

ESSAYS FROM WAJAHAT MASOOD, WILLEM MARX, FAISAL DEVJI, F. S. AIJAZUDDIN

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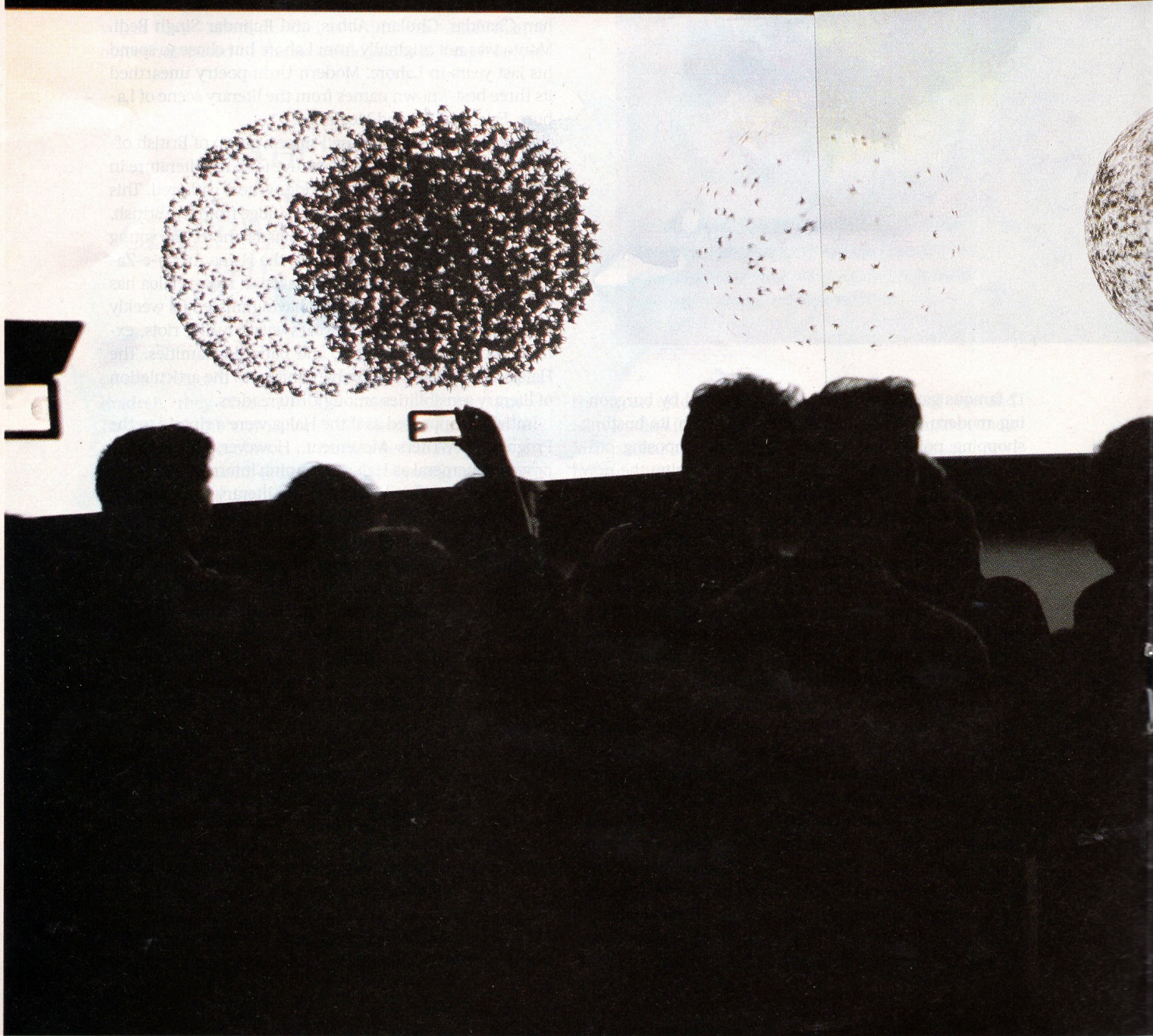
