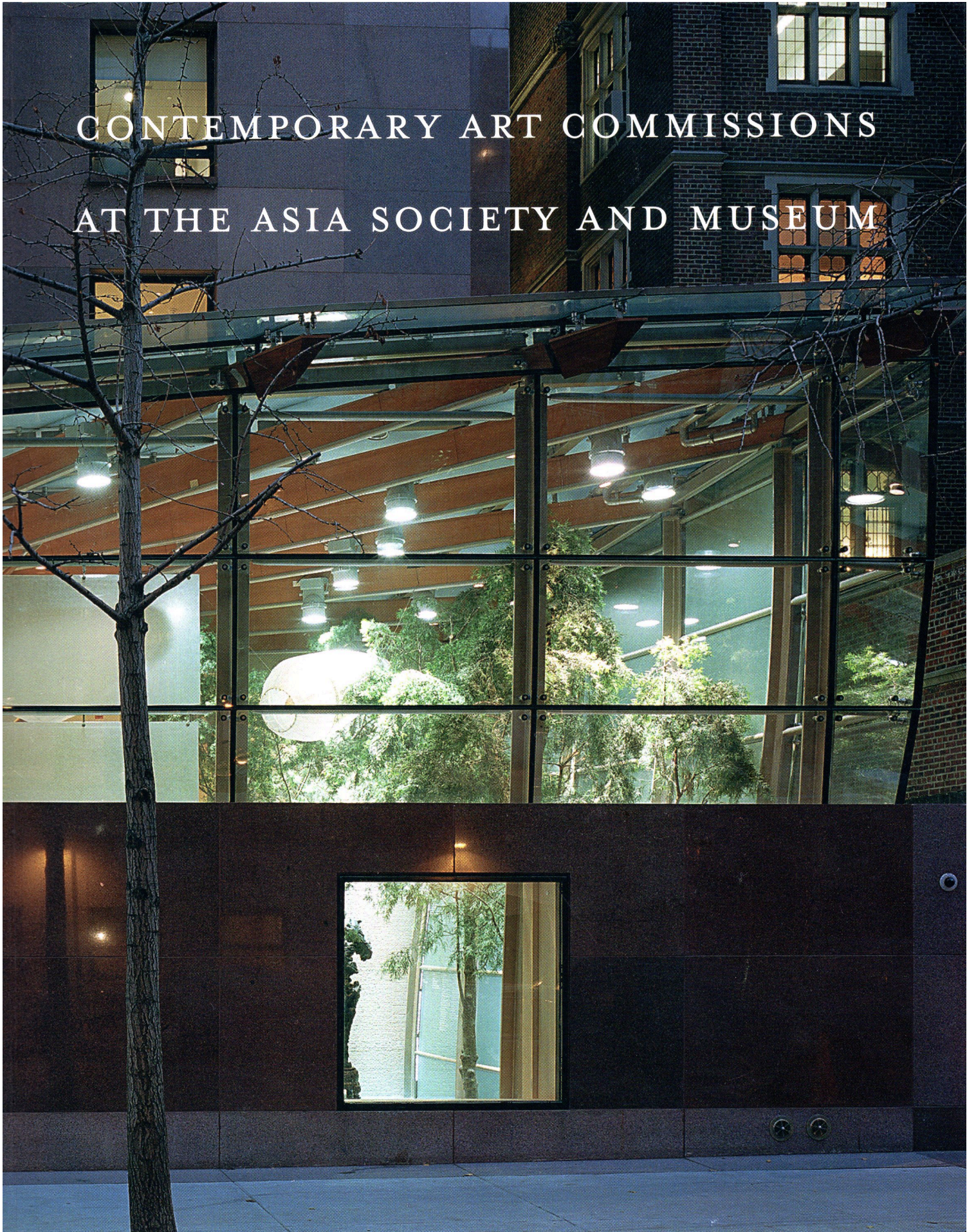


CONTEMPORARY ART COMMISSIONS
AT THE ASIA SOCIETY AND MUSEUM



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PREFACE

NICHOLAS PLATT

PRESIDENT

ASIA SOCIETY

We are pleased to announce the completion of the renovations to the Asia Society headquarters at 725 Park Avenue in New York City. The rationale for the renovation, undertaken by the New York architect Bartholomew Voorsanger, was an expansion of our facilities to meet increasing demand as we enter what some have named the “Asian Century.” The redesign has doubled the size of our public and exhibition space, expanded the AsiaStore, created a glass garden court with café, as well as provided a refurbished auditorium for performance, policy, business, and education events.

