



The Arts
SOUTH ASIA

Harvard South Asia Institute

The Arts
and
South Asia

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FROM THE DIRECTOR



Courtesy of Ekabhishek

Artists, musicians, and creative writers are as important to the Harvard South Asia Institute as historians and economists, entrepreneurs and scientists, political leaders and civil servants. The arts—fine arts and music, theater and literature, and more—comprise a fundamental part of South Asian culture and society. The arts are uniquely lived in this region, giving South Asia its nuanced history and flair. South Asia is in fact defined by its artistry, its architecture and epic poetry, its textiles and crafts, by its vibrant, continuously evolving traditions and movements. The arts come to life in all facets of South Asian culture. South Asian artists have played a leading, innovative role in the arts from antiquity, and have had lasting influence on international art forms. This publication is a further extension of our commitment to the arts in South Asia.

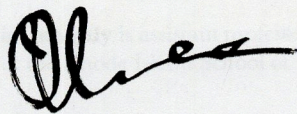
In the pages that follow, you will encounter a collection of essays by artists and scholars on topics as diverse as the region itself. Sona Datta, curator of South Asian art at the Peabody Essex Museum, demonstrates how art reflects life in paintings and installation art following the Partition period; while Fakrul Alam, a literary critic, explores the impact of Ekushey (Mother Language Day) on Bangladeshi society and on other native tongues. Sonali Dhingra, a doctoral candidate in art history at Harvard, raises urgent questions about the disappearance of premodern Buddhist sculptures from Odisha; as Rachel Parikh, Calderwood Curatorial Fellow of South Asian Art for the Harvard Art Museums, describes the surreal and humbling feeling of what it is like to hold and care for precious centuries-old artwork. Shazia Sikander, a renowned Pakistani artist, wrestles with tradition as she seeks to preserve some elements but also ultimately break with it in her own original miniature paintings. And Sunil

Sharma delves into the deep realm of Mughal-era poetry, shedding light on the paradisaical beauty of historic Kashmir. The collection ends with verses of Tamil *sangam* poetry, translated into English. With stunning economy of language, they offer us a glimpse into what Tamil poets call the *akam* (the inner world) and the *puram* (the outer world).

These essays, all newly commissioned, are concise and fascinating explorations of the arts and South Asia. They offer us fresh ways of thinking about the region—the past and the future; the commitment to traditions and the forging of modernity; great political narratives and textures of everyday life; the language of loss and the riotous music of resistance.

As always, we invite you to engage actively with the essays that follow. Please feel free to take notes in the blank pages provided, and share the digital edition with your friends and colleagues.

Regards,



Tarun Khanna

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Shazia Sikander is a Pakistani artist. Her work has been shown in both solo and group exhibitions at several museums, including the Whitney Museum and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.



Image courtesy of Shazia Sikander. A busy, colorful, modern, and highly visible
outdoor event space in the park had also been masterfully captured in her
photography.

The Elasticity of Tradition

Shazia Sikander

After graduating from the all-girls Convent, a Roman Catholic missionary-run English-medium high school in Lahore, I joined the Kinnaird College for Women and started studying literature, math, and economics. Like many others of my generation, growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s was a deeply conflicting experience. The Soviet-Afghan War was creating new sociopolitical and cultural ruptures in Pakistan. Religion was steadily becoming institutionalized. The Hudood ordinances, which limited women's rights, loomed large. Coeducation dissipated. Religious tolerance diminished. Even attending an art school back then was thought of as immoral. It was precisely the mindless malaise injected and perpetuated by Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorial regime that pushed me as a young woman into the direction of art. If uncertainty had been the hallmark of our time, then pursuing art as a career path was to confront that uncertainty. Art remains an instinct to imagine, or reimagine, the future.