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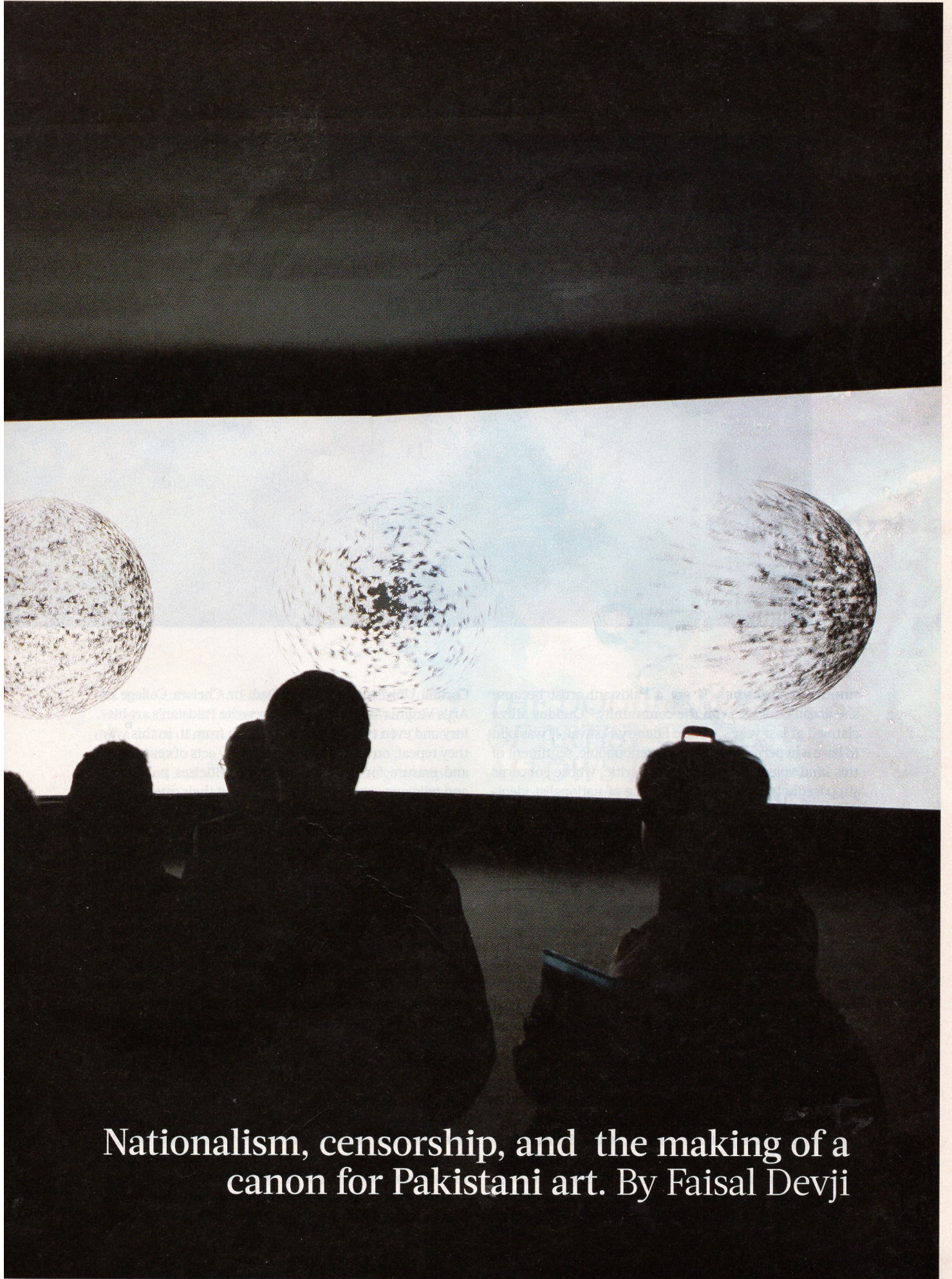
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Culture

