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small pleasures



Uprooted, 1995, vegetable pigment, dry pigment on wasli handmade paper, 8.5 x 7.25 in.

Shahzia Sikander's

miniature paintings reveal

an ironic mixture of past and

present, East and West. Jona-

than Goodman gets close up.



Shahzia Sikander sees her art as a series of slightly comic, but ultimately serious transgressions. Born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander has been in the United States for four years, first as a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design and, more recently, as an artist-in-residence at the Glassell School of Art in Houston, Texas. Long before that, in a decision the artist now sees as an act of rebellion, Sikander chose miniature painting as her major at the National College of Art in India. This was a courageous decision, for no one had declared a major in this folk art form for five or six years. As Sikander says, "Some people didn't understand and told me, 'don't study miniature painting; it will retard your creativity.'"

Sikander persevered, however, and this particular "transgression" proved to be the right decision. Recently, Sikander's works have been exhibited at New York's Drawing Center, as well as the 1997 Whitney Biennial. In India, Sikander initially learned by copying from artworks by Bashir Ahmed, a contemporary artist specializing in this field who was also her teacher. But this method of instruction didn't last very long – only for two paintings. From the start, Sikander was interested in developing on her own. However, she acknowledges that her apprenticeship taught her patience and perseverance and also, she adds dryly, the unusual skill of plucking tail-hairs from squirrels in the Lahore zoo for her brushes.

Sikander's own artworks, a very contemporary *mélange* of traditional miniature painting styles and modernist abstraction, are exquisitely detailed portraits whose subjects range from Mughal emperors to personal friends. The subtle subterfuge and comic aplomb of her artworks are qualities that would describe the artist herself.

The most recent of her paintings reflect Sikander's complicated, but good humored, take on the multicultural intricacies of American life. The title of one artwork, *Uprooted* (1995), clearly suggests an autobiographical reference – but one which the artist expands upon with a more universal intent. Shoes abound in the painting, floating in mid-air around two images that serve as self-referential markers throughout her work: a rent veil and a cloud-like white form. The work also includes a pair of platform shoes – accurate renditions of *khusas*, very decorative, traditional work-shoes in Punjab; and on the top of the painting, a very old pair of Japanese shoes, the only pair with feet – perhaps a literal visualization of her wish to put her feet on the ground.

Other formal elements include a beautifully detailed landscape at the bottom of the work, with a magnificent red flower on the right. All kinds of abstract painting effects fill the center – pinkish and black ribbons, along with net-like patterns against a blue-white sky. A floating spiral of brown, white and yellow bands occupies the left side of the canvas, while a small gray city-scape lies below. This artwork, with its inspired amalgam of postmodern and ancient painterly effects, characteristically engages in several epochs and traditions at once.

In *Ready to Leave?* (1997), the mix of influences is even more evident: The central image is a traditional portrait of a beautiful woman at her

subtle
subterfuge
and comic
aplomb



Perilous Order, 1997
vegetable pigment, dry pigment,
watercolor and tea water on wasli
handmade paper, 10.5 x 8 in.

toilette, her face covered with a gray circle – a modern veil that does not so much hide as actually obliterate her features. Here, as in all her works, Sikander does her best to reinvent the traditional image as a symbolic emblem. Another much-repeated image is that of the woman waiting for her lover, a trope that Sikander quotes ironically in a number of her works.

Ready to Leave? also includes an image of a griffin – the mythological beast with the features of several animals – in this case, wearing a rent veil. According to Sikander, the creature is emblematic of the *challawah*, a person whose origins and destination are unknown. The griffin stands in a series of patterned, circular bands, whose mandala-like configuration is repeated with more severity on the painting's lower right. Across the top appear several rough, black-and-white sketches of houses. Sikander calls these dwellings “an image of accumulation,” perhaps a recognition of materialism in contemporary American life.

Some critics have misread the iconography of Sikander's recent work

as being entirely defined by postmodern American art culture. While Sikander enjoys the social and cultural freedoms that the United States offers, she maintains a detached and wry distance from its categories and assumptions, both in her art and in her own life. Out of curiosity, she has occasionally worn a veil in public in order to see how Americans would react. At other times, she has braided her long, luxuriant black hair and donned hair extensions, a guise which led people to inquire whether she was from Trinidad. “Americans want a category, for sure,” she says of these experiences.

Interestingly, what Sikander calls “miniature painting” can be more than miniature in size. Traveling in Jaipur, India, Sikander saw works from the Kotah period that were painted in miniature style, but measured as large as four by six feet. Her own painting, *The Scroll* (1991–92), is also big – 18 inches wide by six feet long, and is an early indicator of her ambition to take ancient art and make it new. It represents a narrative, primarily

Reinventing the Dislocation, 1997,
vegetable pigment, dry pigment,
watercolor and tea water and gold wash
on wasli handmade paper, 13 x 9.5 in.



a call for
freedom of
disciplined
kind

of domestic life, occurring in compartmentalized interiors with highly stylized, decorative borders. Although it is in some ways a personal piece, *The Scroll* also incorporates imaginary places, referencing the spatial geometries found in Persian miniature painting during the Safavid period.

As Sikander describes, “The application is the same as with miniature painting: it tells a story. The story now interests me more, although at the time I was more engaged with formal elements – how color enters the surface of the paper, what role the borders play in the narrative.

“There is a thin line between fine art and illustration in this tradition,” Sikander says. “Today miniature painting is considered a low art form, practiced by poor artisans and sold to tourists. I don’t run away from these issues; instead, I address them.”

A recent work, *Perilous Order* (1997), straddles the old and new with particular success. The painting shows a typical Mughal emperor in the center, encircled by a halo – according to Sikander, a “colonial effect”

resulting from Western influences on miniature painting. He is surrounded by four women, rendered in ghostly white. Descending from the frame’s central image is that odd, abstract form that, for Sikander, serves as a recognition of self. Handmade wallpaper creates a border beyond the border of the central image. This beautifully marbled surface is covered with regularly spaced dots, a formal device of very recent origins that subverts all the ancient beauty of the figurative imagery.

Although the pale beauties of *Perilous Order* come from local Indian schools of miniature Indian painting, they traverse the decorated border onto the paper itself. This movement, across delineated boundaries, stands as an accurate metaphor for the physical and metaphysical passage Sikander has undertaken. It is a call for freedom – of a disciplined kind. As Sikander has said of the United States, “Sometimes excessive freedom – the incredible freedom here to do just about anything – is terribly confining. And so I take refuge in miniature painting.” ©