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Drawn by worlds of difference

*Shahzia Sikander works in the tradition of miniature paintings, while crossing boundaries and cultures, writes **Lauren Wilson***

SHAHZIA Sikander's work is based on dualities. The Pakistan-born, US-based artist has reinvigorated the largely devalued craft of Indo-Persian miniature painting, imbuing it with contemporary relevance.

She engages with traditional Mughal and Hindu styles of miniature painting, but "creates rupture and tension" by playing with size and medium.

Her first solo exhibition in Australia includes large-scale wall murals, works in graphite, digital photographs, and animations that set miniature paintings into motion, challenging the boundaries of the genre and "subverting" the history of south Asian painting.

"I like contradiction. I like the fact that there is always an outcome borne out of conflict and it is ongoing," she says. "I chose consciously to work in the medium of miniature painting, and in it, work against the grain, so one is aware of the duality, contradictions and conflicts inherent in that."

Sikander's work is eclectic. Her miniature paintings draw on Hindu, Islamic, Western, and Byzantine iconography, contrasting finite detail with open landscapes painted in a vibrant wash of colours that bleed together.

Movement, flux and transformation are constant themes. Shapes break apart and reform in new and unexpected ways, and symbols do not have given meanings. Her art is based upon the idea that nothing — even history — is static.

"It's about altering your expectation and the element of surprise," Sikander says. "I try to locate a moment of surprise and a moment of suspense. I also try to locate forms that are ripe for transformation."

Sikander lures viewers into her work with false premises. A swarm of bees will turn out, on closer inspection, to be a woman's hair. In one of her digital animations, a flurry of butterflies morphs into a traditional Hindu headdress.

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“For me it’s really about questioning how to create something compelling as an artist, that makes you think and that makes you want to come back and look at the artwork again,” she says.

Sikander was born in Pakistan in 1969. She is reluctant to speak about her childhood and early life there. “I have a problem starting with Pakistan because all my professional life has been outside of Pakistan,” she admits.

She studied at Lahore’s National College of Art in the late 1980s, where her interest in the discipline of miniature painting was sparked. At that time, the medium was largely seen to be a kitsch, tourist-driven craft.

Rudyard Kipling, who wrote the quintessential imperialist poem, *The White Man’s Burden*, was a former president of her art school, and Sikander criticises the fact that so much south Asian miniature painting is housed in Western museums and analysed through Western academic frameworks.

“My interest in miniature painting was to see it outside the definitions of Western scholarship which tends to be very historical, academic and chronological,” says Sikander. “All of that structure and all those labels are actually coming out of a handful of Western scholars.”

In the early 1990s, Sikander moved to the US to continue her education at the Rhode Island School of Design. She has mostly worked and lived in the US since, but resists being tagged an “immigrant artist” whose work reflects a personal attempt to bridge cultures. “It was never determined that I would leave one culture for another, it was really just an outcome of pursuing work and opportunities,” she says. “I find mobility to be so common for an artist. The current climate for art is so global and for me it’s always been about taking whatever option is available at that point.”

She also rejects the suggestion that elements of cross-cultural fusion and hybridity in her work stem from her own experiences.

Ancient and modern: In *Spinn (II)*, 2003, Shahzia Sikander uses vegetable colour, dry pigment, v



Surprises: Sikander works on a mural at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art

“It’s absolutely not about that; the imagery is driven out of academic research into the genre and a systematic engagement with the parameters given in miniature painting,” she says.

Nonetheless, the politics of identity have haunted her career, enhanced surely by the culturally specific genre she has chosen.

“Where identity steps in, a lot of the time it’s very arbitrary, there is a tendency to put that ethnic lens on people and I have found that really frustrating, because whether one is from Pakistan or not is secondary to the work,” she says.

