

# DIRECTIONS

## Shahzia Sikander

November 18, 1999–February 21, 2000



*Venus's Wonderland*, 1994–97 (checklist no. 27).



**S**HAHZIA SIKANDER'S ART IS about complexity, contradiction, and synthesis—about past and present, Asia and America, self and society, reality and perception. Bringing together elements from diverse sources, she devises enigmatic images that reflect her own experiences and serve as the visual equivalents of mixed metaphors.

The artist's themes, as well as her materials and methods, originated in Asia and developed in the United States. Born in 1969 in Lahore, the cultural heart of Pakistan, Sikander studied painting there at the National College of Art. Most of the teachers and students espoused European and American aesthetics, which emphasize individual innovation and self-expression, rather than traditional Asian arts, which stress technical skill and emulation of past works. Sikander, however, was intrigued by miniature painting. Introduced to India by Islamic conquerors, that sophisticated, erudite tradition had flourished from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. Subsequently, under British colonial rule, it had degenerated into repetition of older prototypes; most modern miniatures are commercial copies sold to tourists.

When Sikander decided to switch her major to miniaturism under professor Bashir Ahmed, fellow students warned her that doing so would impede her creativity. But she was fascinated by its labor-intensive and craft-oriented nature. She immersed herself in learning rigorous techniques: preparing *wasli* paper (several sheets of paper adhered together); making pigments from plants and minerals, and brushes from squirrel hair; applying multiple layers of opaque and translucent watercolors; and burnishing (rubbing the surfaces with a stone for density and sheen). She became

adept at painting foliate borders and classic figure styles from Persian, Mughal, Kangra, Deccan, and Rajput sources. As she mastered the skills, she also gradually recognized the relevance of miniature painting to contemporary political issues, including her own position as a woman in a patriarchal society. Using a visual idiom that was precolonial, representational, and Islamic was in itself a political statement—one that offered possibilities for self-expression and social subversion.

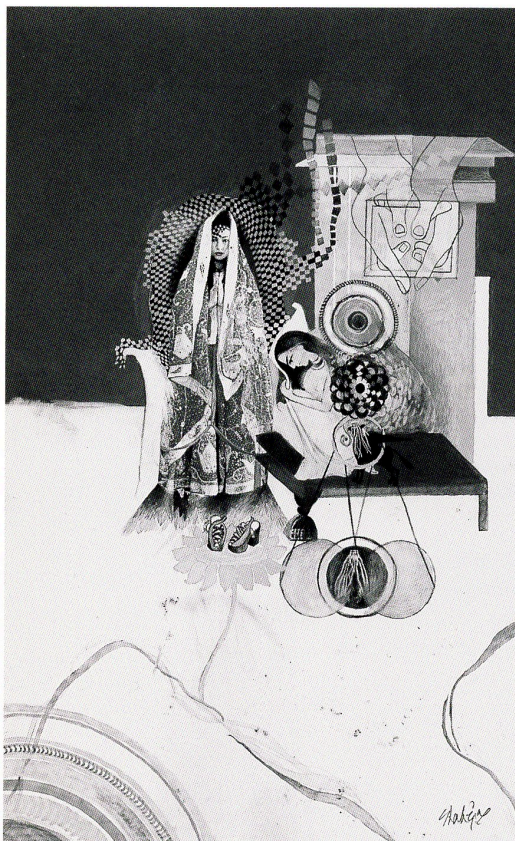
While still a student, Sikander challenged tradition by inventing, rather than copying, historicizing images and by introducing elements from modern reality. *Mirrat I (Waiting on a Wishful Thought)*, 1991–92, refers to traditional Kangra-style scenes of a woman awaiting her lover; Sikander personalized the theme by portraying a friend daydreaming of romance. In *The Scroll*, 1991–92, she pays homage to the intricate architectural geometries of sixteenth-century Persian miniatures, updated with a narrative of a modern, progressive, middle-class family. From left to right the composition shows the artist (the long-haired figure clothed in white) traversing an imaginary house of many rooms and emerging to paint her own portrait.

