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Islamic miniature painting encompasses a rich history in South Asian culture. For centuries, this book art has documented this region's culture and society through intricate patterns and images. These illuminations have been revived through artists who study the traditional practices and styles. Miniature painting tends to be exotified in Western eyes for its small size, intricate

handwork, and subject matter. Eastern images have seduced Americans not only through this art, but in this region's current news broadcast in the United States. Since last year's September 11th attack, the media has painted a vivid, misrepresented image of the Muslim woman as a subordinate figure in South Asia.

With 9-11 behind us and the media in the forefront, women like Shahzia Sikander and Sabeen Raja have been challenged with the task of redirecting misconceptions about their culture and most importantly, their art. Sikander, a New York artist and Raja, a MICA graduate student, are Pakistani women exploring Islamic miniature painting with a personal and

contemporary voice. Trained at the National College of Art's undergraduate school in Lahore, Pakistan both women studied traditional techniques. Individual interviews with each artist reveal their passion for art and for their native country.

I contacted Shahzia Sikander while she was on a break from her mural project in her New York home. Shahzia came to America in 1993 to pursue graduate studies at the Rhode Island School of Design and since then has continued to produce and exhibit work here. She has explored and expanded her art to large scale installations and expressionistic brushwork, while still remaining close to her roots in traditional miniature painting.

Formica Interview with Shahzia Sikander

Originally trained as a miniature painter, you expanded your art to include contemporary ideas and techniques with these traditional skills. How did your interest in this artistic path begin?

It happened in Pakistan. It was part of the school that I went to study at, the National College of Art (NCA). Pop culture around there was very kitsch I thought. It was primarily constructed for the tourist industry. In school I got to understand it better. I remember there was a lecture series I attended. That very brief introduction was enough for me to get excited about it.

How much of your background as a Muslim plays a significant role in your work? I noticed that your paintings include Hindu and Christian references.

I lived at a convent. It is a normal thing for people to go there since a lot of missionaries are set up. India and Pakistan were under British rule and remained a British colony for several hundred years. One's relationship to other cultures and religions happens at a very young age. I still feel that at times I am so much more aware of other religions than maybe people are of Islam. I did not want to be a cultural representative of any type. Suddenly it was a double burden that you had to carry, also because of the fact that not much was known about the Indian Pakistani art.

What part of society did you grow up in?

My family is very middle class. My father had a government job. They are not businessmen as a lot of the upper middle class in Pakistan. They were very progressive people because of my father's side...a lot of family members were human rights activists and writers so it was a normal thing to pursue education. I had my family's support always to pursue whatever I wanted, but not financially. I didn't have any money when I came here and so for me the biggest challenge was to put myself through school.

(Shahzia continued top of page 12)



Shahzia Sikander
E-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings, 1997
Vegetable Color, dry pigment,
watercolor, tea, on wasli paper



Sabeen Raja
Me Being Short, 1999
Opaque watercolor on wasli paper
9.75"x15.75" (framed)

Entering MICA's graduate department in the Fox building, I was surprised to see Sabeen Raja's studio. She works comfortably on floor cushions, propping her painting in her lap. In our conversation, she explained her close relationship with traditional miniature painting and contemporary subject matter.

Formica Interview with Sabeen Raja

What made you want to come to MICA?

We don't have a very good graduate school in Pakistan. NCA just started one, which is a visual arts program, so it's not really good. After spending four years in the same college I thought I should get on with my life and move on to get more exposure to art. My art wasn't really growing after my thesis. I wasn't really growing.

I came to MICA because Shahzia was here and she was doing so well (Shahzia was doing work at RISD, Yale, Chicago, etc.).

Could you explain about the history behind the miniature paintings you studied in school?

In making miniature painting we are influenced by schools. There are hundreds of schools which are historical and no longer exhibit. It was not a

movement but more like a workshop of court painters. Miniature painting was a book art with illuminations and illustrations. We had to study three basic schools for our training: Mughal School, Pahari (Kangra) School, and Persian school.