As part of this renovation, the Society commissioned nine artists to create new works for different spaces within the building. These works are by leading Asian and Asian American artists: Heri Dono, Yong Soon Min, Vong Phaophanit, Navin Rawanchaikul, Nilima Sheikh, Shahzia Sikander, Sarah Sze, Xu Bing, and Xu Guodong. Each commission responds to the interior spaces while also drawing our attention to complex cultural issues—significantly enhancing the experience of the newly renovated building. We are most grateful to Jack Wadsworth for his active support of our contemporary art projects and especially this publication. The contemporary arts commission project is made possible by a major grant from W.L.S. Spencer Foundation.

These new facilities confirm the Society’s forty-year record of addressing cross-cultural exchange and understanding between people of the United States and Asia. Since the tragic events of September 11, we believe that there is an even greater urgency for our programs, which are unique in their focus on arts, economics, politics, and society from Central Asia to the Asia-Pacific. The art commissions bear testament to this, symbolizing the Society’s role in encouraging dialogue between the United States and Asia.

NEW
COMMISSIONED
WORKS
AT THE
ASIA SOCIETY
AND
MUSEUM

VISHAKHA N. DESAI

The splendid architectural features of the renovated Asia Society and Museum building are enlivened by the striking new works of art that inhabit its public spaces. While some of these works are readily visible, others are found in unexpected spaces. Together, they manifest the Asia Society's strong commitment to new art and artists as the Society enters the twenty-first century.

Soon after we decided on the renovation project, we began to discuss designs that could enhance the experience of art not only in the galleries but also in other public spaces such as the Garden Court and Cafe, the stairwell, and the Visitor Center. The architect for the redesign, Bartholomew Voorsanger, fully endorsed the idea and enthusiastically developed a design that would serve as a sophisticated backdrop for works by leading Asian and Asian American artists. This idea became integral to much of our thinking about what the public spaces should look like and which artists' work would make sense in the new spaces.

One important motivation for renovating the Asia Society building was to create interiors that would reflect the dynamism and fluidity of current and future Asian experiences. For example, one of the most dramatic new directions for the institution in the last decade has been the development of an ambitious program to present contemporary arts from all disciplines—visual, literary, and performance. Although these programs have been well received and have helped establish the institution as a leader in the field of contemporary Asian and Asian American art, the spatial constraints of the original building did not allow for a consistent program of contemporary art exhibitions. Our galleries were well equipped for small-scale exhibitions of traditional Asian arts but not suitable for the bold, sometimes messy, and conceptually expansive works being made by contemporary Asian and Asian American artists. In the new Asia Society and Museum, we wanted to declare our unequivocal support for the art of this new century by commissioning artists to create work for spaces outside the galleries, where visitors might not expect to find art.

The first step was to identify the artists and determine their interest in the project. We created a list of artists whose work would simultaneously evoke the complexity of Asian artistic expressions worldwide and suit the unusual and specific locations in the new building. I enlisted the help of

two colleagues and good friends who have been involved in the Asia Society's contemporary art initiatives from the beginning: David Elliott (then Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm and now the founding Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo) and Apinan Poshyananda (Professor of Contemporary Asian Art, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok and a leading curator of international exhibitions of contemporary Asian art). Both were participants in the first round-table discussion on contemporary Asian art that we held in 1992. Elliott is one of the few curators and directors in the West who has consistently shown Asian artists since the 1980s, when he was at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. We started working with Poshyananda soon after he returned to Thailand from Cornell University as a doctoral student in art history in 1991. As contemporary Asian art grew in exposure, Poshyananda became one of the most accomplished curators in the field, and his work was noticed in places as diverse as Brisbane, Tokyo, and New York. He was the curator of the first major contemporary art exhibition at the Asia Society, *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* in 1996. Since the late 1980s, I also have taken a keen interest in contemporary works by Asian and Asian American artists and have become familiar with a wide variety of artists in the United States as well as in Asia. After corresponding by e-mail for several months, the three of us met briefly to discuss our choices and narrow down the list of artists. We made a list of about fifteen artists, taking into account the diversity of their work, their nationalities, and their possible interest in the kind of long-term, site-specific work that this project would require. To our surprise, there was an almost unanimous choice of artists and, by and large, agreement even about the potential location of the individual works. The next step was to develop priorities in the list and begin to contact the artists to ascertain their interest in the project.