After traveling in northwestern India in 1992, Sikander spent two years at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where her art was completely out of context. Studying Western notions of identity, gender, and multiculturalism, she began to experiment with content and to create complex personal symbols that mock or refute simplistic cultural clichés in favor of nuance and ambiguity. *A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation I*, 1995, and *Hood's Red Rider (Series I, No. 2)*, 1997, feature a multiarmed goddess derived from sources in Hindu art; when separated from that context, the



figure became a secular image of feminine power. Although she had never worn conservative Muslim dress in Pakistan, Sikander clothed her goddess in a veil. By merging antithetical subjects, she questions the historic animosity between Hinduism and Islam and confronts the Western stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed. Often the veil is torn or conceals a nude of sensuous proportions or expands into a garment resembling a net. Does the garment offer protective shelter, or stifling imprisonment, or both?

Finding herself categorized as a minority in America, Sikander uses her art to comment, with gentle irony, on Western preconceptions of her origins. In the first "Extraordinary Realities" series, 1996, she appropriated crudely

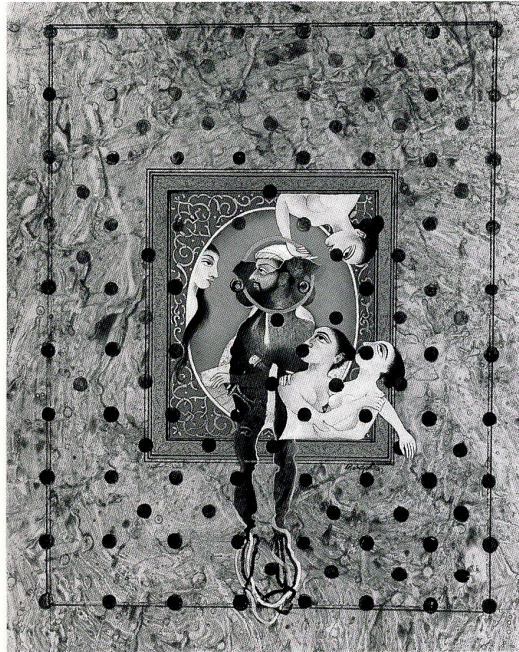


*Extraordinary Realities (Series II, No. 1), 1997*  
(checklist no. 14).

painted tourist-trade miniatures—scenes of men hunting and drinking—and then superimposed self-portraits, thereby implying her rejection of the values inherent in the underlying works. One vignette presents Sikander in elaborate Pakistani dress standing with hands together in the Hindu *namaste* greeting (which resembles the Christian prayer gesture), layered over an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This evocative blend of icons reflects, in part, Sikander's observation that many Muslims know about other religions, but the converse is rarely true. In another composition the artist's likeness cowers, with a distraught expression, behind a chair—amid so many complex realities, who is she really and where does she belong?

As artist-in-residence at the Glassell School of Art, Houston, from 1995 to 1997 the artist conceived new hybrid images to express the transient and transcultural nature of her life. She repeatedly portrays a female body with footless lower legs linked by rootlike tendrils, usually hovering in a vast nebulous space, as in *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, 1995, and *Multiple Bearings*, 1997. This emblem of Sikander as free, independent, and self-nourishing sometimes merges with the multi-armed goddess or is layered atop traditional images, as in *Perilous Order*, 1994–97, and *Uprooted Order III*, 1997. The griffon—an ancient mythical composite of a lion and an eagle—symbolizes the artist's identity as a cultural hybrid and a *challawah* (a Punjabi term for someone who moves about fast and cannot be pinned down). The motif of shoes or feet in midair may suggest the ability to rise above an obstacle or perhaps the desire to become grounded; the lotus flower is a pervasive Asian symbol of renewal and spirituality.





*Perilous Order*, 1994–97 (checklist no. 19).

Sikander's miniatures often develop over many weeks or months, and the process of making each work expresses her philosophical ideas. Her layering of one image on top of another, for example, implies the accumulation of new and transforming experiences in life. By painting over meticulous details with looser, gestural strokes, she declares her liberation from rigid traditions. Eliminating the usual separation between an image and its decorative border serves as a metaphor for traversing personal, social, and metaphysical boundaries. *Perilous Order* exemplifies her layered approach to meaning. Begun as a technical demonstration of how to make a marbled border, the work evolved into a portrait of a Pakistani friend, portrayed as Aurangzeb—the Mughal ruler from 1658 to 1707, noted for enforcing Islamic orthodoxy in South Asia yet reputedly also a secret homosexual, as was Sikander's friend. The artist later added the overlay of black dots as a reference to the grid of

Minimalist art (the visual and theoretical antithesis of her own style), but the dots also suggest an environmental rigidity imprisoning the man and women within. The title thus alludes to both the perilous mental state of a gay man in a conservative society and the difficult situation of a Pakistani miniaturist in the international contemporary art world.

