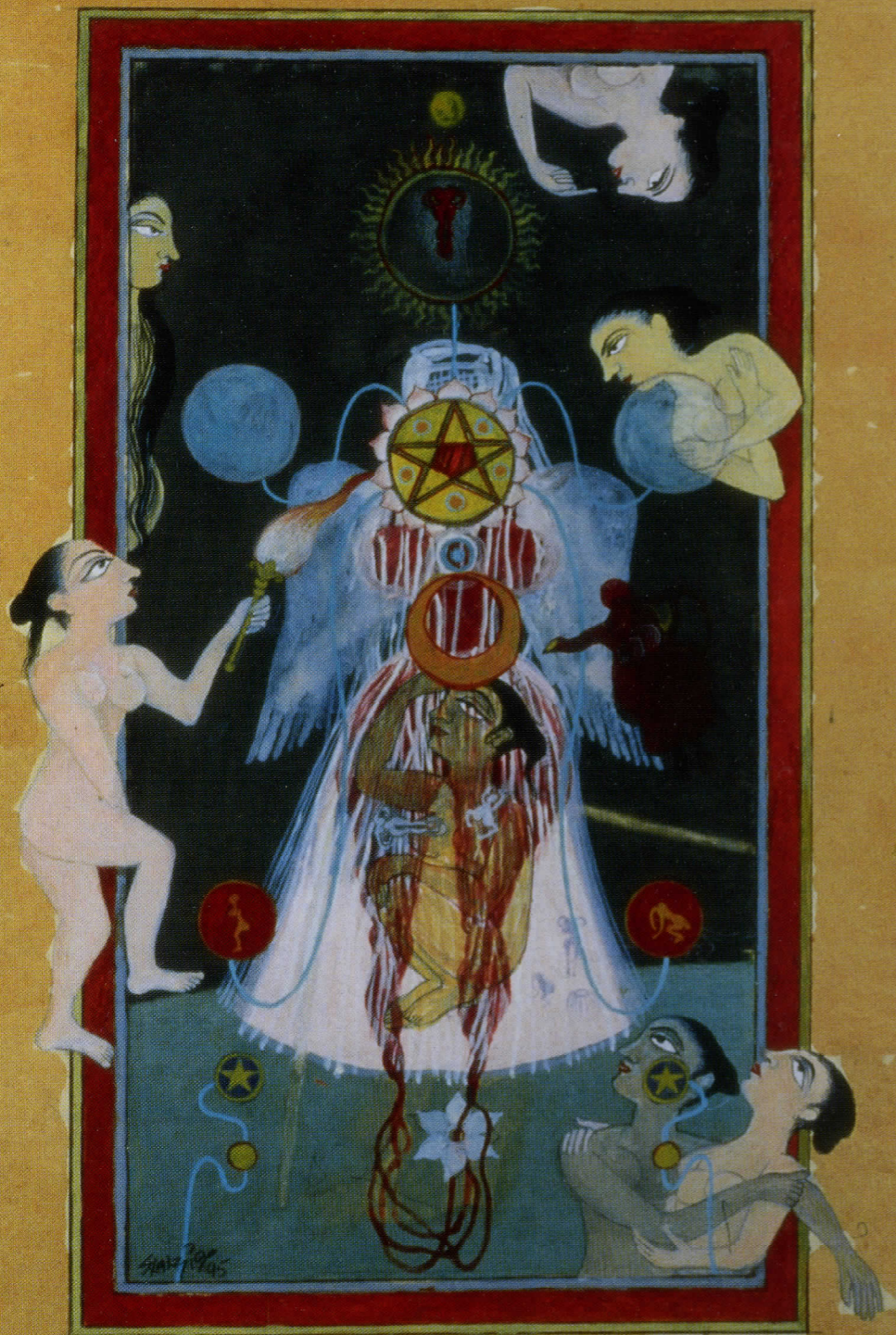
Sikander builds a connective language from the vocabulary of fragmented images. In Sikander's works, we may excavate layers of meaning in the interstices between Pakistan and India, Muslim and Hindu, representation and abstraction, then and now, here and there.