LITTLE DICTATORS





Nationalism, censorship, and the making of a
canon for Pakistani art. By Faisal Devji



“**SHAHZIA SIKANDER** is not a Pakistani artist because she doesn’t engage with the community,” Quddus Mirza claimed at last year’s Lahore Literary Festival. It was odd to have a hypernationalist, even xenophobic, sentiment of this kind voiced by a painter and critic, whose concerns supposedly include the questioning of nationalist ideology. Even more oddly, the same Mirza had offered glowing praise for Sikander in a national newspaper some years earlier. This startling shift of opinion may be dismissed as an example of the petty conflicts and personal resentments that mark Pakistan’s cultural elite. But it signals something more ominous in a context where “culture” has come to represent Pakistan’s only positive image to many of its own citizens as much as to art buyers and investors internationally. So what is this hastily-constructed canon of “Pakistani culture” that includes some artists but excludes others?

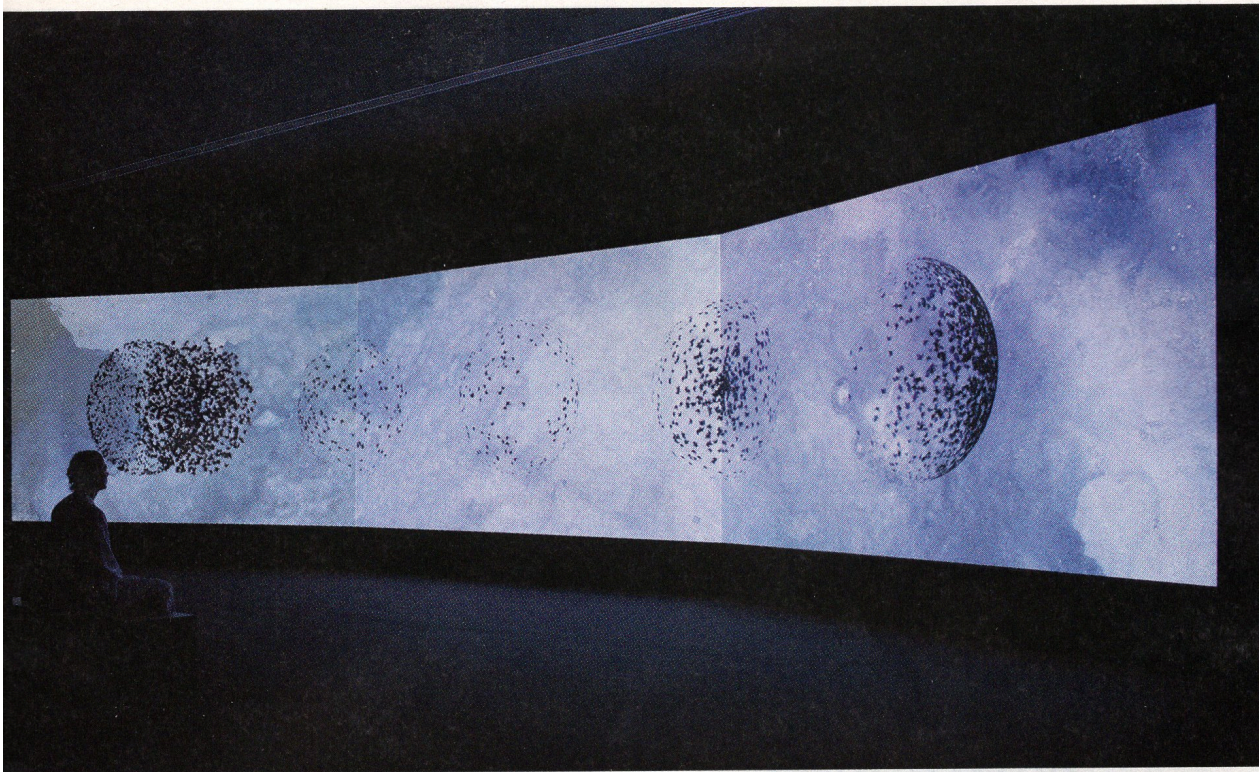
Sikander is one of Pakistan’s best-known artists. She was born, raised and trained in the country, whose citizenship she continues to hold, and whose history and traditions her work has consistently addressed. One wonders then what “community” it is that Mirza thinks she isn’t engaging. Perhaps it is the small and self-appointed community of artist-critics, which Mirza apparently speaks for. Indeed, Pakistan is unusual in producing critics who are also artists, which in any other profession would involve them in a perpetual conflict of interest.

