

Issue — 9

*Out of Line*

# Manual





**Manual**

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(cover)

Raul Gonzalez III  
American, b. 1976  
*Watchalo, Papa, Watchalo* (detail), 2016  
Mixed media on paper  
35.6 × 27.9 cm. (14 × 11 in.)  
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2017.12  
© Raul Gonzalez III



two-sided poster	—	Artist on Art <b><i>Out of Line</i></b> Craig Taylor	30	—	Double Takes <b><i>Your House is Mine (All City)</i></b> Namita Vijay Dharia & Stefano Bloch
5	—	Introduction <b>Out of Line: Straight Lines and Right Angles</b> Reginald Dwayne Betts			<b>Carey Young's Declared Void</b> Jared A. Goldstein & Mimi Cabell
8	—	From the Files <b>Bill of Sale for Sam</b> Amber Lopez <b>Public Outrage and Private Parts</b> Douglas W. Doe			<b>Blue Bra Lady as Political Icon</b> Fida Adely & Lucinda Hitchcock <b>The Humble and Divine: Iranian Dervish Cap</b> Kate Irvin & Sheida Soleimani
16	—	Object Lesson <b>Mist as Method: Cloudy Mountains</b> Jeffrey Moser	poster	—	Artist on Art <b>"...Alright!... Alright! Huh?"</b> Douglas Kearney
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Columns

From the Files pries open the archive, Double Take looks at one object two different ways, Artist on Art offers a creative response by an invited artist, Object Lesson exposes the stories behind objects, Portfolio presents a series of objects on a theme, How To explores the making of an object

# Shahzia Sikander: Drawing and Disruption

Jan Howard

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One is most charged as an artist  
...when you are thinking with  
your brush. Some of it will be  
uncomfortable. In so many ways,  
taking the route of art is not to  
seek stability in uncertain times;  
it is to confront the uncertainty.<sup>1</sup>

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Shahzia Sikander, November 1, 2016

FIG. 1  
Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
(RISD MFA 1995, Painting/Printmaking)  
*Web* (detail), 2002  
Ink, opaque watercolor, graphite, and tea on *wasli* paper  
Sheet: 22.7 × 18.9 cm. (8 15/16 × 7 7/16 in.)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46  
© Shahzia Sikander



Drawing is at the heart of Shahzia Sikander's artistic practice, and she uses her gift as an image maker to upend expectations and challenge the status quo, whether within an artistic discipline or politics. The RISD Museum's intimate work *Web* [Figs. 1 and 2] shows Sikander's deft linear facility and imagination at play, in this instance in response to a world ruptured by the terrorist events of September 11, 2001. The composition is rich and complex in execution and interpretation; within it she layers visually disruptive juxtapositions, including the disproportionate use of scale, with motifs and narratives from multiple eras and cultures, to create new ways of seeing and understanding.

Delicate tracery delineates a literal web over the top half of the drawing, and its context within the work offers many ways to think about its interpretation. An allusion that many Westerners might miss is the story of Muhammad and the spider and the cave. To briefly recount this well-known tale: Muhammad needed to escape Mecca, where he was threatened with death by those angered by his teachings of Allah. He fled along with his closest friend, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, to Yathrib (now Medina, Saudi Arabia), where his followers had settled. They hid in a cave, as Muhammad was certain that God would hear their prayers to protect them. In answer to their call, a spider wove a web that so completely covered the entrance to the cave, their pursuers were fooled and moved on.<sup>2</sup>

Sikander, born in Lahore, Pakistan, is a strong advocate "for the perception of Muslim Americans to gain depth and momentum through art and literature that is free to engage, explore, critique, and expand its inherent Muslim-ness."<sup>3</sup> Artists and writers referencing Islamic culture are often at a disadvantage working in America, where so few fully understand basic narratives and motifs. While Sikander was raised a Muslim, she attended a Catholic high school in Lahore and has a broad background in Urdu and English literature. She first came to the United States in 1992 for an exhibition at the Pakistan Embassy, after achieving early success at home for her innovative approach to traditional Indo-Persian miniature painting. The following year she enrolled in the graduate program in the Painting and Printmaking Department at RISD and has lived in this country

ever since. Working here as a Muslim was initially liberating. Although she had a supportive family and art community in Lahore, life under the regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-haq had become increasingly restrictive. In America, Sikander achieved wide recognition in museum and galleries by the late 1990s for both her painted miniatures based on Indo-Persian traditions and her large-scale installations and wall drawings. At a time when the contemporary