All the artists we contacted expressed interest. Some of them, who had been aware of the Asia Society's distinguished history of traditional Asian art exhibitions as well as our more recent efforts to present new works, were so supportive of the idea that they agreed to participate despite their busy schedules. A few were unable to be involved because of prior commitments but asked that we come back to them for the next

phase. The artists selected for the inaugural phase of the art commissions project included: Heri Dono (born in Jakarta, lives and works in Yogyakarta); Yong Soon Min (born in Suwon, South Korea, lives and works in California); Vong Phaophanit (born in Vientienne, Laos, lives and works in London); Navin Rawanchaikul (born in Chiang Mai, lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Fukuoka, Japan); Nilima Sheikh (born in New Delhi, lives and works in Vadodara, India); Shahzia Sikander (born in Lahore, Pakistan, lives and works in New York); Sarah Sze (born in Boston, lives and works in New York); Xu Bing (born in Beijing, lives and works in New York and Beijing); Xu Guodong (born in Shanghai, lives and works in Shanghai). Although at different points in their careers and with diverse approaches to their art, all of these artists traverse countries and cultures with fluidity and create their work at the interstices of diverse, globalizing cultures. Some of them are of Asian origin and make their homes in the West; others continue to have their primary residence in Asia. In their work and in their lives, these artists illuminate the layered complexities of East/West connections and make evident the changing dynamics of Asian experiences.

When we brought the artists together for a site visit and a discussion of the project, they began to share their ideas with one another and to think about their work in relation to each other's proposed works. The function of the assigned spaces also seemed to trigger ideas for the new work. For example, Yong Soon Min was assigned the wall outside the auditorium for her installation. The function of the space and her ongoing concern about the issues surrounding the Asian diaspora spurred her to consider questions of time in performing arts and, in particular, the cross-cultural currents in music that seem to travel freely between Asia and the West. Her work, *Movement*, consists of vinyl records with labels of popular Asian record albums from the last few decades, affixed to a mirrored wall. To indicate time, she has included clocks in the center of each record. The installation exists as a singular work of art and resonates with the varied performing arts programs that take place in the auditorium.

Navin Rawanchaikul has been preoccupied with modes of travel and the stories they generate, especially when the travel entails cross-cultural experiences. New York art audiences know him for his public art project,

titled *Taxi Dreams*, with P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center and Public Art Fund. For the past several years, he has been making small pieces of furniture in the shape of popular Asian modes of transportation, ranging from scooters and cycles to *tuk tuks* (Thai taxis). For the Visitor Center, he made a two-seat sofa in the shape of a *tuk tuk*, complete with wheels for easy movement. The ceiling of the *tuk tuk* is painted with images depicting the lives of *tuk tuk* drivers in Bangkok. This illustrated story, in the style of a comic book, deals with taxi drivers and their comments about the changing face of their city. Rawanchaikul's *Tuk Tuk Scope* is thus simultaneously about bringing the ubiquitous images of everyday Asia into Western surroundings and about the relationship between permanence and perpetual movement. *Tuk Tuk Scope* works on multiple conceptual and visual levels, not to mention its role as a place for visitors to sit.

