

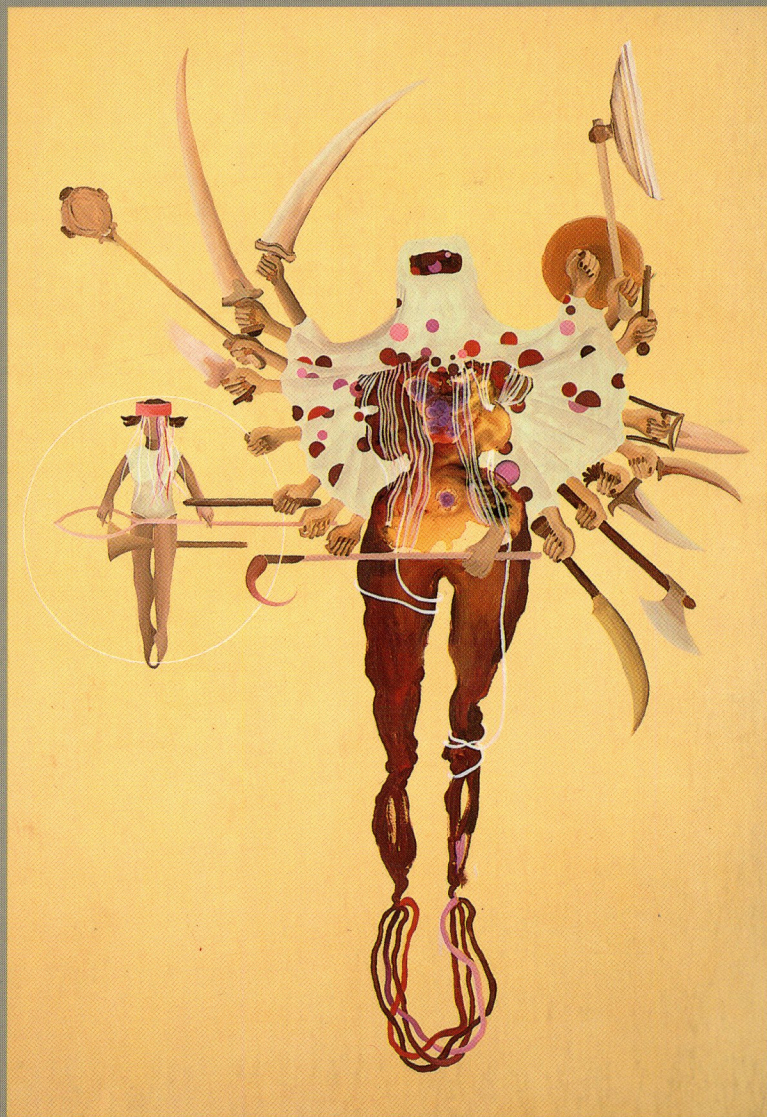


# PUBLIC CULTURE

Society for Transnational Cultural Studies

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ALTER / NATIVE  
MODERNITIES



DILIP  
PARAMESHWAR  
GAONKAR  
GUEST EDITOR



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*Reinventing the  
Dislocation*

1997  
Vegetable color,  
watercolor,  
dry pigment,  
tea wash  
on 'wasli' paper  
13" x 9 1/2"



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**Miniaturizing Modernity:  
Shahzia Sikander in  
Conversation with Homi K.  
Bhabha**

*edited by Robert McCarthy*

On 8 March 1998 a public discussion inaugurated a Renaissance Society exhibition of Shahzia Sikander's work at the University of Chicago. Portions of that talk are abridged here, beside a selection of Sikander's work engaging the Indo-Persian classical form of miniature painting.

**Homi Bhabha:** I was reminded while walking through your show of David Sylvester's interview with Francis Bacon where Bacon said that he never wanted to invent a new technique, that people who wanted to invent new techniques in fact were limiting their scopes. What Bacon wanted to do was to *reinvent* an earlier technique, one that had been handed down to him. Somehow the distinction between the traditional and the avant garde is profoundly problematized and confused in your work. The terms don't seem to operate in opposition to each other. Do you think that reinvention describes what you have done? Does your work fit into this tradition/modernity sort of binarism?

**Shahzia Sikander:** I think that the boundaries are blurred, and that that blurring comes out of the act of making art in particular circumstances of time and place. The appeal of miniature painting was that it embodied both the past and the present. It was vulnerable to the kinds of practices that happened in the National College of Art in Lahore and to the incorporation of the personal and the cultural, but, although I always intended to go beyond miniature painting, I did not set out to reinvent it.

*Public Culture* is grateful to Lori Bartman, Susanne Ghez, Pat Scott, and Hamza Walker of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago for their generous assistance and permission to reproduce this interview.

