



Reclaiming Indo-Persian
Miniature Painting.
Reclaiming History:
A Feminist Story

Shahzia Sikander
in conversation with Rafia Zakaria



(page 120) Shahzia Sikander, *Hoods Red Rider #2*, 1997. (Detail of pl. 128.)

(facing page) Shahzia Sikander, *The Scroll*, 1989–90. (Detail of pl. 116.)

Despite an agonizing injury to her ankle, Shahzia Sikander presented a stimulating overview of her work at the 2017 symposium in Richmond. For the written version that comprises this chapter, more in-depth reflection was possible. Shahzia and Rafia Zakaria discuss intersectional feminism, growing up in Pakistan, and Sikander’s transnational oeuvre.

Beginnings

Rafia Zakaria: You began your artistic journey at the National College of Art in Lahore—an institution whose first principal was a British colonial officer named John Lockwood Kipling; a man who was instrumental in “discovering” the art of the sub-continent, in the Orientalist practice of edifying the exotic “object” into the exhibited “artifact” of colonial domination. How did that particular history inform your beginnings? What is the legacy, in your view, of those beginnings on your alma mater and on Pakistani art in general?

Shahzia Sikander: Missionary and colonial histories are deeply entrenched in our legacy as citizens of Pakistan. How we negotiate this complex inheritance determines our collective movement forward. The intertwined constructs of identity and definitions of high and low art played out locally at NCA in the ’80s, amid the shadow of the empire and the haphazard decolonization project of Zia-ul-Haq’s opportunistic military regime. I recall the wooden model of the Qur’an being placed in Lahore’s Charing Cross. The site once held the Queen Victoria sculpture. I wish the government had commissioned a public artwork from any of the Pakistani artists instead. This is the period when the Lahore Museum’s potential to act as a mediator to reflect and define a post-colonial identity had not been cultivated by any of the powerful elites. In my experience of high school at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, switching back and forth from English to Urdu instruction at the whim of the government was a failed cultural reform experiment. Although an education in an English-medium Catholic school was seen as advantageous, its predominantly English curriculum and rote learning I had to consciously dismantle later as an artist. Textbooks did not reflect our realities. The 1980s in Lahore were a confusing time.

I arrived at NCA in 1986–87 in search of a creative environment to reflect upon the mechanism of power and the potential for individual freedom. It was an instinctive decision for me to leave the Kinnaid College for Women, where I felt out of sync with the overbearing “waiting for marriage” culture. Zia-ul-Haq’s military dictatorship was robbing the youth of its innate need to express. I felt increasingly stifled. Finding one’s calling was urgent.

What was our cultural production, and how as a young person we saw it or not, was a significant theme in the ’80s during the sociopolitical and cultural ruptures of the Soviet–Afghan War [1979–1989]. My interest in miniature painting was sparked by

my own lack of knowledge about the miniature painting tradition. It was also clear to me that the “tradition” was truncated, at best, and its custodian Bashir Ahmad was struggling to find A+ students to work with. Miniature painting at NCA was a colonial project linked to the English provenance of reviving the Indian crafts. There was definitely no discussion around the intelligence within the “genre” of miniatures or the merit of pursuing such a tired craft. What I also encountered at NCA was a split regarding who and what could be the “modern miniaturist.” Bashir Ahmad’s work was restricted to mostly copying historical miniature paintings with some changes; on the other side was the work of Zahoor ul Akhlaq, who was engaging the language of historical miniatures through the canon of Western painting. In the mid ’80s, “contemporary miniature painting” was neither hip nor happening. It was mostly mired in its prevalent iterations of “tourist kitsch” much more than its “indigenous” status. I was discouraged from wasting my potential on an inferior subject by many teachers at NCA.

However, there was nothing visibly exciting either in other fields at NCA in 1987, at least to me at that time. Also, the significance of local artists was overshadowed by the art history curriculum itself. I often wondered about the logic of reading art through the ages that did not include South Asian artists. There were no special courses to discuss the history of Pakistani art either. And in terms of miniature painting, its pre-colonial history was written mostly by Westerners from the perspective of Eurocentric nineteenth-century scholarship. Without deep critical conversations about English conquest, dispersion, and revival of the arts within the academic institution itself, the identity of a Pakistani art was in flux. Such missing gaps before the internet were huge lacunas in my early development. The colonial residue, the military’s culture of uncertainty, and the dictatorship’s moral ambiguity, along with the feudal hierarchy in Pakistan, felt like a stalemate in those years.

RZ: The feminist poet Adrienne Rich once said that it is “essential for the feminist critic [and I would include the feminist artist as a feminist critic] who believes that her work is a ‘pursuit with social meanings’ ... [to have] a clear understanding of power, of how culture as meted out in the university works to empower some and disempower others” (Rich 1986). How did you experience this at the National College of Art in terms of which disciplines and which ideas of art and which artists were empowered and which were disempowered? How did this relate to the politics of the time in Pakistan and what role did it play in the development of your creative consciousness? What did the resurrection of Indo–Persian miniature painting mean at that particular time, within that political and artistic space?

SS: Miniature painting, with its unresolved national status and deep stigma, captured the paradox of culture and nationalism far more than any other discipline at NCA in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the ’80s.

Though NCA was a haven for creative exploration and expression, the usual academic politics of inclusion and exclusion were also present. There were many visual voices, some powerful and some not. There was an emphasis on modernism and various iterations of abstract expressionism. Portraiture, landscape, and figurative painting were not generally regarded as intellectual. Conceptual art had traction. Miniature painting—seen as backward and irrelevant—was not even a contender for power.

The high art versus low art debate was not the most compelling argument to disavow miniature. I felt conflicted at the very foundation of rejecting something without first investigating it. The detective in me wanted to understand the resistance toward the language of the miniature. I had also enrolled to study advanced mathematics at Kinnaird College for Women, where I was for a year before coming to NCA. My first epiphany was realizing that I could use my interest in mathematics toward understanding miniature painting as a language and application system, and examine it as a problem-solving idea.

What I did not realize then was that I was gravitating towards the invisible, the ignored, and the disadvantaged.

Bashir Ahmad, the custodian of miniature painting, could be seen as disempowered in the 1980s. He did not belong to the upper middle class of the country, which continues to remain the primary gatekeeper of art and culture. His lack of exposure outside of the miniature rhetoric was limiting. “Successful” artists went abroad to return with newer languages and ways of thinking. I met Salima Hashmi when I was starting my third year at NCA on her return from abroad. Zahoor ul Akhlaq was also trained at the RCA, London. Bashir Ahmad’s devotion to “tradition” was interesting to a young observer. Both his teachers—Sheikh Shujaullah and Haji Sharif—belonged to a family of court painters. How tradition is defined and how it is disseminated, that performative aspect captured my imagination.

The diminishing of women’s rights, emerging blasphemy laws, the Islamization project, and the polarized public and private spaces discouraged dissent and creative expression. I was inspired by women leaders like Asma Jahangir, the human rights activist, while a student at the convent. One of my first mentors even before joining NCA was the artist Lala Rukh, who was a founding member of the Women’s Action Forum. Being a part of WAF gave me substantial insight into women’s rights and issues, as well as a broader grasp on the intersections of community and art.