When we first approached Vong Phaophanit, our intention was to ask him to design an installation using water and neon (for which he has become well known in Europe) for the Garden Court. When he looked at the space and thought about the many functions of this room—a place where visitors can eat, rest a while after seeing the museum exhibitions, or listen to an informal concert in the evening—he thought that a water feature might be overly ambitious. Instead, he came up with the wonderful idea of a neon installation on the west wall of the Garden Court. In *planta lucum*, Phaophanit decided to use Latin rather than Laotian script, as in previous works. He was inspired by the location of the work in the Garden Court and created neon words for the project, each a Latin name for a tree or a flower that has been imported from Asia to the West. The work bears testament to Phaophanit's ongoing interest in metaphors of migration, the fluidity of cultural existence, and connections between seemingly opposite or disparate elements. The unusual combination of wax with neon, in which the power of one light-producing element (neon) is diffused by a light-enhancing source (wax), is an integral part of the conceptual thrust of the work.

Xu Bing is an artist whose current work focuses on the metamorphosis of shapes, concepts, languages, and, indeed, existence itself in the age of global transmissions of cultural content. Xu's initial exploration of nonsensical Chinese characters to convey the weight of culture has evolved

into a new script in which English words are written in the manner of Chinese characters. The goal is bold: to create a language that takes into account the fusion or interconnection between the world's two most powerful nations, China and the United States. On a personal level, this



language also reflects Xu's own journey from being an artist in China, commenting on the Chinese situation, to being an émigré Chinese artist living in the United States, trying to make a new life in which his two worlds can come together. His work for the Asia Society takes this idea and develops it further through computer animation installed on the curved wall descending from the lobby level to the auditorium. This work is playful yet conceptually complex: a sentence is first seen traveling across four successive computer screens, "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me how to get to the Asia Society?" The English words metamorphose from Chinese-looking characters that the artist calls "Square Word Calligraphy" or "New English Calligraphy," still legible in English, into standard Roman type. The question suggests the predicament of finding "Asia" in our midst,

but the form of the sentence also refers to the kind of basic questions that would be learned by new English students in places like China or Chinese immigrants here in New York.

The artists described so far deal with the complexities of East/West connections in historical and contemporary frameworks. Other commissioned artists are more focused on the situations in their native countries. Heri Dono, one of the best-known Indonesian artists on the international art scene, is actively involved in the national struggle for Indonesia to

become a flourishing democracy. *Flying in a Cocoon* features three angels, each encased in a translucent fabric cocoon hanging from the ceiling of the Garden Court. Reminiscent of both the Hindu mythic bird Garuda and Superman, Dono's figures seem eager to come out of their

shells, almost ready for the full flight of freedom. Conceived last year when the Indonesian experiment in forming a true popular democracy promised to take hold, Dono's work seemed a very timely and powerful symbol of the country's new aspirations. With President Wahid's fall from power, these angels, struggling to emerge, remind us of the fragile hopes for democracy in Indonesia.

For Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander, the opportunity for their work to be seen together, as commissions on the stairwell wall and in one of the inaugural exhibitions in the new galleries, has brought to the surface complexities in the relationship between their two countries, India and Pakistan. Neither artist has engaged with the troubled politics between India and Pakistan in an overt way, but both have talked about the politics of culture on the subcontinent. Sheikh, who was raised in New

Delhi, was inspired to use this occasion to reflect on the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, using that event as a starting point for her large hand-painted scroll and the soundscape that accompanies it. Sheikh's *River: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind* was inspired by the sinuous curve of the staircase, employing the metaphor of the river to explore the cultural effects of the Partition; the movement of families and belongings between India and Pakistan. Intended to be savored in sections as the visitor ascends the stairs, Sheikh's scroll is as much a testament to troubled



narratives of the past as a signal of hope for a new beginning for the two countries, so close and yet so far, not unlike estranged family members.

Sikander, like Sheikh, has drawn upon the traditional Indian miniature format for much of her work, which resonates with personal reflections. Sikander has deliberately used both Rajput (traditionally Hindu) and Mughal (traditionally Muslim) elements in her paintings to address the complexity of this relationship. Having left Pakistan soon after college graduation for further studies in the United States, where she has lived for most of her professional life, Sikander focuses on broader issues of the Asian diaspora and her own complicated existence as an immigrant. For her, the politics of the subcontinent is played out in a third space, where Indians and Pakistanis have a choice to, and often do, come together. Sikander's work reflects these broader realities of the subcontinent and her own desire to connect with a South Asian culture in which India and Pakistan can share their common heritage.

