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HAIDON

Painting Today
Tony Godfrey

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THE

FIGURE



readily available as targets. There is, one could argue, a moral imperative on painting to show this vulnerability of flesh, but also to show possibilities of how people may act, subjects as well as objects.

It is difficult to think of any more wretched or angry complaint from the persecuted than Sue Williams's early work / 225 /. A reaction to an abusive relationship, her painting *It's a New Age* is raised beyond desperate griping by the pawky line, the mordant humour and the sheer effrontery of the presentation. This is sophisticated graffiti. It is an unusual example of art as self-therapy escaping mere self-indulgence: the body on the point of collapse.

Sometimes the figure is there allegorically or by proxy. Given the acute anthropomorphic tendencies of Zapotec culture to which Toledo belongs (his double or other since birth is the iguana) is it not difficult to see that in his work human ambitions and drives are played out on our behalf by animals / 226 /.

The miniature tradition of Persia and India was a narrative one. In its heyday under the Mughal emperors, by the twentieth century miniature painting in the region existed almost solely as a minor tourist industry. It was the least popular course, for example, at Pakistan's Lahore National College of Arts when the teenage Shahzia Sikander enrolled. At that time there was only one other student. 'My interest was and still is to create a dialogue with a traditional form — how to use tradition while engaging in a transformative task.' Sikander refused to be subsumed by the craft and to fulfil the expectations of nostalgia that people had of the miniature, especially after her move to the USA: her work would confound and puzzle such preconceptions. Her *Extraordinary Realities* series of 1996 was painted over miniatures made in India for tourists, which were themselves painted over old manuscript pages.

There is a strong residual belief from the twentieth century that painting should be heroic and hence large. If, however, we call these works 'intimate paintings', we are closer to a true understanding. We get close up to look at them, as though peering through a keyhole, and in so doing we become enveloped in the complex space, enter into a fictive and surprisingly uncertain world. The space of the best Mughal miniatures was always complex: the space Sikander creates in her work is even more complex, inconsistent even, as though different planes are coexisting. This is made explicit in her installation works, where she uses translucent paper to overlay image on image / see 406 /. Narrative happens in space, but her interest is not in making narratives; rather, it is in creating intimate space in which we find our own narratives, our own identities. Hence the complexity and contradiction in a painting such as *Pleasure Pillars* / 227 / which combines F-111 bomber aircraft with *gopis* (the lovers of Krishna who dance joyfully through myriad Indian miniatures), a Venus de