Painting on canvas has a long history in the West. When I joined Lahore's National College of Arts in 1986, I was in an intuitive mode, seeking out what would speak to me. I had no predetermined ideas or intent. I looked into architecture, photography, ceramics, printmaking, and painting with equal interest. There was a prevalent emphasis on modernism, and various iterations of abstract expressionism were abound; but what I was not interested in was a derivative relationship to the West via painting. Then I ran into Bashir Ahmed, the master miniature painter who challenged my entire understanding of high and low art. His was a dedication and commitment rooted in tradition. Such devotion to "tradition" arrested my attention. I was seeking my own sense of connection to history during the deeply unstable 1980s. Miniature painting's then-designated status of irrelevance in the so-called intellectual artistic prac-

tices was a perfect foil for my own work. Instinctively I knew that my calling was to dig deeper into miniature painting's complicated canon within historical representations.

During this period, miniature painting was nonexistent in the global contemporary art world, as the Euro-American canon dominated the field of painting. I have examined Indo-Persian miniature painting for three decades and see my role as primarily investigative. History and storytelling feature prominently in my work, calling into question issues around redaction, perception of authority, and independence. The whole process of locating one's relationship to "tradition" is a paradox in and of itself. How does that ownership occur? What is originality? Creativity? Imagination? How does one create something anew? Inventive possibilities abound within the world itself, not just within the realm of the mind. The world is full of mystery, containing within it myriad distances between the real and the imagined. Within that context, the rhetoric of imagination is buoyant, full of possibilities, a soaring and empowering space that is free from constraints, that binds all of us together. Our histories are about redactions. Imagination is very much about taking ownership of the narrative; it is a fundamentally political stance.

An artist often has the burden to reimagine. In reimagining lies the ability to break molds and reexamine norms. Contemporaneity is about remaining relevant by challenging the status quo, not about holding on to positions of power. Within the work of art, the elasticity of the form is its ability to remain relevant over its various iterations within geographical, historical, sociopolitical, cultural, gendered, and psychological transformations. I am interested in the dynamism of form: form as something alive and in relationship to its space, technique, and time. South Asia and its diaspora—with its diverse history and traditions, its linguistic and racial diversity, and its complex provenance—interest me deeply. Who are we? What is identity? Early in my practice I began developing a personal vocabulary, an alphabet of sorts, in which forms could serve as stock characters and no longer had to hold on to their original meanings. A recurring form, one of many I've developed as part of my visual language, is a silhouette of the hair culled from the head of a *gopi*, a female devotee of the Hindu god Krishna as represented in historical Indian miniatures. By removing the female figure and leaving the trace of her hair, I wanted to emphasize the potential within the dislocated form. At once singular and representational, when animated and reproduced in the millions, the hair silhouettes operate as a pulsating mass of movement that oscillates between several representations, such as the sun, spheres, swarms, birds, bats, or insects.

What is important is the kinetic thrust, the enormous energy charge at the interface of this undulating movement of forms. The hair unit as a form is simultaneously tangible—a rigid icon—and elusive, constantly morphing and altering. Powerful and subliminal, the beauty of the *gopi* hair particles is that they can operate as both the unhinged and the durable, functioning as a

force, an engine for survival. To detach is to renew. Disruption as a means of exploration is a consistent element in my experimental strategy. The notion is to sever, so that the female account is freed to create its own history and empower its own narrative. The “hair” iconography, when unleashed from its servitude to the *gopi* aesthetic, has greater scope and autonomy. Not only do I see the motif as decentered but also as asexual or androgynous. It is a metaphor for inevitable change that occurs through time. It is also a metaphor for complexity and the probability of freedom.

Digitizing captured my imagination as a stand-in for vector. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction all are essential for the movement and projection of my drawings inspired by traditional Indian and Persian miniatures. Drawings on paper, as witnessed in the folios, illumination manuscripts, and endless Indian and Persian historical paintings, contain an aspect of infinity in that the narrative doesn't end at the edge of the painted, but hints at a world beyond. That idea has always been at the core of my dismantling traditional miniature paintings. In developing a parallel between the drawn and the digital, both of which have infinite space, I wanted to collapse the boundaries between organic and synthetic drawing. The intent is to transform motifs in order to cultivate new associations for trenchant historical symbols in the quest to service more than one vantage point.



Image courtesy of Shazia Sikander.