FIG. 2  
Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
(RISD MFA 1995, Painting/Printmaking)  
*Web*, 2002  
Ink, opaque watercolor, graphite, and tea  
on *wasli* paper  
Sheet: 22.7 × 18.9 cm. (8<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46  
© Shahzia Sikander





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Western art world had few South Asian representatives, her work contributed to a growing discourse here around cultural identity, especially by artists previously excluded including women, people of color, and those working outside the U.S. and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Her work also engaged a renewed appreciation for figuration and narrative. But nearly ten years after Sikander arrived in America, the attacks of September 11th changed what it meant to be Muslim in this country.

In *Web*, the spider and its web seem to play dual roles of protecting and ensnaring, perhaps a comment on the shifting attitude of the U.S. government and many citizens toward Muslims. There is a dichotomy in the web, as it appears to be in the process of construction at the bottom and destruction at the top, where a lion is devouring a deer. The spider, comparable in size to the large mammals surrounding it, sits at the web's center, where it has seemingly provided a barrier for the deer behind it. Another deer prances on the web, and a pair of antelope stands at its edge, threatened by an approaching cheetah or leopard. Their positions are ambiguous. Will the web entrap or shield? At the bottom of the sheet, outside the web's circumference, is a bucolic scene where deer prance and graze while a fawn nurses among trees and flowers and birds.

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The animals and vegetation are modeled on images found in historical Indo-Persian miniature paintings, a tradition in which Sikander trained at the National College of Arts in Lahore from 1987 to 1990.<sup>5</sup> Hunting scenes are a common subject within this practice and were understood to allude to broader issues of territorial control and military strength, so were a natural source for the artist to turn to when contemplating September 11th. The sensitive depiction of deer in miniature painting has a special appeal for Sikander, especially in regard to their delicate and supple movement. In an exceptional Indian Mughal miniature in the RISD Museum's collection, *Shah Shuja Hunting Nilgai*, attributed to Payag [Fig.3], the grace and vulnerability of the animals is in evidence.

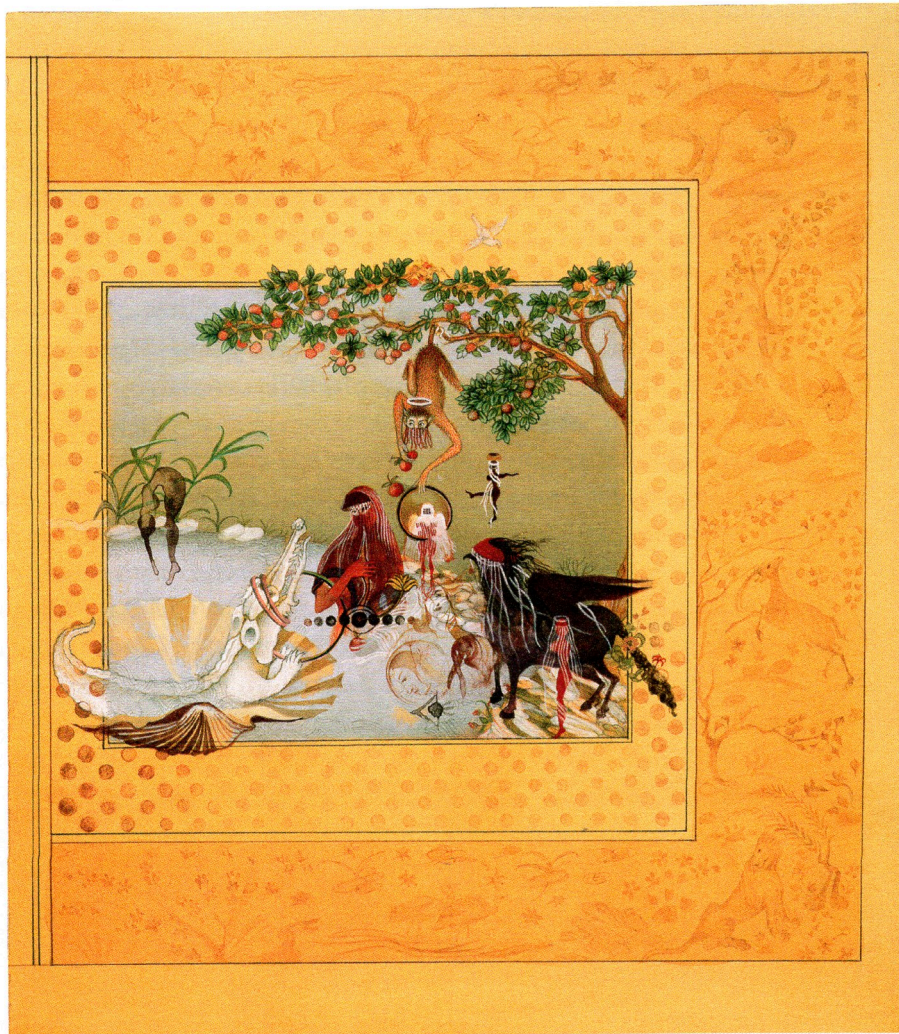
Birds in particular are rich in Sikander's use of symbolism. She is particularly engaged in the bird in flight and its connection to the imagination, to Islamic mythology and philosophy, and especially to Sufism. In many beliefs, including Islam, birds in flight are equated with the ascension of the soul to a higher realm. A famous eleventh-century Sufi allegorical tale by Fariduddin Attar, *The Conference of Birds*, narrates the meeting of a large group of birds who want to find their king. With the aid of the hoopoe bird, the group is guided to the mythical Simurgh, hiding in the mountain Kaf. The thirty birds that complete the arduous journey there find they are in fact Simurgh (in Persian, the word translates as "thirty birds"), or the divinity within.<sup>6</sup> This type of spiritual journey is a recurrent theme in Sikander's work, especially in reference to flight as a metaphor for the creative process.<sup>7</sup>