RZ: A line from a poem also by Adrienne Rich reads: “Graffiti without memory grown conventional” and then later “Death of the city, Her face sleeping. Her quick stride, Her running. Search for a private space” (Rich 1978). Both memory and the boundaries between public and private space play a crucial part in *The Scroll* (pl. 116), which was your thesis for your graduation from the National College. What did the reclamation of the Indo–Persian art form in this manner, with its interspersions of intimacy, mean?



116 Shahzia Sikander, *The Scroll*, 1989–90. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper. 33 × 162 cm. Collection of the artist.

SS: *The Scroll* is a personal exploration of identity within a local, social, and cultural space. I was inspired to reflect on the internalizing process of labor as a means of creative intimacy unleashed by miniature painting’s intense craft. The extensive labor required to paint the micro details in the work with single-hair brushes was both a deeply conflicting and equally meditative experience. The tedious weight of the labor and the prescribed tradition, alongside the innate desire to create unencumbered art, was often hard to manage at a young age. Working eighteen-hour days over two years altered my sense of space and identity. I was isolated. I did not have much time to make friends. I was always working.

There is a critique of another kind of labor in *The Scroll*—class- and gender-based household labor and menial domestic tasks. The conditions of the specific location are not that important. The house could be countless upper middle-class houses in Lahore. There is the literal space and that becomes the site of the work, as well as the critique of the work.

For me, *The Scroll* was not only an act of reclamation as in taking ownership from its colonial representation. I was seeking to link miniature painting to a pictorial tradition earlier than colonial history, connecting it to the Safavid tradition in an attempt to step outside of the colonizer and the colonized paradigm. Imagining the Safavid painter Behzad’s tightly compressed, perfectly balanced language, with its various Sufi metaphors within the local vernacular architecture of the eminent Nayyar Ali Dada, allowed me to explore my interest in architecture and geometry. The protagonist, a self-portrait depicted in opaque and diaphanous white, traverses from the beginning to the end of the horizontal plane, aware of its own limited time in space. Choosing to use the interiority of a house as a place of imagination was also a comment on the present cultural moment under Zia’s time, that restricted physical movement, especially for women in public spaces.

RZ: Spend a little time describing the process via which you work. How did you conceptualize this piece? How closely did you try and adhere to the conventions of Indo-Persian miniature painting? What leeway did you permit yourself?

SS: Although the thesis requirement was to produce miniatures the size of notebook pages, I decided to make a singular 5-foot (1.5 meters) “massive” miniature painting. By determining a more innovative format, I was able to link the internal dismantling of space with the external magnification of scale. In my mind, to interrogate the meaning of space within the Safavid school, the spatial dimension associated with that style of miniature had to collapse, without losing the inherent balance between craft and content. So that I would not be critiqued for any technical “short cuts,” I gave myself more than a year and a half to work on the idea and the painting itself, given the slow and tedious technique. Acquiring the craft from Bashir Ahmad was pragmatic. I was not interested in glorifying the past with nostalgic reconstruction, so I kept the focus on creating *The Scroll* as a forward-looking work.

I also looked at the tradition of Chinese scroll painting and the structure of narrative in a wide array of films. The analytical framing devices in the work are creative takes on the function of sacred geometry in architectural spaces, how negative space creates rhythm and emotionality. There were lots of visits to the Lahore fort as well as other Mughal sites in the city. I was looking at Satyajit Ray’s use of narrative. Closely examining the black-and-white dynamic in the films to study the visual movement was inventive for me. There were other films then too that I checked out, like Alfred Hitchcock’s use of suspense. In some parts of *The Scroll*, I’ve depicted mystery as abstract in some of the action of figures. There is irony too, as the mystery is often illustrated as an absurdity and not surreal. My painting was informed from a young person’s coming of age in a culture that restricted curiosity and questioning. *The Scroll* is a

117 (facing page) Shahzia Sikander, *Monsters Within*, 2000–01. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 37.8 cm × 28.9 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund.

breakthrough in that respect. It explored the flux of identity and impact of youth as abstract notions in introspective, but not ornate, detail within the miniature tradition.

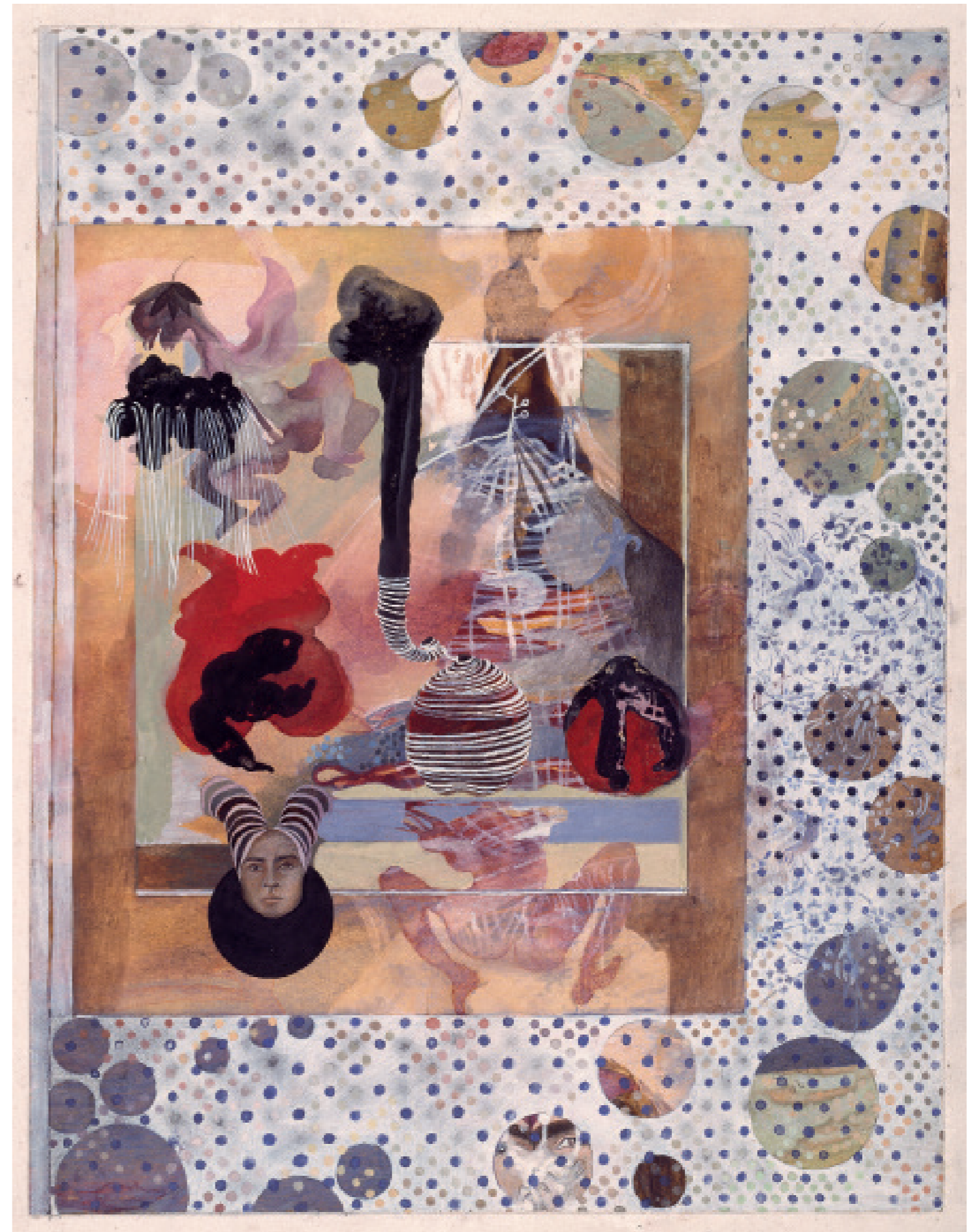
I was also interested in how an epic poem existed in time through various visual interpretations. Much of miniature illustration came about by many generations of painters depicting timeless narratives like Firdowsi's *Shahnama* or *Conference of the Birds* by Attar. I wanted to create an epic visual poem, and *The Scroll's* content and shape and size were influenced by that desire. I listened to the Sabri Brothers' rendering of Iqbal's *Shikwa* and *Jawaab-e-Shikwa* for months while painting the work. Urdu Sufi poetry, with its rich and nuanced tradition, is also a background cultural influence, especially for its emotional and intellectual reach that cuts across social and economic barriers. It allowed me to imagine the work from yet another lens and to insert some additional points of reference and symbolism—for example, the use of red in the fence and as a psychologically charged color for some spaces in the piece. The luminous white light framed in every window, which implies the otherworldliness, visible, tangible, and ethereal, is also a Sufi metaphor. Mir Taqi Mir's poetry is also an inspiration for this work.

