

HELLO

P A K I S T

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OUR FIRST TIME
WITH GLOBAL
ARTIST
**SHAHZIA
SIKANDER**

HIGH WATTAGE
WOMAN

MEET
**SHAHVAAR A
KHAN**
OF DESI BOYZ
FAME

Sajal Ali

URNS ON THE LIGHTS
FROM WITHIN

HERE IS
WHERE
IT'S AT

WEDDINGS
NEW YEAR'S
PARTIES



THE WORLD IS MINE

AT THE APEX OF HER GLOBAL SUCCESS

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

LOOKS BACK AT 2016

IN THIS HELLO! EXCLUSIVE



Shahzia Sikander

Shahzia Sikander is a global icon for Pakistani art and the scale she traverses in her work is massive – it is globally sought and internationally appreciated. In this exclusive conversation, she shares the ethos of her work and her journey as an artist from her early days at the National College of Arts in Lahore in the 1980s to her multi-award-winning status as a Pakistani-American artist today.

To quote a statement used often to describe your work: Your pioneering practice is a departure from the Indo-Persian miniature painting that you learned at NCA in the 80s.

My work is experimental but equally rooted and invested in tradition. The privilege of a contemporary artist is that one is a witness to history. I have chosen to investigate a certain history, one where the historical Muslim visual tradition operates.

Time is the key. You said once that you need three to four years to prepare a show? Do you still feel the same?

Work demands research. From the onset, I challenge myself intellectually and emotionally to be inventive and to take risk, to not be repetitive. Working in this manner usually requires time.

Your first large scale installation miniature painting 'The Scroll' (1989-90) at over five feet was also your thesis painting and it launched the trend of making large-scale

contemporary paintings in the miniature painting department at the National College of Arts. Did you also teach at the National College of Arts?

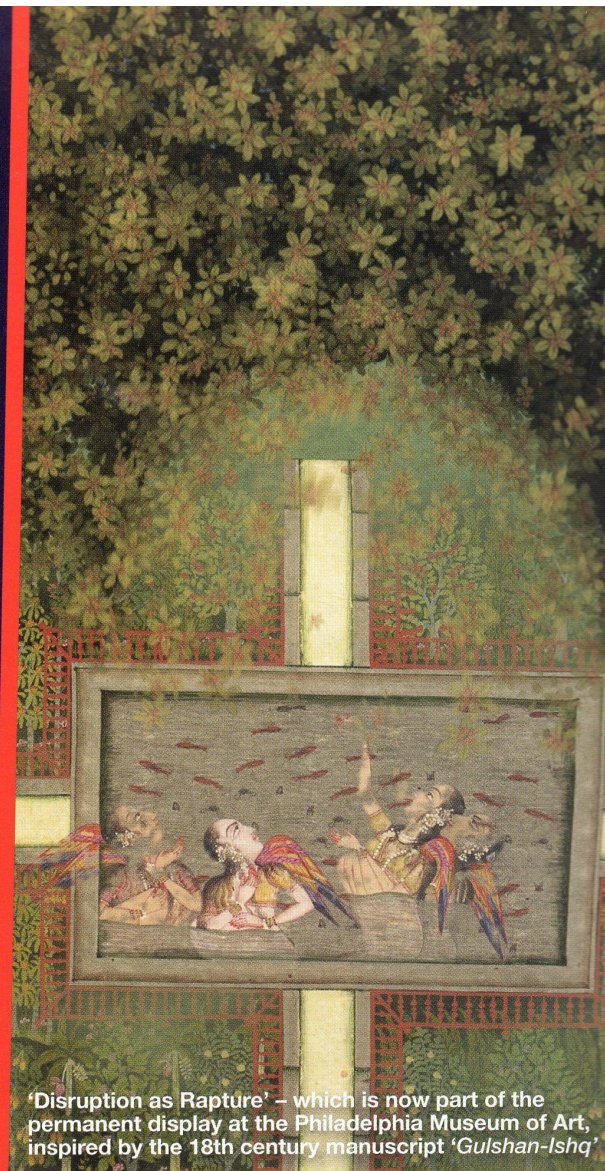
'The Scroll' was a game changer. It launched a rigorous inquiry and deconstruction of miniature painting and my work stood out because it had gone beyond the traditional illustration. I was looking at narrative structures in film and cinema when I conceptually laid the foundation for 'The Scroll.' Some early influences were Michelangelo Antonioni, Alfred Hitchcock, and Satyajit Ray – which I explored alongside the Safavid depiction of narrative, light, and the mysterious interiority of space. The sheer recognition I received in the press on my thesis exhibition impacted the miniature painting department directly with an influx of students opting to 'specialise' in it. In 1992, I was hired to teach – the first person to teach alongside master teacher Bashir Ahmad, and the very first woman teacher in the history of the miniature painting department at NCA.