The flora and fauna scattered throughout the sheet, creating a fertile environment, are elements more typically found in the border design for a miniature painting, but they play a foundational role in this composition. In an earlier work, *Venus's Wonderland* [Fig. 4], Sikander worked in a format replicating an album page, with the central image surrounded by imagery, including an outer border based on a similar type of flora and fauna design she was taught to copy during her studies at the National College of Arts in Lahore.

Sikander's teacher at the National College of Arts, Bashir Ahmad, had revived the practice of Mughal-style miniature painting at the college, creating a bachelor's degree program there in 1982. At that time, the school's program was predominantly based on Western models of art practice. This was the first program in a South Asian academy where students were instructed over several years in the history, theory, and techniques of the miniature-painting tradition. Sikander learned how to prepare the paper and colors, copy historical miniatures, and

FIG. 3  
Attributed to Payag  
Indian  
*Shah Shuja Hunting Nilgai*,  
ca. 1650–1655  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper  
16.9 × 26.1 cm. (6 5/8 × 10 1/4 in.)  
Museum Works of Art Fund 58.068





eventually create her own compositions. The field of miniature painting grounds her practice today, especially in the centrality of the role of drawing and the patience and discipline required in the execution. An example is in her preparation of the *wasli* paper support used in this piece.

The artist generally makes the *wasli* paper for her miniatures in batches, layering two or three sheets of dampened cotton-fiber paper with a wheat-starch paste and ground copper sulfate as a preservative. Using the palm of her hand as a squeegee, she forces the paste through the paper and eliminates any excess paste and air bubbles in the laminated sheet. Taped to a board, the sheets dry for two days. They are then



burnished with a shell on both sides, creating a flat, smooth, and luminous surface. Lastly, Sikander stains the paper with several applications of tea, controlling this wash of color in an even and continuous flow across and down the sheet.<sup>8</sup>

Once the sheet for this work was meticulously prepared, she began by transferring a flora and fauna composition she had previously drawn. In traditional miniature work, it was common to transfer designs through papers that had been pricked along the line work, so that a dry pigment could be pounced through the holes as a guide for drawing the work. In *Web*, Sikander selectively drew over some printed components, making all the line work appear to be applied by hand. Only magnified viewing makes these distinctions clear [Fig. 5]. All the linear work in this drawing, aside from the flora and fauna, was drawn freehand by Sikander.

