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A Journey of Ideas

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Shahzia Sikandar:

Charting a New Discourse

By Shahzia Sikandar

ALTHOUGH HER STYLE IS MINIATURE AND BELONGS BY HERITAGE TO HER NATIVE COUNTRY PAKISTAN, SHAHZIA SIKANDER'S WORK CROSSES ALL BORDERS TO DRAW FROM MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES AND SENSIBILITIES. MUGHAL MINIATURE, HINDU MYTHOLOGY AND WESTERN MINIMALISM, MERGE AND DISSOLVE IN LAYERS BENEATH LAYERS ARTICULATING THE ARTISTS PERSONAL HISTORY AND SOCIAL AWARENESS. LIVING AND WORKING OUT OF NEW YORK FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, SHE ADDRESSES THE COMPLEXITY OF CULTURAL FUSION WITH IMPECCABLE SKILL AND INTELLIGENCE, LEGITIMISING THE APPROPRIATION OF MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES – YET CLAIMING A SPACE THAT ECHOES HER OWN NEED TO BE DECLASSIFIED; TO BELONG IN ESSENCE TO HERSELF, AND TO THE WORLD.

When I first encountered a new space, by leaving Pakistan and coming to the US in 1993, my impulse was to absorb, digest and then regurgitate my felt experiences—thus I painted subjects in context to my new location. *A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* came out of this experience – the signature figure evolving as an image of a self-nourishing, interconnected form, refusing to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, to be stereotyped. It mirrored my own state of being.

Often, I am asked what tradition means to

me as juxtaposed with the avant garde in my work, whether there is a reinvention or a conscious need to blur boundaries. While I didn't set out with the aim to subvert, let alone reinvent a tradition, those boundaries became blurred simply through my engagement with miniature painting, through the act of making them. I was aware from the start that I was indulging in anachronistic practice, labour intensive and limited in the scope of its impact. But I was interested in an art form whose present was of the past.

In Pakistan, during my training period in 1988, making miniatures was clearly a valid activity. In fact, it was taken for granted. Offered as a subject in the fine arts department at the National College of Arts in Lahore, it was not a popular aesthetic nor a traditional form clamouring for revival. My interest at that time was in the form's cultural and historical dimensions, not simply as works of visual pleasure – which raised issues about beauty and aesthetics – but at a fundamental level. I was curious as to why miniature painting existed. That is where I started. But it was only much later that questions posed by a form that exists in the present yet is not “contemporary” began appearing in my work.

Initially, miniature painting seemed restrictive, yet I discovered it was not so. There is something in our part of the world, the sub-continent, which allows multiple aesthetics to coexist – a parallel could be drawn with New York City which operates on a postmodern platform though different from the premodern plurality of the subcontinent.

Although it seemed self-referential and lacking a context outside its tradition, miniature painting was allowed to exist simultaneously with other practices. The general consensus was that it was a stylised and faded genre that had more to do with craft and technique than genuine expression. But clearly, we have some relationship to the form even if it is part nostalgia. And, although the anxiety among friends and faculty was that my creativity would be retarded with its limitations (that miniature art was merely an exercise in fine copying), I was curious as to what submission to miniature painting entailed. I was interested in saying, “Yes, I want to copy.” There was never a doubt that I would go beyond that.

However, as an undergrad in the US, even as my work evolved in its new environment, the critique one encountered was usually culture specific, of what I represented as an artist from Pakistan, not who I am today and what my work is, in the present context. A remark like, “Are you trying to make East meet West?” is offensive, as the whole experience of being in another land, pursuing different practices emerges from a curiosity, a wanting to learn new techniques and broaden one's vision. Not to deliberate a melding of two cultures in a self-conscious way.

Much of my work, especially done from 1993-99 was drawn from multiple references. A vocabulary that, while referencing and maintaining integrity to tradition, betrayed my own experience as it revealed the act of appropriation, alteration, and addition.

In my student-days experience in Pakistan, representations of Hindu mythology were unacceptable. I became interested in how history simplified the visual in terms of Hindu and Muslim or in my experience, Indian and Pakistani – a visual that I felt did not lend itself to simplistic dissection and separation. My curiosity and fascination with Hindu mythology was triggered when I first visited India with a group of artists in '92. In the same year I visited America and a personal encounter with a Hindu who was to become a trusted person in my life, led to an exploration of his cultural history; a need to know and understand the aesthetics of India, a country so near yet so distant.

Art, for me was always a ticket to ‘experience,’ even as a child, and it remains so today. No matter how transcending, liberating or empowering an act art becomes, boundaries always exist—be they cultural, national, religious,



political, geographical, historical or psychological. It became essential for me to understand and indulge in all such boundaries, only to break them down, to open discussion, to raise questions, to articulate their shifting nature.

The learning process (outside of my training with Bashir Ahmed, professor of miniature painting at the National College of Arts, Lahore, also included studying images printed in exhibition catalogues, published by institutions like the Smithsonian. While the discourse on this genre was usually descriptive and tedious—the narrative did not interest me—it was the formal construct that held my attention.

Conceptually, schools like the Indian Ragmala, which gives representation to theories regarding the feminine and masculine dimensions of music, was of great interest. Kangra was introduced to me by Bashir Sahib and it became one of the most important influences in my later work. In Kangra, the signature image of a woman in the foreground always awaiting her lover, or in anticipation of an event, was to be reinvented in my painting *Ready to Leave?* which reflected the psychic chaos of the contemporary world.

