

Shahzia Sikander



51 Ways of Looking

The construct is conceptual.
The dialogue is open-ended.
The narrative is unpredictable.
The suggestion is subjective.
The structure is infinite.
The rhetoric is suspended.
The memory is regurgitated.
The ownership is continuous.

I encourage the viewer to leave behind any cultural or personal assumptions, and in turn bring to these works as many ideas they can about the genesis of a circle and a rectangle. This suite of drawings was created from humble beginnings with a heavy dose of imagination.

—Shahzia Sikander

I answer the phone and hear Shahzia's voice. She is visiting the city after many years, and she has been invited to speak at her old college.

"Will you come," she asks, "to give me moral support?"

"Sure," I say. I too have known the uncertainties which accompany journeys back to what once was home. But I come only partly to give her moral support. I also come because I am curious.

I hop into my old Suzuki. It is early in the year, but summers are long in Lahore, and spring has almost run its course. The city is green and already sluggish from the warmth of the sun. There is more traffic than there used to be, but there is also more orderly conduct at the traffic lights, and I arrive quickly.

Shahzia lives around the corner from the home built by my grandfather and now shared by four of my aunts and uncles. Her house is green and low, like the city itself, and abloom with flowers on hanging vines.

She greets me with a happy but slightly opaque expression, her gaze directed both outward and inward. It is the expression of someone trying to find herself in a place where for a long time she has not been. It is an expression common to Shahzia, regardless of whether she is in New York or Lahore. I recognize it, and it makes me smile.

"Glad to be back?" I ask her.

"Overwhelmed is more like it." She laughs. "But very glad."

"So are you nervous?"

She nods.

We follow the canal with its weeping willows and then pass under the canopies of the trees along Mall Road, returning to the place where Shahzia first learnt to paint miniatures, over a decade ago. The National College of Arts is a beautiful red-brick building built by the British at the height of their Empire. Its first principal was Rudyard Kipling's father. Its current students walk around in paint-spattered jeans, men and women both sporting pony tails.

Shahzia looks around her. Neither of us speak. Then a reception committee of administrators and professors surrounds her and ushers her inside.

The auditorium is packed. I take a seat in the middle, trying to blend in with the teenagers and twenty-somethings as much as my receding hairline will permit. One asks if I'm the guy who wrote that novel, and when I nod, she says sweetly that she liked it. I thank her: she has made me feel welcome.

I turn my attention to Shahzia, who is standing on the stage, looking not entirely comfortable as she is introduced. But then the students start to clap, and the applause catches her by surprise because it is deafening. They applaud her as one of their own who has achieved something they respect. It is an accolade, and it lasts a full minute.

It does not seem to make Shahzia relax.

But as the lights go out and the projector turns on, Shahzia becomes more and more at home. She takes us on a journey which begins here in Lahore and meanders through the boot-wearing American heartlands of Texas and New Mexico before arriving on the wall of the Whitney in New York. She describes the evolution of her work from traditional miniatures, to miniatures with contemporary motifs, to large canvas paintings informed by the miniature, to works which leave canvas behind and operate in veil-like layers of depth in three-dimensional space. She switches from Urdu to English and back again, and takes questions from her excited young audience.

I watch as Shahzia mesmerizes them with a story of her life told through the story of her work, a story so many of us who have left the safety of a geographically-determined home desire to tell, a story as much about changes in perception and personality as it is about changes in location and events.

Pakistan is in many ways walled off from the rest of the world. A ring of near-impossible visa requirements, hostile neighbors, and state censorship has tried for decades to keep us boxed in—physically, mentally, and artistically. So Shahzia's story of transcendence resonates with the students in the auditorium.

"That's so cool," the girl next to me whispers to a friend.

I nod in the darkness, thinking, It certainly is.

Months later, it is my turn to call Shahzia. I am in New York for a few days. We agree to meet in a café, and she says she will bring her laptop.

"Why?" I ask her.

"To show you my new work," she replies enigmatically.

I am struggling with my second novel, and I have come to New York for inspiration, for a way through my problems of unimaginative structure and tone. It is cold, so I bundle up well. Manhattan's avenues channel the wind, whipping the end of my scarf out behind me.

I find Shahzia at the back of the café. She asks about my writing, and listens patiently to my woes. When I have finished speaking and wrapped my hands around my mug of hot chocolate, she opens up her laptop and places it on the table between us.

She tells me that one of the challenges of making miniatures, in fact of painting generally, is that it is so labor-intensive. Her hand, she says, lags far behind her mind when she is executing her work. But technology has opened up new possibilities, new ways of seeing things.

"Like what?" I ask, not following her.

"Like animation," she says.

On the screen of her computer, I see an image beginning to form. First there is a process of layering, with intricately drawn individual components assembling, one by one, until they constitute a whole. And then, as if by magic, pieces detach themselves and begin to swirl, creating a vortex of movement and change. The effect is dizzying, a blend of ancient and ultra-modern techniques used to express the distinct sensibility of the woman sitting across from me.

