

Elusive Paradise

The Millennium Prize



Message from the Sponsor	5	
Foreword	6	Pierre Théberge
Preface	8	Diana Nemiroff
Statement of the Jury	11	
After Arcadia	13	Diana Nemiroff
Outside Matters	37	Johanne Sloan
Catalogue		
55		Geneviève Cadieux
63		Janet Cardiff
71		Tacita Dean
77		Liz Magor
85		Shahzia Sikander
93		Valeska Soares
101		Jana Sterbak
109		Yoshihiro Suda
117		Diana Thater
125		Jeff Wall
Works in the Exhibition	133	
Exhibition Histories	135	

*The rhetoric of postcolonial studies has made exotic a rather unfashionable word. It does, however, remain a useful category of inquiry... as a way of understanding that which is immune to translation, that which is received intact and is allowed to exist without an equivalent.*¹

Shahzia Sikander operates as an artist in a space of hybridity. In her work the promiscuous association of different codes of representation—Hindu and Islamic, figurative and abstract, photographic and painterly—stands in odd contrast to the rigorous material discipline of miniature painting, the oldest figurative painting tradition of the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, that grounds her artistic practice. Subjects such as the court, the hunting scene, and the garden, which traditionally had their own space and formal conventions, frame unlikely apparitions in her paintings: portraits of real people, or images such as that of an acrobat in a striped leotard which have personal or iconic meaning for her. Nor is this hybridity a simple matter of bringing Eastern traditions into the West. A figure that appears again and again in her work is a voluptuous, many-armed goddess from the Hindu pantheon, laden with weapons, whose form is veiled with the chador often worn by Muslim women. The veil that would usually be interpreted as a symbol of oppression in the West is here a mask, both mysterious and empowering. It is a recurring and ambiguous motif in her work, a symbol perhaps of the core of untranslatability in all poetic and personal languages.

One of Sikander's earliest images is that of a scroll in which she depicts a continuous and ever-changing architectural space. A white-clad figure moves through this space, which suggests now privacy and modernity, now a more communal and traditional space of shared activities, and emerges at the other end to paint a portrait of herself. The doubling of the artist's figure, both observer and observed, is a specifically self-conscious pose communicating an awareness of multiple realities. Later, this multiplicity is given a more sophisticated and less narrative form, when it is translated into the discontinuous operations of collage.

¹Faisal Devji, "Translated Pleasures," in *Shahzia Sikander* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 1998), p. 11.

Layering and veiling are omnipresent in Sikander's recent work, wedding a modernist understanding of the visual power of the stylistic ruptures of collage with a much older preference for the seductive evasions of the indirect utterances. At the same time, a loose and gestural vocabulary emerges and is overlaid upon the more strictly stylized images of the miniature, as if two languages, one primal and direct, the other full of elaborate poetry, commingled in a new and unfamiliar tongue.

The miniature paintings in this exhibition and the mural work entitled *Chaman* share the theme of the garden, understood as a place where different realities are reconciled. In *Chaman* Sikander has created an enclosure, veiled by layers of tissue paper that hang, overlapping, from the walls. The room feels like a walled garden, secure from intrusion. Compositional hierarchies are abolished from these walls, resulting in a profusion of images that break down distinctions between the animate and the inanimate realms, producing a sensation of imaginative release inviting reflection. *Chaman*, which means "garden" in Urdu, was first created for the Philip Morris branch of the Whitney Museum in New York, where it was shown between April and July 2000. In the second version of the work, made for the National Gallery of Canada, Sikander has constructed an almost theatrical space, its entrance framed by floating sheets of tissue paper that hang at an angle to the walls. The imagery of the room builds up gradually. It is sparser and more abstract on the side walls and denser on the end wall, inviting and drawing the viewer into the space. Within, the atmosphere created by the pastel colours and the layers of tissue paper is warm and sensual. Echoing motifs in the miniature paintings, repeated geometric designs alternate with the curved outlines of a woman's figure, while painted floral and architectural forms play off one another on the walls. The contrast suggests the complex, hybrid character of the garden, a place not only of sensual repose but intended also for contemplation.

Sikander often refers to her experience of leaving Pakistan to study and take up residence in the United States as a pleasing dislocation. Trained as a miniaturist—an anachronistic and idiosyncratic choice within the context of her schooling—she learned not only a discipline and a technique but a conceptual means of encoding reality into images that were meant to be read like poetry. Instead of repeating the conventions, she has translated them into a fluid and hybrid prose that links cultural tradition with the space of lived experience.

D.N.

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