

## FIRST, A DISCLOSURE (OR AT LEAST A HELPFUL CAVEAT):

if you're tuning in for your monthly update on the state of the cultural exotic, postcolonial other, new developments in "glocal" style, or the center's inexorable yield to the periphery, you might do well to turn the page. Sure, the painter Shahzia Sikander, born and raised in Pakistan, manages to flip the script on the whole history of Indian miniatures, but to position her as an artist throwing off the oppressive yoke of male patriarchy, Islamic censorship, or the pervasive Western fantasy of South Asian culture as simply some kind of prohibitive version of *Footloose* does a disservice to her work.

Sikander doesn't need a tight-lipped, bespectacled chaperone watching over her at the dance; her veiled princesses in formfitting patterned leotards display more pelvic articulation than Alvin Ailey's principal dancers. The kids are alright, she seems to be saying, despite Rushdie's *fatwa* and the Taliban's policy of zero-tolerance for the display of female skin. Sikander's pleasures, in other words—be it the calligraphic strokes of the Mughal tradition framing her painting, or a whirling concentric mandala superimposed on a stop-motion silhouette—*don't* come at a price. That is, frissons—exotic or otherwise—are more likely inspired by a pinwheel formation of cowboy boots tricked out like a cosmic sundial, or a flying gryphon hovering over rolling green fields, than the notion that a shy, unassuming girl from Lahore could turn her back on the Old Country, enroll in painting classes at RISD, and a few short years later design a MoMA banner that juxtaposes a milky white nymph from Bronzino's *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* with a 12th-century Indian sculpture of a celestial dancing figure in—true to its roots—a darker shade of pale.

The charge we get from looking at a Sikander painting, whether in miniature form

or displayed as a cascading collage covering the gallery wall, is akin to the thrill of gazing at a buxom Lisa Yuskavage nude, or the Old Masterish distortions of John Currin's female cherubs: quite simply, it's the ordered sensation of elegant rendering, well-paced intervals, or, in this case, a balance between eighties style palimpsests and the hard-edged contours of late nineties graphic design and architectural rendering. The truth is in the paint, not the anti-septic ideology surrounding it. This gut level reaction makes claims of a "transgressive" charge, or any pious reading that incorporates the artist's personal sacrifice, or the risky revealing of—what else?—cultural difference, somehow hard to swallow. Political agendas tend to become moot in the face of visual poetry.

Multiplicity, hybridity, and the fraying of borders may be buzzwords at the moment, or a way of marketing an artist as the next, or the newest, or simply just more than his or her predecessors, but this quantitative reading tends to buckle under the weight of its own hyperbole. Doubtless, Sikander's paintings are loaded with pastoral landscapes, pattern and design motifs, Persian arabesques, variations on the lotus position, trickster monkeys dangling poison fruit from a tree, and all manner of multilimbed goddesses of sword-wielding destruction. Is this the grand metaphor of displacement I've been hearing so much about? The pitched battle between East and West? Well, not exactly. Sikander traffics in themes of displacement, but she avoids the maudlin cliché of tragic exile and focuses on our universal desire for fictive transport—not from the dominant paradigm (whatever that is in this slippery moment), but from the more personalized sense of alienation that clings to each of us.

DAVID HUNT



Shahzia Sikander, *Untitled*, 2001, Still from four-minute Quicktime digital file. All images courtesy of Deitch Projects.