"Is this the direction you're going to take now?" I ask. "Animation?"

"Not necessarily." She smiles. "It's just something I want to explore. We'll see where it goes. But I feel excited about it."

I sit there, watching the screen. This is the power of being in a global cross-roads like New York, I tell myself. Shahzia has found in a completely different cultural and technological context a way for her work to continue to evolve.

"So?" she asks.

"It's amazing. I'm paying for your coffee."

"Why?"

"Because you've helped me."

When I return to Lahore, I am eager to write. The limitations I perceived before now seem much less daunting.

After our conversation in the café, I am very curious to see what Shahzia will do next. But our paths fail to cross. She comes to Lahore when I am away, I come to New York when she is. And so time passes.

Until one day, when I am in London, a parcel arrives for me from abroad. Inside it is a large gray envelope. Inside that is a manila folder. And inside that are reproductions of *51 Ways of Looking*. I spread them out on the floor of my living room, until they cover the carpet.

Outside, it is raining. Through the window, I can see the tops of trees which have all but lost their leaves and the spire of an old church in Bayswater rising up behind the row of Victorian houses across the street.

I turn on the lights and walk slowly around the images of Shahzia's work. Then, because the detail is so fine, I squat. And then I lean forward, bending even nearer. And finally I crawl, navigating the images with my face close to the paper, at a distance more typically suited to the nose than to the eyes.

In this pose, bloodhound-like, I make my way through delicate elephants dissolving into fantasy, beautiful horses against the suggestion of chariots and fields, a gazelle connected by the swirl of its horn to a flowering world. I see drawings which evoke some of Shahzia's much earlier work, and yet are informed by a subtly different sensibility, by a surreal whimsy, or, as on a cowboy boot, by the personal and political in the form of an airplane.

Still crawling, I see black circles make an appearance, superimpositions on the scenes behind them. These become stronger, come even to dominate, leading into a world of geometric forms, of arcs and lines. I see something which for me is far indeed from the South Asian miniature, part of an entirely different tradition, and yet at the same time perhaps not, because in their celestial nature these orbs and orbits appear to hark back to a time when in our part of the world astronomy and mathematics sought the essence of spirituality.

I continue to crawl and see these forms soften, taking on texture in a field of squares and curving into a sphere with an organic indentation, like the bottom of an apple. The circles come to be inhabited by a shape which I recognize as a figure's head of black hair, and this symbol in turn spins, passing through different guises as it did in the animation I saw on Shahzia's computer.

Then come a series of visions which walk that boundary between miniature and animation more closely, with mirror images reflecting technology's power to scan, reproduce, and manipulate. Winged figures and the heads of more- and less-bearded men assemble in circles—again circles—before yielding to a drawing more like a traditional miniature, a half-evoked composition of a man against a background the color of a tea-stain.

Still crawling, I arrive at the end, to a series of frames, painstakingly drawn, but with the central field black, reminding me of the degree of labor required for ornamentation in the traditional miniature, and suggesting, perhaps, that ornament and substance need not be separate, that in fact they cannot be.

I sit back on my haunches and reflect on the journey I have just taken, from ancient Lahore, to cowboy boots and the surreal, to the strict impositions of the rules of geometry, to the possibilities of technology, to the wisdom a traditional artisan might seek to share with a contemporary artist.

Only then, standing up, do I realize that I have not followed the order in which the images were grouped when they were placed in the envelope.

I suspect Shahzia would not mind. Her art is her story, of course. But its power is such that it easily becomes part of my story. It resonates with the experience of life across boundaries and borders which I, and so increasingly many of us, have lived.

Alone in my flat in the London rain, looking at *51 Ways of Looking*, I feel remarkably less alone.

—Mohsin Hamid

Shahzia Sikander was born in Lahore, Pakistan and studied painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1992. She then came to the United States where she received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1995. Sikander's work first became widely recognized in the 1997 *Whitney Biennial* and a simultaneous show at The Drawing Center in New York. Her work has since appeared at numerous galleries and museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.; Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; and most recently at The Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey, San Diego Museum of Art, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, and the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. She lives and works in New York.

Mohsin Hamid grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, went on to attend Princeton University and Harvard Law School, and then worked as a management consultant in New York and London. His first novel, *Moth Smoke* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2000), was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, a winner of the Betty Trask Award, and a runner up for the PEN-Hemingway Award and the Commonwealth First Writer's Prize. It has been published in eleven countries and nine languages, and is a cult best-seller in Pakistan, where it was also made into a TV mini-series. His articles and essays have appeared in *TIME*, *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Nerve*, *The Friday Times*, *Dawn*, and *Outlook India*. He is working on his second novel, and divides his time between Lahore, London, and New York.