These refined and detailed ink lines were not made with a pen, as might be expected, but with a brush. Careful looking reveals Sikander's remarkable control of her line work. The strokes are steady, continuous, and precise, rarely providing evidence of wavering or misstep. Sikander's spare additions of opaque watercolor evoke the sense that *Web* is in a state of evolution.

From the beginning of her studies in Lahore, Sikander was interested in the miniature tradition's potential for subversion. Before her, no one had explored its possibilities as a radical art form. "At that time, miniature painting was a completely untapped field for contemporary art.

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FIG. 4

Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
*Venus's Wonderland*, 1995–1997  
Vegetable color, dry pigment,  
watercolor, and tea on *wasli* paper  
30.48 × 27.31 cm. (12 × 10 ¾ in.)  
Collection Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann,  
New York  
© Shahzia Sikander  
Courtesy the artist

FIG. 5

Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
(RISD MFA 1995, Painting/Printmaking)  
*Web* (detail), 2002  
Ink, opaque watercolor, graphite, and tea  
on *wasli* paper  
Sheet: 22.7 × 18.9 cm. (8 15/16 × 7 1/8 in.)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46  
© Shahzia Sikander



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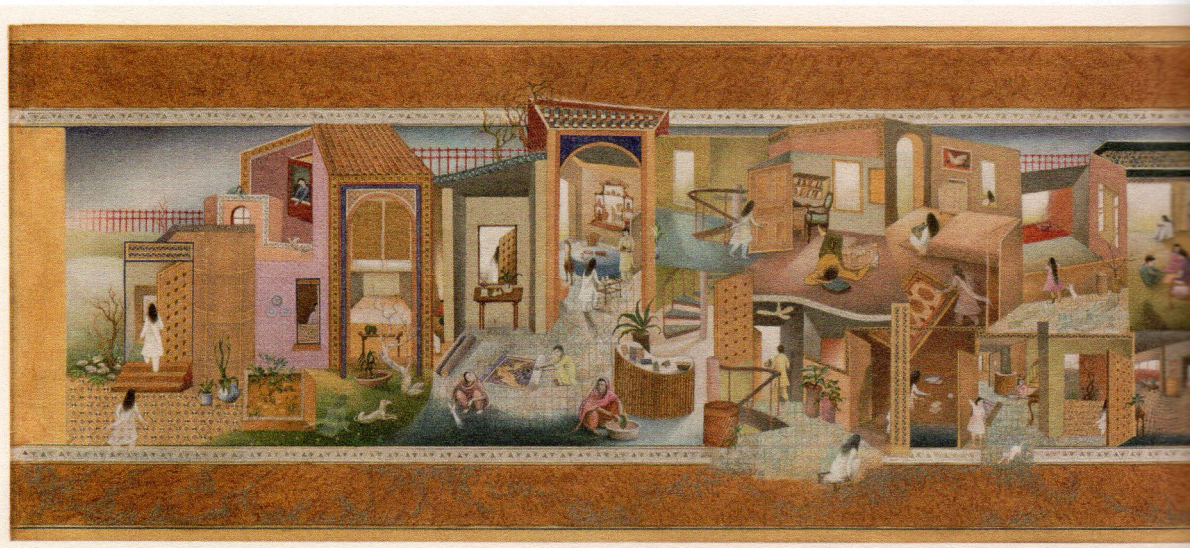
I chose the medium when it was widely considered craft, with no room allowed for creative expression, because I perceived a frontier.”<sup>9</sup> As curator Valerie Fletcher has previously noted, the fact that the genre was precolonial, representational, and Islamic made Sikander’s use of it a political gesture in itself.<sup>10</sup> Before Sikander completed her studies, she demonstrated the practice’s rich capacity for investigation by introducing personal and contemporary subject matter, expanded scale, and cinematic imagery, receiving high praise and recognition for leading the way in a pursuit of the miniature tradition within the contemporary art discourse [Fig. 6].<sup>11</sup>

Like Sikander’s Lahore thesis work, *Web* includes subject matter referencing the present day, such as the industrial towers and fighter jets. Vertical structures and airplanes, in any form, still call to mind the terrorist hijacking of American passenger airlines to destroy New York’s World Trade Center on September 11th, and that was especially so in 2002, when the drawing was made. Sikander’s structures could be read as watchtowers, communication towers, or oil wells.<sup>12</sup> All offer plausible readings. Following the passage of the Patriot Act just six weeks after September 11th, the access of personal data by the U.S. government and government surveillance became of increasing concern to U.S. citizens.