The process of creating a miniature painting can be methodical and ritualistic. How have you changed or adapted the process?

It remains such since I have not resorted to having others make them for me. It is a laborious and methodical process of



Shahzia Sikander's 'Apparatus of Power,' a survey of her works at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum in 2016



'Disruption as Rapture' – which is now part of the permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, inspired by the 18th century manuscript 'Gulshan-Ishq'

working within a certain scale and language. Other works I make like films, though in nature digital, are also born of a rigorous method and ritual, rooted in drawing.

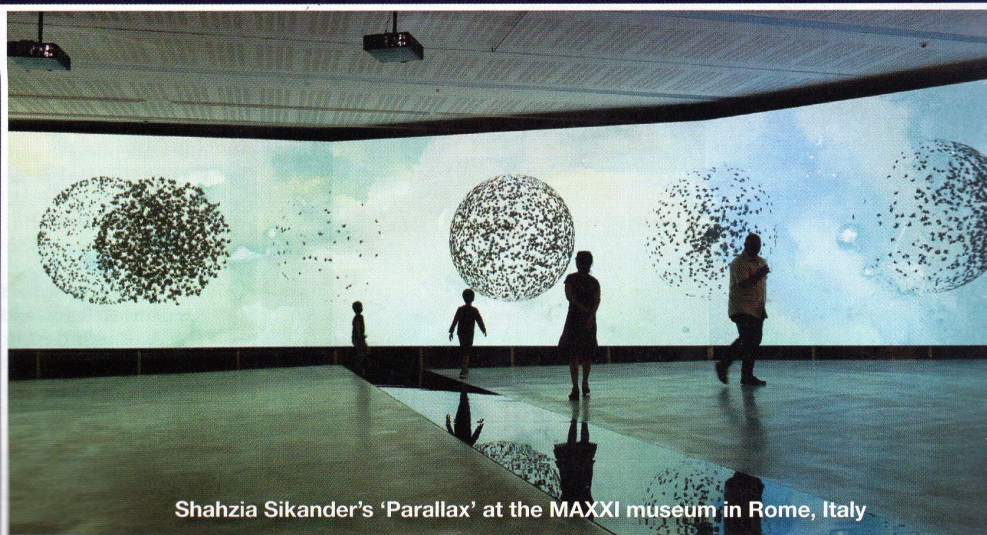
What do you find different now in Pakistan than when you were growing up in the 80s which was plagued with the malaise of the growing institutionalisation of religion?

Growing up within the cultural, social and political shifts under Zia definitely pushed me, as a young woman, into the direction of art. Ironically the experience of religion in my immediate surroundings within the private space at that time was about spirituality. Demands were not made of one's faith. It was a relationship between God and oneself. I held on to that notion deeply as I lived around the world.

You've always explored ideas around authority and power.

As an artist, I am deeply invested in this idea – on how to make work that can speak to the world and can remain cyclical. Critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are the three tenets that allow authority to be suspended as difference and autonomy to come into play. Many examples are within various works I have done: Like the show I created and curated 'Provenance the Invisible Hand' in 2009 at the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum; the film *Bending the Barrels* which was screened last month at the American Academy in Rome; and the recent works that examine the history and policies of the East India Company.

