

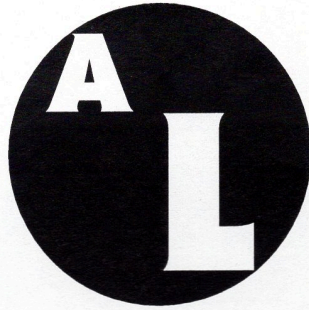


Art Lies

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ArtLies

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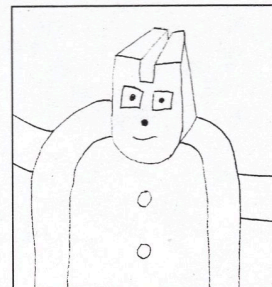
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Kerry Reynolds



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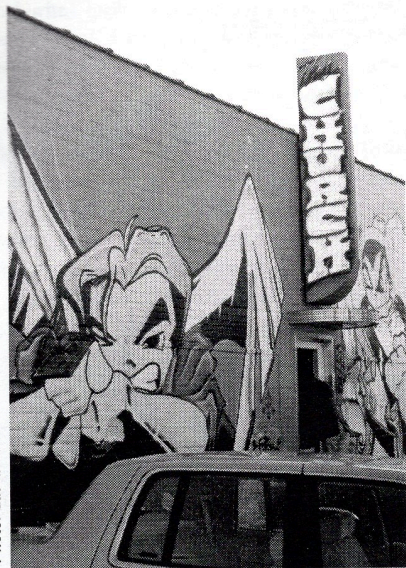


Photo: Laura Lark



Elizabeth Jackson



# Beyond Surfaces

Interview with

Shahzia Sikander

Gudrun Klein

Shahzia Sikander is presently a Core Fellow at the Glassell School at the MFA. Her works were recently selected for the upcoming Whitney Biennial, which will run from March 12 to June 15, 1997. The following conversation was conducted and edited by Gudrun Klein.

Gudrun Klein: Can you briefly sketch your educational and social background?

Shahzia Sikander: I grew up in Lahore, Pakistan. Went through an all girls Catholic school - a rather outdated British set up. From there to the Kinnaird College for Women which was the next essential step in the act of being a "well educated," "presentable" woman with marriage down the lane as the most essential aspect within the social system. But marriage for me was hardly a bait for emancipation. I grew up in a middle-class progressive-minded family, but during the military dictatorship. There were many levels of contradiction and I always found myself in reaction to all that.

GK: How is that connected with wanting to become an artist?

SS: I didn't think I was going to be an artist. But art was like a space of freedom, and it is a women's space in Pakistan's social system. There is a very small artist community and most of them are women. And one of the interesting aspects of Pakistan's history is that art was never institutionalized, really. No galleries, no museums, etc. It was not one of the agendas of the patriarchal system, so it just fell into the hands of women. The creative impulse was mostly a women's thing. It is a great taboo for men to be artists. Let me say something more general about women in our coun-



Shahzia Sikander, *Apparatus of Power*, 1995 Mixed Media, 10" x 7"

Courtesy of the Artist

try's history.

Historically, many extremely sophisticated women of the upper middle class had hobbies and now they can make strong professional choices - the lower class women are eager to learn since most of them work side by side for income. Women will be the greatest agents of social change. Women in the context of art were always outside the rat race. They had nothing to lose, but were also never a threat to the extremely patriarchal system. Contradictions abound. To change any of that you had to face some of these contradictions. And in art I did some of that on an instinctive level rather than an intellectual one. Coming from a middle class family, we had to deal with the fixed hierarchies of the patriarchal system, but while we demonstrated, or were mostly silent, we got really nowhere with that. And for whatever reason, I felt a need for change, an urgency, a personal restlessness.

GK: Can you relate that to your discipline of choice in some way?

SS: When I came to the National College of Art (hereafter NCA), nobody was especially interested in Miniature Painting, and in a way that was one of the reasons why I became interested. I wanted to know what this rather suspect tradition was all about. It was perceived as mostly craft, anti art. For me, without being fully aware of it, it was a reaction and a



fascination at the skill at home, you know, the craft part, that sometimes others were ashamed of but were ready to promote in front of a tourist as a subcontinental art form.

I know now that I am interested in the in-between spaces of cultures and the personal. And creativity was never an individual phenomenon. It was and is responding and collaborating. And women have made that possible more easily, working against the bureaucratic tendencies of the system in Pakistan. Art for me is lived experience which has been about revealing the interconnectedness of things and people. No matter where, really.

**GK:** Come back and explain a little more about this particular art form, Miniature Painting. Give me a little more context to understand it, since you say it is not a typical Pakistani art form, but rather a subcontinental one. And you also make the distinction between art and craft as a problematic one.

**SS:** Well, let's see. It was a special stage in my life. I was so eager to learn and observe. A lot of other young artists were not even willing to do that, they wanted to intellectualize all the time. I was ready to apply myself, totally.

I became an apprentice to a local male artist who had done MP all his life and was teaching at the NCA. Only I and one other student were taking classes with him, and the man made it hard on people to want to stay and learn the art. I also had come across the work of an English man, a former keeper of the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert Museum who had researched this art form. I began to realize that the artist was practicing this discipline in the contemporary scene. And I had learnt about it through reading texts and meeting the Englishman. And, incidentally, the Englishman is generally well known, the artist is only known in Pakistan.

