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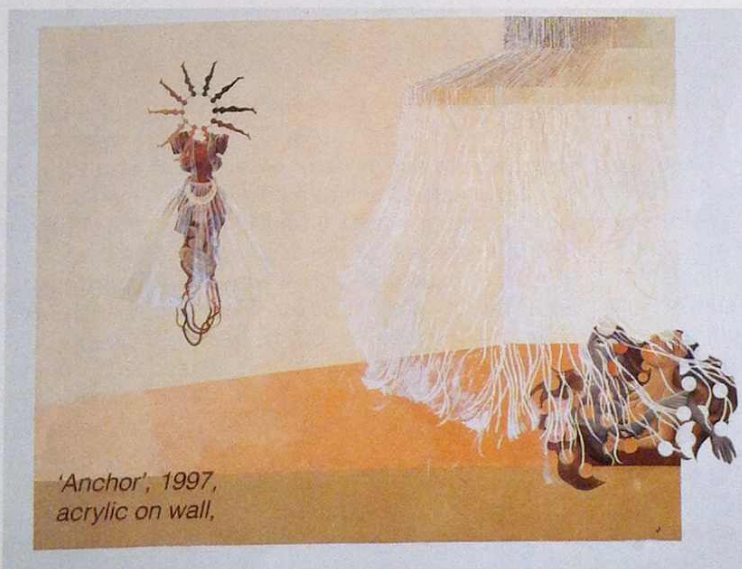


From the Whitney Museum New York, to the Hirshorn Museum Washington, the Renaissance Society Chicago, to the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, Shahzia Sikander has exhibited her work widely in the USA and earned well-deserved plaudits.

Re-inventing MINIATURE

by Rehana Savul

It seems not long ago that we stood admiring Shahzia's work at her thesis exhibition at the National College of Art, Lahore. Employing multiple perspectives and executed in a scroll format, her miniature painting was an exquisite presentation which examined the classical tradition in the context of her own environment and experience — novel, because its references were autobiographical rather than traditional. With the integration of images from her immediate experience of life and her home, Shahzia had evolved a personal idiom, contemporary, yet rooted in the classical tradition of miniature painting. Her work bore the mark of a versatile



*'Anchor', 1997,
acrylic on wall,*

talent and was subsequently acquired by the Asia-Pacific Museum, Pasadena, California.

Since then Shazia has blazed a trail of success. In the short span of eight years, she has not only acquired a prestigious place in the international art

milieu, but enabled miniature painting to be accepted as a viable art form, dynamic and able to absorb 'modern' trends. Based in the USA, she is a recognised miniature painter with a distinctive personal style and her work continues to present a new viewpoint, a contemporary ethos in the miniature format.

Internationally, she has shown her work at the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Australia, at the Ludwig Museum Germany, at the Second Johannesburg Biennale, in South Africa as well as shows in Portugal, Greece and England. She has been the recipient of coveted awards like the



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was capable of absorbing current trends. Encouraged by her teacher Professor Bashir Ahmad at the NCA and later, her exposure to a dynamic art milieu during the Master's program at the Rhode Island School of Design in the USA, inspired Shahzia to introduce a whole range of visuals, cultural nuances and interesting contradictions and juxtapositions into her work. And though she may not have consciously set out to re-invent the miniature, it was certainly her wish to blur boundaries between tradition and the avant-garde in order to make it relevant to the 21st century.

As her work evolved, Shahzia discovered great freedom in the miniature expression — as much in the past as in the present. Her work became 'charged' with multiple references, an exciting combination of tradition and personal experience, representation and abstraction, besides varied cultural references. Aesthetic manipulation of collage and abstract imagery added another dimension to her representations and her spontaneous, 'gestural' tissue drawings stood in stark contrast to the detailed discourse of her miniatures. At one point she surprised everyone by shifting scale from the miniature to the mural in a bid to make 'more confrontational work'. But miniature remained her forte. In her own words, "I still found the miniature a place of freedom, so I persisted instead of abandoning it in favour of a new medium." And despite the fact that in the US she lacked context outside the miniature tradition, outside of autobiographical references, references to home but she used the situation to her advantage. Of her experience in the US she says, "I wanted to make it work for me, not against me. I often refer to my experience here as a pleasing dislocation. I came here by choice, and I appreciate the opportunity to appropriate languages and experiences, be it Hindu mythology or the figurative / abstraction debate. They are equally exotic, and the miniature can accommodate them both."