The Western discourse of representation versus abstraction, especially in its relation to the miniature genre interested me. I deliberately began contrasting the abstract reserved nature of Muslim art with the expressionistic and sensual elements of Indian painting, destroying all borders between them through this intermingling. The paradox of identity, especially that of

Pakistan and its complex relationship with India, became crucially important. By combining the Muslim-Hindu vocabulary, I found the intersection of the two provided a new visual language with which to confront problems of identity and who claims what. I was and am driven to bringing miniature painting into the arena of critical inquiry.

It is curious that people are unable to see the conceptual forms outside the narrow parameters established by the practices of the 60s. I find miniature painting a very conceptual activity. In that sense, every little mark is important; not to say they all have specific meaning attached to them. But I am more open to 'meaning' being constructed not simply within the piece but also through a larger set of relationships that surround the work – playing with tradition, evolving a vocabulary; claiming lived experience.

Even as I use a very prescribed and structured form, I feel free of 'being prescribed.' That tension is appealing. Miniature painting comes with a set of rules. The conceptual transforms itself into the act. It's the materiality, the seductiveness of the surface, the investment, the submission, the hours that are put in to create translucency that become significant players. In the end they are meditative and meaningful gestures, like ritual. In this sense, the style is more about subverting modernity than subverting tradition.

At the same time, the act of doing miniatures does not register as painting in the heroic sense of a eurocentric activity of putting pigment on canvas. Miniature paintings are small and detailed, but in terms of how imageries develop, my miniatures share an affinity with abstraction in that many of the organic forms evolve with



gesture in relationship to materials. For instance, in *A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, the red floating female form with loops at her feet on the yellow tissue drawings is very much about how the pigment sits on the paper; the image forming as a set of painterly marks. In the process of drawing on tissue, time is of essence. There is a rigour behind these drawings. They are open and democratic—not fussy or fetishistic, with no beginning or end. They begin as a mark-making process, a journal or diary. There is a premeditation, but never a decision to construct with the deliberation of unearthing an original set of experiences. I subject these forms to the making of miniatures with attention to detail, definition, accessorising and ornamentation.

In the installations and wall-works, the process is more confrontational. By shifting scale from the miniature to the mural is not any

particular statement. It is more an exploration of hierarchy surrounding the investment of labour.

Often, I get the sense that viewers are expecting something, an elaborate code that will reveal a cultural or political platform. But I'm not a spokesperson. My work is more about raising questions than providing answers. Even for me, issues as the veil, which I used in works between 1994-96, remains exotic—a charged and provocative stereotype.

The first time I put it in a work, the viewer response was strong—"Why?" It is not just a question of what kind of meaning the image is transmitting but what kind of meaning the viewer is projecting—as a response. I actually wore a veil for a brief period to elicit people's reactions. I wore it to the grocery store, to a bar, to a classroom and discovered that people would get confused and intimidated. Obviously for me, it was just the opposite. Nobody could see my body-language or facial expression. That gave me more control, security and articulation. The veil performances elicited very interesting responses.

But the learning process didn't come without criticism. I offended people who thought that the seriousness of an issue was being made trivial. Yet, these were the very issues I wanted to scrutinise and understand. It was a manipulation, and an assertion of my own responses to the veil. The delight in making aware my presence and yet being anonymous. I felt empowered. Not to say that, that is the condition of most veiled women.

Merging antithetical subjects stemmed from the desire to question the historic animosity between Hinduism and Islam and confront the Western stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed. Humour is an essential element in my

work and it allows me to challenge questions of identity with a heartfelt concern.

In the banner for the entrance of New York's Museum of Modern Art's, I created the convoluted relationship between Indo-Greco-Roman histories. The light-skinned Bronzino's Venus and the darker Apsara flirtatiously twist and turn and sinuously intertwine in an intimate configuration. In their mannerist posture they deviate from the simplicity of the classical norm. Outcasts of the canon, they embrace not in a dangerous liaison, but rather as accomplice - witnesses of a 'one-sided' history.

Most definitely, my experience in the United States has rewarded me with a broader vocabulary. It does not matter where I practice, but interaction with various artists and some wonderful collaborations have helped overcome some of the conflict I have had with the placement of my work in museums and private collections. The artist as the "lone genius" in the studio bothers me at times. The search for validation can be difficult. What is relevant though, is that I am most comfortable with miniature painting. It comes naturally, which is not to say I will do them for the rest of my life.

Miniature for me is a place of freedom. I often refer to my experience in the United States as a pleasing dislocation. The opportunity to appropriate languages, cultures and forms, be it Hindu mythology or the figurative/abstraction debate, are enriching. My intention is not to exclude but to merge, mix and layer. In that respect, I find much affinity with the DJ culture in its relationship to 'sampling.' Thus I journey, from miniatures to mural paintings, from precision and figuration to abstraction, from tradition to invention, from the norm to its transgression.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER: Having studied art at the National College of Arts, Lahore and The Rhode Island School of Design, USA, she has had several solo and group shows in the US. Considered one of the foremost of the new generation of artists, she has won several prestigious awards in her eight years of intensive work in the United States. Shahzia lives and works in New York.

Slides of paintings courtesy: Deitch Projects, New York.