

A VERY MODERN MINIATURIST

Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander uses miniature painting techniques to create mega-sized works and even installations

BY TANIA MOITRA

Sikander started out by studying intricate miniature painting techniques and never looked back, successfully questioning the scope of miniature painting and contemporising it in a way that has literally given the art form a new lease of life.

Take, for instance, her work currently on show at the Honolulu Museum of Art. A part of the Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art exhibit, Sikander's *Unseen Series* effectively straddles

the traditional and contemporary, resulting in stunning high-definition projections of beautifully detailed miniatures and other abstract work in the open air at night.

It's also a vivid and poignant tribute to Doris Duke, the American heiress, who amassed one of the world's most enviable collections of Islamic art and kept them on her five-acre estate called Shangri La.

But although Sikander can be considered a major figure of contemporary Pakistani art

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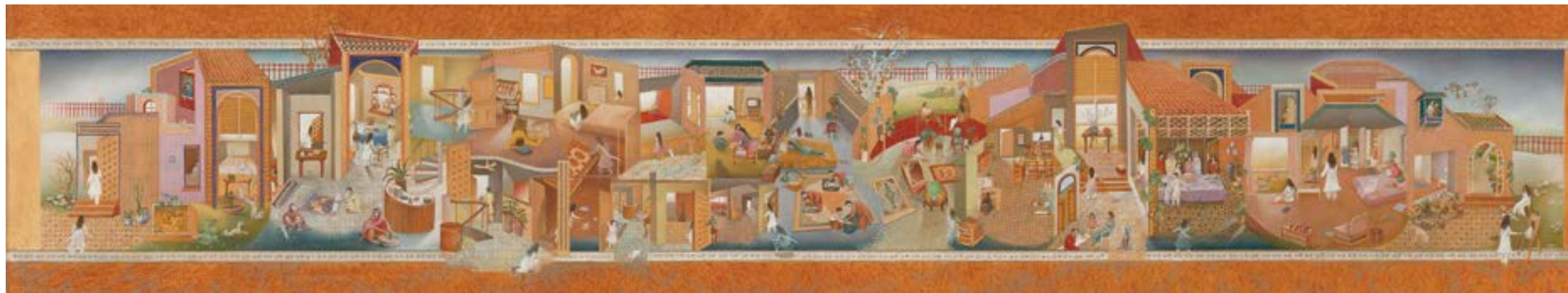
PAKISTANI ARTIST SHAHZIA SI-kander has been described as a 'Maximalist Minimalist'. She insists that miniature paintings should never be curtailed by size and she has put this belief firmly into action, creating everything from large-scale artworks and murals to multimedia installations, fluid animation films and videos that are almost intimidating in their size, intensity, depth, focus and imagination.

"I've been studying miniature painting for almost three decades now. For me, it has always been heroic in scope and not limited by its scale — rather it's a space to unleash one's imagination," says the 45-year-old artist, whose wild, immersive experiments with the art form have paved the way for a whole new generation of miniaturists.



BOLD ART
(LEFT) THE MANY
FACES OF ISLAM, 1997-99,
14 X 18 INCHES





ART OF THE MATTER
THE SCROLL, A 5-FT LONG, 2D
MINIATURE OF SIKANDER'S
HOME, FIRST TURNED THE
ARTISTIC SPOTLIGHT ON HER



Sikander's bold explorations using miniature painting techniques have made her extremely successful and high in demand

CANVAS WONDERS
(ABOVE) PARALLAX,
AN INSTALLATION AT
SPACE: THE LINDA PACE
FOUNDATION, 2014-2015;
(LEFT) SINXAY: NAR-
RATIVE AS DISSOLU-
TION #2, 2008, 89½ X
59¼ INCHES; (FACING
PAGE) "SHAHZIA
SIKANDER SELECTS",
2009

remaining relevant by challenging the status quo, not about holding on to positions of power," affirms the slim, articulate artist.