The Scroll was also groundbreaking in how much creative liberty I was able to negotiate from different mentors with differing opinions to bring everyone together in support of contemporary miniature. *The Scroll* emerged as the tipping point in the local debate around "modern miniature." It received national critical acclaim in Pakistan, winning the prestigious Shakir Ali Award, the NCA's highest merit award, and the Haji Sharif Award for excellence in miniature painting, subsequently launching the medium into the forefront of NCA's program (Hashmi 1992a; Hashmi 1992b; Khan 1992). I was asked to teach alongside Bashir Ahmad, becoming the first female to teach miniature at NCA.

Migration and Meaning

RZ: You left Pakistan at a very young age, knowing very little about the Western art world that you were entering. How would you describe the experience of bringing this largely unknown (in the global contemporary art world) art form to the United States? Which of your works would you say describes the dialogue between what you brought here and what you found here?

SS: The journey to explore the personal had already started in Pakistan in my work. With distance from "home," the process of self-actualization came into focus. The new work started to resist the straitjacketing that I encountered in terms of one's biography. Who I was and what I represented became limiting constructs, as the burden projected onto me to represent "a culture" felt not just unfair but alien. Becoming the other, the outsider through the polarizing paradigm of East/West, led to an outburst of iconography of fragmented and severed bodies, androgynous forms, armless and headless torsos, self-rooted floating half-human figures reminiscent of female and children's bodies (pls. 117, 128). Explicit, dislocated, buoyant, experimental in scale and ephemeral in nature, the





118 (facing page) Shahzia Sikander, *Perilous Order*, 1989–97. Transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, and charcoal on marbled board. Sheet: 26.4 × 20.8 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: 97.83.2.

119 (below) Shahzia Sikander, initial layer of *Perilous Order*, 1989–97. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and gold-leaf on wasli paper.



work started to expand in format and medium as I started to paint on floors and walls and developed performance as a means to collaborate with others. Learning how to drop fear and embrace vulnerability to live the true potential of the mind with burning questions was exhilarating and painful. The search to create work that demanded internalizing also meant dealing with the frustration to unlearn. It was never as simple as creating new narratives in the miniature style.

The Euro–American canon dominating the field of painting and art history was still very much Eurocentric in the early '90s. Even though the big theme emerging after the fall of the Berlin Wall and economic transformations was globalization in the art world, contemporary art from South Asia was still not visible in exhibitions or in gallery representations. Reading art journals and art history books that did not relate or represent one's experiences, one had to use imagination a lot. My work started to breach national boundaries to dismantle control over women's bodies in visual and national representations. Ismat Chughtai and Kishwar Naheed started conversing with Fatema Mernissi, bell hooks [Gloria Jean Watkins] and Hélène Cixous, as I started to manipulate the established forms and pictorial conventions of miniature paintings further.

Decolonizing also meant locating context and intimacy across race and sexuality. By dislocating traditional framing devices of center and margin within miniature painting, I could open up the narratives of gender and sexuality. For example in *Perilous Order* (pls. 118, 119), I was already commenting on homosexuality and its precarious existence within the Punjabi culture of Lahore, and had created a stylized portrait of my gay friend as a protagonist in a Mughal portrait. In the US I started layering it further with iconographies of gender to punctuate the androgynous within the eroticized space of the miniature.

I started working in ink—an extremely fluid material—to inject it with the experience of the measured and controlled use of hand, learned from making precise miniatures. The images emerging in ink were surprising to me. As soon as I started to layer them on the calm and precisely painted miniatures, the encounter between the two surfaces was visually and emotionally explosive. The unmediated spontaneous gestures could be read as disruption of the perfect state of the miniature. Unlike graffiti I was violating my own work in an attempt to unlearn and learn simultaneously.

This supposedly invasive gesture was also about assaulting the notion of the “stock” figure, which was increasingly being read as autobiographical by others. I was understanding how to identify and deconstruct the stereotype to open a dialogue. How could one's work



120 (left) Shahzia Sikander, *Eye-i-ing Those Armorial Bearings*, 1989–97. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 21.5 × 14.5 cm. Collection of Carol and Arthur Goldberg.

121 (facing page) Shahzia Sikander, *Pleasure Pillars*, 2000–01. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 30 × 25 cm. Amita and Purnendu Chatterjee Collection.



contribute to that kind of collapse of authority? What was my role as an artist, and how I could contribute towards a new cultural code of acceptance and rejection?

I think the work that best expresses this tension is the work I created for the simultaneous exhibitions in 1997 at the Drawing Center and the Whitney Biennial. The work was a culmination of my time at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] and then moving to Houston for two years, experiencing the cultures of north and the south as well as looking at underrepresented narratives of African–American artists alongside the works of women artists. For example, *Eye-i-ing Those Armorial Bearings* (pl. 120) calls into question visual symbolism and cultural semiotics in multiple contexts. The work was inspired by the Project Row Houses, a highly successful community revival intervention Rick Lowe began in Houston, Texas, in the 1990s. The painting contains various recontextualized images and icons. By countering both derogatory representations of blackness in the medieval West as well the politicized representations

122 Shahzia Sikander, *Many Faces of Islam*, 1993–99. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea, and gold-leaf on hand-prepared wasli paper, 61 × 71.1 cm. Commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine* special issue: "Imagining the Millennium", September 19, 1999.





123 Shahzia Sikander, *Provenance the Invisible Hand*, 2009. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, ink, gouache, gold leaf, and silkscreen on paper, 172.5 × 208 cm.

of the veil in modern times, I attempted to reclaim such associations via positive representations, through the reimagining of entrenched and contested historical symbols.

