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South Asian
Moving Image

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2

MOVING IMAGE REVIEW & ART JOURNAL

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Aims and Scope

The Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ) is the first international peer-reviewed scholarly publication devoted to artists' film and video, and its contexts. It offers a wide-reaching international forum for debates surrounding all forms of artists' moving image and media artworks: films, video installations, expanded cinema, video performance, experimental documentaries, animations, and other screen-based works made by artists. *MIRAJ* aims to consolidate artists' moving image as a distinct area of study that bridges a number of disciplines including, but not limited to art, film and media.

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Cover Image: Shahzia Sikander, *The Cyprus despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden* (2012–2013), Khorfakkan Cinema, Sharjah UAE. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander Studio.

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ISSN 2045-6298

191–201 Editorial

Articles

- 204–220 The ecologies of technological experimentation: Sheba Chhachhi's multimedia environments
NANCY ADAJANIA
- 222–235 'YOU'VE TOLD ME THAT THREE TIMES NOW':
Propaganda/anti-propaganda in the Films Division India
documentary, 1965–75
AVIJIT MUKUL KISHORE
- 236–250 The frame as borderland: Secular gazes and believing
bodies in Bani Abidi's *The Distance From Here* (2010)
ADNAN MADANI
- 252–266 *Is this just a story?* Friendships and fictions for
speculative alliances. The Yugantar film collective
(1980–83)
NICOLE WOLF
- 268–283 Moving towards the epicentre: The void and the image in
the film-making of R.V. Ramani
LUCIA IMAZ KING

Features

- 286–297 Experimenta; instigating a counter-cultural film platform
in Bangalore: Shai Heredia in conversation with Rashmi
Sawhney
SHAI HEREDIA AND RASHMI SAWHNEY
- 298–309 Taking control of the narrative: Shahzia Sikander in
conversation with Behroze Gandhi
SHAHZIA SIKANDER AND BEHROZE GANDHY

Review Articles

- 312–322 Emergence lab/history as cinema-in-the-museum: The
Tah-Satah exhibition, Jaipur, January–March 2017
KAUSHIK BHAUMIK
- 324–334 Shadowing the image archive: *In Medias Res: Inside
Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays*, Mieke Bal (2016)
RASHMI SAWHNEY

337 Index



Shahzia Sikander,
Gopi-Contagion
(October 2015), HD
video animation on
digital LED
billboards.
Installation as part
of Midnight
Moment: Times
Square Arts, Times
Square, New York
(2015). Photo:
Ka-Man Tse.
Courtesy of Times
Square Arts and
Shahzia Sikander
Studio.

INTERVIEW

Taking control of the narrative: Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Behroze Gandhi

Introduction

Shahzia Sikander is a Pakistani-born, internationally acclaimed artist whose practice is most commonly associated with its engagement in Indo-Persian miniature painting. The strict, formal tropes of miniature painting are re-contextualised, however, through her re-processing of these in a variety of artistic media. The larger scale artworks consist of video installations created for art gallery and biennale contexts as well as for sites in the public realm, such as Times Square, New York (*Gopi-Contagion* [2015] discussed below). Also the maker of drawings, prints, paintings and murals, and having worked on several interdisciplinary collaborations, Sikander's practice examines the forces at stake in the contested cultural and political histories of South Asia. Her practice has contributed to a major resurgence in miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore (and the art world beyond) inspiring a wide-scale re-appraisal of this tradition. She has exhibited at biennales in Istanbul, Turkey (2013 and 2003); Auckland, New Zealand (2013); Sharjah, in UAE (2013); Venice (2005) and

New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1997). Exhibitions in 2016 and 2017 include solo and group shows in Miami, Abu Dhabi, New York, San Francisco and Hong Kong. Her studio is currently based in Manhattan, New York (2018) and she is working on an exhibition to open at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York in 2019.

Behroze Gandhi is an independent film-maker whose company, Hindi Picture, has produced a range of programmes on South Asia for UK television, including *On the Other Hand* (1991), *Flight* (1998) and *Surviving Sabu* (1997). She has written and published extensively on Indian cinema and has curated film programmes at London's ICA, British Film Institute, and Whitechapel Art Gallery. She has lectured in cinema at several Indian, UK and US universities. She is currently producing a documentary film on the legacy of her parents, Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, who promoted and exhibited Indian contemporary art through the pioneering Gallery Chemould (now Chemould Prescott).