How did these miniatures function? I know I saw them in the Qur'an. Were they primarily religious based?

All schools have own subject matter. Persian miniatures were about storytelling of prophets, Islamic events, myths, and religious stories. Mughal School is mostly about the kings. They had court painters who made paintings of their glory and their status, and the emperor's pleasures.

Could you explain a little about your materials and techniques?

I use Windsor & Newton watercolors. I don't have time to make vegetable dyes and natural colors. We join paper, like five and six sheets and we make glue which is called lye. You cannot buy this in the market. Colors are mixed in shells. It's a good color preserver and it stays for a long long time. Our brushes are called qalam, a man-made brush. They have squirrel tail hair. For the flow of the line we use this brush...for the details, for line and for rendering.

We can't use normal watercolor brushes because they are not really meant for miniature painting.

Is miniature painting a common art form you see nowadays in Pakistan?

Not at all. It's contemporary in relation to people coming out of NCA. Most people do miniature painting copying, but others do contemporary pieces not for sale. Miniature painting is mostly done in Lahore and Karachi.

(Sabeen continued bottom of page 12)

How do people back home such as your family perceive your work?

I've made a lot of effort to get them involved in every stage of my career which is the only way of cutting through the distance. There is always an expectation they have with artists who leave and go outside to produce work. It's tough to go back. I have sent some work to group shows but I haven't had a solo show back home. The miniature painting department has really become a big deal and when I was there I was the only student.

You may not have intended to reinvent the miniature painting tradition but this seems to be what occurred between 1992 and 1993 when you moved to the United States. What prompted you to cross cultures at that time?

I came here for a show in 1993 at the Pakistani Embassy. When I got here I visited some schools and got excited about staying on for my masters. In general the distance gives you a certain objectiveness. It also is at a time when you are coming of age and it is also an exciting time to step away and have the whole world at your feet, literally. Sometimes interviews and people writing to me exaggerate where one is from. People think coming from that part of the world to here is an act of liberation in itself or of coming to this greater knowledge. It isn't like that, but it was such a natural progression. I left Pakistan right out of undergraduate school, so a lot of my

growth has happened, which is normal to almost everybody after school. I have been here 8 years now and so of course the work started to reflect my living experiences and it became relevant to being here.

Could you explain a little about your materials and techniques. What traditional aspects are kept in the process?

I don't make my own brushes. I made them once in Pakistan, but creating your own paper and brushes is not necessarily the most convenient thing.

If I find the right kind of brushes in the market, I use that. Some traditional parts I keep in the process are pigments and maybe a few techniques that I can instantly sort of use. I use watercolor and some vegetable color but sometimes I just like mixing all of it together. The paper is called wasli. You paste several layers of paper together with glue. It has copper sulfate in it which acts as a preservative so it's very resilient and it won't warp in your work because you are working with a lot of water. It's better for me to make all the paper at once and then use it over a period of 2 years.

Online I was surprised to see a 2001 digital still from a QuickTime video file. What interests you in working digitally?

Well, people saw the digital file as painting which is so amazing because it's disguised and it's very small...the size of the miniature. It's in a narrow corridor, and opposite it is another painting which is the actual miniature. This piece called *Intimacy* is about the relationship between the two. The QuickTime piece is a very slow moving 4 minute film. It's a very huge 18 gig file.