If the towers are read as oil-drilling derricks, the imagery recalls the widespread opposition to President George W. Bush’s campaign to invade Iraq, claiming the Iraqi government was concealing weapons of mass

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FIG. 6  
Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
*The Scroll*, 1989–1990  
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,  
and tea on bark and paper  
50.5 × 179.6 cm. (19 7/8 × 70 3/4 in.)  
© Shahzia Sikander  
Courtesy the artist

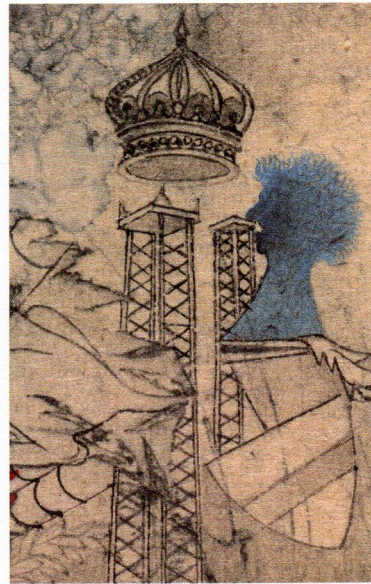


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destruction (since proved false). Millions across the globe protested, citing America's dependence on foreign fuel sources and charging that the veiled goal of the Iraq invasion was the American exploitation of Iraqi oil fields. In *Web*, the towers' meaning becomes even more layered by the addition of armorial bearings with the towers at the upper right, including a crown, shield, and portrait bust [Fig. 7]. It is as if the communication towers / oil derricks have become a part of an armorial bearing, claiming identity with the information / petroleum resources as a continuation of colonial-era exploitation. Another drawing Sikander made at this time, *King George* [Fig. 8], is more explicit about her feeling on the subject, depicting President Bush suited in armor and posed in a victorious stance on top of a map of Iraq. Sikander acknowledges that "the political bent in my work gained momentum between 2002 and 2004.... Several works from this period... are reflections of my underlying interest in responding to political and cultural shifts."<sup>13</sup>

Compounding the political ciphers in *Web* is the fact that the only colors used are red, white, and blue—a scheme that is seen in many of Sikander's works of this period, some with clearer references to



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FIG. 7  
Shahzia Sikander  
*American and Pakistani*, b. 1969  
(RISD MFA 1995, Painting/Printmaking)  
*Web* (detail), 2002  
Ink, opaque watercolor, graphite, and tea  
on *wasli* paper  
Sheet: 22.7 × 18.9 cm. (8<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46  
© Shahzia Sikander

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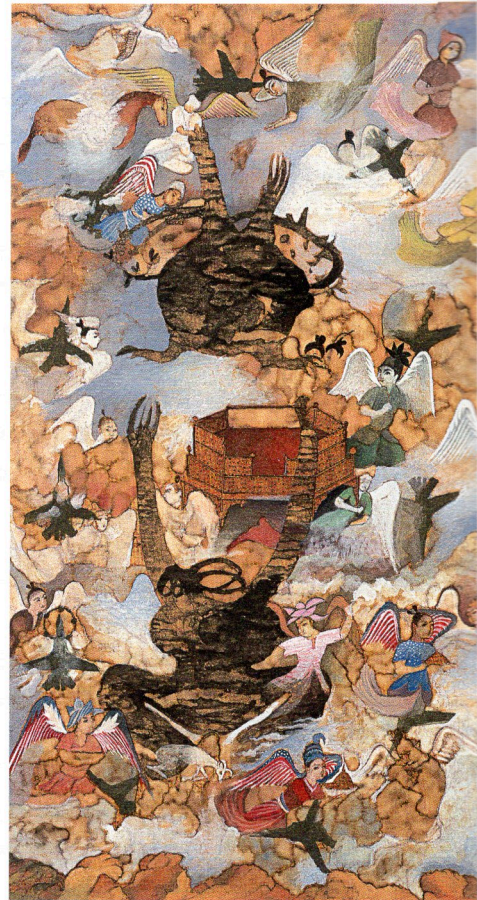