So I began to be fascinated with those tensions. The context of this art form in the context of art in Pakistan in general, and grappling with the whole social and political dimensions (intuitively more than intellectually) on a personal level.

Take the language issue, for a moment. I grew up learning English, then I was learning French. And I hardly know Urdu well enough. Then I did not really grasp what is at stake but in a way you don't speak any language properly, really. English was the ticket to success. Urdu wasn't. And generally, working - you have to be disciplined and persevere and work is always a struggle and humbling experience. So to become an apprentice to a very bitter man who saw his art as unrecognized and became very demanding, was tough.

It was isolating but something really meaningful. And, ironically, working in this art form had political meaning. I had no desire to be political. But I think violating the established aesthetic standards became a political gesture in a subtle way.

I want to comment on the historical aspect very briefly. MP is a language I had to acquire and it is a language coming from Persia, Central Asia into India.

The other comment I want to make is that when the British came to India, they saw the lived experience of what I would call art in the everyday lives of people, and deemed it beautiful, but clearly not "art." They opened Western-style art schools injecting European art and aesthetics introducing watercolor, chiaroscuro and scientific perspective in imitation of contemporary British painting. They recognized the skillfulness, the industriousness of various traditional Indian art forms but rarely the context. And that dichotomy is pervasive. And it's problem-

atic. And it's part of the context I became caught up in without understanding all its vagaries.

I became caught up with the technique. I was seduced by the materiality of the process, the preparation of making paper, making dyes, the application of it, the creation of luminosity, understanding the material, the construction of the work. The deliberate variety of formal information as narrative was not the sole agenda. I am more of an image oriented artist and I wanted to change the vocabulary. It is an internalised process but it is about growth and interaction. When you learn something, you undo or let go of something while doing something new.

**GK:** So, let's look at what happened to you being here. There's so much to address, and we can't cover even the surfaces... But let's try. Language, work, surfaces, appearances, women, notions of who you are.

**SS:** When I came I was not aware that I was a woman, specifically. I was just myself. Coming here, I gradually became aware that, yes, I am a woman from Pakistan, a Muslim woman, because that's a label people sometimes use to describe me. But what does that mean? Let's take the veil issue. I never wore it, it had not been a lived experience for me personally. Being here, I became curious. And it was a reaction to questions from people here that I wanted to find out what it meant to me. So my mother sent me this very beautiful lace veil and I wore it. And it was amazing. How people responded, and how I felt, too. Religion is spirituality and not politics. All of a sudden it had a political meaning through a piece of clothing. And I became anonymous. The veil protects you, too. Or take wearing Pakistani clothes. I get addressed as if I were very conservative. It's a great disguise when you want to just observe. Perceptions of you as a person change with your clothes. And wearing the veil I did offend a few people because I could take it off and it was not my lived reality.

And you know, a friend of mine asked me whether she could put extensions and braid my hair. I agreed. So I wore braids, and people, again, responded so tellingly. People avoided eye contact, I was taken to be Trinidadian, and Pakistani people made slightly derogatory comments thinking I wouldn't understand. I was questioned whether I was trying to identify with the African-American community and why the hell was I doing that?

So, what is identity?

**GK:** So, how does that tie in with your particular art form, the MP, once you came into the new environment, this altered context, what happened?

**SS:** My dislocation was real. I was in a different system. There was an acute lack of articulation, a pressure to perform. I was going to work and hated being one of the so-called minority students and having to deal with all the simplifications that come with that from both sides and the concomitant misinterpretations. I also had not experienced the critical rigor of art critiques and I knew I had to internalize it all, let it flow out through work. And that became our common language, not English

**GK:** Did you have a common art language?

**SS:** While I knew many basic elements of art, having more



## SIKANDER

resources, and being challenged to question art in an intellectual way, learning the elements of their language of art was part of my work of assimilation. I was ready to try something new. And this exploration was relevant as a next step in my development as an artist. The timing was right.

You know, I want to mention something about so-called cultural diversity. In Lahore, going to NCA was a big change in that I was suddenly surrounded by students from all over the country. And they spoke different languages, have different cultures, and I did not do much about that diversity then. But it was there. And there were students from other parts of the world, who, seen from here, were "minorities" and, again, I didn't do much to interact with them then. Coming here I became conscious of such issues. And, say, that move in Lahore from my first school to NCA became a cultural exchange between two separate cultures 8 miles apart. I experienced a similar shift when I moved from Rhode Island to Texas, but most obvious is the parallel to me moving from Glassell to the Row Houses where I interacted with other artists in the Third Ward.

GK: How has your art language changed through all of this?

SS: Well, one thing is that MP has become fascinating in yet another way. I have begun to develop my own language within its language. I also have become interested in the narrative aspects of the art form which held no interest for me in Pakistan. And now I want to do collaborative art projects on various levels, in various dimensions. One project is bringing together different techniques, scales etc, and art forms in my own personal work. But beyond that, working with artists here and experiencing difference through such collaborative work. And thirdly, bringing about exchanges of artists between here and Pakistan and vice versa. Those are my big projects for the near future which excite me.

★

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