Her miniatures are rendered in different styles — some traditional, others modern, some are re-invented while others unabashedly hark back to earlier forms. She paints carefully in delicate

South Asian Women's Creative Collective Achievement Award in 1999, The Joan Mitchell Award in '98, The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award and the Core Fellowship, Glassel School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Her miniatures are housed in many reputed private and public collections in many parts of the world.

What is the secret of her phenomenal success? Besides her obvious talent, it is Shahzia's undeviating commitment to miniature painting. Despite perceptions in art circles that miniature painting was a stylised and faded genre based on craft and technique rather than genuine expression, some young artists, including Shahzia, were eager to examine its cultural and historical dimensions and curious to discover what submission to miniature painting would entail. Certainly it

appeared restrictive, came with a set of rules, seemed self-referential and lacking context outside its tradition, but Shahzia was not deterred. She was very much aware that it was an anachronistic practice which was not only labour intensive, but limited in scope and impact but she was

"I think my work is about observation. More about raising questions than providing answers."

confident that she could go beyond its boundaries. The fact that numerous schools of miniature painting had co-existed and multiple visual discourses had prevailed alongside the miniature through the span of its existence, negated the premise that it was a 'fixed' genre. And though it may not be termed as 'contemporary' aesthetic, it

washes of color, with the precision and detail that is in keeping with the tradition and then over-paints, introducing a dot motif which blocks out much of its detail, moving it to the realm of abstraction. This effect is very pronounced in 'Ready to Leave', the image of a woman adorning herself with her face blocked by a large modernist dot. According to Shahzia, "I put in all this time, and then I subtract it through a violation of that space. I do gestures that I have no control over. And it's the simultaneous existence of two forms of exploration that charges the work. You might find yourself asking, where did all the details go? Where did the face go? because a dot sits on it." And yet in the miniatures, 'In Your Head and not on My Feet' and



Recognised as a miniature artist with a distinctive personal style, Shahzia has ventured into new ways of seeing and depicting — examining the classical tradition in the context of her own environment and experience, thus evolving a contemporary ethos in the miniature format.

Right: *Shahzia in Studio*, 1999 (photo by Jason Schmidt)
Below: *'Beyond Surfaces'*, 1997



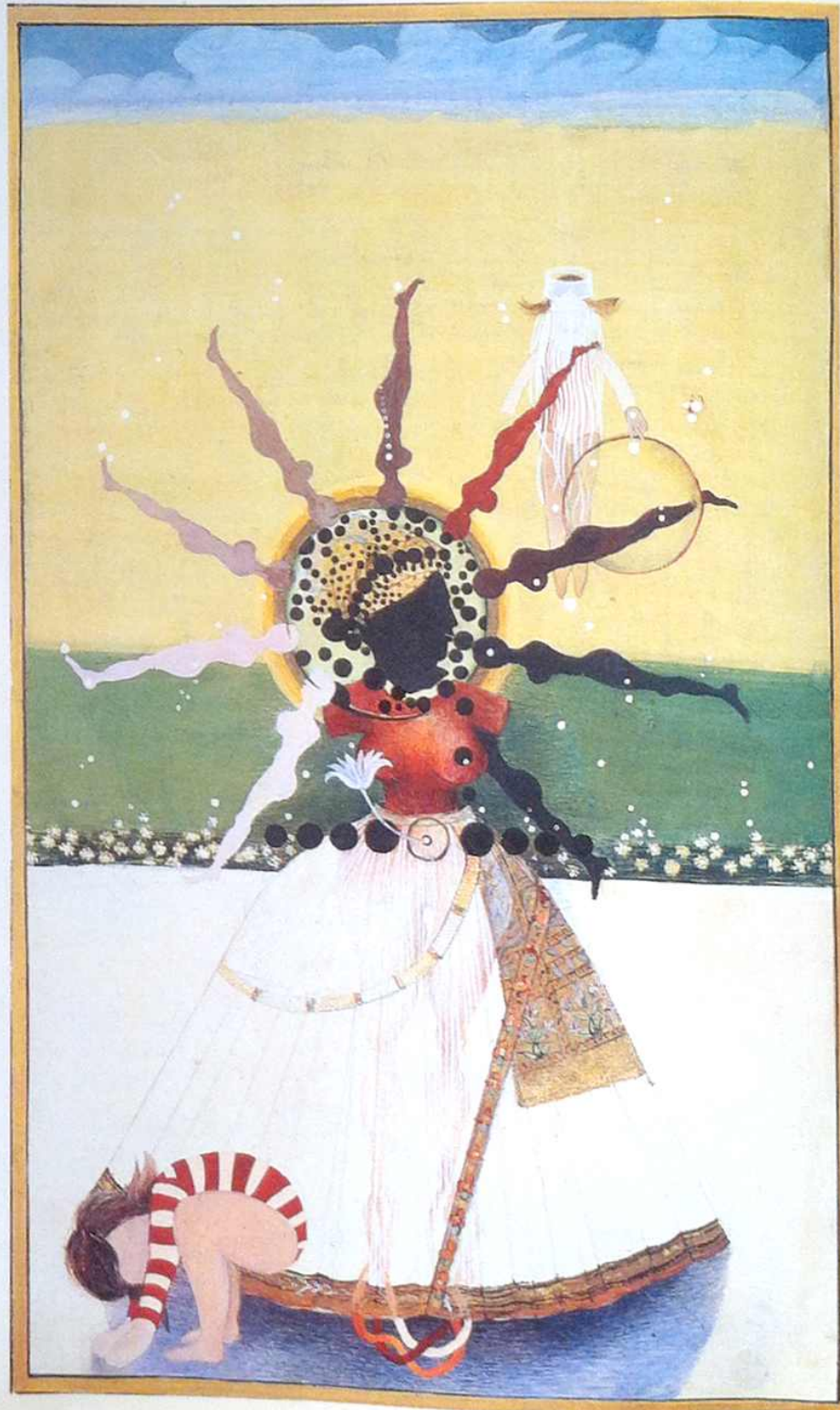
'Where Lies the Perfect Fit', one featuring a Persian courtesan and the other a dancer, the figures are presented in the classical Mughal style. Using a varied palette of luminous colours, the artist explores space and perspective with flair and renders figures, design elements and movement with tiny brush-strokes to create the stylised format of the classical school.