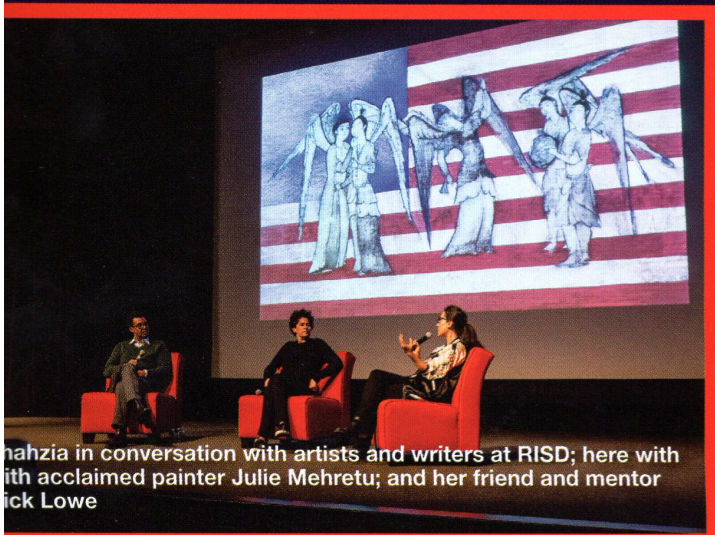
'The sheer recognition I received in the press on my thesis exhibition at NCA impacted the miniature painting department directly with an influx of students opting to 'specialise' in it'



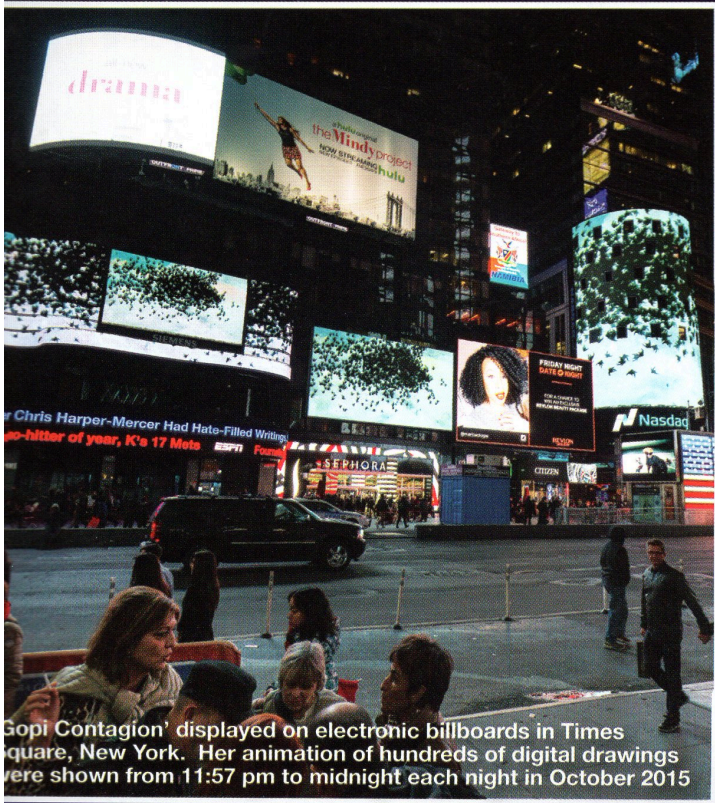
Shahzia Sikander's 'Parallax' at the MAXXI museum in Rome, Italy



Zahzia Sikander (far right) in conversation with Ayad Akhtar (second from left) at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)



Zahzia in conversation with artists and writers at RISD; here with acclaimed painter Julie Mehretu; and her friend and mentor Nick Lowe



'Gopi Contagion' displayed on electronic billboards in Times Square, New York. Her animation of hundreds of digital drawings were shown from 11:57 pm to midnight each night in October 2015

'I have been developing platforms of open conversation, inviting artists, activists and writers at RISD. Much of the dialogue is to elaborate on the role of art, especially in uncertain times'

You've been an advocate of personal freedom and individuality; would you share some thoughts?

Freedom is essential in pursuit of creativity. Not the perception 'I am free' thus I can do whatever I want. More about digging in the direction of truth and pursuing with an open heart and mind – the pursuit that leads to a level of involvement that can foster collective participation

You've always seen yourself as a citizen of the world with respect for other cultures and with the consistent desire to investigate the roots of your own identity. Do you think identity is fluid?

Fear at the root of one's understanding of one's self has never contributed to great art or literature! I see identity as a pursuit curve, a foil to truth, a chase where both real and fabricated are entangled. The pursuit of truth is such a fleeting premise when held hostage to authenticity. This idea of an authentic identity is a misconception to put it mildly. I also like the Pakistani-American playwright Ayad Akhtar's take on identity as a McGuffin – which means it aids yet is irrelevant to the overall plot.

You recently won the American Academy Religion and Art award.