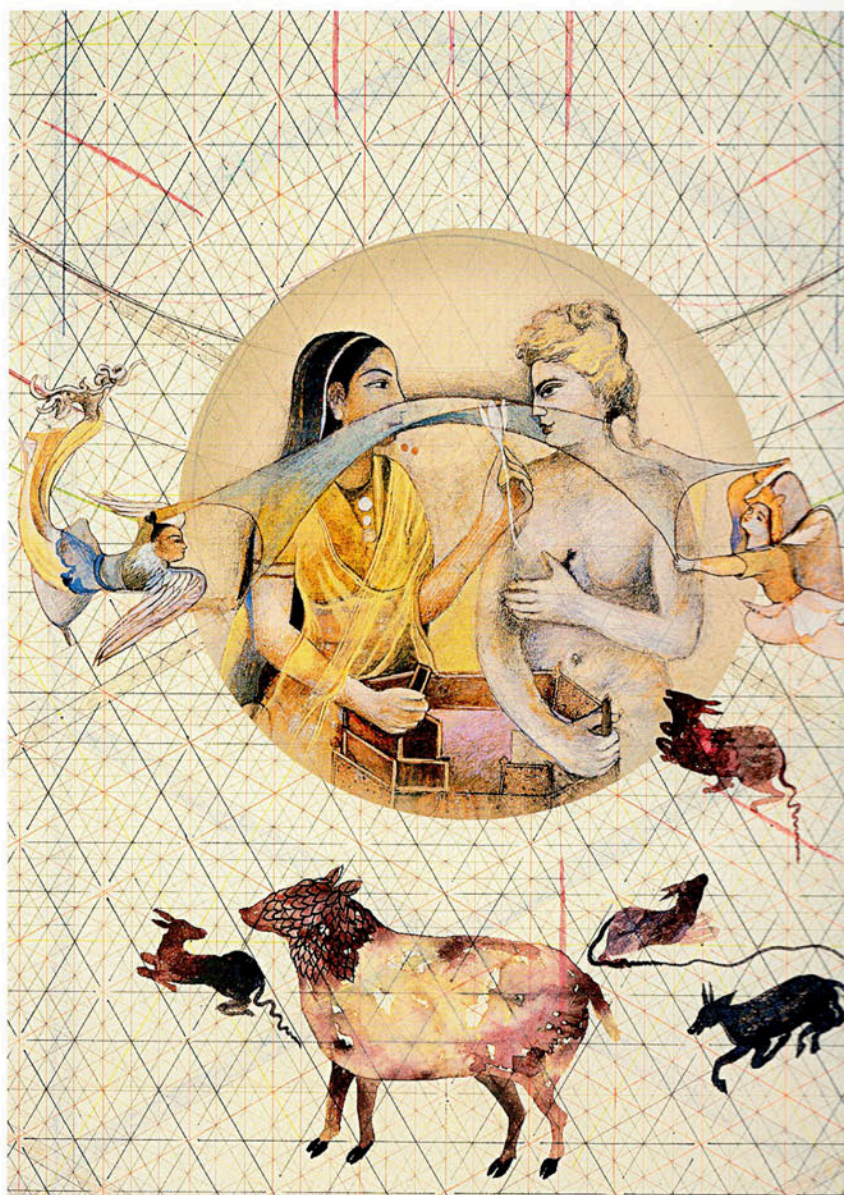


Milo and a Hindu goddess, who stands in the centre beneath the face of a woman who herself stares calmly at us. A red and a blue heart are conjoined, a dog rips the neck of a deer, a griffin (a *chillava* in Punjabi) swoops down. Dots appear everywhere: as jewels or as decorations or as holes, as in a screen, in the picture plane.

One of the attractions of the miniature for Sikander is the process: 'The act ... the materiality, the seductiveness of the surface, the investment, the submission, the hours that are put in to create translucence. In the end, they are very meditative and meaningful gestures, like ritual. In this sense, miniature painting is more about subverting modernity than subverting tradition.' She is offering us a host of diverse things, challenging us to weld them together. Using computers has allowed her to morph and mutate her work still further, as in *Offering I*, where she quotes one of her own earlier works but refits it in the computer-derived space she has become interested in / 228 /. That she can combine such a traditional technique with hyper-modern technology is one of the strengths of her practice.

Storytelling art has emerged, or re-emerged, as we have seen, as one of the most widespread practices in the twenty-first century. Often, as in the work of the American painter Amy Cutler, it is small-scale, immaculately made but intense. Cutler's work likewise owes much to a tradition of miniature painting and little to modernism. It is work that a few years ago would not have been seen in a museum, being discounted as 'mere illustration'. There has also been a sexist bias against this type of work, much of it being by women, and there has been also a bias against work that embraces smallness — too nice, not ambitious enough, too much like playing with Polly Pocket. There are no men in Cutler's world save the snowmen that women go to collect, and who melt. These women are strong women but often in difficult circumstances: in *Traction* / 230 / their braids are used to pull a house across the snow. The sense of entrapment is emphasized by the girls inside the house being forced to sew with their own hair. Like so much twenty-first-century myth-making there is a blend of the gothic and sci-fi, of innocence and cruelty.

The three artists of the Canadian artists' collective the Royal Art Lodge present a much more erotically charged world, and one that is also apparently dominated by rules of exchange / 229 /. Their work, like Cutler's, is centred on drawing: it is no surprise to find that one member (Marcel Dzama) did nothing but draw from 1996 to 2000. The paintings derive from dreams — or reveries in that liminal state between wakefulness and sleep. This imaginative world seems charming, innocent even, until we spot the disembowellings, the interspecies sex. This all seems great fun (Dzama has had action figures made after the figures in his paintings), but it is overshadowed by violent crime, war and chronic alienation.



227. Shahzia Sikander
Pleasure Pillars, 2001.
Watercolour, dry pigment,
vegetable colour, tea and
ink on wasli paper,
30.5 × 25.4 cm (12 × 10 in)

228. Shahzia Sikander
Offering I, 2003. Gouache and
digital imaging on paper,
32.3 × 24.6 cm (12¾ × 9¾ in)



Art installed in specific places is often necessarily contingent on social context and circumstances. To enter Damien Hirst's *In and Out of* in 1991 was to go into a London fashion shop that had gone out of business during a recession: it is no longer a haunt for the butterflies of fashion. First one was struck by the clammy heat: four humidifiers puffed out clouds of moisture. Five paintings on the wall had nothing on them but lumps of brown paint and shelves of flowers underneath. When one went closer, one realized that these lumps were not paint: they were the squirming larvae of tropical butterflies / 403, 404 /. Once hatched, they would about, taking sustenance from bowls of sugared water. In the basement below were eight more paintings, each a monochrome in garish house paint, with dead butterflies trapped in the dried paint. Instead of bowls of water there were ashtrays filled with old butts. Upstairs the paintings gave life, but downstairs they were the scene of death. The paintings were, of course, only a constituent element of a room more important as symbols than things in their right.

Karen Kilimnik began her career as an installation artist scattering memorabilia around galleries to evoke her fascination with celebrities. As her career has developed, this interest in memorabilia and rooms has been blended with her paintings. An exhibition in 1998 saw the floor covered with artificial snow and the path for the viewer to follow marked with red velvet cord and fairy lights, while smaller paintings were propped against samovars and jewels that seemed to have slipped from a portrait of a Tsarist princess were scattered around. There was piped Christmas music. This was simultaneously kitsch and about kitsch, and a constant ambivalence remains in her work: we enjoy the fakery while knowing it is just that. If we agree with Nietzsche that what is real in art is the intensity with which a deception is undertaken, we can simultaneously secretly enjoy the kitsch and, more knowingly, laugh at it. Exhibiting in an eighteenth-century palazzetto in Venice in 2005, Kilimnik showed paintings of herself and Scarlett Johansson / see 136 /, loose copies of Gainsborough's cows, Degas ballet dancers, George Romney's *Emma Hamilton*, dogs and horses / 405 /. Around them she placed period chairs,

fake birds' nests with painted eggs, artificial flowers and glittery jewellery. A tape endlessly played bird song.

The Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie creates painted rooms that seem initially to be full of nostalgic artifice: they re-create historic nineteenth-century rooms with pastel-coloured walls / 407 /. But the walls are separated, standing proud, and they always act as an environment for her other procedures: avant-garde fashion drawings, remade CD covers, political and social agit-prop. Delightful though they are to look at, they create an environment in which to consider how we live.

Shahzia Sikander never saw herself as just a miniaturist (see Chapter 7). Paradoxically, being small, miniatures create whole worlds, so it was almost inevitable that she would expand her work into room-size installations / 406 /. For Sikander the installations are evolving processes; the experience of the viewer happens more explicitly in time, as he or she walks up to and looks at and through the various layers. The contradictions built into all the elements of Sikander's work likewise become more explicit. This she associates very much with notions of deconstruction:



404. Damien Hirst
Out of Love, 1991.
 Resin, house paint, tropical
 colors and butterfly pupae,
 butterflies, cigarette
 ashtrays, sugar, tables,
 chairs, as installed in a
 shop in London, ground
 and basement

Everything has a contradiction embedded within it. ... It is not the act of dismantling but recognition of the fact that inherently nothing is solid or pure. I read French philosopher Jacques Derrida and was influenced by his suggestion of binary oppositions as creators of hierarchy. I saw my work in connection to notions like west/east, white/black, white/brown, modern/tradition, presence/absence, beginning/end, and conscious/unconscious.

Painters increasingly take an active role in how their work is displayed, whether it be Howard Hodgkin having the walls on which his work is hung painted different colours / see 252 /, or Mary Heilmann providing her own chairs for the viewer to sit in / see 335 /, or Peter Halley layering the walls behind his paintings with prints and linear diagrams that replicate the shapes in his paintings / 408 /. If Halley's early paintings had echoed the image of an electric cell, here one seemed to be in the actual engine. Often graphics spell out ambiguous, gnomonic phrases that undercut the paintings to create a delirious but uneasy sensation.

Most of the artists above have seen the painted room very much as one in public space. Contrarily, the American artist David Reed has often expressed the desire to paint bedroom pictures: 'A painting in a bedroom can be seen in reverie, where the most private narratives are born.' This is where we can have the most intimate relationship with a painting. It is also where we slip most commonly from consciousness to the liminal to dream. Reed dramatized this by re-creating the two bedrooms from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*, placing beside a replica of the bed a video player showing the scene where it appears / 410 /. However, he had changed the flower painting behind the bed in the film for one of his own paintings and had that same painting digitally inserted into the film. This is wonderfully uncanny, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. But the scene in the film is itself wholly *unheimlich*, reality and dream being confused inextricably, and involving obsession, disguise and deception, with fantasy and memory.

Like many artists, Reed does not see the museum as the only place or the best place to show his work:



paintings not to be nostalgic or sentimental means they have to be about this moment. The idea of this is that they should be an integral part of life, not separated in museums or galleries. Paintings here they can be part of normal life, seen in moments of reverie.

to be shown in museums, he tries to make them feel familiar again. Given the opportunity to recreate the Rococo mirror room in the Landesmuseum in Austria, he watched film after film about vampires (411). Vampire films merge desire and fear, and dream. The vampire is both illusory (it cannot be seen in the mirror) and real (it sucks blood). By placing paintings in the mirrored rooms with the films, he turns them too into a realm of fantasy. But for Reed, vampires also symbolized a wider social condition:

Stories describe the fear and anxiety caused by technological extensions of our body. We are part machine, part living and part dead, and we don't know how to deal with this knowledge. We are wearing aids, computers, and other machines to

extend our bodies. And we have internalized the perceptions of technological machines: photography, film, and video. We dream in pans, close-ups, and moving camera shots.

Rudolf Stingel often presents in lieu of traditional paintings Celotex insulation boards that viewers can carve into or paint, or else he will 'paint' pictures by gouging polystyrene. Yet the sensation is still pictorial. His work often expands across the whole room. As with Yves Klein, what can be construed as an anti-painting act becomes subsumed within the discourse. It may suggest the possibility of liberation, of losing oneself in the unreality of the shiny material, but by simultaneously emphasizing the grossness of the stuff he works with, materials more associated with the packing room than the gallery, Stingel short-circuits such desires. We are left on our feet, enveloped by the sensuality and puzzled by the open-ended concept (412).

When, like other Indian artists, especially women artists, Nalini Malani turned away from painting in despair at the sectarian killings in her country, she

405. Karen Kilimnik
Works installed at Bevilacqua la Masa, Palazzo Tito, Venice, June–October 2005

406. Shahzia Sikander
To Reveal or Not to Reveal, 2004. Acrylic, gouache and ink on tissue paper, site-specific dimensions. Installed at San Diego Museum of Art