Gandhi first became aware of Shahzia Sikander's practice when Sikander was invited to participate in Field Art Projects (2004) curated by Theresa Bergne, in which participating artists were commissioned to produce artworks in the context of a care unit at St Bartholomew's Hospital, Smithfield, London. She was later invited to interview Sikander in Rome in December 2016, coinciding with Sikander's exhibition, *Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector* at Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI), a conversation that continued in their e-mail exchange. The conversation opened with a discussion of the 'dislocation' of objects, ideas, and identities, themes that are prevalent in Sikander's practice.

Behroze Gandhi: A recurring image in your work is the silhouette of a female body without a head. You mention that this is an image that emerged from gestures in ink on paper, a suggestion that arose from the marks themselves. Does this image, one that emerged from your unconscious, take on different meanings throughout the twenty-odd years of its existence in your work; years in which you have witnessed huge changes while living in the United States?

Shahzia Sikander: Uncertainty is the hallmark of our time. Art has been a deeply personal vehicle for me to confront the uncertainties, hierarchies, misrepresentations and the expunged of today. The female form did emerge from an intuitive digging in the direction of the continuous, the living aspect of the feminine, the nature of thinking with a brush, while being inspired by many great writers and artists, such as Kishwar Naheed, Eva Hesse, Hannah Arendt, Ismat Chughtai and Wislawa Szymborska, to name just a few.

The dislocation of objects, ideas, concepts and forms, and the way that meaning is constantly in flux, captures my imagination. Historically, the movement of objects and bodies, such as in trade, slavery, migration and colonial occupation, has forced meaning to shift and oscillate with every generation. When one thinks in terms of narratives, and how history is determined through narrative, how real is that narrative? Our histories are about redactions. Imagination is very much about taking ownership of the narrative; it is a fundamentally political stance. As a painter, a thinker, I am equally interested in the dynamism of form; form as something alive and in relationship to its space, technique and time. The female form that you mention has had several iterations and in each life it has retained its past while remaining relevant to its present and hinting at the future. For example, my signature form's resurrection last year, during the 2016 US presidential election echoed the expunging of the female narrative and the excessive misogyny within the larger political discourse. It was also of great significance that the image last year became a permanent public artwork in mosaic form at Princeton University cementing its multivalent value.

In another instance, in a different visual iteration (*A kind of slight and pleasing dislocation #2*, 2001, a multi-part mural), the form marked the removal of my work from a public art commission in New York in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. The

image, at that time was read by some as 'violent', and I was asked to remove it from the commissioned work. I ended up declining participation in the project as a protest. The beauty of the image is that it embodies flux. The image is also about inner strength; its self-rootedness implying that, as humans, we carry with us our own roots. The image is also about the ability to adapt and muster strength from within at moments of extreme adversity. The headless condition hints at the expunging of female narratives from history, culture and religion.

BB: You mention that many images in your work were chosen because of your desire to subvert Hindu with Muslim and Muslim with Hindu traditions. The image of hair in your work *SpiNN* (2003), the stylised hair-do of the *gopi*,¹ comes from a very visible tradition of Hindu iconography. How does your background and training in the miniature tradition facilitate that image-making process?

SS: The works done in the early 1990s did examine the Hindu-Muslim shared geographies and histories. This is in the period before I moved to the United States. I had reached out in 1991 to the artists Ghulam Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh in Baroda from Lahore to work with them, but was denied the Indian visa required for engaging in an artist residency. At this time, having grown up in Pakistan and never having visited India, I was curious about the enormous range of historical miniature painting schools across the sub-continent and was eager to learn from collections in Indian private and public institutions. The inability to use and own one's history freely was a deeply moving and haunting idea. As a young artist, I was just following my curiosity to access and understand the many layers that make up South Asian identity, including the multiplicity of faith and politics. The drive to subvert was not intentional. Engaging the genre of Indo-Persian miniature painting made it imperative to move across all sorts of categories and definitions to gain an in-depth grasp of the shifts in style and content between the many schools of miniature painting and their respective forms of patronage. An example is the use of the hair silhouettes in my work. Technically, it is the silhouette of hair taken from several depictions of females, including women in the Kangra (painting) school, not just limiting it to the image of *gopis*. The *gopi* representation, in many historical miniature paintings, operates as a stock character that in and of itself, is worth deconstructing.