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the American flag [Fig. 9]. It is worth noting the red used is closer to a blood red than a true red. In the time following September 11th, it was difficult to be anywhere in the U.S. without being surrounded by American flags. The pervasive flag displays reflected a spirit of solidarity around the victims and those who responded to the tragedy, but for some this nationalism also unleashed unfounded fears of and distrust for Muslims in America. This marked a profound shift from Sikander's own initial reception in the U.S., which she described in the early 1990s as "wonderfully porous." In a March 2016 opinion piece for the *Los Angeles Times*, she discussed continuing ramifications for Muslims in the U.S.:

Long gone are the days when one could travel on a Pakistani passport without raising security alarm and waiting in detention rooms. Now, the incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric spreading in certain parts of the U.S. is dangerous and suffocating. It robs all of us of our innate human empathy.<sup>14</sup>



One of the most dominant elements in *Web* is the mysterious closed form that overlays the left side. It is connected to a series of drawings that Sikander created while she was a graduate student at RISD. Looking for a greater rupture in her miniature work, she developed “a personal vocabulary, an alphabet of sorts, in which forms could serve as stock figures that no longer had to hold onto their original meaning. I produced my own visual language.”<sup>15</sup> Much of the new language was inspired by the discourse at RISD focusing on feminism, sexuality, and identity. The small female figures seen in *Venus’s Wonderland* [Fig. 4] are taken from this new vocabulary. Layered onto a scene she copied from a Pakistani historical miniature that portrays an Indian fable, they personalize and complicate the image. She developed these forms, primarily referencing the body, as quick, loose, gestural drawings in opposition to the exacting and detailed work of the miniature.

In 2001, Sikander found new inspiration for her personal lexicon of forms, which

emerged from an interest in locating the “life” of a form. Taking the standard coffee-table Islamic art book or catalogue as a starting point, I went about dismantling categories of representation such as ceramic, metal works, textiles, and the decorative arts in order to represent the objects made in these media as imaginative inhabitants full of life.<sup>16</sup>

The model for the form in *Web* is a container or purse that would hang from a belt. She drew these images, using a loaded brush, onto thin paper which wrinkled and caused the ink to dry with a mottled, organic texture.<sup>17</sup> She then reproduced the forms with direct gravure as stand-alone images in a series of prints and as layers in more complex images, such as those in *Web* and *No Fly Zone*. In *Web*, the purse seems to intertwine economics with her narrative.

Another technique incorporated into *Web* is the white wash applied over the printed and drawn ink depictions of flora, which dissolves the imagery into a beautiful pattern of small pools. In a similar way that this process disintegrates her image, at the upper left edge she has created the illusion that the paper this work is drawn on is being peeled or torn. These effects serve to amplify a recurrent strategy in Sikander’s work around transformation of imagery by redaction or context, which speaks to her broader inquiry into how history is written and rewritten. The themes of development and destruction that persist in this work—in the danger implied by the fighter

FIG. 8  
Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
*King George*, 2002  
Graphite on paper  
35.6 × 27.9 cm. (14 × 11 in.)  
© Shahzia Sikander  
Courtesy the artist

FIG. 9  
Shahzia Sikander  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
*No Fly Zone*, 2002  
Watercolor and dry pigment on *wasli* paper  
20 × 11 cm. (7 ¾ × 4 ½ in.)  
© Shahzia Sikander  
Courtesy the artist



jets and towers set within the fecund landscape; in the deer being hunted and the fawn feeding; in the spider and its web as protector and ensnarer—reinforce this investigation. These themes connect, too, to the cycle of life and time alluded to in the drawing, seen perhaps most obviously in the unexpected juxtaposition of historical and contemporary references but also in how the news cycle continues to affect how the drawing is read. For this viewer, the recent Muslim travel ban, part of the continuing fallout of 9/11 and the new Trump administration, comes to the fore.