Pleasure Pillars (2001; pl. 121) comments on the lack of female recognition across cultures and histories and the inherent violence of erasure, while simultaneously highlighting the multiple identities juggled by women. In 1999 *The New York Times Magazine* asked me to imagine a topic that could be a turning point in the next century for their “Imagining the Millennium” issue. My response was the interface of American foreign policy in Islamic countries to become the polarizing and defining moment. I made *Many Faces of Islam* (pl. 122) almost twenty years ago, and the painting was only reviewed in 2017 when it was on view at the Asia Society in New York as part of *Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora*, where it was called “both prescient and an American masterpiece” (Vartanian 2017). The painting takes on many aspects of power, war, money, commodities, beliefs, and censorship through many players and shape shifters. There is humor and critique to challenge entrenched patriarchal and fixed historical representations. I used the language of illuminated manuscripts to engage pop culture and history.

124 Shahzia Sikander, *The World is Yours, The World is Mine*, 2014. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and gouache on hand-prepared wasli paper, 40.5 × 28 cm. Created for *The New York Times* “Turning Points” magazine and opinion page, December 4, 2014.

RZ: Showing work is central to the existence of the visual artist, your work has been shown all over the world and hangs in many of the world’s most prestigious museums and collections. At the same time curators can be, as the art critic John Berger put it, “patronizing, snobbish, and lazy,” born of the fantasy that “they have been asked to accept as a *grave civic responsibility* the prestige accruing from the ownership of the works under their roof” (Berger 2016). Do you agree with Berger? What have been some of the positive and negative experiences you have had with curators over the years?

SS: The curator has power as the gatekeeper. Who gets to be included and exhibited is such a complex process. The majority of collections and exhibitions of art remains male and white. The hardest aspect of being a visual artist is that the value of work and frameworks of inclusion are often determined by others.

The most interesting experiences have been where the artist has also functioned as curator or to some degree as a collaborator in the process of selection and representation.

When I was invited to curate an exhibition at Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, I had the autonomy to cull a narrative from a range of historical objects in the museum’s permanent collection and their provenance, as well as to respond to the selection by creating new work in dialogue (pl. 123) (Sikander 2009).

My journey has also been about creating an emotional, not only an intellectual, dialogue with miniature painting within a changing geopolitical order around global art. In the West, in the ’90s, when little was known about contemporary miniature painting, to continue with miniature painting was not about perpetuating the “exotic.” The fact that my work opened doors for an entire generation of young miniature painters in Pakistan was a direct outcome of being a pioneer, regardless of the “token” representation at times in museum exhibitions. In addition, dedicating myself to the plight of the dismembered miniature-painting genre was precisely to shed light on its truncated history. Miniatures are often hiding out of sight in Western museum storages or in private collections yet to be published. *Mine* has been an investigative pursuit of three decades, highlighting the



125 Shahzia Sikander,
Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1,
 1995. Vegetable color, dry
 pigment, watercolor, and tea
 on hand-prepared wasli paper,
 16.8 × 9.2 cm. Museum of
 Fine Arts, Houston: 2003.728.
 Gift of Joseph Havel and Lisa
 Ludwig.

126 (facing page, left) Shahzia
 Sikander, *Who's Veiled
 Anyway?*, 1997. Transparent
 and opaque watercolor, tea,
 graphite pencil, and charcoal
 on board. 28.7 × 20.6 cm.
 Whitney Museum of
 American Art, New York:
 97.83.1. Purchase, with funds
 from the Drawing
 Committee.

127 (facing page, right) Shahzia
 Sikander, initial layer of *Who's
 Veiled Anyway?*, 1989.



politics of provenance, ownership and narration by taking a closer look at historical works, documents, and unarchived materials to use as inspiration for a new direction in art history and contemporary visual idiom. I also find it important and useful to write about my own work and the intent behind it. In 2014 I produced *The World is Yours, The World is Mine* (pl. 124) and an essay expanding on the theme and its visualization through literary and hip hop references for *The New York Times*, which is about the Ebola outbreak and its conflicting narrative of enforced quarantine in a supposedly hyper-connected globalized world. Portraying Langston Hughes alongside portraits of Death and musician Nasir Jones points to interlinked histories from the vantage point of New York City, a place of integration and turmoil that is still coming to terms with its underrepresented narratives of people of color.





(facing page) Shahzia Sikander,
Who's Veiled Anyway?, 1997.
(Detail of pl. 126.)

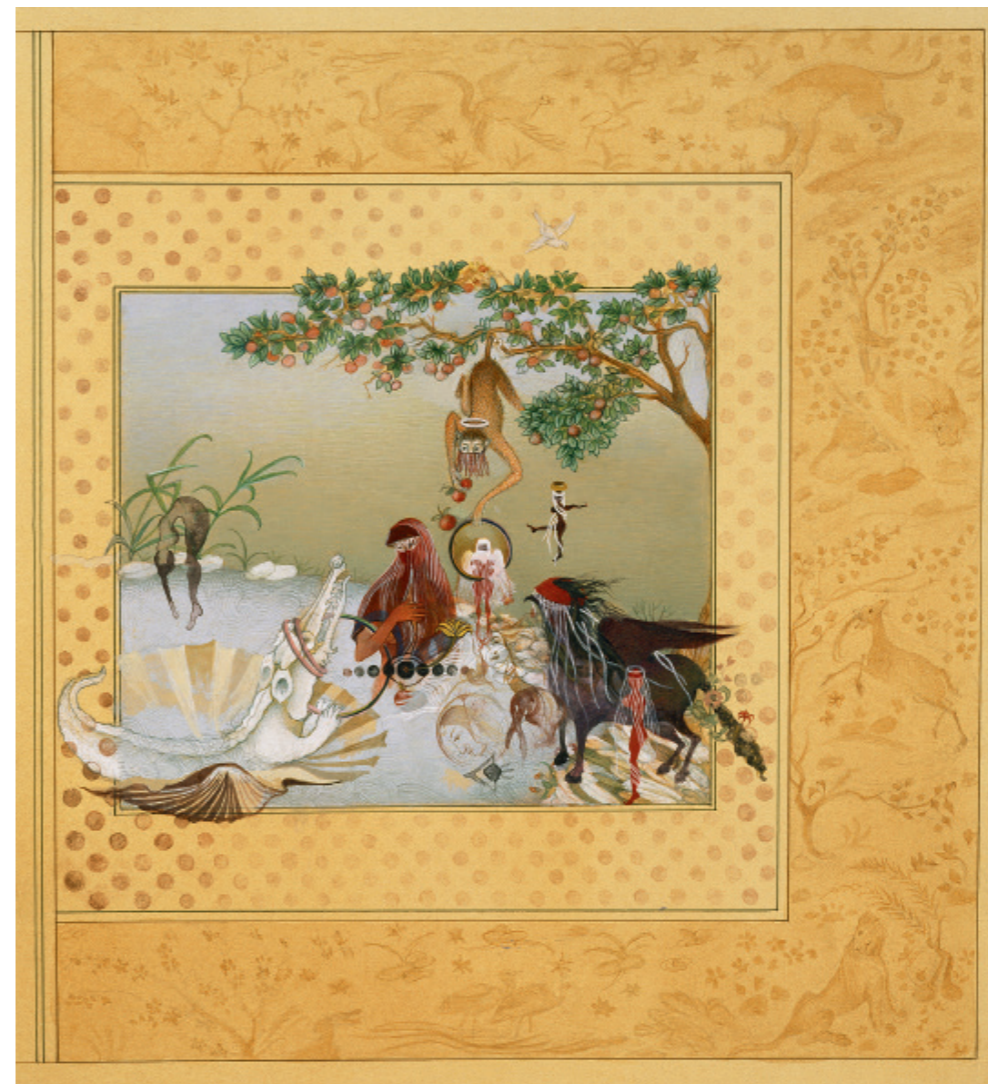
Reclamation as Feminism

RZ: One of your innovations within the corpus of Persian miniature painting has been the development of a vocabulary of sorts, a cast of characters or forms that recurs in your work. In your *Uprooted Order* series (pl. 125), for instance, you take the female stock character in isolation to draw attention to its specifics. Then, in *Who's Veiled Anyway?* (pls. 126, 127), you use the veil to create confusion around the gender of the central figure. How does this utilization of the female form or what is associated with the female form, such as the veil, play on the idea of gender?