In my work, when the hair iconography is unleashed from its servitude to the stock female form, it has greater scope and autonomy. One such example is the large-scale multi-screen public video artwork, *Gopi-Contagion* (2015)² where the movement in the animation descends as an ephemeral swarm. This site-specific public artwork took place every midnight during the month of October in Times Square, New York as part of the 'Midnight Moment' project. The hair image was extracted from its miniature painting source, multiplied and choreographed to move like a flock of birds and bats resolving into a delimited mass and then redistributing visually and experientially. The work, spanning several digitally animated billboard-sized panels, spoke more about collective behaviour than traditional iconography as it embarked on its vertiginous journey outside the confines of the (drawn) page. The first experiments in

separating the hair from its source were also experiments in the concept of engaging difference, in the sense that the hair silhouettes were kept intact. The intention was to imbue them with a new meaning without altering their original character. It was imperative that they retain their distinct shape and form and yet cast themselves in continuously evolving iterations.

Not only does the hair transform into a motif while retaining its unique shape and operating as de-centred, but it is also a motif that is asexual or androgynous. Disruption as a means of exploration is a consistent element of my experimental strategy. The notion is to unhinge the image, so that the female account is freed to create its own history and empower its own narrative.

The single unit of the female hair silhouette has tremendous possibilities. Originating as a singular representational image, when reproduced and choreographed in the millions as moving images, it operates as a pulsating mass of movement that oscillates between several possible representations, such as the sun, spheres, swarms, birds, bats or insects. What is important is the kinetic thrust, the enormous energy charge unleashed by this undulating movement. It is simultaneously tangible – a rigid icon – and elusive, constantly morphing and altering. Powerful and subliminal, the beauty of the female hair particles is that they can operate as both the disconnected and the durable, functioning as a force, an engine for survival.

BG:

The other icons that appear frequently in your work are the stock characters from your *Portrait of the Artist* series (2016), four etchings published by Pace Editions that reference the historical *Mir'āj* paintings of the visionary night journey of the Prophet Muhammad.³ It is like the horse and the image of Vishwaroopa⁴ – the infinite universe without beginning or end. These are from two mystical, devotional traditions where I think you have avoided getting embroiled in the binaries of religious versus secular traditions. I am interested in how you negotiate this question when using religious imagery?

SS:

But what determines an image as 'religious'? What image can be placed in one broad category of definition? I have investigated the art-historical tradition of Indo-Persian miniature painting now for three decades. The genre is dense, diverse and utterly elusive, defying all forms of categorisations. I would like to share a recent video animation work of mine, *Disruption as Rapture* (2016) to illustrate my point. When the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) reached out to me in 2015 to develop a multi-dimensional work to bring to life their (permanently owned) historical manuscript of the epic love poem *Gulshan-e-Ishq*, the first thing that came to my mind was 'provenance'. I began by analysing the manuscript, investigating its ownership and asking who commissioned it, who painted and wrote it, and to whom it belonged? I needed to establish in what language it was written and who translated it. Furthermore, I wanted to know who determined the story and how it ended up at the PMA.

The *Gulshan-e-Ishq* manuscript itself exists in several iterations, painted by different generations of artist who attempted to illustrate this epic poem. *Gulshan-e-Ishq* or *Garden of Love* is an allegorical

tale written in 1657–58 by Nusrati, a court poet to Sultan Ali Adil Shah II of Bijapur. The story is a classic tale of star-crossed lovers who must face daunting challenges and painful separation before they can live 'happily ever after'. The poet recounts this tale of connection, separation, longing and the final union of lovers by creating a world full of lush gardens and magical beings, where the love story emerges as a metaphor for a soul's search for, and connection with, the divine. The version at PMA is the only version that exists intact as a book. There are more than ninety visual illustrations and over 4500 verses of untranslated Daccani Urdu/vernacular and Persian Naskh script, the language of the Muslim elite in South-Central India. The Sufi love story is Sanskritised. It is a North Indian Hindu (Bhakti) love story recast as a Sufi tale for an Islamic court. It defies translation because the layers are so numerous and so complex that the text hard to translate. The English synopsis offered by the Museum about the 'story' then begs questions around authority and ownership of the text. This manuscript's journey from its origin to its present home belies the truncated and dislocated history of much of South Asian art. In order to engage the multiple narratives within *Gulshan-e-Ishq*, it was important for me to keep in mind the ethos of the work from within its historical and socio-political period. The religious and cultural plurality at play remained an important lens in time.

