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SHAHZIA SIKANDER

APPARATUS OF POWER

“Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power,” organized by Asia Society Hong Kong Center, was heralded by the institution for its poignant engagement with Hong Kong’s colonial past. The Asia Society, where the exhibition took place, occupies a former British military barracks and explosives magazine. A small selection of Sikander’s videos and prints were also shown at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum on Victoria Harbour. Spanning these two sites, Sikander’s show was presented as an exploration of the British occupation of Hong Kong by both land and sea.

Unfortunately, this historical framework distracted from the actual content of the exhibition, which was more an intimate study of Sikander’s processes and motifs nurtured over her 25-year practice; the subject of imperialism constituted but a fragment of the show’s works. On view were around 70 paintings, drawings, prints and videos, organized into four thematic sections. Mostly borrowed from Sikander’s personal collection, the works offered visitors a chance to experience rarely seen pieces that have special importance to the artist.

The first gallery introduced the artist’s core motifs and techniques, beginning with *The Scroll* (1989–90), Sikander’s thesis project for the National College of Arts in Lahore, where she studied miniature painting. *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* (1993), by contrast, is a painterly abstraction of a headless female body with limbs that end in wide loops instead of hands and feet. This is an iconic image that, for Sikander, symbolizes self-sufficiency for the way the figure connects back to itself.

A clever array of works in the second gallery focused on notions of representation and replication. In creating *I Am the Exact Imitation of the Original* (2009), Sikander investigated the power of authenticity by faithfully copying in ink a facsimile of the American Declaration of Independence’s signatory page. In a series of portrait drawings of Laotian monks (*Monks and Novices*, 2006–08), Sikander confronts the tourist industry in Laos, where paintings depicting stylized versions of these subjects are sold to foreigners. Here, she challenges the capitalization of such stereotypes by sensitively rendering the likeness of each individual.

The third gallery reiterated common symbols in Sikander’s work to draw awareness to the methodology of rote learning that underlies the miniature painting tradition. Patterns made from Sikander’s signature motif of hair belonging to Gopi—the name for female worshippers of the Hindu god Krishna—define the structure of large-scale works in this room, such as *Epistrophe* (2013–15) and *Apparatus of Power* (2013–16). In *Practice Makes Perfect* (2011), an oversized sheet

of music superimposed with Urdu script, Sikander acknowledges the analogous method of learning music through practice and repetition. Nearby, the overlaying of music and words in Sikander’s video *Parallax* (2013) offered the perfect soundtrack to this exhibition segment. Animated imagery featuring magnified landscapes and spinning disembodied arms, accompanied by music and poetic recitations, created a disjunctive and otherworldly experience.

The exhibition ended with a gallery labeled “Empire Follows Art,” named after four political propaganda-style prints. They led off a selection of works that seemed to have little in common with one another, other than serving to demonstrate Sikander’s technical prowess. Four etched portraits (two depicting herself and two of playwright Ayad Akhtar) revealed her skill in intaglio printmaking. Astral imagery in these works indicates Sikander’s longtime fascination with the Mi’raj, a miraculous spiritual odyssey in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. *Seraph* (2010–16), meanwhile, is a small study in ink of a so-called company man of the British East India Company, who recurs in Sikander’s other works. Here, she has added angelic wings to the character to suggest his moral redemption.

The contextualization of Sikander’s work within a geographically specific history undermines its multivalent potential and tethers it to postcolonial theory; one was, therefore, left wondering whether the Asia Society imposed a colonial framework on this exhibition for the sake of localism. A forthcoming catalog, featuring an excellent essay by curator Claire Brandon, as well as contributions by renowned scholars in other disciplines and the artist herself, will help to correct this emphasis by focusing on the significance of the exhibition beyond its site of origin.

JENNIFER FIELD