Born in Lahore, Sikander entered The National College of Arts in 1987 and took up miniature painting at a time when it wasn't very popular. But "what others saw as enslavement to craft and technique, I saw as a path for dialogue," she says. In 1991, she wrote a thesis outlining the possibilities of experimenting in miniature painting for which the institution awarded her the Shakir Ali and Haji Sharif prizes.

It was a work called *The Scroll* in 1991 that first turned the artistic spotlight on Sikander. It was a 5-ft-long, two-dimensional miniature

painting of her home — she grew up in a big joint family — with a ghost-like figure in white traversing through the rooms. "It was the first time anyone in the genre at the National College of Arts had attempted to create a 5-ft miniature!" she laughs. "*The Scroll* was a game-changer for contemporary miniature painting as I challenged the existing requirements of that time. I went beyond the boundaries instead of depicting a contemporary version of a traditional ritual," she recounts.

After graduation, Sikander flew to Washington to install some of her paintings in the Pakistani Embassy and decided to stay on in the United States. In 1993, she enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design. Two years later, she attended the Glassell School of Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston as a Core Fellow and remained there until 1997. During this time, she cultivated a deep interest in wall and floor drawings using paper as her medium of expression.

She was invited to attend the prestigious Whitney Biennial in 1997, and since then, it has been a heady string of successes with global works selling for upwards of \$100,000. Today, she lives and works in New York with her husband and son and aims to make way for new forms of discussion and dialogue through her work.

Sikander doesn't believe in boundaries in terms of medium, format or content, and creates works that can explore just about anything. "In *The world is Yours, The world is Mine* (2014), I was interested in commenting on how history is

constructed and that the person who gets to tell the story ends up defining history," she says. "Such narratives rarely tell the everyday stories. I juxtaposed hip-hop and Indo-Persian miniature painting in this context as they are modes of storytelling and are a means of engaging with personal histories."

Sikander's constant experiments with various formats and media have earned her a number of prestigious awards, including the inaugural Medal for Art from the US State Department in 2012. Just last month, she received the Asia Society Award for Contributions to Contemporary Art at Art Basel Hong Kong, where she also showcased her work. She's also a member of the Asian Art Council of the Guggenheim Museum.

Does she feel disconnected from her country? "Not at all," responds Sikander. "I was invited to the Lahore Literary Festival last year (the first invitation of this kind from Pakistan) and I'm very appreciative of the opportunity to meet so many people I consider an integral part of my personal community.

It's my deep desire to exhibit my work in my country. I'm hoping this will happen as more and more young people get involved in the arts and open up the field."

Drawing inspiration from the world around her, Sikander says she's deeply influenced by books, cinema and theatre alike. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* — in which he talks about various forms of cultural collision — had a profound impact on her work, especially as she shifted scales, while the films of Satyajit Ray and Godard impact the way she uses light in her productions.

Sikander loves to travel, and these experiences also find their way into her artwork. Road trips are a favourite, and she often draws and sketches while on the move. "Since my youth in Pakistan, driving has always been an essential part of how I experience the world," she says, adding that driving was a key part of her research for her widely acclaimed video animation artwork, *Parallax*. "Even my most embellished miniatures have been created with motion in mind, an open-ended, ongoing sense of space and story," she says.

Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art is open until June 7 at the Honolulu Museum of Art. Also coming up is an exhibition at the Guggenheim Bilbao being launched July 17. Sikander will also participate in the Performa Biennial in New York in November. And there's no doubt that she will continue to deliver path-breaking mixes that will captivate her existing fans and win new ones. **E**



and has made a mark on the international circuit with creations that are technically sound and also a stunning creative force, she receives scant recognition in her home country.

Sikander is often criticised for not engaging with her community or accused of pan-

dering to Western tastes and understandably, she finds this reaction to her work distressing and disturbing as she feels strongly about her roots. "The freedom of the artist as an individual is what allows them to create their own worlds. Being contemporary is about