I engage with time as subject in the work. Working in kinetic painting, in video and animation, the limits imposed by the size of a single sheet of paper are ones I have constantly disrupted. Drawing on paper, as witnessed in the manuscript itself, contains an aspect of infinity in the narrative that does not end at the edge of what is painted, but rather hints constantly at a world beyond. Velocity, magnitude, and direction all become essential aspects in creating time. The music, which is a significant part of this video animation work, was composed by my collaborator of ten years, Du Yun with vocals by Ali Sethi.⁵ Ali Sethi's arduous training with classical music lends the type of precision and spontaneity to the piece that can come about only with a deep knowledge of classical Indian music. His response in ragas to the audio-visual stimuli was, according to him, a melodic instinct that he had developed after years of training with a maestro in Pakistan. Drawing functions like a libretto in this video work. Because there are so many gaps in the understanding of the original narrative, in translation, in history and in representation, the negative space became a focal point. I was interested in the notion of the lacuna, when missing chunks in tradition or in history allow ruptures to occur, and this allowed me to insert myself within the 'tradition'.

The energetic and dramatic fireworks-like forms in the work are made from images of hundreds of wings. The use of wings is a deliberate reference to flight. Flight is a recurring notion, functioning often for the realm of the imagination as well as the search for internal enlightenment. In my animations, I am keenly aware of how certain images lend themselves to motion, and how to diverge from the obvious ways in which something would move. Here, the transformation of wings is rebuilt as particle systems that are entangled and soaring; also an indirect reference to the idea of *mi'rāj*,⁶

the visionary night journey and the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad as one of Islam's most mystical themes. Nusrati's poem, in Masnavi format and its reference to Sufi enlightenment and Hindu devotional Bhakti, functions as a connecting tissue, and the flight motifs used throughout the work also carry the theme of strife and the struggle for the truth. Art offers the ability to continuously reinvent and transform motifs in order to cultivate new associations to counter entrenched historical symbols. In this way, the forms, elements, motifs and the stories can reflect more than one vantage point.

BG: In India you are aware of how the artist, M.F. Husain became hideously enmeshed in the politics of religious fundamentalism through his borrowing from a Hindu iconography? Does the fact of living outside India and Pakistan make this less of an issue for you?

SS: I have lived in many places. I do not think that living in the US, or anywhere for that matter allows for a kind of freedom where all nuances within an artwork are fully understood and accepted. In my experience, the West has hardly been a neutral space. With distance, there is a level of artistic freedom that allows one to cull new associations and meanings from within contested symbols and iconographies, however, if the variety of contexts are not readily accessible within the broader culture, it can result in a simplified understanding by the audience. One has the added burden of having to explain the contexts and histories. The shared histories of India and Pakistan are so enmeshed that issues around ownership often become polarizing. The near impossibility for a Pakistani to live in India does not help either.

The notion of home, for me, resides within the rhetoric of imagination, which seems so much more buoyant, so full of visual possibilities. I think of imagination as a soaring and empowering space that is free from constraints. And if you are thinking in terms of interconnectivity, isn't imagination what ties all of us together? What inspires me is to open up the discourse of ownership. For me, belief is itself a personal space and not about self-righteousness. South Asia and its diaspora, with their diverse histories and traditions, their linguistic and racial diversity and complex provenance interest me deeply. The whole process of locating one's relationship to 'tradition' can be a paradox in/of itself. Who owns what, and how? More importantly, how does that ownership occur? What is originality? What is creativity? What is imagination? How does one create something anew?

BG: What I find fascinating in your use of religious imagery, for example, in *The Last Post* (2010) – the fragmentation of the image of the many handed Goddess, brings out associations for me with another very potent image in the Mahabharata, where Arjuna's son Abhimanyu takes on the Kauravas single-handedly, when he has penetrated their discus formation and then uses the wheel of the chariot to fight the enemy. How do you find motifs relevant to your work?