Time is, of course, also an element of the work's creation. While *Web* has been analyzed primarily following the chronology of Sikander's development as an artist, it also nearly reflects the chronology of its evolution, except the web is the final layer. Her work evolves slowly, as Sikander states in this essay's opening quotation, by allowing her brush to guide her thoughts and not fearing where it takes her. The very last elements added to this composition, and they may have been added somewhat later in time according to the artist, were the tiny silhouettes of *gopi* hairstyles—nearly invisible next to the jet at the upper left [Fig. 10]—motifs that have become ubiquitous in Sikander's more recent work. They are derived from historical Indian miniatures depicting female followers of the young Krishna. This small gesture confronts the historic antagonism between Muslims and Hindus, but as shapes they take on meaning according to context. They read in many works, as they do here, as birds or bats, and the association with flight is wholly appropriate. Their inclusion connects this work to



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Sikander's digital animations in which the *gopi* hairpieces multiply and swarm with a fluidity of transformation and interpretation that is a hallmark of her work.

A web is an ideal metaphor for the multitude of thematic threads that are finely woven together in this drawing, especially in the context of the word's broader definition as a complex network. The work encompasses the webs of personal identity, cultural influences, political relationships, global economics, international security, and immigration, just to name a few—all issues that are an even greater part of our daily conversation now than they were when the work was created. That Sikander can wrap all of this into such an exquisite work on such a small scale speaks to her remarkable visual and conceptual imagination.



## Object Lesson

- 1 "Shahzia Sikander with Sara Christoph," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2016, <http://brooklynrail.org/2016/11/art/shahzia-sikander-with-sara-christoph>.
- 2 The author is grateful to the artist for patiently sharing her thoughts on the sources of her imagery and her techniques in this work in a telephone conversation on June 28, 2017. The synopsis of the story on the spider and the cave is taken from <https://www.islamicity.org/6327/history-of-hijrah-migration-for-peace-and-justice/>.
- 3 Shahzia Sikander, "We Need Diverse Influences: Artist Shahzia Sikander on Her Multicultural Past and Our Ruture," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-shahzia-sikander-20160327-story.html>.
- 4 Sikander had received many prestigious exhibition opportunities, including one-person exhibitions at the Drawing Center (New York) and the Renaissance Society (Chicago), and inclusion in the 1997 Whitney Biennial (New York).
- 5 Sikander's official graduation date is February 16, 1992, but her graduation session and last year of study was 1989–1990.
- 6 Mojdeh Bayat and Mohammad Ali Jamnia, *Tales from the Land of the Sufis* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2001), 52–56.
- 7 A recent example is the print portfolio *Portrait of an Artist*, published in 2016 by Pace Editions, with its reference to the Mi'raj story, the revelatory night journey of the Prophet Muhammad, in both Sikander's images and the accompanying text by Ayad Akhtar.
- 8 Sikander stains and burnishes a sheet in the video "Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1, September 21, 2001." <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/shahzia-sikander-in-spirituality-segment/>.
- 9 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Shahzia Sikander," in *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power* (Hong Kong: Asia Society Hong Kong, 2016), 302.
- 10 Valerie Fletcher, *Directions: Shahzia Sikander*. Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2000. Exhibition brochure.
- 11 Her thesis work, *The Scroll*, started a trend in the miniature department at the National College of Arts. Since she presented this work and until very recently thesis projects have been large-scale miniature painting, as opposed to small notebook-sized pieces that had been done prior. There was a great deal of positive press around her thesis work, and through the 1990s she was seen in Pakistan as leading the way in the contemporary exploration of miniature painting. Almost unheard of, following graduation Sikander was asked to stay on at the NCA to teach miniature painting, which she did for a year. Her contribution to contemporary Pakistani art is regularly omitted.
- 12 An email sent April 21, 2003, from the artist to the author refers to them as communication towers, although Sikander described them as oil wells in a telephone conversation on June 28, 2017.
- 13 Sikander, "Time as Nemesis to Authority," in *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power*, 276.
- 14 Sikander, "We Need Diverse Influences."
- 15 Sikander, "Time as Nemesis to Authority," 276.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 282 and 287.
- 17 In this generative process, Sikander created ten or twenty works during a single session using large ink-filled brushes on tracing paper from rolls. She appreciated the skin-like nature of the transparent sheets. In some of these drawings, she used a black ink with a red tint that gave the appearance of dried blood.

**FIG. 10**  
**Shahzia Sikander**  
American and Pakistani, b. 1969  
(RISD MFA 1995, Painting/Printmaking)  
*Web (detail)*, 2002  
Ink, opaque watercolor, graphite, and tea on *wasli* paper  
Sheet: 22.7 × 18.9 cm. (8 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46  
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