Some of Sikander's works address racial and ethnic divisions in this country. Reading about genealogy, she learned that many white Americans can trace their ancestry through European coats of arms, whereas black Americans cannot—a minor detail that is nonetheless indicative of racial inequity. In works titled *Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings*, 1997, Sikander invented emblems for Project Row Houses, an alternative art space in an African American neighborhood in Houston. Those motifs recur in other works that express the artist's belief in the essential interconnectedness of people of many different origins.

Among the literary and cultural sources Sikander examines are characters from Eastern and Western mythology and pop culture. *Venus's Wonderland*, 1994–97, presents an Indian fable: in a former life the Buddha was a clever monkey who foiled the attempts of a crocodile to capture him as he crossed a river, and in doing so he taught the reptile about kindness. In Sikander's surreal image the monkey is veiled (therefore female) and the crocodile rests in the shell of Venus, copied from Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*, 1484, with that goddess's head floating on one side. *Then and N.O.W.—Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella*, 1994–97, muses on changing roles and the absurd contradictions of being female today: the initials punningly refer to both the present and the National Organization



for Women, while the main characters allude to the naive yet enduring fantasy that virtuous and helpless women are rescued by princes whom they marry. Sikander also reinterprets the tale of "Little Red Riding Hood." Instead of a meek girl threatened with violence and saved by a man, the "Hood's Red Rider" compositions of 1997 and 1998 feature assertive females, including a self-reliant gymnast in a striped leotard who knows her own mind and supports a host of adult identities.

Although living thousands of miles from her homeland, Sikander is still inspired by South Asian culture. Her paintings on a clay ground pay tribute to the centuries-old folk art of rural Indian women who paint symbolic and abstract motifs on the earthen walls of their homes. In recent large-scale murals Sikander fastens overlapping layers of translucent paper, which partly veil the symbols painted behind.



*Hood's Red Rider (Series I, No. 2)*, 1997 (checklist no. 17).



*Walking a Thin Line*, 1997 (checklist no. 28).

While the wall compositions usually have variable outlines, the artist sometimes delineates or implies a border—an act reflecting her observation that self-imposed structures and limits are useful amidst the incredible freedom of choices in America. And so Sikander continues to find support and inspiration in the traditions of miniature painting that launched her into the international art world.

Valerie Fletcher  
Curator

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## CHECKLIST

Unless otherwise indicated, works are made of opaque watercolor, watercolor, vegetable dyes, and tea wash on *wasli* paper. Numbers 1 and 2 have gold leaf; numbers 3 and 31 have graphite; numbers 4 and 5 include silkscreen; number 7 has red ink; numbers 9, 10, 14, and 31 have collage; number 19 has oil; number 26 has photographic emulsion; and numbers 29 and 30 have acrylic and clay on green paper. In dimensions, height precedes width.