SS:

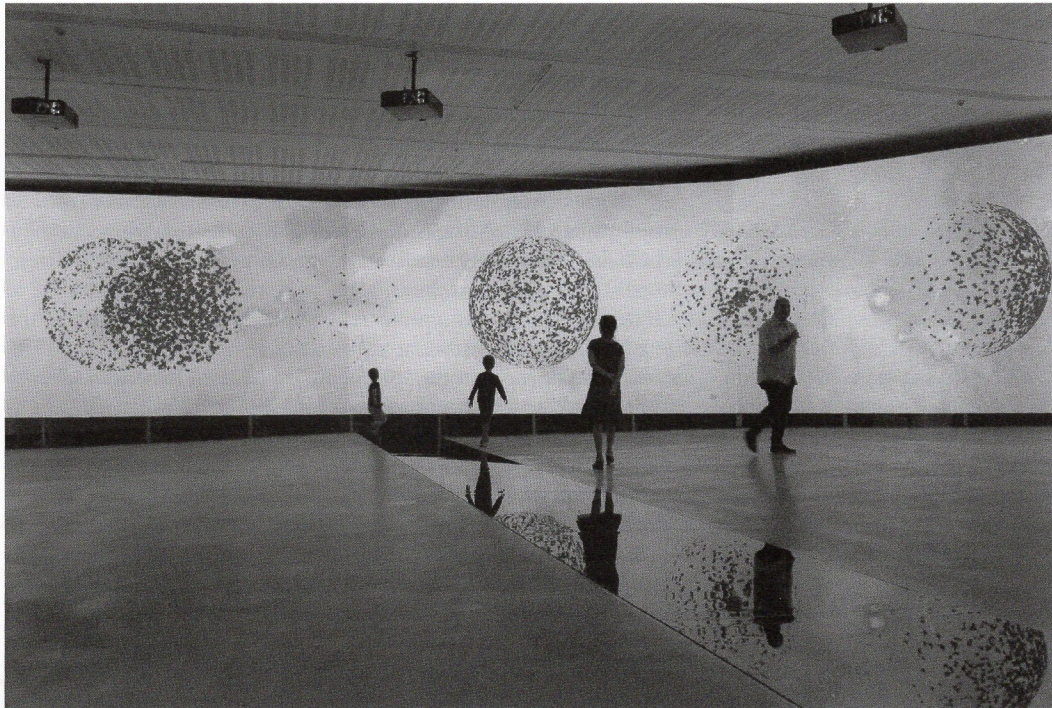
When I study ‘motifs,’ for lack of a better word, I am engaging with their character, not just with their shape and form. I am looking into their histories and their abilities to survive over time. Such an idea has always been at the core of my dismantling traditional miniature paintings.

The spinning arms, like the ones in *The Last Post* (2010), (a video animation with music composed by Du Yun), emerge through animation as broken forearms with clenched hands. They are iterations of struggle, fear, terror, might, control, loss of power and/or fate, and are born from analysing a multitude of references.

Like the female hair silhouette, the arm motif has creative potential because it can exist as a unit that can expand and multiply, transforming its meaning. For example, in *The Last Post*, the symbol of the East India company man shatters (in the screen image) but never truly disappears. It re-emerges as a ‘Frankenstein-ian’ constellation of red, white and blue arms, a play on the lasting effects of colonial and imperial histories. In *Utopia* (2003, a work in ink and gouache on paper), the stylised Safavid angels atop the red, white and blue US flag, via Jasper Johns, mark an encounter between two different epistemologies of symbolism. The reductive aspect of Johns’s use of the flag takes on an uneasy sentimentality in the presence of the ethereal Persian angles. In my own self-portrait, the red, white and blue arms represent the ephemeral, hyphenated American identity linked to the subliminal, androgynous idea of the self.

Painting to me is like a poem. It is a reflection of a human emotion. There are endless ways of imaging a human emotion. One of them is through portraiture. A portrait is often like a motif; it is not always about a person or personality. I made a portrait of Mary Magdalene for the opera *Tosca* when it opened at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.⁷ That piece will soon become a permanent outdoor sculptural work in Houston. It is inspired by the various iterations of Mary or Mariam. It is a template for the celebration of the feminine present in nature and in all cultures and religions. The portrait as a motif is rendered transparent on purpose, so that it can function as a fossil in time, containing within it an internal order that connects it to various traditions. Seen as such, the portrait can also function as a vessel through which history passes. In another instance, the portrait is of Langston Hughes in *The World is Yours, The World is Mine* (2014, ink and gouache on prepared paper).⁸ This painting explores multiple modes of storytelling from the vantage point of New York City, a place of integration and turmoil that is still coming to terms with its underrepresented narratives, including its African-American history. Many issues arise: not just questions of wealth and class, but of trade, global economics, crime, capitalism, race and personal identity. In this particular project, my interest in finding links between two disparate forms of storytelling was led by juxtaposing poetry and Indo-Persian miniature painting.