Dana Self  
Curator

#### Notes

1. Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other than myself/my other self,” *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, eds. George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, (London, England: Routledge, 1994), pp. 9–10.
2. Minh-ha, pp. 14–15.
3. Vishakha N. Desai, “Whither Home? The Predicament of a Bicultural Existence,” *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, an exhibition catalogue for an exhibition by the same name, guest curator Margo Machida, The Asia Society Galleries, New York, NY (New York, NY: The New Press, 1994), p. 31.
4. Sikander as quoted to Reena Jana in “Shazia Sikander: Celebration of Femaleness,” *Flash Art*, March/April 1998, np.
5. Salman Rushdie, “In Good Faith,” in Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, Harmondsworth, Granta/Penguin, 1992, p. 393, as quoted by Homi K. Bhabha, “Unpacking my Library ... Again,” *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds., Iain Chambers, Lidia Curti (London, England: Routledge, 1996), p. 205.
6. Reena Jana, np.
7. Sikander to Self in an October 5, 1998 telephone conversation.
8. Sikander to Self in an October 5, 1998 telephone conversation.

*Born in Lahore, Pakistan, Shazia Sikander lives and works in New York.*



left: *Apparatus of Power*, 1995.  
photo: Shahzia Sikander

front cover:  
*Uprooted Order, Series I*, 1997.  
photo: Shahzia Sikander

## Works in the Exhibition

*All dimensions in inches; height precedes width*

*Apparatus of Power*, 1995  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on wasli handmade paper; 16 1/4 x 13 1/4  
From the collection of Carol and George Craford, CA

*Extraordinary Realities, Series II*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, collage on wasli handmade paper; 21 3/4 x 18  
From the collection of Bruce Velick and Denise Filchner, CA

*Extraordinary Realities, Series III*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, collage on wasli handmade paper; 5 3/4 x 6 1/4  
Private collection, San Francisco, CA

*Venus's Wonderland*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on wasli handmade paper; 20 1/2 x 18 5/8  
From the collection of Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann, NY

*Transient Transformations*, 1996  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on paper; 17 1/2 x 14 1/2  
From the collection of Sam Feldman, TX

*Restrained Locations Within*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors on wasli handmade paper; 22 x 18  
From the collection of Councilman Joel Wachs, Los Angeles, CA

*Ready to Leave, Series II*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors on wasli handmade paper; 7 3/4 x 6 1/4  
From the collection of Richard and Lois Plehn, NY

*Collective Experiences*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors on clay and paper 28 x 22  
From the collection of Richard and Lois Plehn, NY

*Cycles and Transitions*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors on clay and paper 31 x 25  
From the collection of Jessica Parish, CA

*The Scroll*, 1992  
gouache, watercolor, tea on paper; 20 x 71  
Courtesy of the artist

*Mirrnat 1*, 1992  
dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, tea on wasli hand-prepared paper; 18 3/4 x 15 3/4  
Courtesy of the artist

*Mirrnat 2*, 1992  
dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, tea on wasli hand-prepared paper; 18 3/4 x 15 3/4  
Courtesy of the artist

*Uprooted Order, Series I*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on wasli handmade paper; 17 1/2 x 12  
From the collection of Arthur G. Rosen, NJ

*Uprooted Order, Series II*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on wasli handmade paper; 17 1/2 x 12  
From the collection of Arthur G. Rosen, NJ

*Uprooted Order, Series III*, 1997  
vegetable and watercolors, dry pigment, tea on wasli handmade paper; 21 3/4 x 17 3/4  
From the collection of Jacquelyn and Bruce Brown, FL

Special thanks to Shahzia Sikander for her generous dialogue about her work and her dedication to the stunning mural she painted *in situ* for her exhibition. Thanks also to Todd Hosfelt, Director, Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Courtney C. Cooney, Director, Deitch Projects, New York, NY; and the lenders to our exhibition.

As in artist in residence, Shahzia Sikander painted a large mural that is part of her exhibition at the Kemper Museum. Visitors were able to watch her work.

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