In the 'Extraordinary Reality' series, Shahzia appropriates crudely painted tourist-trade miniatures of men hunting and drinking, paints over them and then super-imposes cut-outs of her own photographs, thereby implying her rejection of the underlying values

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inherent in the paintings. Religious differences between the sub-continental peoples is often an issue in Shahzia's work – there is often a juxtaposition of Muslim/Hindu imagery. A Muslim woman's veil atop an armed Hindu goddess in 'Fleshy Weapons', a formal portrait of a Muslim gentleman surrounded by Hindu nymphs in 'Perilous Order' and then again a painting from the tourist-trade miniatures with herself in an elaborate headdress, standing with her hands in the Hindu 'namaste' stance, collaged over an image of the Madonna. Faisal Devji, in his essay 'Translated Pleasures' for The Renaissance Catalogue, interprets these works as "... a very complex dialogue between photograph and painting, between

contd on pg 111



their young ones' clothes and shoes. The huddle of clothes was just that, a huddle of clothes. Then the camera zoomed in on the pile of shoes. Though almost all of them were the ubiquitous rubber sandals that one sees on the feet of so many poor children in Lahore, each pair again seemed different from the first.

It seems that a score of factors—contusions and bumps on the feet, the wearer's way of walking, whether he or she is careless or particular—can mould the shoe into something more than a slip-cover, such as clothes are. They do not become amorphous things when abandoned, but retain their own shape, and something else besides, an indelible imprint of the wearer. Post-mortem, they can become almost an identikit, uncannily resurrecting the personality of the wearer.

That is why those abandoned shoes—on the one hand, of affluent youngsters struck down by a cruel disease, and on the other, of desperately poor young boys killed by a savage murderer—unerringly and equally evoked such poignancy and pathos, the pathos of young lives irretrievably lost.

contd from pg 48

Re-inventing Miniature

Christian, Hindu, and Muslim; between the traditional and the modern, original and fake, artist and artisan". Besides Shahzia's penchant for Hindu mythology, the juxtaposition of icons is indicative of the artist's concern about the ill-will between the sub-continental peoples. Shahzia explains her fascination for Hindu mythology – "Whereas the Islamic miniature reflected a minimal, reserved poetry all its own, Hindu mythology has a certain weight. It is very elaborate. In terms of representation, anything is possible – the sensual, the sexual, the explicit, even the abstract".