What this double role allows artist-critics like Mirza,

Cornell University’s Iftikhar Dadi or Chelsea College of Art’s Virginia Whiles to do is to rewrite Pakistan’s art history and even erase important figures from it. In this way they repeat, on a smaller scale, the very acts of censorship and erasure for which their work criticizes politicians and religious or military leaders. In fact their ostentatious “critique” of such violence, which is externalized in the political arena, actually permits these writers to internalize it even more effectively in the cultural sphere—and all with a seemingly clear conscience.

Among the most significant victims of such historical vandalism are Pakistan’s Unver Shafi and Sikander. I wrote about the latter’s work more than a decade ago, and given the international acclaim she has received since then need not repeat my reasons for considering her an extraordinary artist, both technically and conceptually. And yet Sikander’s pioneering work is under threat, being routinely censored by the artist-critics whose writings have made them brokers for prizes, museums, and the international art market.

In his book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, Dadi does not mention Sikander even once, despite writing about her peers and teachers—and even exhibitions in which she was featured. Since Sikander was the first Pakistani artist to achieve recognition globally, opening the door for others, including her artist-critics, to describe this exclusion as dishonest is putting it kindly. Similarly, in *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Poli-*



tics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting, Whiles refers to Sikander's work only very briefly and ignores its foundational character for the school of art she writes about.

Both Dadi and Whiles write art history in a genealogical style, tracing contemporary aesthetic production back to founding fathers in a comically patriarchal way. They suggest that Imran Qureshi, the Pakistani artist who painted on the rooftop of New York's Metropolitan Museum last year, is the "father" of the new miniature, forgetting that in the 1980s and '90s it was Sikander, working with Bashir Ahmed and Zahoor ul Akhlaq, who provided miniaturists with a new format as well as an international platform. Moreover, while Sikander fully acknowledges her indebtedness to teachers and traditions, she has broken the genealogical line not simply by garnering more recognition than any of them, but also by putting such genealogies into question in her work, which always cancels out the idea of origins.

Neither her work nor that of Shafi, with its intensely abstract character, fits easily into the crudely "political" categories that writers like Dadi have invented for Pakistani art history and which they seem to have taken wholesale from the academic chatter common in U.S. universities during the '80s and '90s. Here is an unembarrassed example from a description in Dadi's book of his own work: "We attempted to articulate a post-conceptual practice in dialogue with the vitality of popular urban visualities

THE DOUBLE ROLE OF ARTIST-CRITICS ALLOWS THEM TO REWRITE PAKISTAN'S ART HISTORY AND ERASE IMPORTANT FIGURES FROM IT.

to create photography, sculpture, and installations commenting on the visual theatrics of violence and urban identity and serving as an oblique critique of official nationalism." One looks in vain for the "oblique critique" that Dadi refers to, only to be met by a barrage of obvious and stereotyped oppositions, in which such overexposed terms as "clash of civilizations" or "war on terror" are subjected to rather trite reflection.