SS: Art has been a deeply personal vehicle for me to engage paradoxes and polarities, power and history, via expunged female accounts and narratives, whether in art, culture, religion, or the political discourse. Some of the iconography I created was a direct result to counter narrow definitions of the other. The beheaded feminine forms with interlinked roots of my lexicon were about my observing as a young artist the lack of female representation in the art world and the misogyny present toward women in almost all spheres of work and life. The female forms are uniquely personal too, as in the image of a self-nourishing, uprooted female figure that refuses to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, or be stereotyped. This year has seen strong women's voices taking a stance against harassment, misrepresentations, oppression, and silencing women from history.

Even twenty-five years ago, I did not fit the average American's picture of a Muslim. My independent nature was also seen as an anomaly. Many assumed I left Pakistan to avoid a patriarchal culture and subjugation by a Muslim male. I was often left feeling that the complexities of being a Muslim in America were too nuanced for the majority to grasp. There is a certain wit and candor in *Who's Veiled Anyway?* for those who are willing to dig deeper. The painting's intent is to open up multiple positions of perception around gender and religion. The notion of the "veil," despite its "cliché," persists in defining the Muslim female. When I first encountered the probing notion often pointed toward me in the US cultural space of the early '90s, I wanted to respond, to raise questions from a variety of histories and representations.

The protagonist in this painting appears to be a veiled female, yet on close inspection one can see that the stock character is of a male polo player from an Indo-Persian miniature. One could read it as a comment on patriarchal histories, or one could read it as a desexualizing of the miniature. Evoking French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous's idea of the "*écriture féminine*" (Cixous 1994) (often called white ink), I painted over the male figure with chalky white lines in an attempt to make androgyny the subject. It was also a means of tracing my own relationship with the largely male-dominated lineage of miniature painting. The use of white also referenced the foundational element of the *gad rang* (opaque color) technique in miniature painting. White is used as the "body" for all colors. Using white paint, as an editing tool to "write" with, also played literally and conceptually on redaction and on who gets to define the "other"



128 (left) Shahzia Sikander, *Hoods Red Rider #2*, 1997. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 25.5 × 18 cm. Collection of Susan and Lew Manilow.

129 (right) Shahzia Sikander, *Red Riding Hood*, 1997. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 17.5 × 10.5 cm. Private collection.

in the collective imaginary. Whose histories are being determined by those in positions of power, whether colonial, imperial, or nationalistic hierarchies?

RZ: In the 1990s, when you were a new immigrant, you painted *Red Riding Hood* (pl. 129) and the inverse *Hoods Red Rider #2* (pl. 128). There is also the entrancing *Then and N.O.W. Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella* (1997). In all of these you take on the centrality of female figures from Western fairy tales and place them within the tradition of Persian miniature painting. It is in this sense a multilayered reconceptualization, the contemporary and the familiar, the menacing and the benign, all coming together in one composition. What were you hoping to convey about the multidimensionality of femininity?

SS: My love for storytelling was imbued in early childhood through my family and books. My very first memory is of Korney Chukovsky's book translated in Urdu. A couple of years later, encounters with Poe and stories of the Miraj provided enough of an eclectic mix to spark my interest in expression. Kalila and Dimna illustrations

130 (left) Shahzia Sikander, *Venus's Wonderland*, 1995–97. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 30 × 27 cm. Private collection.

131 (right) Shahzia Sikander, *Maligned Monsters*, 1999–2000. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 31.5 × 12.5 cm. Created for the Museum of Modern Art, New York banners as part of *Projects 70: Janine Antoni, Shahzia Sikander, and Kara Walker*, 2000–01.

were also instrumental in linking my interest to children's books and the plural histories and cross-cultural influences embedded within archetypal narratives. As an adult, irony and satire was behind work I created in the mid-'90s such as the series *Hoods Red Rider* (pl. 128), *Then and N.O.W. – Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella*, *Venus's Wonderland* (pl. 130), *Monsters Within* (pl. 117) and *Fleshy Weapons*.

The so-called Western fairy tales were part of my childhood storybooks in Pakistan. These tales, like many female stories in my generation, carried deeply entrenched gender bias. The representation of the female in general across cultures is a big question mark. When I started examining miniature painting as a young adult, the depiction of the woman often perturbed me. As one example, in the Kangra School of miniature painting it bothered me that the female was such a passive or dormant agency, silent or weak, either longing for the lover or awaiting a fate yet to unfold. I wanted to make some paintings where the female protagonists were proactive, playful, confident, and intelligent, and connected to the past in imaginative ways. In my paintings, women are not intellectually dismissed but respected for their ideas, neither are they the victims of overt representation, but dense with nuance and multivalence (pl. 131).

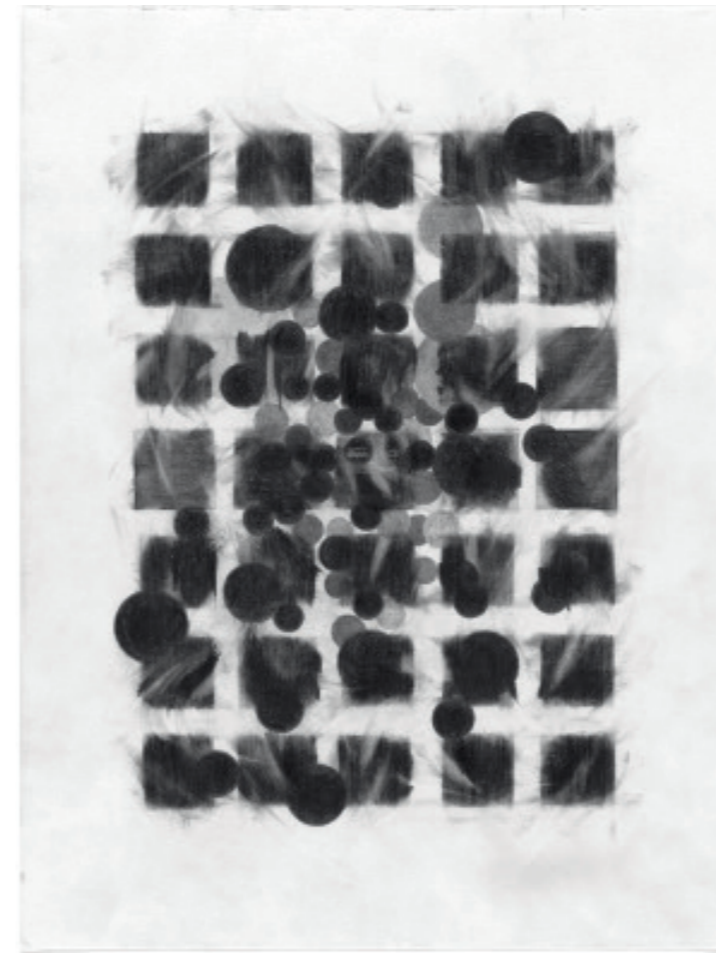
In today's transnational ways of living and being, frameworks that restrict the definition of one's work to purely national and cultural histories and identities feel restrictive.