Shahzia's work has earned raves from well-known art critics. Washington Post's Paul Richards observed that "her painting comes with pedigree ... Her technique is antique, and rigorous and slow. To make her colours glow, she will sometimes put them down in 10 or 20 layers. But in spite of all this slowness, her images ensure that the viewer's mind keeps hurtling – from the Hindu goddess *Kali*, who delivers death, to Cinderella's slipper; from African-American hair-do's to the beard of Shah Jehan, who built the Taj Mahal. The veiled world of Islam appears in Western painting as a style and a mood and an antique fascination. The style is orientalism. The mood is one of languor. The antique fascination with the East goes back at least to Rembrandt and Matisse". Commenting on the diversity of her work, he notes "both Eastern thought and Western ones twinkle in her art – both goddesses with

many arms and Botticellian sea-shells, both Mughal forts in Pakistan and row houses in Texas, both Quranic calligraphies and minimalistic grids". Valerie Fletcher, curator at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington looks at her work from another angle: "Finding herself categorised as a minority in America, Sikander uses her art to comment, with gentle irony, on western perceptions of her origins ... although living thousands of miles from her homeland, Sikander is still inspired by South-Asian culture. She continues to find support and inspiration in the traditions of miniature paintings that launched her into the international art world". Homi Bhaba, cultural critic and professor at the University of Chicago evaluates her work as "the reinventing of a technique, the re-evaluation of tradition to the extent that tradition is no longer opposed to modernity". And that says it all.

contd from pg 72

Goodness, Gracious, Great Balls Of Fire

'Gull's' are an established organization comprising of young enthusiasts, who don't just talk big but actually make things happen. The 'Gull's' are, Ahmed Butt (director), Mustafa Ali Butt also referred to as 'Superman' (accounts & security management), Usman Majid (production manager), Marty (security head), along with many others without whom 'the show simply can not go on'. Dedicated to promote the young talent of Pakistan, they have been arranging many plays, concerts, fashion shows etc. for almost five years now. 'We are slowly but steadily trying to create a New World.'

At the present 'Gull's' has two departments: Executive and Teenagers. The former deals with arranging entertainment for the older generation, like 'Tribute to Madam Noor Jehan', 'An Evening with Zil-e-Huma' etc. The later, is responsible for creating a platform for the younger generation to expose their talents to the maximum. The Rock Festival is a living example of their efforts. 'Rock scene in Pakistan is quite mature and crowd appreciation is also increasing by the day. Unfortunately, it has not been properly exposed; in fact, it has always been discouraged, not so much by the people but by the media and the uncooperative Corporate Culture. Although, things are changing for the better now'.

Just as they plan to eventually take this festival international, 'Gull's' are preparing to expand. An office in London will be the next immediate step. Also, there will be more departments, dealing with specialized fields of entertainment, e.g., the moving pictures! A feature film by the Gull's is already in its initial stages. 'We are devoted to our cause and will

keep on trying to open up minds, create new tastes in Pakistan and abroad. There is so much unexplored talent in our country, the time has come to not only discover it for ourselves, but to also show the world what we, the Pakistani's, are all about', says, Ahmed.

contd from pg 73

Music Wizard

to the desired style, like bhangra, sufiana, carnatic, Hindustani classical, etc. His admirers recognise in him, a rare ability to come up with music that touches the masses, urging Watal to declare himself the poor man's Quincy Jones. His repertoire of compositions includes ghazals, Tamil pop, bhajans, remixes, patriotic songs, shabads and carols. According to Watal, 'Concepts have changed enormously, earlier the ultimate objective of singers with potential was, 'Sing only for films,' today it is, 'I want to be a Pop star!' I always take on people with talent and who have the ambition to reach the top!'

'You are made or destroyed by audiences, so I try to create such music as will be liked by common people, neither too esoteric nor too abstract, but nice and entertaining.' Clearly, his strength lies in his total integration with music and the ability to predict what the masses will listen to tomorrow. Moreover, his uncompromising standards are believed to give him a cutting edge. 'I believe a song can be a hit, if it makes you feel good, I believe in simplicity. Music is universal. Peter Gabriel, Madonna, Sting and even Ricky Martin's music has strains of Indian compositions.' He was interviewed by the Voice of America recently for his undeniable talent. Watal sees no reason why he wouldn't hit the international circuit soon, though he feels he already has with the overseas popularity of his productions. 'I feel good that finally today, I am being asked for by name and not by the name of the singer whose music I've composed' While Shubha Mudgal and Shweta Shetty openly acknowledge the young lyricist's contribution to his success, Watal's response to Baba Sehgal and Daler Mehndi's lack of recognition, elicits a grim, 'It is good to be a star but do not forget your roots.'

Watal sums up his essence with, 'It is important to do your good deed – because you eventually reap what you sow.'

contd from pg 75

CREATING GANDHARA

Dana Tai Soon Burgess and company plan to reshow 'Gandhara: East West Passages' at the Kennedy Center in November 2001. Burgess will also be travelling to China, in June this year, to