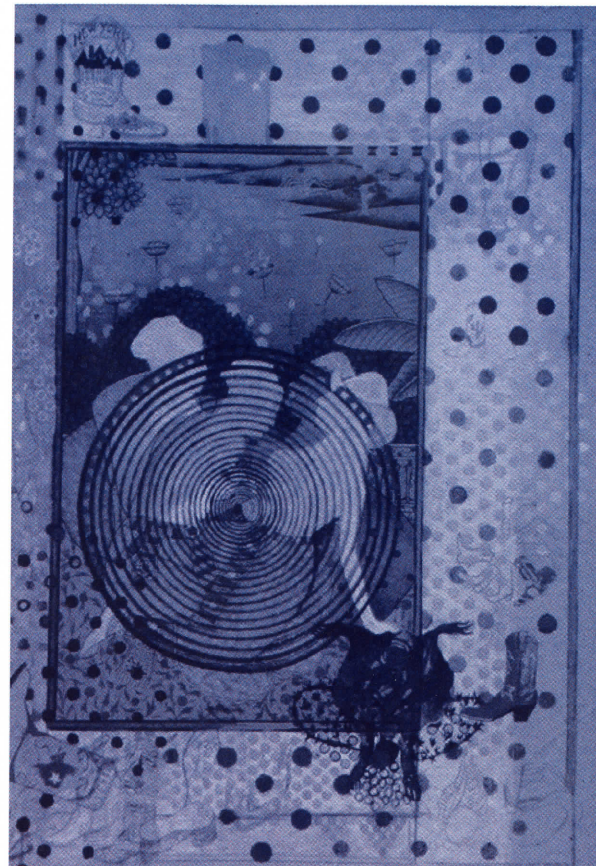
I was interested in the relationship to traditional painting and the tiny things created by hand then scanned into the computer. This was a commentary on memory because the painting is very stationary and then the piece sort of moves. You can't view both at the same time. There is enough room in the corridors between both that you see one and then you have to turn around and look at the other. When you come back to the previous image in a minute that image has evolved and changed. What you see it's like a fleeting moment. It's very much about the transient nature of things.

How do you see your work informing people? Since your work brings a new perspective to Western culture, I could see it serving as a way to inform us especially about stereotypes. As a Muslim female artist you work with the burka and the female image, which is a stereotype that we see here a lot.

That is a very interesting and tough question. It is important to address that. The work I did when I first came here...the issues about identity were very prevalent and foreign to me because if you are coming from a place where you are the only people and you never have to

deal with anybody other than Pakistanis it may be a very sheltered existence. Inevitably people would ask whether you had a very oppressive relationship to religion or to your growth or to who you were as a Muslim woman. In my experience my father's side was very educated and progressive and also Pakistani culture is very different from Iran's culture and Iran's culture is very different from Saudi Arabia's so it's not just one way. I decided to do a performance and I wore the cover called burka for 3 weeks in very absurd places like the bar, grocery store, classes, and the street just to see how people would react. In the process I became overrun by the whole thing myself and lost control of it. I realized that a part of me became anonymous and I did not care what I wore underneath it. It was provocative and it helped me to articulate myself because nobody could see my body language and facial gestures. I was very shy when I came here and within those 3 or 4 weeks I felt like I gained a lot of confidence. It was also by choice. Nobody was asking me to wear it and I could take it off whenever I wanted to. So some people thought I trivialized the seriousness of an issue. In that moment there was a lot of mixed emotions and a lot of reactions. It was just like an amazing tool to go out into the world and experience it and naturally it entered my work. I did not realize that once I put those images in my work, all of a sudden it was like you were burdened. My attempt was never to take on such a new issue. My purpose was to use the stereotype and to turn it around and to help the viewer and to use humor in the process. To turn the stereotype to bring focus to it and then to provide a different answer for it.

(Shahzia continued top of page 22)



Shahzia Sikander
Riding the Ridden, 2000
Vegetable Color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea, on handmade wasli paper
9.75"x15.75" (framed)



Sabeen Raja
Jury Tension, 1999
Opaque watercolor on wasli paper
4x5.5"

I was wondering about your life in relation to Islam. Has this had any affect on your miniature painting?

Miniature painting was traditionally Islamic painting because all of the old masters were Muslims in the Mughal and Persian schools. I do contemporary works using the technique and medium of miniature painting. I do not make Islamic paintings since my painting's subject matter has nothing to

do with my religion. I am to some extent a practicing Muslim but I have never used my religion as subject matter in my work.

