

ARTS AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST
WINTER 2005

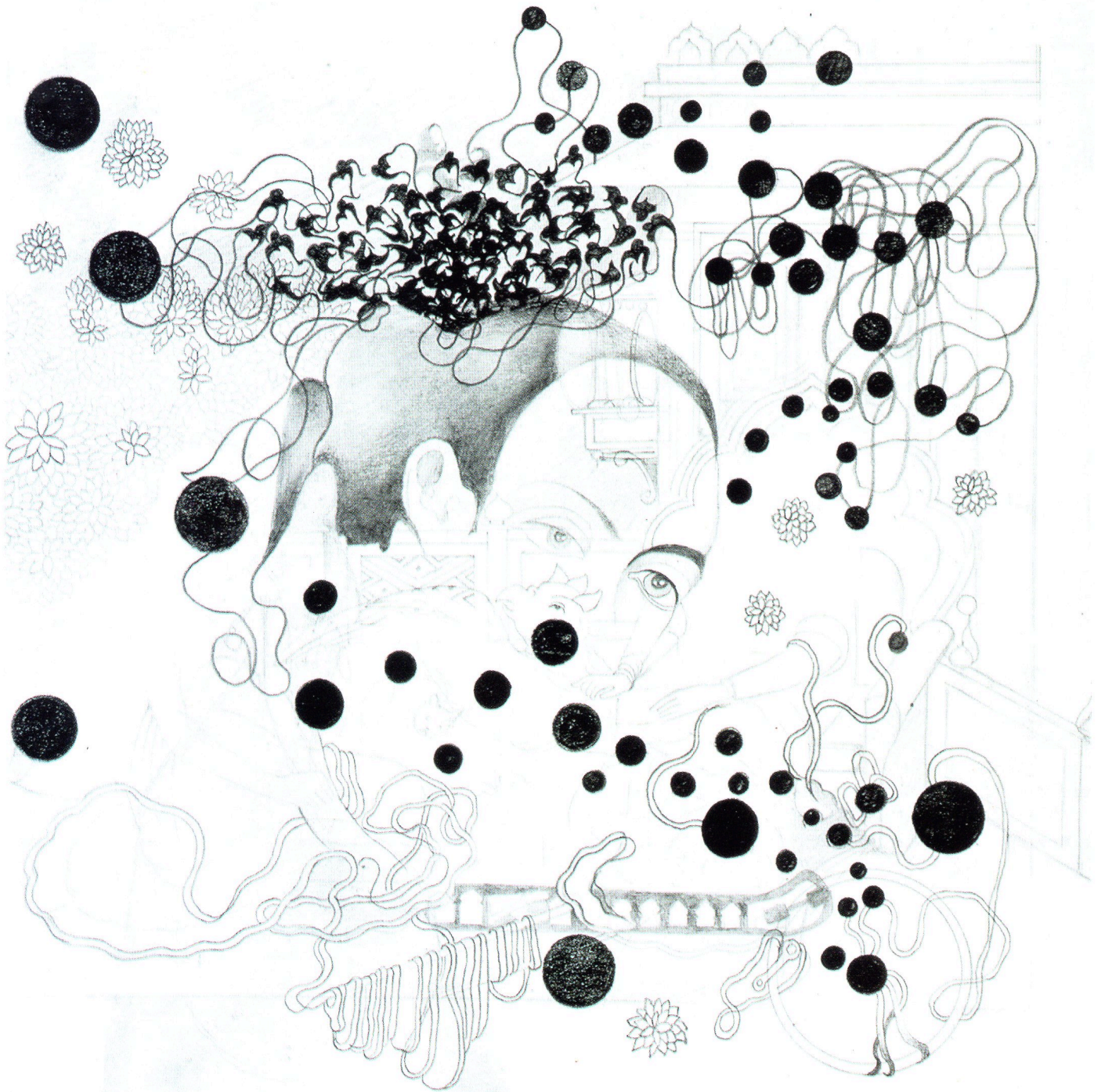
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Shahzia Sikander, *51 Ways of Looking*, 2004, courtesy of the artist and Brent Sikkema gallery, NYC

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

It is not often that a space for a review becomes grounds for a reading of readings. I recently met artist Shahzia Sikander in New York City for a 7-Up and a chat. What began in earnest as a discussion about her recent exhibition at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art rapidly evolved into a discussion surrounding art criticism, the dangerous politics of identity marketing and the burden of representing a subcontinent. We also talked about the show.

INTERVIEW BY NEGAR AZIMI

Bidoun: I sought out reviews of your work after having seen the show at the Aldrich. It seems that art critics emphasize one subject in particular—namely the restrictive nature of the miniature—the medium on which much of your work is based.