Don't most artists of color and women get boxed in? As a transnational, a Pakistani, a Pakistani-American, a woman, now an older woman artist, a Muslim woman, an Asian, an Asian-American, and so forth, there are plenty of categories to swim in and out of. Complex and nuanced art that does not fit in any dominant narratives gets marginalized regardless. Contemporary Islamic art itself is a revolving category. I have learned that categories are inevitable. The real issue is how the work navigates the various categories over time.

RZ: In the earlier part of this decade you painted *The Cypress Despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden* (pl. 132), a work which uses text and which was inspired by the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish. Some other lines from another Darwish poem are: "I am a woman. No more and no less. I live my life as it is, Thread by thread." Would you say the same of yourself? Do you live your life painting by painting, its episodes captured in your work?

SS: Feminism remains a much-debated term. My work is also not static. I have always aimed for my work to tap into the time of its making as well as encompass the elasticity

132 Shahzia Sikander, *The Cypress Despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden*, 2012–13. Series of photographic work from Khorfakkan Cinema, Sharjah, UAE.



133 Shahzia Sikander, *Untitled from 51 Ways of Looking (Group B)*, 2004. Pencil on paper, 30 × 23 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz in honor of Glenn Lowry Museum of Modern Art, New York.

ghazal of the Urdu poet Ghalib. In the spirit of his multi-dimensional poetry, the use of the phrase is also meant to elicit multiple reads. The caretaker as sole survivor became the protagonist in my multichannel audio-visual work *Parallax*.

RZ: Constriction is an inherent characteristic of miniature painting, the bounded nature of space functioning as a sort of limit. Yet it is within these constrictions that you located innovation. Do you think your capacity to do this was influenced by the society and culture in which you were raised, one in which women must find liberation in constriction? In turn, does your move to site-specific installation and animation represent a move away from this, a sort of embrace of your current home and the fluidity of identity that is specific to a multicultural society?

SS: Absolutely, the limitations within the medium itself forced me to think outside of the box (pls. 132, 137). As a young woman and citizen of Pakistan under Zia's military

of experience. Painting to me is like a poem. Language, geography, and identity are charged notions of inclusion and exclusion, always in flux. Mythic narratives get constructed through multipronged protagonists that are not necessarily autobiographical. *The Cypress Despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden* was one such work where poetry of multiple languages came into its own dissonance. While in the abandoned cinema I thought of Mahmoud Darwish's "I have a seat in the abandoned theatre," whose evocative imagery of despair and interconnected fate became deeply resonant. Darwish's message of strength and the tenacity of the human spirit was echoed in my chance encounter with the abandoned cinema's sole caretaker, who was from Pakistan and who had also come to build the space in 1976 as a laborer. When I visited the site in 2013 his work visa was still linked to the architecture. For him, the building was his life, his love, his existence so intricately intertwined with the space as a migrant worker that the imminent death of the cinema in my eyes became a metaphor for his life's labor. The phrase "The cypress, despite its freedom, remains captive to the garden," is from the



environment, where women's rights were under attack, one's innate need to express was even more heightened. The elaborate formal framing devices within historical miniature paintings and illuminated manuscripts, as well as the male Eurocentric framing of the genre within art history, became fertile grounds for deconstruction. I had a hunger for new narratives. Understanding how the art historical canon is interpreted allowed me to change the framing and tell the stories differently.

The confinement led to freedom, so to speak, but different kinds of constrictions can operate within other mediums and directions as well. Take, for example, *Parallax*, a 3-channel single-image video animation (pl. 134). It took

134 (above) Shahzia Sikander, *Parallax*, 2013. Three-channel, single-image HD video animation, with 5.1 surround sound. 15 minutes, 26 seconds, music by Du Yun. Shahzia Sikander, *Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector*, installation view, MAXXI, Rome, 2016–17.

135 (facing page) Shahzia Sikander, *Quintuplet-Effect*, 2016. Glass painting, 6.5 × 4 m. Permanent site-specific commission. Julis Romo Rabinowitz and Louis A. Simpson International Building, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

more than a year to create. The fifteen-minute film was fed from hundreds of drawings I made, alongside elaborate editing and collaboration with animators, composers, and poets. It was challenging in its own ways, forcing me to step outside the familiar confines of painting to imagine a kinetic and interdisciplinary work.

The culture under Zia's period was about institutionalizing fear, punishing dissent, and limiting freedom of expression. There is a similar culture in America right now, and the current incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric is equally dangerous and suffocating. As an artist I respond to the cultural shifts in which my work is situated. In that respect, the work's foundational premise to confront uncertainty dictates its growth. As a transnational artist, the notion of home is grounded within the work. I want the work to speak to the world without sacrificing specificity. The two permanent public artworks at Princeton University's International building are inspired in part by Princeton University Library's late sixteenth-century manuscript, the Peck *Shahnama*, an archetype of the tenth-century epic poem (pl. 135). I use historical figures, spiritual events, images of flight, descent, and material economies to invite contemplation and conversation. In *Quintuplet-Effect*, Adam Smith—the economist, philosopher, and author of the *Wealth of Nations*, who argued against monopolies, using the demise of the East India Company as a case study—is highlighted. Strapped in Company attire, he is fashioned in the Company School of Miniature Painting that emerged in India under the colonial rule. His lofty ideas have grown wings, but he is entrapped in luminous glass, unable to fly, the idea being that we are still caught in the same old patterns of inequities of wealth. The permanent works were created in glass and stone born from ideas drawn on paper, and the dynamism of the pixel as a parallel to the unit of a mosaic.





Duality as Necessity

RZ: There is something Hegelian about your artistic practice, you seem consumed by dualities and the project of reconciling them—text and image, painting and poetry, male and female, portraiture and animation. Safavid angels on Jasper Johns-esque American flags all seem iterations of this project. Why are you so consumed by opposites and by the possibilities of reconciling them in unities?

SS: I don't think of my propositions as oppositional, but more as multiple juxtapositions aimed at unexpected detours. I am more interested in process than the outcome or a synthesis. Improvisational forms such as qawwali and jazz inspire me, and I have a similar approach in thinking and drawing. Binaries tend to emerge often from the curatorial systems used to frame the practice, but I see them as disruptive catalysts. In *I Am or Am I Not My Own Enemy* (pl. 136), the textual phrase in Urdu is about rote, yet through repetition and the gesture of ink it bleeds into an emotional register independent of the viewer's ability to read the Urdu script. If the viewer is familiar with Urdu, they would recognize that the phrase is part of a Ghalib's *shir* (couplet) and can also be read as unrequited love. I like to think of my work as a lexicon of information, which grows and expands, is reused, edited, discarded, with new ideas added. To move forward is to re think and to be able to

detach to explore something new. Identity is not a given but a fluid process that unfolds over time. The Safavid angels atop the US flag are a comment on simulacrum, the angels too are a "copy of the original." There is no absolute way to define one or the other. What is interesting is how *Utopia* (pl. 138) has come to represent two significant moments in time. It first appeared in the *Paris Review* soon after September 11, 2003, and then resurfaced as the iconic cover for *Brooklyn Rail* in November 2016 to mark the US presidential election.