The AAR award in Religion and the Arts is presented annually to an artist, performer, critic, curator, or scholar who has made a recent significant contribution to the understanding of the relations among the arts and religions, both for the academy and for a broader public. It is both an

honour and deeply humbling.

And now to discuss a few of your exhibitions in 2016: Tell us about 'Ecstasy As Sublime, Heart As Vector,' at the MAXXI Museum, Rome, Italy.

This exhibition reflects on how certain symbols in visual art, literature and architecture are historically linked and how strategies in my work cultivate new meanings for such trenchant symbols and motifs. The installations I created at MAXXI also intersect Zaha Hadid's architectural language, like the glass veins in the floor are incorporated to become part of the work.

Your interest in architecture has been present since you were a student?

Architecture informs my sensibilities in that spaces, literal and figurative, are rife with history. Louis Kahn's work was highly influential in my formative years, and his parliament building in Dhaka is a remarkable example of how art and architecture interfere and interact with the social, political, and economic changes in a society. I have also served on the jury for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. In fact, one of my favourite works that won that year (2013) was an Islamic cemetery in Altach, Austria.

And tell us about 'The Apparatus of Power' at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum with your works 'The Last Post' and 'Parallax'?

The Hong Kong exhibition at the Asia Society this year was a survey show of my works from 1987 till 2016. The space was built by the British Army in the mid-nineteenth century



Shahzia at Princeton University in front on her 70-foot mosaic mural installed permanently in the Economics and International Policy building

for explosives and ammunition production and storage. Engaging the site with some of my work that dealt with the history of colonial struggle and international trade in India was a subversive gesture.

Finally a comment about your site-specific video installation 'Disruption as Rapture' – which is now part of the permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art?

This is a video animation set to an original score made in collaboration with the Pakistani author and musician Ali Sethi who uses classical *ragas* to interpret the epic poem. The work is inspired by the 18th century '*Gulshan-i Ishq*' manuscript in Philadelphia Museum's permanent collection. It will be on display for many years as it is part of the permanent historical South Asian wing of the museum and is housed in its own special room.

When advertisements were suspended in Times Square giving time to play 'Gopi Contagion,' what were some of the reactions you saw on the ground?

The reactions were powerful. Many people thought what they saw were bats appearing at midnight. Many said it was eerie and sublime. It was meant to instill awe and wonder leaving viewer full of questions and emotionally moved.

Can you tell us what you'll be doing in 2017? You were also recently selected as the Kirloskar Visiting Scholar in Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

I have been developing platforms of open conversation inviting artist, activists and writers at RISD. Much of the dialogue is to elaborate on the role of art, especially in uncertain times. I hosted a conversation two days after the US presidential elections for students to hear from established artists on how creativity can be channeled for greater means. We had conversations with the Pakistani playwright Ayad Akhtar whose play

'The Who and the What' premieres now in Europe with the biggest German theatre doing the production; with acclaimed painter Julie Mehretu; and my friend and mentor Rick Lowe – the founder of Project Row Houses – whose portrait appeared in my paintings almost 20 years ago. Rick also travelled to Pakistan and we conducted workshops at the Fatima Jinnah College for Women; taught at children's schools; met with community activists behind *Khuda ki Basti* in Karachi; and engaged with the late Sabeen Mahmud. I will host more of such conversations in 2017; am writing several articles for various publications; working on a children's book, and making several new paintings as well as a permanent public artwork. It is a busy period and I am very appreciative.

Can you talk about your recent permanent public artwork at Princeton University which you have just finished?

There are two works which open in February 2017. One is a 70-foot mosaic mural and one a 28-foot glass painting – both installed permanently in the Economics and International Policy building. Princeton is also making a documentary on it which will come out later in spring.

If you had the opportunity to spend a few months working in Pakistan, what would you like to do?

I would like to engage with students and teachers from all economic strata and backgrounds. Not just art students. I came to art via mathematics and language. I would like to teach – not just art – but the value of creative thinking – how to use creativity to solve problems and imagine new possibilities, to share my experiences and with the intent to engage, inspire and be inspired.



INTERVIEW: AMNA R. ALI
PHOTOS COURTESY: SHAHZIA SIKANDER



Detail of the 70-ft mosaic on permanent display at Princeton University



Shahzia's 70-ft mural and 28-ft glass painting for Princeton University at Sikander Studio in New York