Sarah Sze is the only artist selected for the commissions who was born in the United States, although her father is from China. Unlike Sheikh and Sikander, she does not directly express concerns about cultural identity and politics. Titled *Hidden Relief*, the work contains elements of spatial precariousness, evident also in the location she selected for her work in the building. As visitors take the large elevator at the back of the building and exit on the third floor, or as they come out of the third floor exhibition gallery to take a look at the Garden Court below, they will encounter her work in an intimate corner. Emerging organically but made of inorganic materials, the work has a sense of being inside and partially outside. Made to look delicate and fragile at first glance, her work has an amazing strength upon further reflection. *Hidden Relief* suggests a discovery of concealed elements within a construction site, embodying a process of transformation that can be compared to the building project of the new Asia Society.

Xu Guodong sees himself as a contemporary artist expanding the centuries-old Chinese tradition of "enhancing" naturally spectacular scholar's rocks. Chinese intellectuals have long admired the special quality of rocks found in particular lake and mountain regions of China. These rocks are coveted as much for their natural shape, texture, and color as

for their symbolic value in evoking cosmic forms, but these rocks have been manipulated to bring their natural beauty into sharper focus. In this sense, smaller rocks intended for the scholar's studio rather than outdoors were similar to the bonsai tradition in Japan: man-made adjustments to make the natural forms "hyper-natural" or even more beautiful than nature itself. Initially, Xu's work was simply absorbed in the tradition of seeing the amazing rock formations admired by the Chinese literati as natural forms. His creative work came to light when he acknowledged in the late 1990s that many of the scholar's rocks in the collection of the late Richard Rosenblum had been recut and embellished. Since then, he has positioned himself as an artist actively involved in the process of "making" a scholar's rock: from finding the rock in remote areas to cutting and polishing it as well as making an appropriate stand, which is seen as a work of art in itself.

Xu searched for a rock that would be appropriate for the Garden Court at the Asia Society. His goal was to find and create a work that would enhance the elegance and majesty of the new space with its blue marble floor and architectural elements of glass and wood. His first selection proved to be much too heavy for the new floor. Fortunately, the artist found another, slightly smaller, but equally elegant rock, which he embellished and for which he created a base. Against the light-colored limestone of the Garden Court wall, the dark feathery-looking *lingbi* rock demonstrates the creative eye of the artist as well as his deft workmanship.

These long-term installations are intended not only as enhancements of the architectural spaces of the new Asia Society and Museum but also as powerful symbols of the institution's commitment to the creative powers of artists today. For much of the twentieth century, the Western world has ignored the creativity of living artists of Asian origin in the belief that their works were not authentically Asian enough or were too Western in appearance. In museums across the United States one can find fine examples of Asian art from the earliest periods of history through the nineteenth century, at which point there is an abrupt end, as if Asian cultures froze or stopped producing art. The assumption was that most of the Asian region stopped producing any art that was worthy of study or appreciation. In the 1990s, this perception began to change, and we

are proud that the Asia Society played a role in this change. These art commissions reflect the institution's intention to make the study and presentation of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art an integral part of its artistic mandate.

Whenever an institution decides to venture in a new direction, financial backing for such efforts is imperative. Two individuals who are important collectors of contemporary Asian art and longtime supporters of the Asia Society have been with this project from the beginning, with involvement in almost all of our contemporary art projects over the past eight years and have made it possible to make this new direction an ongoing concern. With their generosity and enthusiasm, we have been able to turn our dreams into a realistic plan. They not only sponsored the art commission project and this publication but also created an endowment for the position of a curator for contemporary Asian and Asian American art. I am deeply indebted to them for their encouragement and friendship over the past decade, and I look forward to many more shared adventures in this field. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the W.L.S. Spencer Foundation for the art commissions.