Deploying as she does this logic of juxtaposition, the accomplished miniaturist Saira Wasim is thus preferred in Dadi's *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* over Sikander, for whose subtlety his categories cannot account. Serving as gatekeepers for what counts as "Pakistani art," figures like Dadi simultaneously deploy and

“critique” nationalist narratives, thus helping to direct the flow of money going to support the culture of a country that has become globally visible because of its many problems. Everyone, it seems, can make money out of militancy and war, those who speak for as much as against it.

Even when lavishing praise on his chosen artists, however, Dadi is curiously unable to locate their work in the social and historical context that his book is meant to describe. Wasim’s *Round Table Conference* (2006), for example, is said accurately but also misleadingly to portray meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference;

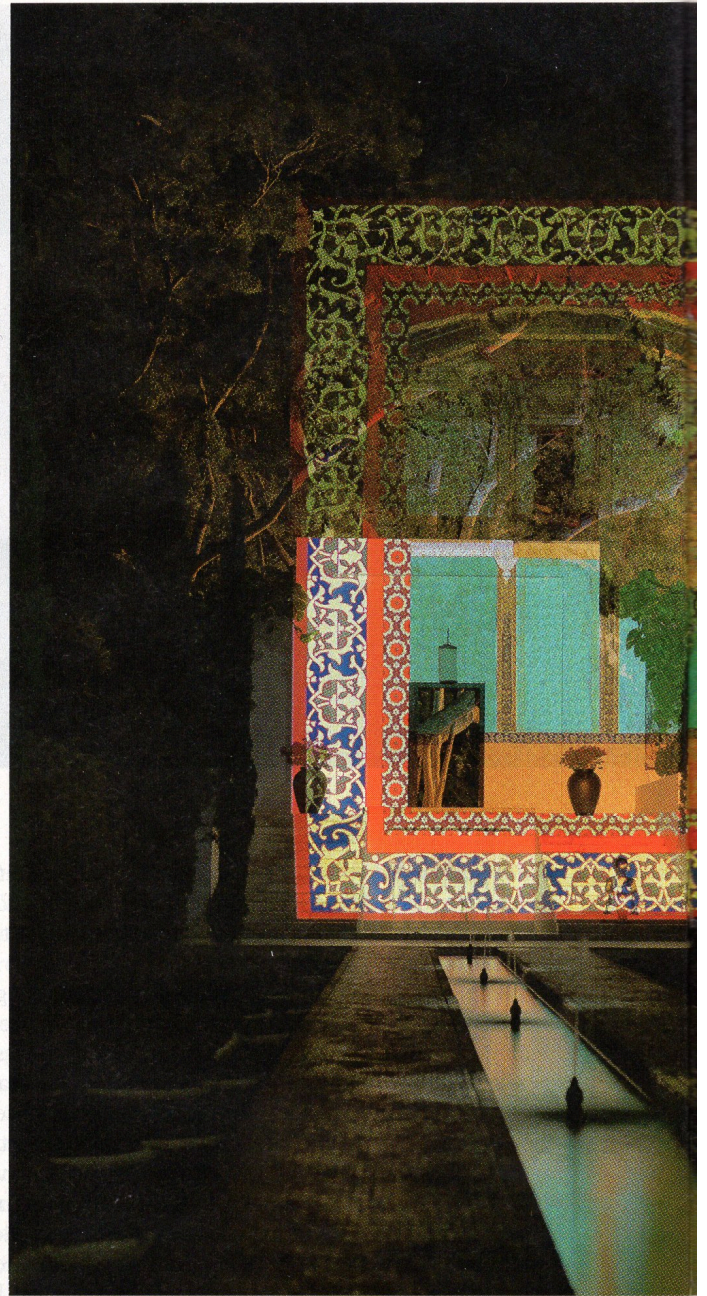
SIKANDER’S WORK IS NOT OVER-DETERMINED BY THE ‘WAR ON TERROR,’ ITSELF NOW AN AESTHETIC COMMODITY.