My interest in art came from a background of studying maths and literature. For me, art is very much a lens through which to observe and experience life, a go-to guide, in short, a means to solve problems. Creativity is a blessing. It has allowed me many times to dig myself out of the dark to find the light. Miniature painting resists translation. The moving image unlocks that resistance by activating



Shahzia Sikander,
Parallax (2013),
three-channel HD
digital animation with
5.1 surround sound.
Music: Du Yun.
Installation
view, MAXXI Museo
nazionale delle arti del
XXI secolo, Rome,
Italy (2016-2017). ©
Shahzia Sikander.
Photo: Luis Do
Rosario. Courtesy of
Fondazione MAXXI
and Shahzia Sikander
Studio.

forms. Action and dialogue allow a story to emerge in 'real' time. I do not start with a storyboard, but rather explore how movement can further expand an understanding of the various forms I have invented. I also focus on movement as coming from within the work, and not as an external influence or effect.

BB: How do these images adapt to the different mediums you use in your work – from paper to animation, and now that you have worked in glass and mosaic? Does the meaning change within these different contexts and use of media? Are there other influences you draw upon, from cinema, literature or poetry?

SS: Let's take *Parallax* (2013) for example, which you saw in Rome (a three-channel looping video animation, about fifteen minutes in duration, with an original score by Du Yun). *Parallax*, created from hundreds of detailed, hand-drawn paintings, is a seventy-foot immersive experience examining contested histories of colonialism and tensions over the control of the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. The play with space and disruptions of scale is intentional. In addition to unsettling compositional and iconographical content, the work engages with destabilising the medium of drawing itself. There is an uncanny similarity between *Parallax* and my very first celebrated work, *The Scroll* (1989–90).⁹ Both works were departures in terms of form and scale. *The Scroll* was a game changer in the field of miniature painting in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead of depicting what was then the norm, a contemporary version of a traditional ritual, *The Scroll* is a highly detailed sixty-inch long miniature exploring the impact of youth and the flux of identity as a moving image narrative within the layered roles and class hierarchies of a domestic interior. I was looking at narrative structures in film and cinema when I laid out the conceptual foundation for this artwork in the late 1980s. I was studying Satyajit Ray as well as Hitchcock and the Safavid painter, Behzad.¹⁰ *Parallax* was realised in an abandoned cinema that I encountered on a visit to the small port town of Khorfakkan in UAE. The caretaker of the cinema was from Pakistan, and he had come to build the cinema in 1976 as a labourer. This was his life, his love: his existence was so intricately intertwined with the space that the imminent death of the cinema-going at that site, in my eyes, became a metaphor for his life's labour. The caretaker as sole survivor became the main protagonist in *Parallax*.

Finding ways to engage audiences in unexpected ways is often an outcome of empathy and curiosity about people in my practice. I am conscious of it, and it allows me to move in the world in a certain way. In an earlier instance in 2009, I happened to gain access to the Military School of Music in Abbottabad (North East Pakistan).¹¹ Although we primarily filmed performances of patriotic songs and military brass bands, I was also able to persuade a few of the soldiers to perform romantic ballads from classic 1950s and 1960s Bollywood movies to use in the project.

Poetry too is an important form of agency in my work. Mahmoud Darwish's poem, 'I have a seat in the abandoned theatre'¹² with its evocative imagery of despair and interconnected fates, was deeply resonant in the making of *Parallax*. I have often also played with

Ghalib's verses of poetry in my drawings. Ghalib was a wizard with Urdu, Persian and many shared Arabic words, their epistemologies, and he maintained their complexity of form and usage. His *ghazals* (poems) can be infinitely mined for meaning. His phrase, 'The cypress despite its freedom is held captive to the garden'¹³ has inspired many of my works, and seemed particularly apt for describing the (UAE-based) Pakistani caretaker's situation I mentioned earlier, as well as my own preoccupation with freedom. To some extent, we all are confined by our own dreams that, like the cypress, whilst free, are 'held captive to the garden'. The idea of freedom is pertinent to all of us in how we understand our own journey.