My work embraces uncertainty and flux. I'm not looking to synthesize, but to elaborate and define difference. Art allows me to dig into the unknown and to be challenged by the mysteries of the world, both real and imagined. There are infinite ways to create meaning. What is authority? Is it not just an approximation? What is the approximate nature of truth? Even the pursuit in and of itself, the pursuit of truth

136 Shahzia Sikander, *I Am or Am I Not My Own Enemy*, 2011. Ink and gouache on prepared paper, 208 × 129.5 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri: 2014.16. Purchase, the Asian Art Acquisition Fund in memory of Laurence Sickman.



137 (above) Shahzia Sikander, *Gopi-Contagion*, 2015. HD video animation on digital LED billboards. Installed in Times Square, New York, as part of Midnight Moment: Times Square Arts, October 1–31, 2015.



138 (right) Shahzia Sikander, *Utopia*, 2003. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 20 × 35.5 cm. Private collection.



139 (above, left) Shahzia Sikander, *Unseen Series 3*, 2011–12. HD digital projection. Installation view. Shangri La, Museum of Islamic Art, Culture, and Design, Honolulu.

140 (above, right) Shahzia Sikander, preparatory drawing for the animation *The Last Post*, 2009–10. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper, 30 × 20 cm.

is a transformative act. Embracing that sentiment allows me to keep the search open-ended, to continuously re-invent, to transform motifs in order to cultivate new associations for trenchant historical symbols from more than one vantage point.

RZ: The painter Edgar Degas is buried in the Montmartre Cemetery in Paris, and on his grave are the simple words, “He loved drawing very much.” In some of your most recent work, such as the installation at the Museo Nazionale titled *Phenomenology of Drawing*, you too return to drawing but you give it dimension and depth. What is your relationship to drawing, and how central is it in the age of animation and constant photographic replication?

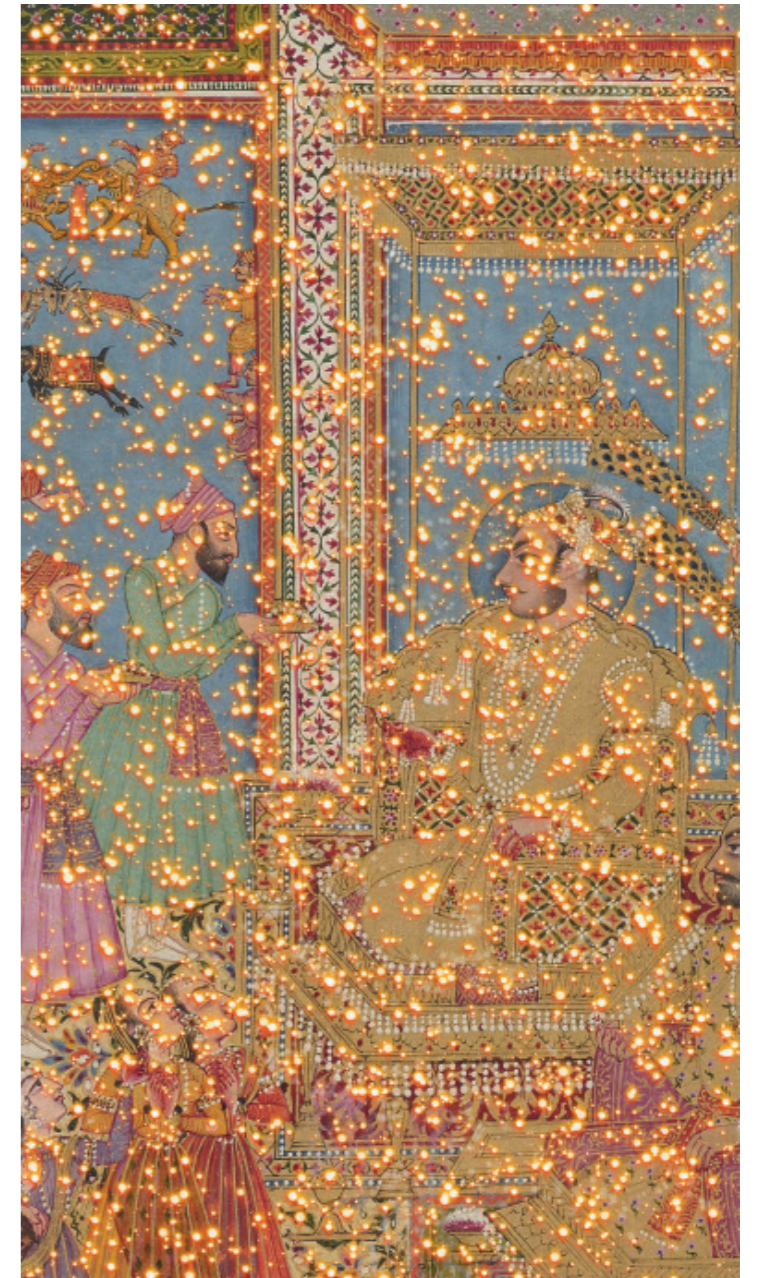
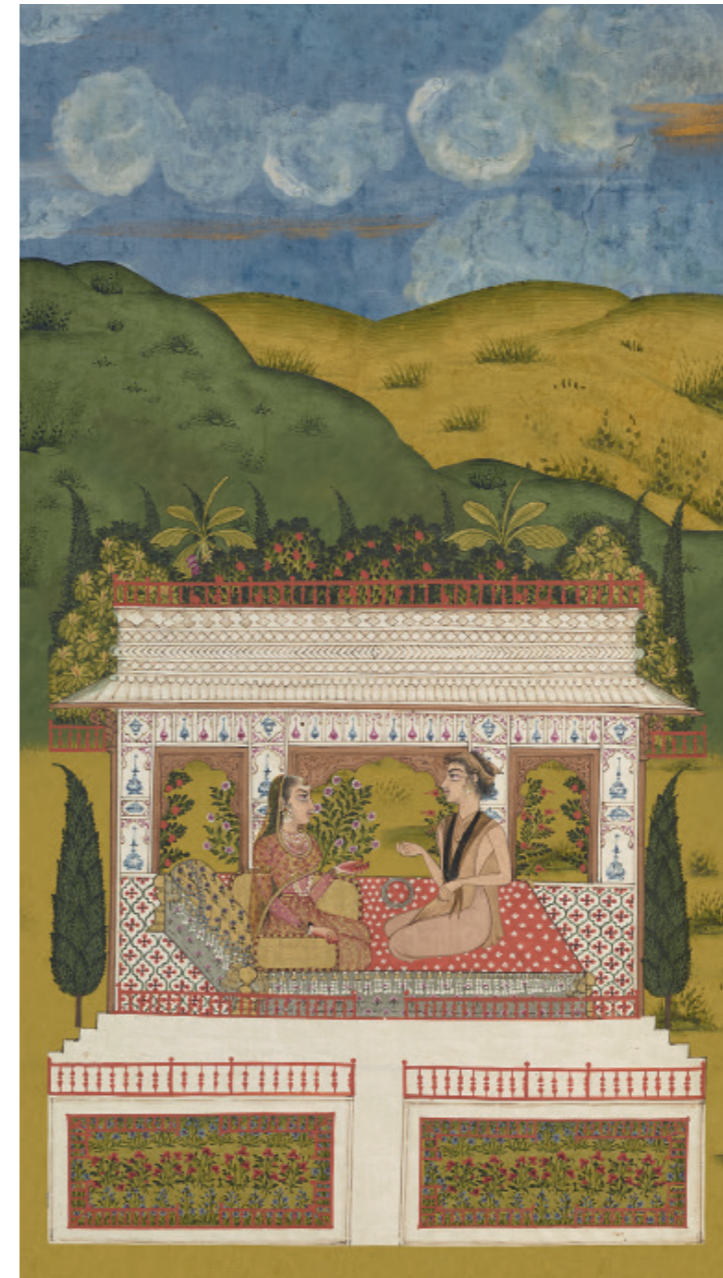
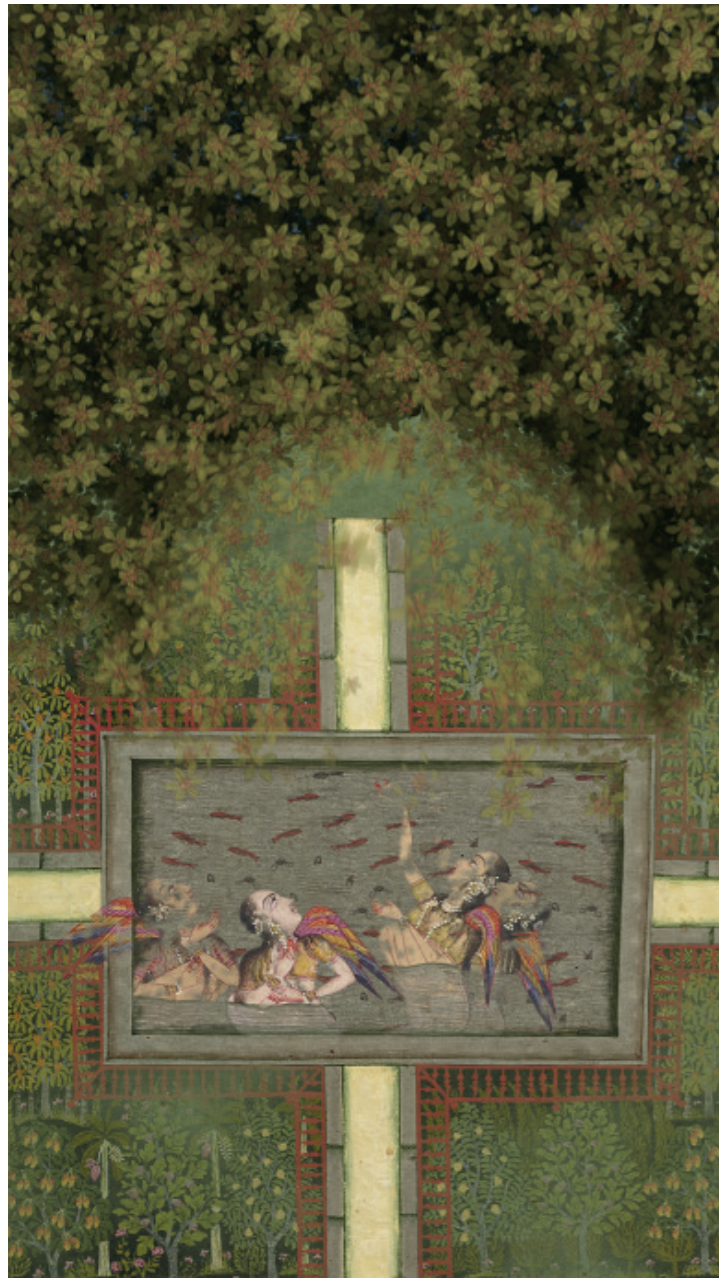
SS: Drawing is my thinking hat. It is a notational tool, a fundamental language that allows me to collaborate with other languages such as writing, animation, music, and projection (pl. 139). I began experimenting with the wall and floor as a drawing surface in the mid-’90s, evolving painted murals into large-scale installations combining densely layered works on paper. The magnification of scale from 12 inches (30.5 cm) to at times 60 feet (18 meters), through the linking of hundreds of drawings on translucent