Shahzia Sikander: The premise that the miniature is restrictive is subjective. It becomes globalized. In that respect being a Pakistani is limiting. Being a woman is limiting. I have become the poster person for breaking the limitations.

Bidoun: I know little about the miniature.

Sikander: The deconstruction of miniature painting has a transformative nature that propels dialogue. The miniature in its most traditional aspect is extremely multi-dimensional. There are schools of painting that vary dramatically. Some have illustrative roots, some are purely narrative based, some use extremely clever devices of abstraction. I have always been drawn to the hierarchy within the practice, of labor and time, issues of scale, precision and gesture.

Bidoun: How dramatic. Your deconstructing the miniature, or demystifying it seems a veritable revolution. Sexual or otherwise. I'll bet your work is read as autobiography.

Sikander: Yes, it is interpreted as autobiography. It's about identity, my identity. So they say.

Bidoun: As an aestheticized construction of the Pakistani woman, I imagine. When did that become evident to you?

Sikander: The introduction of my work happened in the 90s—in the midst of identity politics. That time was a sort of coming of age. The first serious introduction of my work was in 1997,

simultaneously at the Drawing Center and the Whitney Biennial. I was exploring experimental drawing plus trying to avoid being ghettoized as a South Asian/Muslim/Pakistani woman artist. What followed was an exotification of some type; readings focusing on the cultural entity rather than the work itself. I was using “traditional” language for personal expression. How reductive! I became a spectacle. And there were hardly any South Asian artists at the time, which created a responsibility somehow.

Bidoun: So critics and others came to the table with their own readings.

Sikander: The readings being primarily about cultural specificity. The things written were incredible. I have these interviews where people literally described the way I speak rather than what I would say.

Bidoun: Are there any of your works in particular that have lent themselves to critics' and curators' exoticizing tendencies?

Sikander: There have been some images that have been repeated, read with post-orientalist tendencies. I can name three or four works that addressed the notion of identity as being fluid, unfixed. Identity being like theatre. These works play with that idea and were informed by a performance I had taken part in. I dressed in braids and mapped my movements in airport zones—studying how people react when there is a visual encounter that looks familiar and is not. A self-made costume hid my body language, at times it was transparent.

Bidoun: So what was the problem?

Sikander: The work was read as a piece about self-liberation and the veil.

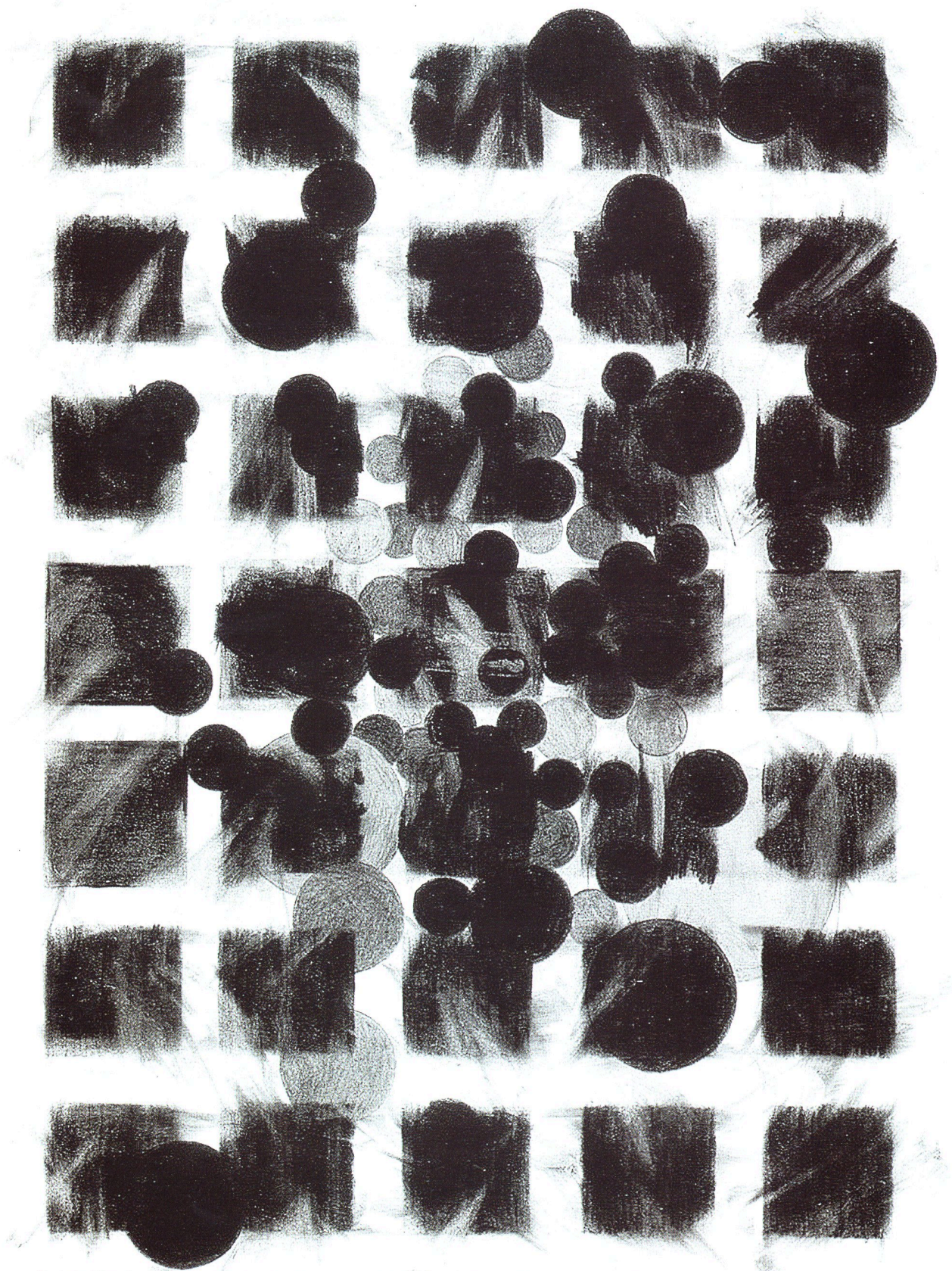
Bidoun: Shocker. How ironic that it was meant as a testament to the fluidity of identity and was consumed as the opposite.