Many people have made this complicated project a reality and deserve to be acknowledged. First and foremost, I am grateful to Nicholas Platt, President of the Asia Society, for fully endorsing the idea of the art commissions in public spaces and for supporting the project every step of the way. Bartholomew Voorsanger, our architect, immediately saw the value of having unique works that could enhance the public spaces and worked with the artists to implement their ideas into workable realities in the designated spaces. Jim MacDonald, project architect in the Voorsanger office, was our active partner, solving architectural difficulties when they arose and working closely with the artists to realize their concepts. George Papamichael, Head of Building and Operations of the Society, was always available to think through potential installation problems and find ingenious solutions. Mirza Burgos, my executive assistant, handled many of the detailed tasks in the initial phase of the project, from creating artist files to working on their travel and work plans. In addition to increased responsibilities for the building project, she handled all of her work with her usual care, grace, and patience. Joshua Harris, our ever-enthusiastic

Installation Coordinator, worked tirelessly with the artists, the architects, and the construction team to coordinate all the details relating to the project. Without him we not could have finished this project so beautifully.

Projects that involve construction and installations in new spaces are invariably more complicated than one could ever imagine. Unavoidable delays in one area can create further challenges in another. A number of people have worked extremely hard to accomplish this seemingly impossible task. I want to commend Helen Abbott, Assistant Director of the Asia Society Museum and in charge of all of our publications, for taking on the herculean task of producing this publication and for working with the designer and the editor to keep the deadline that we had set for the project. Melissa Chiu, our new Curator for Contemporary Asian and Asian American art, joined the staff in September. The moment she arrived she began working on this and other contemporary projects with remarkable elegance and efficiency. Deanna Lee, Museum Associate, is also a newcomer to the Society but has taken on many of the logistical details related to this project. Katy Homans is responsible for the beautiful design of this publication. As a result of their dedication and hard work, this wonderful book will serve as a permanent reminder of an important project.

For the success of the project, it was essential that we were able to enlist the curatorial guidance of two distinguished scholars, David Elliott and Apinan Poshyananda. I am grateful for their advice in the selection of the artists and for helping us at crucial times to contact artists and acquire more detailed information about them. Ultimately, our greatest debt is to the artists themselves. All of them are busy, productive, and much in demand. But they agreed to participate in the project and gave their time and energy to make it a wonderful reality within the inevitable constraints. There is no doubt that these exciting new works will engage visitors to the new Asia Society and Museum and encourage ways of thinking about Asia that befit the realities and aspirations of this rich and complex region.

SHAHZIA
SIKANDER

Miniature paintings create a controlled space. The picture plane is entirely about 'looking in' to a world as opposed to 'looking at' an image. Miniatures tend to deal with different spatial orders of framing; architectural framing, framing of the court, the garden, or the portrait.

These spatial devices employed in miniatures stand in contrast to the composition of my banner, which floats freely without borders or frames. In some ways, my banner is the by-product of spatial constraints. The banner spans three floors and is at no point visible in its entirety. The images unfold as one walks up the staircase. The lack of controlled viewing conditions forced me to think of a more fluid composition. My design takes images beyond the realm of miniatures into larger and far more confrontational scales. For example, the portrait becomes an independent icon, a staircase leads to nowhere, and weapons require no form. Even though my initial impulse was to do intricate, enclosed drawings this new medium required a degree of buoyancy. My interest lies in images that can sustain themselves in an awkward space—free of boundaries and unrooted from tradition.

Miniature paintings tend to be labor intensive and time consuming yet they fail to register as paintings, in the heroic sense. My miniatures share an affinity with gestural abstraction in the way that many of the organic forms evolve through gesture and a relationship to material. Images for the banner were based on high and low sculpture, including popular works made of clay metal or wood, fantastical forms, birds, toys, utensils, and religious deities. Both humorous and bizarre in shape, these sculptures are ordinary and sacred at the same time.

This led to the series of drawings called *Midgets to Monsters*; some of the images from these appear in the banner. The images were scanned and transitioned into fully developed icons through a digital process. The process of painting, scanning, layering, and subverting allows infinite possibilities of serial narratives as well as mediating, morphing, and breaking down images. The work is not only about displacement but also about rerooting; free of being prescribed by its own references.

LEFT Shahzia Sikander, *Midgets to Monsters*

RIGHT Nilima Sheikh, *River: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind*