Some people, instantly intrigued by its design and unfamiliar with miniature painting may not see past its beautiful surface. There is more behind it than just the decoration... stories, etc. Could you explain some of this.

I was very disappointed because people at school asked me, 'Do you use a magnifying glass? How do you work on such a small scale?' Not a

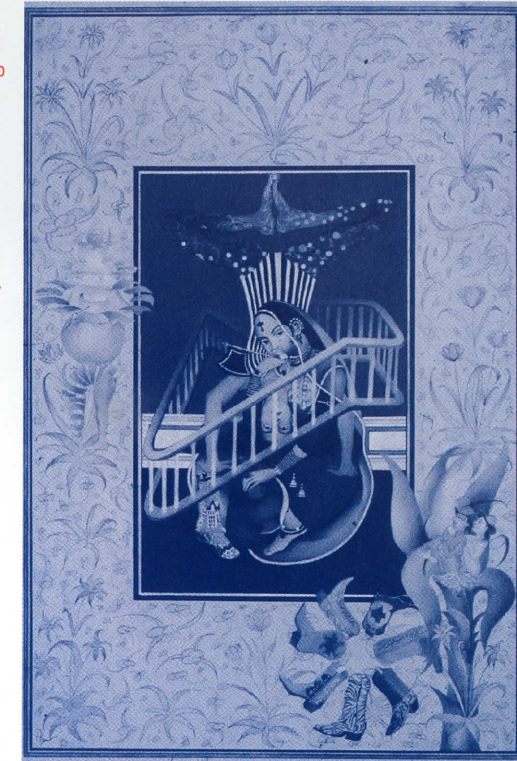
single person here at MICA said, 'I liked what you painted.' What? I'm tired of this. Now I have to work on my painting. I need someone to tell me, 'I like what you painted.' No, they are fascinated and amazed by the size and the detail and the beauty of it. It's another goal for me not just to revive but to change the concept. It's painting and it's important and the subject matter could be important. During the old times, miniature was book art and it was also used for medical illustrations. It was not decorative art. Miniature painters were not painters like us. They were mathematicians and scientists. They used to draft, layer things, make angles, make planes, then put the figure inside.

Is the art primarily dominated by men? I was interested to hear about the role women have in Pakistani art.

Not much because I know most of the girls who get out of NCA get married. In my class there were 9 girls. I am not married and I am making art but the rest are all married. They have their children and they are living as housewives and they don't give a damn about art and what they learned and what they should have done. Imagine going to MICA and coming out as a housewife. The problem is that in our culture and society we don't give much respect and importance to art.

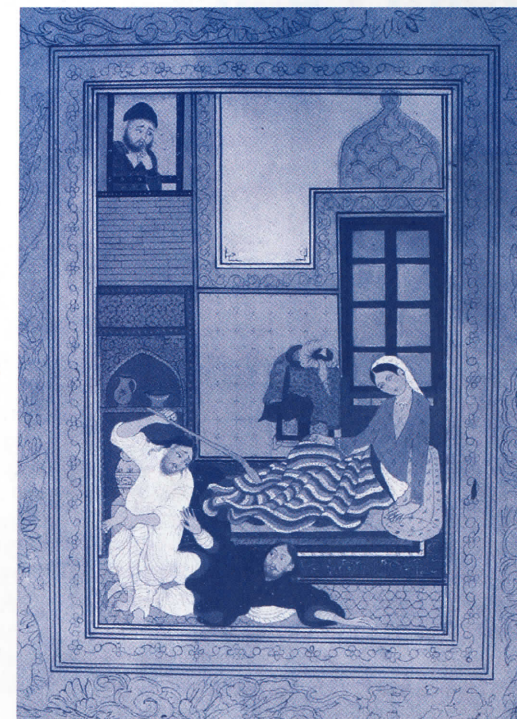
When a girl is making art you don't take her seriously. I was never taken seriously in my family. Most of my family are doctors, engineers, people in the army, and they don't really believe in art. They think a girl who is not good in her studies can get into the field of art. Even my own Dad started taking me seriously when I got distinction in NCA. All my paintings were sold and then he had faith in me. I wanted to work for the revival of miniature painting not even in Pakistan but in the US too. I knew very few people who believe in miniature painting and I took this big step in believing in what Shazia is doing.