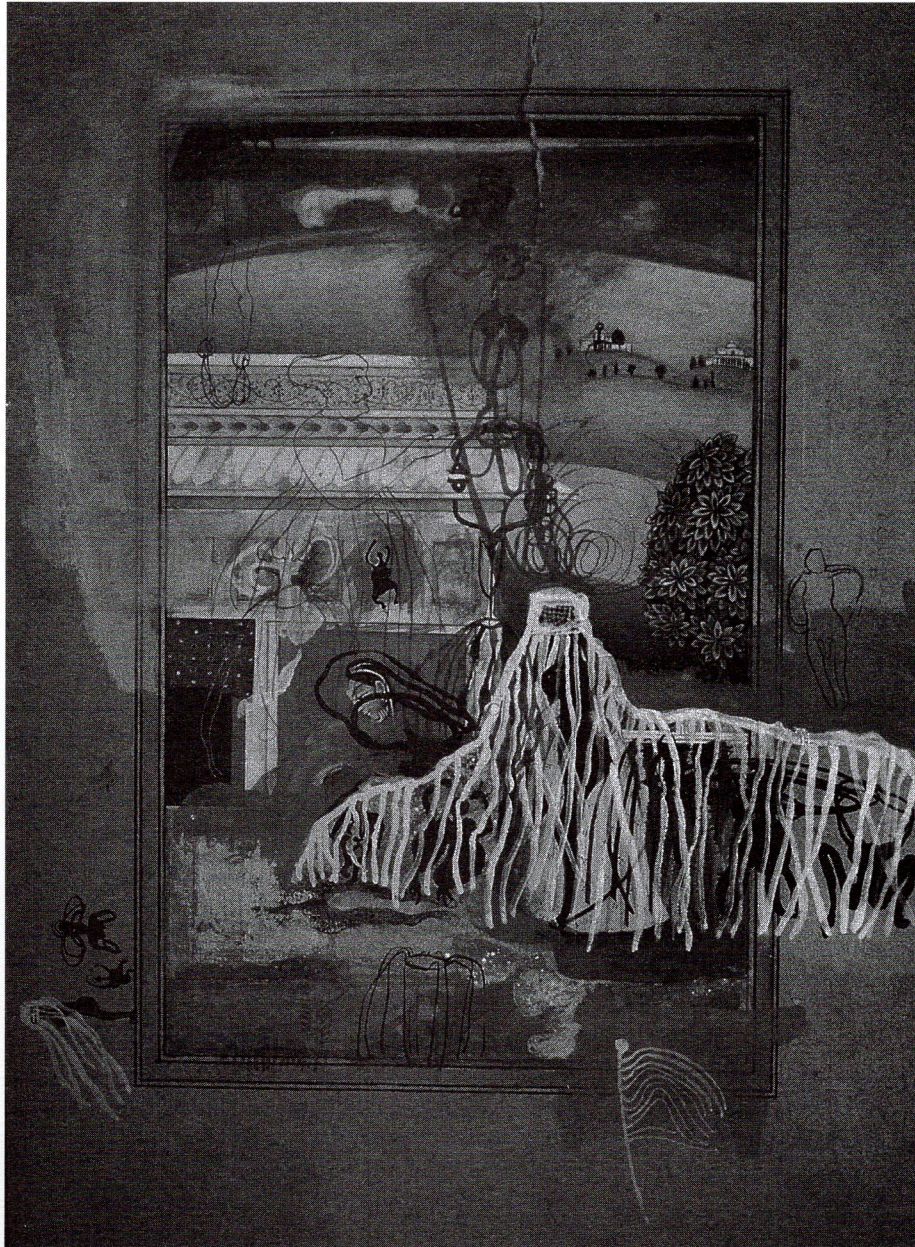
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**HB:** It is interesting that the game-playing that happens in institutions of instruction also actually produces particular practices. Usually, when people look at work that comes from other cultural or historical contexts, or work by diasporic or migrant artists, there is an attempt to see cultural differences in the image, in a style, at some mimetic level of the work. What I find interesting is something else, which is that cultural difference is not merely for the eye; it is in the way one is trained—it is what art school means “there” as opposed to “here.” What distinguishes culturally different kinds of work seems not merely to be the making of one image different from another, but the whole training that happens before paint touches paper.

**SS:** My decision to study miniature painting was questioned by some of my colleagues and other faculty. They said it would retard my creativity, that miniaturism was just rigorous copying. I was attracted to understanding *why* the form existed. Being in that position forced the issue of establishing a relationship to craft or technique, in this case a highly stylized, even fated, genre. And the instructor did play kinds of mind games. To gauge his student’s seriousness and resilience, one of the first assignments was to catch baby squirrels for the making of brushes. He did teach us how to make brushes by hand, but what fascinated me more was the way our training was conducted—the play, the subtle provocation—I was interested in seeing what could be learned in this process of submission, of subjection to the technique as it was lodged in this patriarchal arrangement. At the same time, it was not that he was teaching what would have been taught during the Moghul period, either. All of this was happening in a place of experimentation. The distinctions do get confused. The illustrations we studied were printed in catalogues published by Western scholars.





*Separate Working  
Things*

1995  
Vegetable color,  
watercolor,  
dry pigment,  
tea wash on  
'wasli' paper  
8" × 11"



**HB:** You have developed a Durga figure, a Kali figure, from the Hindu pantheon, and then uncannily doubled it, overlaid it with the enigmatic veiled woman [see cover]. It seems to me that sometimes you don't so much bring the East and the West together but, more interestingly, the East and the East, and that in doing so you are bringing out the nearness of difference, the intimacy of difference that can exist within any culture.

**SS:** In my experience, in Pakistan, representations of Hindu mythology were unacceptable. I was interested in how history simplified the visual in terms of Hindu and Muslim or, in my experience, Indian and Pakistani—a visual that I felt did not lend itself to simplistic dissection and separation. Maybe this refusal is where I've entered the work myself: the central, footless figure in *Fleshy Weapons* is rooted to herself.

**Shahzia Sikander** attended the National College of Art in Lahore, Pakistan and the Rhode Island School of Design before holding a residency in the Core Program at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. She now lives and paints in New York City.

**Homi K. Bhabha** is Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, where he teaches English and Art History. His publications include *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) and the edited volume *Nation and Narration* (Routledge, 1990).





*Perilous  
Order*

1997  
Vegetable  
color,  
dry pigment,  
watercolor,  
tea wash on  
hand prepared  
'wasli' paper  
10 1/2" x 8"