1. *Miniature in Mughal Style: Imaginary Man*, 1991, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. (29.2 x 21.6 cm). Edward C. Stanton III and Diane S. Baker, Houston.
2. *Mirrat I (Waiting on a Wishful Thought)*, 1991–92, 11 7/8 x 8 7/8 in. (30.2 x 22.6 cm). Collection of the artist.
3. *The Scroll*, 1991–92, 13 1/8 x 63 7/8 in. (33.3 x 162.2 cm). Collection of the artist.
4. *Riding the Written*, 1993, 14 1/2 x 10 in. (37 x 25.5 cm). Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, Bradford, England.
5. *Untitled IV*, 1993, 15 1/2 x 12 in. (39.5 x 30.5 cm). Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, Bradford, England.
6. *A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation I*, 1995, 11 x 8 in. (28 x 20.3 cm). Ann Hatch, San Francisco.
7. *Separate Working Things*, 1993–95, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. (24.2 x 16.5 cm). Private collection, New York.
8. *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, 1995, 15 x 11 in. (38.1 x 28 cm). Suneeta and Nanik Vaswani, Houston.
9. *Extraordinary Realities (Series I, No. 1)*, 1996, 9 1/2 x 6 5/8 in. (24.2 x 16.8 cm). Sue Rowan Pittman, Houston.
10. *Extraordinary Realities (Series I, No. 5)*, 1996, 10 x 7 in. (25.4 x 17.8 cm). Christine Smith, Houston.
11. *Let It Ride I*, 1995–96, 15 x 10 in. (38.1 x 25.4 cm). Alton and Emily Steiner, Houston.
12. *The Pendulum*, 1996, 15 x 9 7/8 in. (38.1 x 25.1 cm). Claire Ankenman, Houston.
13. *Cholee Kay Pechay Kiya? Chunree Kay Nichay Kiya? (What Is under the Blouse? What Is under the Dress?)*, 1997, 9 3/4 x 5 1/8 x in. (23.5 x 13 cm). Marielise Hessel Collection on permanent loan to the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.
14. *Extraordinary Realities (Series II, No. 1)*, 1997, 11 3/4 x 6 3/8 in. (29.9 x 16.2 cm). Bruce Velick and Denise Filchner, New York.
15. *Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings (No. 1)*, 1997, 8 1/2 x 6 in. (21.6 x 15.2 cm). The Carol and Arthur Goldberg Collection, New York.
16. *Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings (No. 3)*, 1997, 14 1/2 x 9 3/4 in. (36.8 x 24.8 cm). Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles.
17. *Hood's Red Rider (Series I, No. 2)*, 1997, 10 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. (25.7 x 18.2 cm). Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago.
18. *Multiple Bearings*, 1997, 16 x 11 3/4 in. (40.7 x 29.9 cm). Laura-Lee W. Woods, Pasadena, California.
19. *Perilous Order*, 1994–97, 10 1/2 x 8 in. (26.7 x 23.3 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase with funds from the Drawing Committee.
20. *Ready to Leave II*, 1997, 7 1/2 x 6 1/4 in. (19.7 x 15.9 cm). Lois and Richard Plehn, New York.
21. *Red Riding Hood*, 1994–97, 7 x 4 1/4 in. (18 x 11 cm). Courtesy the Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens, Greece.
22. *Then and N.O.W.—Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella*, 1994–97, 7 x 4 1/4 in. (18 x 11 cm). Courtesy the Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens, Greece.
23. *Uprooted Order I*, 1996–97, 10 x 4 1/2 in. (25.4 x 11.5 cm). A. G. Rosen, Wayne, New Jersey.
24. *Uprooted Order II*, 1996–97, 10 x 4 1/2 in. (25.4 x 11.5 cm). A. G. Rosen, Wayne, New Jersey.
25. *Uprooted Order III*, 1997, 6 5/8 x 3 3/8 in. (16.8 x 9.3 cm). Joseph Havel and Lisa Ludwig, Houston.
26. *Uprooted Order V*, 1997, 7 x 8 3/8 in. (17.8 x 21.3 cm). Dorri and Arthur Melvin, Houston.
27. *Venus's Wonderland*, 1994–97, 12 x 10 3/4 in. (30.5 x 27.3 cm). Collection of Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann, New York.
28. *Walking a Thin Line*, 1997, 7 5/8 x 7 5/8 in. (19.4 x 19.4 cm). A. G. Rosen, Wayne, New Jersey.
29. *Hood's Red Rider (Series II, No. 1)*, 1998, 28 x 22 in. (71.1 x 55.9 cm). Kim Knight, San Francisco.
30. *Hood's Red Rider (Series II, No. 2)*, 1998, 28 x 22 in. (71.1 x 55.9 cm). Sydney Fisher, San Francisco.
31. *Segments of Her Desire Go Wandering Off*, 1998, 10 1/8 x 15 in. (26.7 x 38.1 cm). Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, Scarsdale, New York.
32. *Reinventing the Dislocation II*, 1994 and 1999, 13 x 9 1/2 in. (33 x 24.1 cm). Courtesy of Deitch Projects, New York.

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