Sikander: My coming from a Muslim country as a woman was suddenly the point of it all. I was actually running these performances to generate imagery that would come back into my paintings, building an archive so to speak. But so many people reduced the work to one assimilated understanding.

Bidoun: It's tricky because the veil is the lens through which much of the Occident constructs the East. It's so damn seductive and lends itself to knee-jerk absolutes, hysterics.

Sikander: Yes. People are image-oriented and seek the stylized. But I am not interested in autobiography.

Bidoun: There is a noted reductionism in the art world, not to



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mention mainstream thought. Whatever that is. The same treatment of the veil as a fetish is also transferred to ideas about “East and West.” *The New Yorker* has called your work a “fond plea for multiculturalism.” Is it just me or is that pretty brutal? It seems to me this reading is more consistent with some of the Pakistani work shown in last year’s ‘The American Effect’ show at the Whitney. On the flip side, I have read Homi Bhabha note that your work is about “the closeness of difference.” This makes more sense to me than this Benetton-style handholding. Do you feel like the nature of your references is lost sometimes to western audiences?

Sikander: Yes.

Bidoun: Okay, so Bhabha is a post-colonial scholar and in the academy, but is there room for such discourse in the art world?

Sikander: Yes, why not? But that shouldn’t mean that the only way to address work of people like myself has to happen through the post-colonial construct. What about Dilip Para-meshwar Gaonkar’s essay on alternative modernities? His proposition is that similarities are elusive and fragmentary.

I am interested in reclaiming the production of context for my work. It’s been frustrating to encounter the same rhetoric of culture and technique, tradition and innovation. Recently in collaboration with Jessica Hough, we had a round table discussion with Feri Daftari from MoMA, Vishaka Desai from the Asia Society and Joan Kee from IFA—to discuss the problematics of representation, especially in light of what has been written about my work in the past ten years.

Bidoun: Speaking of representation, what do you make of the so-called internationalization of the arts—the CNN Documenta, the growth of international biennales, etc. Your visibility preceded most of it, and I am not including the ‘Magiciens de Terre’ exhibition and all those tired examples because the height of the movement I am referring to really did not start until far after that. How do you feel about this so-called internationalization of the arts, all the mobility?

Sikander: Mobility is a privilege. I have a Pakistani passport. Let’s just say that I only have visions of mobility. My work travels, I travel less.

Bidoun: Okay, so the globalization or internationalization of art is a myth. You’re right, that’s breathtakingly provincial of me.

Sikander: But there are international venues that are still very young, promising. When Vasif (Kortun) was here he mentioned that he is inviting artists to Istanbul for a period of time to produce work. That makes a lot more sense than just shipping work with no relationship to place, theme.

Bidoun: That seems to me a more authentic vision of the “international,” less token and rooted in aggressive ethnic marketing.

Sikander: Yes, I would love to produce work in that way.

Bidoun: And your arts education is also the subject of much writing, again spun as hyper-restrictive in the Pakistani context. Is that accurate, or sensationalism again?