141–142 Shahzia Sikander, *Portrait of the Artist*, 2016. Two in a suite of four etchings, with accompanying collaborative text with Ayad Akhtar. Paper: 68.5 × 53 cm; image: 56 × 43 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Acquired through Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Published by Pace Editions, Inc.

papers, directly led to exploring animation. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction—all essential elements inherent in the process of drawing—become more active through animation and music, linking time-based mediums to the act of thinking.

Drawing provides the armature for expression, so remains essential in my practice for working in other mediums. The preparatory drawing for the animation *The Last Post* (pl. 140) is a very detailed work, which gives the animation a certain depth that I think can only come through the hand-drawn and not via software. In *Portrait of the Artist*, a set of four etchings (pls. 141–142) allows me to explore the salient processes of etching to create visceral iconographic forms. Evoking the motif of the Miraj—its character, shape and form, its history and ability to survive over time through the use of aquatint, spit bite, water bite, and soap ground—I also drew the detailed portraits directly onto the copper plates, using soft ground to get highly sensitive impressions.

Parallax (pl. 134), a multi-channel animation, is made entirely out of hand-drawn elements to demonstrate the technical and emotional malleability of drawing that works as a textual and spatial map. For example, to illustrate oil I equated it with ink, and recorded the movement of ink to capture the oozing of liquid through the perceived orifices and the cracks in one section of the work.



143–146 Shahzia Sikander, *Disruption as Rapture*, 2016. HD video animation with 7.1 surround sound. 10 minutes, 7 seconds, music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi; animation by Patrick O'Rourke. Philadelphia Museum of Art: 2016-87-1. Commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016.

Equating ink with oil, then oil with movement, movement with time, time with history, and history with hierarchy, I was linking material with matter, drawing with thinking, and power with natural resources. Oil signifies the rupture. Once unleashed, it is impervious, seeping into all facets of the animation. Drawing allowed me to illustrate these complex associations.

In *Disruption as Rapture* (pls. 143–146), the choreographed movements around the idea of flight are made from units of painted wings, hair, and head silhouettes that operate as particle systems against the painted backgrounds. The collaborative spirit of the work is reflected in the multiplicity of aural and visual languages and in the work's elasticity to be experienced in multiple sites and situations, not just within the South Asian Galleries

at the Philadelphia Museum of Art that originally commissioned the work. The way I look at drawing is that it is rooted in a human lineage that can communicate across cultures, and has the capacity to be introspective as well as forward-looking. Imagination can be a metaphor for a soaring and empowering space that is free from constraints, that ties past to present and present to future. Creativity has no national, racial or religious boundaries. It is the power of imagination that fosters new frontiers. There is an artist in each and every one of us. The human journey is of strife and struggle for the truth. Ghalib best describes the work of an artist as a job that is never done.