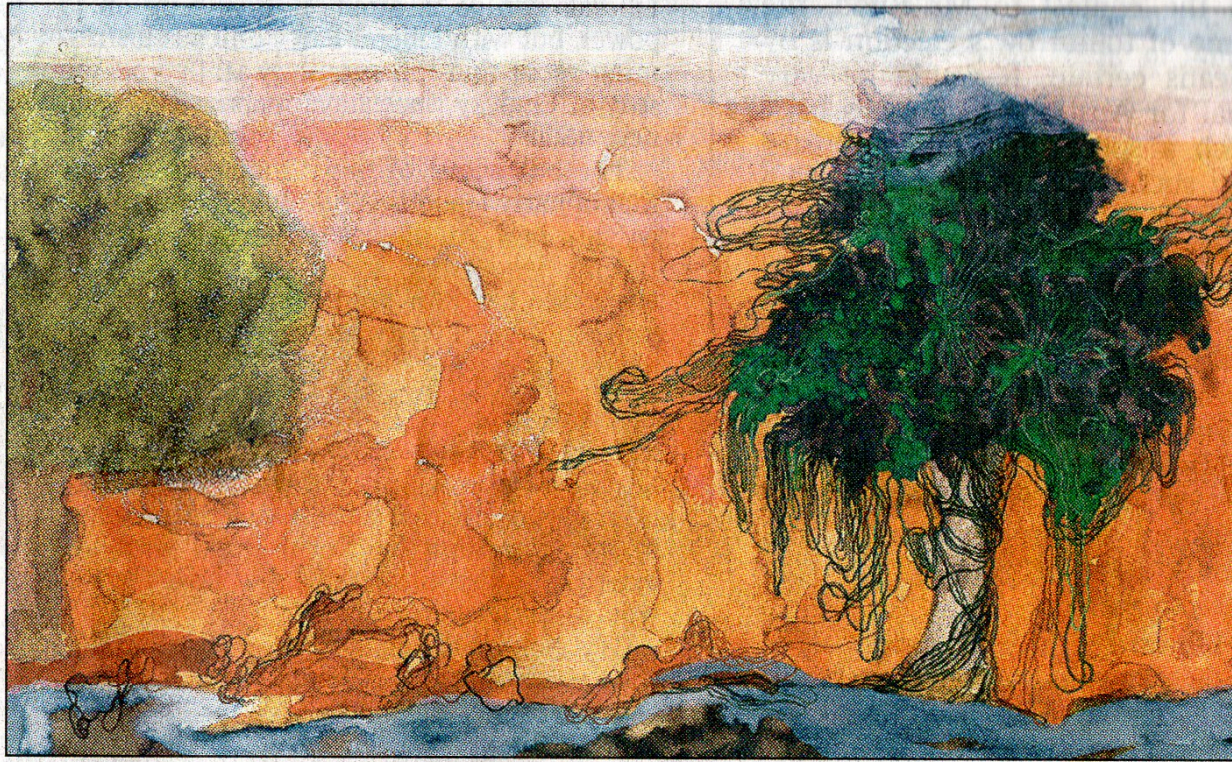
“People assume if an artist is within the culture the work belongs to, it is more authentic and I find that problematic. That search for something ‘legitimate’ ventures on notions of primitivism and I think that there

is almost a danger of a revival of that.”

Since Sikander’s foray into miniature painting, it has had a revival in Pakistan. At her alma mater, an increasing number of students are majoring in it and this has caused the tradition to be associated with Pakistan, when it is a broader south Asian cultural tradition.

Sikander has been influenced by post-colonial theory and seeks to challenge the opposition of east versus west. “To me the most interesting aspect of the miniature is that pages have been torn out of books of illustrations and exist in Western institutions as individual artworks.”

Appropriated in this way, taken out of context, the art of the miniature has come to symbolise the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.



Vibrant: Sikander's *Land-Escapes, Series 3: #2*, 2005, ink and gouache on paper

Despite her theoretical influences, however, Sikander insists that aesthetics and intuition are more important than theory.

“As an artist one has a lot more freedom than an academic to take liberty with the medium and create rupture with it in a volatile manner, almost like graffiti,” she says.

“It’s like you’re defacing something but at the same time you are in awe of its beauty. I think the impulse is always subversive.”

Sikander’s life is as fluid as her art. She moved to Germany recently and says that disengaging with the familiar is an important part of the artistic process for her:

“It’s very important for me not to be stagnant; being in Berlin is difficult and demanding but it’s about constantly disengaging with the familiar.”

She also says life for New York artists

changed after September 11, 2001. “When I first came to New York, I found a really wonderful climate and an interest in diversity even in the mainstream. It was a moment of looking outward.

“And then, immediately post 9/11, it was an inwardness and a collapse of lots of different things, although right now there is questioning again,” she says.

But Sikander admits the more she travels, the more she is aware of parallels between cultures: “There is so much similarity in the way politics takes shape across the globe and in the way artists come together to create work.”

The Shahzia Sikander exhibition is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, from November 27 to February 13