It may be apt to conclude with the observation that the two most significant elements running through my work are light and scale. For the glass, stone and mosaic artwork I made for Princeton University campus, *Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector* (2016), the image of Buraq¹⁴ allows the symbol to shift throughout the day with the changing light, suggesting the symbol of flight. We can see our path in mundane terms or from a wider perspective that recalibrates with age. There is always another side to a story, like a sleeping giant resting momentarily, only to awaken as the consciousness of a new narrative.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. *Gopi* is the Sanskrit word that refers to cow herding girls famous for their unconditional devotion to the Hindu god, Krishna.
2. Documentation of this work is available online: <http://arts.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/media/press-releases/shahzia-sikander-gopi-contagion/index.aspx>. Accessed 6 December 2017.
3. Etching is the medium used to combine diverse sources of imagery in the plurality of Sikander's art historical and socio-political themes. Layered with portraits of the artist, the *Mi'rāj* becomes a metaphor for the artistic journey in search of 'truth'. For a further account of the *Mi'rāj* narrative, see endnote 6.
4. Vishwaroopa is considered the supreme form of the Hindu god Vishnu, where the whole universe is described as contained in him.
5. Du Yun won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her opera *Angel's Bone* (2016–17).
6. *Mi'rāj*, in Islamic legend, is the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad into heaven, prepared to meet God by two archangels one evening while sleeping in the Ka'bah of Mecca. In the original version

- of the mi'rāj, the Prophet is subsequently transported by archangel, Jibril, to heaven. In some early accounts, the ascension was associated with the story of Muhammad's night journey from Mecca to a 'further place of worship' (Jerusalem). The two separate incidents were gradually merged in the course of history so that Muhammad's purification followed by his ascension (enabled by the winged mythical creature, Buraq) appears to occur in a single night, spanning Mecca and Jerusalem. See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jibril>. Accessed 15 December 2017.
7. Fourteen artists produced commissioned works for (the US) Gallery Met, inspired by a production of Puccini's *Tosca*, which opened on 21 September 2009. The exhibition, *Something about Mary* featured works by Hugh Bush, Paul Chan, Francesco Clemente, George Condo, John Currin, Rachael Feinstein, Barnaby Furnas, Elizabeth Peyton, James Rosenquist, Julian Schnabel, Dana Schutz, Shahzia Sikander, Rudolf Stingel and Francesco Vezzoli on the theme of Mary Magdalene.
 8. *The World is Yours, The World is Mine* was created for *The New York Times's* 'Turning Points' magazine and opinion page (4 December 2014) and depicts a portrait of Langston Hughes and the musician, Nasir Jones.
 9. Documentation and further details on *The Scroll* can be found online: <https://www.npr.org/2015/10/02/445291163/breaking-the-mold-artists-modern-miniatures-remix-islamic-art>. Accessed 22 Jan 2018.
 10. The Safavid Dynasty ruled from 1501 to 1722 and was one of the most significant founding dynasties of Iran, often considered the beginning of modern Iranian history. Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād lived from c. 1450 to c. 1535, and was also known as Kamal al-din Bihzad or Kamaledin Behzad.
 11. This was when making the work, *Bending the Barrels*, part of a series of video works produced between 2007 and 2009. The work is composed of footage shot at the Military School of Music in Abbottabad in which moving images are overlaid with songs associated with Pakistan's colonial past. Sikander reframes military codes and rituals to complicate received stereotypes about passivity and the bellicose.
 12. 'I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater' features in the publication, *The Butterfly's Burden* (2008) by Mahmoud Darwish, with an English translation by Fady Joudah, Washington: Copper Canyon Press.
 13. This verse from Ghalib's poem is taken from Ghazal, 94 verse 2 written in the mid nineteenth century. For an English translation of Ghalib's verse, see: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/ooghalib/094/94_02.html. Accessed 17 December 2017.
 14. See endnote 6 for a reference to the winged mythological creature with the body of a horse and head resembling a human, known as Buraq.