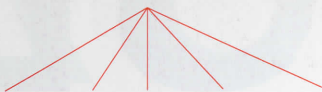
(Sabeen continued bottom of page 22)



Shahzia Sikander
Elusive Realities, 2000
Vegetable Color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on handmade wasli paper
11x7.375"

Sabeen Raja
Copy of traditional miniature painting from unknown source, 1998 Opaque watercolor on wasli paper





How have you been affected by the September 11th terrorist attacks?

I lived in Tribeca only a few blocks away. I was not there when it happened since I had already moved to Brooklyn but it is where I was for the past two years. I had a very deep relationship to that cause (9-11 related) and my friends and to the people in the area. People I know were put out of their homes for a while and of course you know the focus on Muslims was very troubling.

Yes, I just hope you haven't encountered too much trouble like in airports.

I have been working and I just haven't had the opportunity to experience something. Who knows if I will but little incidents like we had rented a car and kept it longer than expected. The place I had rented it from for the past year became very paranoid and...things like that are bizarre, scary, and so unnecessarily oppressive. At the same time I have a lot of people wanting me to participate in panels on Islam and that's like bizarre and very troubling.

Yes, because everyone wants you to be the teacher now.

All the focus is on you because of religion. That's the troubling thing for me as a person and as an artist. I'm not interested in my works that are scenes about religion nor about politics or about feminism. For me as an artist it is all about experience and it's also about articulating the nature of things and maybe providing attention to them but never providing answers. All these boundaries will always be present...cultural, religious, political, geographical but I don't think that as an artist that you can erase those boundaries. You can basically provide focus on them. You can bring to attention and for me that's actually more important.

What does renewal mean to you?

I think renewal to me is about being humble and it's about civility. It's about having an open mind towards understanding things and not necessarily sticking to just one way of addressing something, one way of understanding something. It's about being open to others and to other views and to other people's views and to always sort of stay open to that.



So it's not just the attitude of the men, but the attitude of the women.

Yes, if the woman can take a step, man is nothing. They can't really pressurize her. We have very good women artists in Pakistan but most of the girls my age are into graphic design. Their attitude is to get a good job. I have to sell my paintings to make a living because I don't have any other job, but I want to change this concept that it's not decorative art. It was fancy and it was meant for some other reason during that time. Now it is painting. I am born a Muslim and I am from a modern society and I don't wear burka because I am an educated person. You can wear fashionable clothes as a modern Muslim. I'm not from that part of society to wear burka and hide myself. I'm not a piece of cloth. I am a human being and I have the right to live the way I want to live, but it's totally opposite in a low class. There, if you are 25 and you are not married, oh my god, it's really hard for you. You have to get married. They send you to good schools, then say, Okay, you're done with your BA, which is not even your four year bachelor. That is enough education for you. Now go get married and go to hell.

How have the September 11th attacks affected you?

Well it hasn't affected my painting yet ,but it has affected my life here in the USA. I can't wear my Pakistani clothes any more because I am afraid that someone will attack me because Pakistani and Afghani look alike. I have enough terror in my country and I thought I would be safe here, but after September 11 I don't feel safe anymore. I can't proudly say that I am a Muslim because some stupid Muslims did it and it has given a bad name to all Muslims. On TV, radio, media everywhere I hear Pakistan and things going on in the war and I am tired of it .

What does renewal mean to you?

I don't know what it means right now. I don't know what to say.