Sikander: On the contrary, the 80s in Pakistan were very restrictive and given that context, the National College of Arts was a haven for dialogue. It was a great place to be, not restrictive at all in the larger context of Lahore and Zia’s military regime.

Bidoun: And you studied miniature painting.

Sikander: That just happened circumstantially. Art for me was about application, and exploration of the conceptual and formal. The conventional approaches in the painting department at that time were rigid and boring. How much landscape and figurative painting could one do? I gravitated towards miniature painting because no one else was interested in it, literally. Its social context was intriguing. It supposedly represented our cultural platform, yet laden with suspicion and ridicule. I had grown up thinking of it as kitsch. My limited exposure, primarily by looking at the work produced for tourist consumption, came into question.

Bidoun: Would you ever teach miniature at the National College of Art?

Sikander: I did. I got fired.

Bidoun: Okay. What were students reading in school as reference material on the arts?

Sikander: The readings were as limited or diverse depending on the individual. A grasp of western art, compliments of *Art Through the Ages*, and then several books on local arts, non-western modernism.

Bidoun: Pretty standard. Was the emphasis on canonical western modernism? You mentioned *Art Through the Ages*.

Sikander: No we looked at Pakistani and Indian artists too, it was quite progressive for that time.

Bidoun: Your success must have left an impression on students.

Sikander: My success created an incredible mushrooming of miniature painters. There was a perception that one would gain fame and opportunity by pursuing miniature painting. I see a lot of my work plagiarized.

Bidoun: I guess I have seen that in Iran among younger artists recreating Shirin Neshat videos with handi-cams. It looks more like Lars von Trier meets Celine Dion. Sometimes artists are as complicit in the labeling game as the market that they operate in.

Sikander: Yes, the hypocrisy is incredible. Many who criticize my work as not being faithful to the tradition of the miniature are the very people who are copying it. And anyway we are talking about copying a copy! The miniature is the ultimate copy. The irony.

Bidoun: Can you tell me about the work at the Aldrich, which is predominantly drawings and a new animation work?

Sikander: There is a suite of 51 drawings, titled '51 Ways of Looking.' Drawing is space for stripping to the basic. The drawings start with a sphere and a rectangle—the abstracted space of representation, the abyss, the fundamental unit. Everything is created from that base, and viewers must create their own progression or narrative. The drawings are fairly controlled. They are works on paper but also paintings. They're not heroic in the sense that there is no pigment stretched on large canvases, but they are large in representation.

Bidoun: Why the animation? You have created a seven minute video called *Pursuit Curve*.

Sikander: "Pursuit curve" is a term used in mathematics to describe the path an object takes when chasing another object. Much of the imagery in the work is inspired by landscape and its connection to history. I was inspired by desert landscapes I visited in California and Mexico. I returned to my books of miniature paintings to look at the ways artists treated the landscape in their work. So I focused on the natural world—both on a human and on a microscopic scale.

Bidoun: What about the iconography you use in the video?

Sikander: The iconography within the animation has a number of possible interpretations. The starburst shapes, for example, could be read as celebratory fireworks or exploding bombs, benign growth patterns or bleeding wounds.

Bidoun: So there is an ambiguity. And the loop, or "pursuit," engenders multiple readings.

Sikander: Yes, I am interested in the aspect of time being cyclical, nonlinear. What is the active agent here? The larger object pulling or the more aggressive object being chased—is one the active agent in the American landscape or the one dying to assimilate?

Bidoun: With regard to the animation, the work seems anti-ani-

mation, anti the intricacy of the miniature. Many of the images are child-like, even naïve.

Sikander: The drawings are scanned into digital files to eliminate the hand drawn element and then threaded together to create a sense of navigation. The shift is purposefully subtle, not challenging, not confrontational. Technology is not instant, it's controlled.

I am experimenting with traditional techniques, non-traditional materials, scale, labor and performance, perhaps to explore identity—not mine!—proposing a psychological space in which it is flexible. The narratives are open-ended. They renegotiate difference. The work is inspired by a range of painting schools, but they've been simplified and stylized to become non-nostalgic, stripped of any sentiment.

Bidoun: Stripping is a bit like driving through a desert landscape.

Sikander: I have always operated on the principle of adding. I wanted to reverse that. How much information can I strip off. Stripping is not about vulnerability. Just like how drawing is fundamental. It is not vulnerable.

Bidoun: Stripping all the baggage surrounding your work and approaching some vague notion of the essential. That sounds a bit like our conversation.

Sikander: Yes.

Shahzia Sikander, *Untitled* (production stills), 2004
courtesy of the artist and Brent Sikkema gallery, NYC

