

# ART *India*

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art in  
**PAKISTAN**



Shahzia Sikander.

# SUBVERTING A TRADITION

SALIMA HASHMI INTRODUCES SHAHZIA SIKANDER —  
PAKISTAN'S MOST INTERNATIONALLY CELEBRATED  
ARTIST WHO HELPED RE-INVENT THE MINIATURE

NEMESIS IS THE TITLE OF SHAHZIA Sikander's new show that opened this September at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in the US. Trained as a miniaturist at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, Sikander went on to 're-invent' the form. And in the course of her various painterly journeys, became Pakistan's best-known international artist. Transitions of many kinds have marked Sikander's meteoric career.

Growing up in a conservative, yet enlightened household, which saw no contradiction in granting a convent education to girls, and imposing a strict Muslim regimen at home, the artist remembers being heir to a "confluence of beliefs" in her childhood.

The decision to specialize in miniature painting at art school gives us an inkling about the quality of Sikander's choices – of "always taking the longer route". Going on to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) for her MA in 1993, Sikander was confronted by a dislocation that was painful, daunting and ultimately challenging. There was a protracted but eventually fruitful struggle to understand, define and circumscribe this experience.

Sikander described this experience

of dislocation, shared by many: "When I first encountered a new space by leaving Pakistan and coming to the US in 1993, my impulse was to absorb, digest and regurgitate my felt experiences. Thus, I painted subjects in context to my new location."<sup>1</sup>

She moved on to a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas after her MA. Here, the opportunity to work with marginalized Afro-American women and children gave her the inspiration she needed. *Knock, Knock, Who's There? Mithilia. Mithilia, Who?* was a community-based project developed in an Afro-American ghetto: it explored concerns that have constantly re-

occurred and metamorphosed over time in Sikander's work. Issues of gender, religion and culture were addressed in this project even as the experimental nature of the work led her to a more adventurous way of conceptualisation.

*Acts of Balance* was her first solo museum exhibition in New York – it was held at the Phillip Morris building of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her works had previously been noticed at the Drawing Center at the Whitney Biennale, also in New York. At the Phillip Morris venue, the small jewelled format of the miniature on *wasli* exploded into an installation (earlier seen in part at the Brisbane

**Shahzia Sikander.** *Chamman*. From *Acts of Balance*, a solo show at the Whitney Museum. Ink, gouache, acrylic on wall and paper. Dimensions variable. 2000.





(Left) **Shahzia Sikander.** *SpiNN*. Still from a video animation. 6 minutes, 50 seconds. 2003. (Right) **Shahzia Sikander.** *Pursuit Curve*. Detail from a video animation. 7 minutes. 2004. The title 'Pursuit Curve' is taken from an expression used in mathematics to describe the path an object takes when chasing another object. All images courtesy the artist and Brent Sikkema gallery, NYC.

Triennial, 1999), which carried overlapping strips of translucent parchment-like tissues. Dense and spare clusters were painted, drawn on, and marked – thus hiding and revealing 'the passages' painted directly onto the wall beyond. The work carried a 'forest' of symbols and figures, secured by drawing on the resources of playful mark-making and emphatic painting. In the sculpture court, stood a commanding triptych that carried narrative images and compositions translated from the small to the 'grand' scale. The Hirschorn Museum in DC had already hosted a solo exhibition by Sikander, (perhaps the only living Asian artist to be so honoured), the Renaissance Society in Chicago followed next. The Asia Society presented *Conversations with Tradition: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander* in 2001, an opportunity Sikander relished. "This opens not only an East-West dialogue but also an East-East exchange," she said.<sup>2</sup>

Shahzia Sikander has been vocal about the need 'to cross boundaries' that divide India and Pakistan. The need to blur barriers that compartmentalize genres, separate the traditional from the modern, has been a continuing imperative. "I didn't set out with the aim to subvert,

let alone reinvent a tradition. Those boundaries became blurred simply through my engagement with miniature paintings, through the act of making them. I was interested in an art form whose present was in the past," she said.<sup>3</sup>

Sikander negotiates efficiently with the tensions produced, when the many pasts that we are heir to, are juxtaposed with each other and when there are many presents that we must traverse. There is a fearlessness in these encounters that marks all her work. It is accompanied by a reliance on intuition, which seems never to fail her. Living in the West, she does not condone 'conservative applications of the Western canons', nor does she retreat into safe essentialisms that accompany the 'reading of artists emerging from places distant from the 'centre'.' Sikander's art is a testament to her determination to be rooted in her time, as well as in her multiple geographical and cultural locations. The 'spin' that she puts, speaks both of her abilities as well as her restlessness.

She has worked with diverse mediums: standing outside of herself, and destabilizing her own established art-making process, she has experimented with digital technology,

producing animated works of lasting value. Sikander states, "The parallels existing between a miniature painting on *wasli* and a high resolution screen are subjective at best, but primarily they exist in the usage of space and time."<sup>4</sup>

In Sikander's new animation *Pursuit Curve* (from *Nemesis*), much of the imaging seems to have been inspired by the changing 'landscapes' around her: apart from, of course, the landscapes of the sub-continent, Sikander tries to retain the 'feel' of the landscapes of California and Mexico. The longings explored here are tied up with the sense of loss of place. The iconography within *Pursuit Curve* can be seen to have many interpretations: are the starburst shapes exploding bombs, fireworks or bleeding wounds? Sikander's works can move very quickly from being celebratory to being broodingly dystopic. These are the edgy dualities which reflect the complexities of the worlds she has 'visited'. Intuitively, she opens new doors with every new encounter.

#### NOTES:

- 1) International Gallerie. Vol.3, No. 2. 2000.
- 2) art news. Sept 2001.
- 3) International Gallerie. Vol.3. No. 2. 2000.
- 4) Salima Hashmi. *Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan*. 2003.