the title’s clear reference to the far more celebrated and consequential Round Table Conferences of the 1930s are left unexplored. It was in those meetings, after all, that Pakistan’s history might be said to have begun, witnessing as they did the birth of the future country’s name. Similarly, when describing the use of the number 5 in Risham Syed’s work, Dadi links it to everything—from the five senses to Islam’s five prayers—except one of the most common references in Pakistani society: that to the five members of the holy family, who the Shia, in particular, venerate. It is one thing to make Sikander disappear from Pakistan’s art history but to erase, in effect, the cultural presence of a Muslim sect under attack in Pakistan is unconscionably naive.

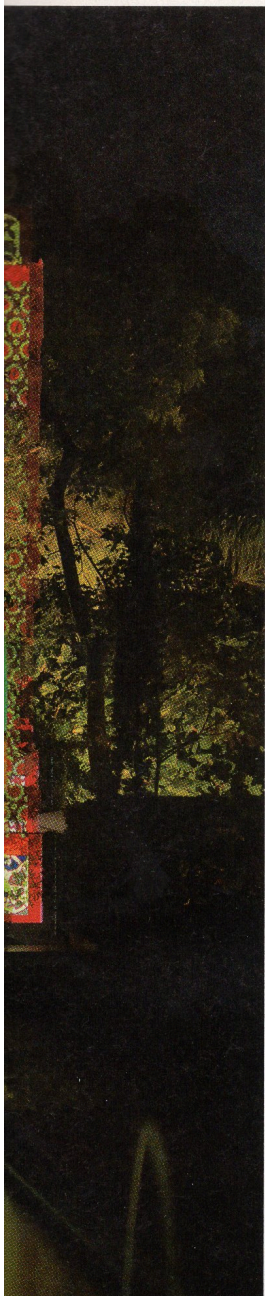
Minor though such exclusions might initially appear to be, taken together they indicate a systematic erasure of history. And nowhere is this more evident than in Dadi’s principal argument about “the art of Muslim South Asia,” which, it turns out, is all about Pakistan. His book foregrounds artists like Chughtai and Sadequain, whose emergence and influence cannot be understood without taking into account powerful Indian voices like S. H. Raza, M. F. Hussain and Tyeb Mehta of the older generation or G. M. Sheikh and Zarina Hashmi among the younger one. Of course, this would show up “Muslim South Asia” as a false aesthetic category, and therefore a made-up commercial label, since the artists involved clearly belong to worlds not defined by their religion. Maybe there is a critique of

“official nationalism” being made in this claim for Pakistani art being synonymous with “Muslim South Asia,” but if so it is so “oblique” as to be invisible. In other words, Sikander’s banishment from Pakistani art history is not merely the result of personal animosities; it illustrates a more general and deeply worrying trend of narrowly nationalist censorship and historical amnesia among the very champions of their “critique.”

With brokers in the art world in a position to rewrite Pakistan’s aesthetic history and set the pattern for collecting internationally, the work of these Little Dictators



COURTESY OF SHAHZIA SIKANDER (2)



represents nothing less than the success of the big ones they so love to inveigh against. If anyone can break this stranglehold on the narrative of Pakistan's cultural history, it is Sikander, who achieved global fame in the pre-9/11 world and whose work is not over-determined by the "war on terror," itself now an aesthetic commodity. But it is a sign of the damage that has been done her if audiences have to be reminded that Sikander was the first artist to grapple with the miniature as a craft-based medium and make it central to contemporary art, internationally. In this sense, all those who came after her from

Lahore's National College of Art's miniature department are indebted to her. But such recognition has been scant. Perhaps Sikander's appearance at this year's Lahore Literary Festival will spur a new appreciation of her work in Pakistan, and in doing so mount the first real challenge to an art-historical narrative that mimes real-world violence through acts of erasure. **nw**

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